

May Election 2007: Historic Showdown in Philippine Politics

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Interview with Coni Ledesma, international spokesperson of Makibaka, Filipino revolutionary woman's association

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May 14, election day in the Philippines, may signal a historic turning-point in its political devolution since the February 1986 "people power" revolt overthrew the U.S.-backed Marcos dictatorship. The prospect is grim. Either the country declines into unprecedented barbarism - so far, international monitors (Amnesty International, World Council of Churches, UN investigators) have documented thousands of victims of extra-judicial killings, forcible "disappearances," torture and massacres exceeding those committed by Marcos—or President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo is impeached by a majority of elected representatives for treason, violation of the Constitution, corruption, etc. This may temporarily stop the "impunity" for State-affiliated criminals. This legal route of redress of grievances is by no means a revolution; it can be aptly described as an in-house purging of decay and rot. Either way, this ritualized election of local officials and congressmen will prove a veritable test-case for the country's neocolonial, oligarchic institutions and the status quo of class inequality that have been, in one way or another, fostered by the U.S., its former colonizer, for over a century now.

Elections in the Philippines, designed by the U.S. colonial government, began as a way of preserving the power of the moneyed, privileged elite within a monopolized party system offered as an alternative to armed resistance by Filipinos. Since formal independence in 1946, the elite bloc of landlords, compradors and bureaucrat-capitalists has partitioned power among their ranks, with personalities overshadowing any ideological differences, if any. Any progressive, radical challenge to elite hegemony, such as that posed by Claro Recto and Lorenzo Tanada in the fifties, or by the progressive party-list today - among them, Bayan Muna (People First), Anakpawis (Toiling Masses), Gabriela Women's Party (GWP), Kabataan (Youth) Party-List, Suara Bangsamoro (Voice of the Moro People) Party-List - has been stigmatized as "communist" or "terrorist." Just as in many "third world" dependent societies characterized by flagrant class conflict, electoral democracy in the Philippines has been distinguished by large-scale bribery of voters, corruption of officials, systematic violence—this time with the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the national police engaged in campaigning for the incumbent administration. The question of legitimacy or accountability is thus decided by the old formula of "guns, goons and gold."

Fraud as spectacle and testimony

In a recent commentary, the Center for People Empowerment in Governance (CenPEG), a think-tank based at the University of the Philippines (UP), concludes that “fraud is an endemic disease that has been institutionalized by a political system—the government, executive and legislative structures, political parties—that remains dominated by political dynasties” (*Issue Analysis*, No. 7, May 2007). A week ago, a group of retired military and police officers revealed a devious plan of Arroyo’s adviser, Gen. Hermogenes Esperon, AFP Chief, to hijack 14 million votes in four regions and 12 provinces to insure the victory of Arroyo’s team.

It is instructive to cite here a recent Social Weather Station (SWS) survey of citizens’ attitudes to the coming elections. The survey found that 40 percent of Filipinos expect the government will cheat, while 69 percent believe that the votes will be stolen by the Arroyo regime through “flying voters,” coercion and other means used during Arroyo’s election in 2004 in which the officials of the State’s Commission on Elections (Comelec) manipulated the counting of votes in Arroyo’s favor. Arroyo unwittingly admitted her fraudulent tenure in the widely publicized “Hello Garci” phone expose.

During the Cold War, the Philippines was touted as a “showcase” of U.S.-style democracy in Asia. Elected politicians toed Washington’s “free world” party line. With the help of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the Pentagon-supervised and -trained AFP, a surrogate army of U.S. finance capital, the puppet president Ramon Magsaysay defeated the Communist-led Huk uprising in the fifties. Today the Philippines is hailed as the second “battlefront” in George W. Bush’s “global war on terror.” The U.S. Department of State has labeled the 38-year-old insurgent New People’s Army (NPA, led by the Communist Party of the Philippines or CPP) as a “terrorist” organization, along with the CIA-built and AFP-coddled Abu Sayyaf bandit-group. While the country in the fifties was barely recovering from the enormous devastation of World War II, today, the economy is in shambles: 80 percent of 87 million Filipinos are struggling to survive on \$2 a day, below decent living standards, while 46 million Filipinos do not even meet their 100 percent dietary energy requirement (IBON *Media Release*, 4 April 2007).

