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THE PHILIPPINES

Weak State, Resilient President

Patricio N. Abinales

Shortly after government forces tear-gassed their way into one of Manila's finest hotels on 29 November 2007 to flush out thirty-odd "rebels" and their civilian supporters, Philippine-focussed e-groups began debating the significance of what became known as the "Makati stand-off".¹ Among the most popular messages was a joke patterned after American late-night host David Letterman's "Top Ten List". Purporting to be an "Intel Info" released by the government's National Intelligence Security Agency, it lists the "Top Ten Reasons Why [Navy Lieutenant Second Grade and Senator Antonio] Trillanes and Company Packed Up" and surrendered:

1. Not even his mother joined them.
2. Oakwood [the plush apartment complex Trillanes and comrades took over in an aborted 2004 coup] had a better lobby.
3. CNN was not there to cover it.
4. The hotel had run out of ice cubes.
5. The APCs [armed personnel carriers] were parked in the lobby, not in the parking lot.
6. Trillanes realized that being tear-gassed was not part of his mandate as senator.
7. [Former Vice-President Teofisto] Guingona [a civilian participant] thought it was an anti-Erap [former President Joseph Estrada], or pro-Erap pardon rally, whatever...
8. Surrender was better than the company of Father Robert Reyes [another civilian participant].

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9. Trillanes noticed that people were crying, not because of the tear gas but because of him.
10. Even GMA [Gloria Macapagal Arroyo] was beginning to look better the longer they stayed.²

This joke and its variants were notable for the way they turned Filipino political humour against the opposition, which is already struggling to prove its viability. In making fun of the small numbers and triviality of the Makati stand-off, the joke highlights the opposition's inability to gain traction despite major exposés against Arroyo and her close associates. Further, where it was once treated deferentially, the opposition here is put on the same level as the ruling elite led by President Gloria Arroyo.³ The joke's popularity also showed how popular sentiment pushed the anti-Arroyo forces off their moral high ground and onto the same level as those in power. In that corrupt, patronage-driven, opportunistic cesspool, Arroyo was *capo de tutti capo* (boss of all bosses) by virtue of her longer residence and knowledge of how things and people operate. This point was really the most humiliating for the opposition: having been sent into the political netherworld by public opinion, it was forced to play by the regime's rules and was expected to lose badly.

This essay explores the imbalance between the ruling administration and its opposition and attempts to decipher a particular puzzle of contemporary Philippine politics: the extraordinary resilience of President Gloria Arroyo. It suggests that Arroyo's staying power has to do with the nature of her political coalition. I do not refer here to her alliances with the military or the support she receives from international actors like the United States. Instead, I suggest we focus more on her relationship with provincial governors, city and town mayors, and