Scourge of the nation

Just like her predecessors, Arroyo has sacrificed the Filipino people’s welfare by implementing neoliberal globalization policies (privatization, deregulation) imposed by the World Bank (WB), International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Trade Organization (WTO). The result is a humanitarian disaster. Filipino economist Alejandro Lichauco has documented unprecedented mass hunger throughout the country in his book *Hunger, Corruption and Betrayal* (Manila, 2005). Three thousand Filipinos leave every day to join 10 million Filipinos working in hundreds of countries around the world, remitting \$12 billion to keep the economy afloat - indubitable proof that the Philippines has plunged from relative prosperity in the fifties to the wretched “basket-case” of Asia in this new millennium of global capitalism.

Meanwhile, the elite desperately clings to power by consumerist propaganda and violence. So ruthless is the carnage in the “killing fields” of the Philippines that it has alarmed some U.S. lawmakers, among them Sen. Barbara Boxer and recently Rep. Ellen Tauscher (*Inquirer.net*, April 26, 2007) who urged Arroyo to prevent more murders of left-wing political activists by “prosecuting those responsible for the crimes.” The U.S. Senate Foreign

Relations Committee is inquiring into the link of U.S. foreign aid with Arroyo's brutal counterinsurgency program that has caused such unconscionable massive atrocities.

Last March, UN (United Nations) Special Rapporteur Philip Alston, who (at the end of his February visit) accused the government's counterinsurgency scheme of encouraging or facilitating the killings, presented to the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) a copy of the secret AFP "Order of Battle" document which converts soldiers as combatants in a "political war" against civilians. Arroyo and the military were not just in a "state of denial." They were and are deeply involved in vilification of anyone critical of the Arroyo regime and complicit in the summary executions of those they label as "enemies of the state." The party-list group Bayan Muna and allied organizations like Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (Bayan or New Patriotic Alliance), for example, have been targeted as "communist fronts" by Arroyo's Cabinet Oversight Committee on Internal Security. At present, 130 members of Bayan Muna (among approximately 356 activists from various civic organizations) have succumbed to extra-judicial murder, abduction, arbitrary arrest, harassment and torture by State terrorist agents and paramilitary death-squads.

Mapping the "killing fields"

Dr. Carol P. Araullo, chairperson of Bayan, has called the plan of extra-judicial killings, abductions, and torture a scarcely concealed "state policy" (see "*Streetwise*," *Business World* 9-10, 16-17 March 2007). Last April, Human Rights Now, a Japanese human rights organization, concluded its fact-finding mission with the appeal to Arroyo "to immediately stop the policy of targeting civilizational organizations and individual activists," and to respect its obligation to follow the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which the government has ratified. It will lobby the Japanese government to suspend all loan agreements "until it recognizes the human rights situation and accountability mechanism have clearly improved" (Press Statement, 21 April 2007). This was reinforced by the prestigious Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)'s statement denouncing the arrest of Rep. Crispin Beltran and the harassment of the "Batasan 5" party-list representatives.

Earlier, on March 25, the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal (PPT) handed down a verdict of "Guilty" against Arroyo and Bush for "crimes against humanity." Based on substantial evidence, testimonies, etc., the killings, torture and forced disappearances "fall under the responsibility of the Philippine government and are by no means justified in terms of necessary measures against terrorism." Not only is the AFP involved in "the majority of the scenarios of human rights violations," but it functions as "a central component and instrument of the policy of the 'war on terror' declared jointly by the Philippine and U.S. governments" that is being used to justify the political killings and impunity of both governments. Sen. Jambay Madrigal, who testified at the PPT against the Arroyo-Bush partnership's ecological havoc, opined that Arroyo's de facto "martial rule" has already turned the Philippines into a virtual "killing field."

Encountering Coni Ledesma



During that historic March session of the PPT at The Hague, The Netherlands, I was fortunate in meeting again Ms. Coni Ledesma, a member of the Negotiating Panel of the National Democratic Front-Philippines (NDFP) in peace talks with the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP). My first meeting with Coni took place over 20 years ago, in Rome, Italy, which I visited after I had chaired and participated in an international cultural symposium in Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia, in 1981. At The Hague, Coni was as vibrant as ever, knowledgeable and generous, open-minded particularly in relation with diasporic intellectuals from the “belly of the beast” like the present expatriate. I decided then that it would be a useful and rare opportunity to conduct this dialogue with an exemplary personality on themes and issues of general interest to a global audience.

To give a framework to this interview, I recapitulate the main events in Coni’s political history. Coni traces her politicization in the 1970s during the mass demonstrations in the Philippines against the Marcos regime which was then collaborating with the U.S. in the imperialist war in Indochina. After some legal political seminars and activities, she went underground and became one of the founders of the Christians for National Liberation (CNL), a significant formation of church people that initiated a path-breaking Filipino version of the “theology of liberation.” In August 1972, she was captured and detained for a year until she was released with the help of the Catholic bishops and the National Council of Churches in the Philippines or NCCP (as Frank Cimatu reports in *Kasama*, April-June 1998). She continued working with sugar workers in Negros, at which time (September 1973) she met her future husband Luis Jalandoni, who is now chair of the NDFP Negotiating Panel.

Aside from her role in the NDFP, Coni is also the international spokesperson of Makabayang Kilusan ng Bagong Kababaihan (Makibaka or Patrotic Moverment of New Women), a revolutionary organization of women, which has spearheaded the fight for women’s rights and collective well-being in the Philippines. Makibaka, for the record, is not a feminist (in the Western academic construal of the term) but a nationalist women’s group concerned with women’s liberation in a neocolonial “third world” setting, allied with the NDFP. It has roots in the complex debates on “the woman question” in the sixties and seventies (see my book *Filipina Insurgency*, Giraffe Books, 1999) and in the militant participation of numerous women combatants in the revolution such as Maria Lorena Barros, Cherith Dayrit, Judy Taguiwalo, and Vicvic Justiniani, to cite only a few names.

In my view, Coni’s role in the national-democratic struggle has been immense and substantial, her experience a rich and dynamic reservoir of wisdom for use by solidarity groups everywhere. Thus I feel that her insight into what’s going on may afford us a perspective not available from other sources. My encounter with Coni at The Hague, at a time and place that fused the urgency of the crisis in the human-rights situation in the Philippines with the combative elan of the witnesses at the People’s Tribunal, the impasse of

the anti-war efforts here in the metropolitan wasteland, and, above all, the realization that this wild and savage May election may be the pivotal turning-point in our national political life, has prompted this interview (conducted via the Internet from April 23 to May 8.)

The May election is crucial for Arroyo's survival. What is your reading of the situation today, before the elections on May 14? What is your prediction should massive cheating be exposed and the public becomes infuriated?

Although the May election is not a presidential election, it is crucial for the survival of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. She has survived two impeachment charges initiated in the House of Representatives, because she was able to buy the votes of the majority of the Congressmen, or because they were administration Congressmen and so voted against the impeachment.

If the opposition is to get at least one-third of the seats of the Lower House and a majority in the Senate, Congress could bring corruption and other charges against Arroyo and this could lead to her impeachment. She needs to ensure her hold on power and preserve the rotten and bankrupt system especially because she wants to conceal her crimes against the people.

She is already taking drastic steps to ensure the victory of administration candidates by using the Commission on Elections, the military and buying votes. Although the law prohibits the military from electioneering, there are reports that General Esperon sent a radio message to all personnel of the AFP to rig the results of the elections and ensure a 12-0 victory for the administration's senatorial candidates. AFP personnel are supporting and setting up campaign posters for the party list of Gen. Jovito Palparan (also known as "the Butcher of Mindoro"). AFP elements attacked the residence of religious leader, Eddie Villanueva, because of his anti-GMA stand (one of his sons is running for mayor in one of the cities of Mindoro, and another son heads the party-list Cibac or Citizens' Battle Against Corruption). Former President Corazon Aquino recently discovered that her telephone is being bugged. And most recently, Makati Mayor Jejomar Binay, who is also the president of the opposition party, United Opposition (UNO), was ordered suspended and was ordered to vacate City Hall. Supporters of Binay filled the City Hall, making it impossible for the police to send him out. Binay is running for reelection and is expected to win against the Malacañang candidate, Lito Lapid.

It is expected that there will be "*dagdag-bawas*" (vote-shaving and vote-padding) during the counting of the votes. This means, adding votes for the administration candidates and taking away votes from the opposition. This was the method used to make Arroyo "win" the presidency in 2004.

The increase in extra-judicial killing and forced disappearance, especially of leaders and members of progressive political parties and organizations, is also a desperate and futile attempt of the Arroyo government to scare and disenfranchise these parties and organizations.

What would happen if the massive cheating is exposed and the public becomes infuriated? The public is already infuriated. Arroyo's popularity rating is very low. She is considered an illegitimate president because of massive cheating used to get her elected. A possible reason why she still hasn't been ousted is because of the question of who will take her place as president. The logical constitutional succession would be the current Vice President, Noli

de Castro. But the large majority does not think he is qualified to be president.

Yet, an incident could ignite the people's anger so much that it can lead to mass actions which can lead to Arroyo's ouster. This was the case with Ferdinand Marcos, and later, with Joseph Estrada.

Should Arroyo's group win and dominate the Batasan, do you agree with some observer's opinion that Arroyo will implement the Anti-Terrorism Law and suppress Bayan and other opposition groups, including the party-list political formations - in other words, heighten de facto martial rule?

Even without the anti-terrorism law, Arroyo is already trying to disqualify progressive party-lists like Bayan Muna, Anakpawis and GWP. But the passing and implementation of the Anti-Terrorism Law is important not only as an instrument to help Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo stay in power, but also to preserve the interests of U.S. imperialism. The U.S. "war on terrorism" is actually a war against national liberation movements, anti-imperialist forces and against those who pose a threat to U.S. interests.

But the Filipino people are challenging the law and continuing to fight for their democratic rights. They are holding mass actions, protests, and moving to have the law declared unconstitutional.

What is your forecast of the next year or two of Arroyo's presidency, assuming she will win a majority in the Congress? If she doesn't, will impeachment unseat her?

If Arroyo stays as president until 2010, and if her current dependence on the military continues, and if she will continue to enjoy the backing of the U.S., the gross violations of human rights will continue and even worsen. She will implement the Anti-Terrorism Law, or as it is euphemistically called, the "Human Security Act of 2007." She will continue with the implementation of Operation Bantay Laya II (Operation Freedom Watch II).

Bantay Laya II is a continuation of the failed Bantay Laya I, a military campaign to crush the revolutionary movement, carried out in 2002-2006. Bantay Laya II is aimed at wiping out the revolutionary movement in five years. It is more vicious than Bantay Laya I, especially in its attacks against unarmed civilians and political activists living in the cities and towns. Death squads who kill or forcibly "disappear" anyone who opposes the regime is part of Bantay Laya II.

At the same time, Arroyo is faced with many problems which she has neither will nor capacity to solve. She could be impeached if the opposition takes the majority in both houses of Congress. She is isolated and unpopular. The AFP is wracked by deep divisions within its ranks due to corruption and complicity in criminal activities. The economy is in chronic crisis. It is being held afloat by massive borrowing and through the remittances of overseas Filipinos. Meanwhile, the mass movement continues to grow. A people's movement could oust her.

The PPT Second Session on the Philippines pronounced a verdict of guilty on the U.S.- Arroyo collusion. Please assess for now the impact of this historic conference.

The PPT is a court of international opinion and independent from any State authority. The importance and strength of its decisions rest on the moral weight of the causes and arguments to which they give credibility and their recognition in the UN Commission on Human Rights. The jurors are persons prominent in their respective fields of work. The PPT itself has prestige within the United Nations and among NGOs (non-government organizations).

The Second Session on the Philippines was held on March 21-25, 2007, in The Hague, the Netherlands. It was held shortly after the Melo Commission and UN Special Rapporteur for Extra-Judicial Executions, Philip Alston, came out with their respective reports finding the military responsible for the torture, extra judicial killings and disappearances of hundreds of leaders and members of progressive people's organizations.

The Tribunal judged the governments of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and of George Walker Bush, accountable "for crimes against humanity, with all the consequences for the persons who are responsible for them." It also stated that "such violations must be stopped immediately." The Tribunal connected the human rights violations with the interests of the U.S. It gave a more comprehensive and deeper analysis of the Philippine situation.

The appeal, indictment and verdict can be used as guides in studying the situation in the Philippines. They are also important documents for solidarity groups and organizations in planning activities and campaigns for the Philippines. The Tribunal denounces as unacceptable the inclusion of the Philippine government in the UNHRC. A campaign should be launched to call for the removal of the Philippines from the Council.

Please give a brief survey of the European attitude to Arroyo's bloody human rights record.

With the increase in gross violations of human rights, more and more European governments and inter-governmental bodies have spoken out to condemn and call a stop to these violations. In a forum in Oslo, Norway, a representative of the Norwegian government expressed concern about the human rights violations in the Philippines. No official of a European country has voiced such a concern in the past.

During the ASEM meeting in Helsinki, on September 10-11, 2007, the President of Finland, Tarja Halonen, raised the issue of political killings during Arroyo's official call on her. The Finnish Foreign Minister later said, "We also want to see an end to the political killings which still form a harsh reality of that country". Shortly after that, when Arroyo visited Belgium, European Commission President, Jose Manuel Barroso reminded Arroyo that the political killings in the Philippines were a matter of concern to the European Commission.

The European Commission's chief envoy to the Philippines, Amb. Alistair MacDonald, expressed shock over the human rights abuses that have become a daily occurrence in the country.

The European Parliament, in a plenary meeting in Strasbourg, passed a resolution expressing "grave concern at the increasing number of political killings that have occurred in recent years in the Philippines", and urged "the Philippine authorities to make the necessary investigations in a timely, thorough and transparent manner and to bring those responsible to justice." The IPU has expressed concern about the continuing repression of six members of the Philippine Congress, Reps. Satur Ocampo, Crispin Beltran, Liza Maza,

Joel Virador, Rafael Mariano, and Teddy Casiño and called for the release from detention of Crispin Beltran.

After conducting its own fact-finding mission on the human rights situation in the Philippines, the World Council of Churches (WCC) issued a statement on September 2006 condemning the extra-judicial executions and called an end to the killings.

An international fact-finding mission of lawyers (from the groups Lawyers for Lawyers, Lawyers Without Borders, and International Association of Democratic Lawyers) went to the Philippines last June 2006 to specifically investigate the killings of lawyers and judges. After the disappearance of Jonas Burgos, in late April 2007, the Amnesty International campaign coordinator said the Philippines' image has become that of "a land of lawlessness."

What role have Filipino migrants in Europe and elsewhere performed and accomplished in the task of confronting the political killings and massive corruption of the Arroyo regime? Are there new signs of political mobilization on their part?

Filipino migrants in different parts of the globe have formed human rights organizations and have set up forums and other public events to inform the people of the host country about the situation. They are participating in the different actions because their families back home are affected by the policy of killings by the Arroyo government and the military. During forums held, they share the experience of their families and friends who have become victims of human rights violations.

And now, after the Tribunal, Filipino organizations are holding forums and symposia to talk about the verdict of the Tribunal and call for more actions against ongoing human rights violations in the Philippines.

Finally, what is your assessment of the gains of the national democratic movement so far, and what are the problems it faces in the future?

In the Philippines, we have the legal national-democratic movement composed of legal and open people's organizations. And we have the 17 allied organizations of the NDFP and the millions of the revolutionary masses they lead, undertaking national democratic revolution through people's war.

Both the legal and the underground revolutionary movements accept the analysis that the root causes of the problems in Philippine society are U.S. imperialism, feudalism and bureaucrat capitalism. They also accept that a change in the present system is necessary. Both aspire for a society where the Philippines will be free from US domination, where the feudal mode of production and values are replaced with genuine land reform, and peasants will be given land of their own to till. Where the natural wealth of the Philippines will be owned and managed by Filipinos. Where there will be national industrialization. And bureaucrat capitalism will be replaced with a government free of corruption, where the vast majority of Filipinos (workers, peasants, fisher folk and petty bourgeoisie) will be adequately represented. A system where there will be real democracy.

The Arroyo regime calls the legal people's organizations "front" organizations of the CPP and the NDFP. They are not front organizations of the CPP and the NDFP. These legal organizations subscribe to and are guided by their own constitutions, organizational

principles, and programs.

The national-democratic organizations comprise the legal mass movement which has been the most consistent in the anti-imperialist and democratic legal struggle in the country. It has a strong mass movement. It has members in Congress. It is creative in using all forms of struggle to push for reforms and fight against the ongoing exploitation and oppression in the country. It organizes and mobilizes hundreds of thousands in different organizations and is deeply rooted among the Filipino people.

Of the substantial gains and achievements of the national-democratic movement since the 1960s, I will only mention the following: one significant achievement of the national democratic movement has been its politicization of the Filipino people as a whole. There is now a greater awareness of U.S. imperialism's hold on Philippine political, economic and cultural life than there was 20 or 30 years ago. For example, the broad mass movement was instrumental for the Senate voting the U.S. bases out of the Philippines in 1991.

The national-democratic movement played a most crucial role in ousting two presidents, Marcos and Estrada, and by doing so has weakened the neocolonial system.

The NDFP, the CPP and the NPA organize mainly in the countryside. Organs of political power and revolutionary organizations of women, youth and peasants are continually being established and strengthened. Mass campaigns such as health, education and economic programs that benefit hundreds of thousands of women, youth, peasants, settlers, and indigenous peoples are taking place in over 120 guerrilla fronts throughout the country. Implementation of the minimum program of agrarian reform such as lowering of land rent, increase of farm wages and farm gate prices, lessening of usury and establishment of cooperatives, is benefiting the peasant masses.

Major achievements of the CPP, NPA, and NDFP have been the two major Rectification Movements of the CPP.

The first rectification movement was in the 1960s. It repudiated the errors of the old Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP) and led to the re-establishment of the Communist Party in 1968.

The Second Great Rectification Movement was in 1992. The Central Committee took a strong position to analyze the major errors in the ideological, political and organizational line of the Communist Party and correct them. The rectification movement of the CPP influenced national-democratic organizations to look into their work and to undertake major corrections.

One of the gains of the national democratic movement has been the growth in political awareness and participation in the struggle of women. Women in their numbers have joined national democratic organizations. They have been elected to positions of responsibility and are among the most militant in defending their rights.

Makibaka, a revolutionary women's organization and a member of the NDFP, draws its membership from peasant, worker and women of petty bourgeoisie in the cities. Many Makibaka members have joined the NPA and have shown excellence in the field. Many have given up their lives in the struggle.

What problems will the national-democratic movement face in the future? Because of the

crisis of the present system, the national democratic movement can expect more repression from the reactionary state. And so, the national democratic forces have to be prepared for this. **Contributed to Bulatlat**

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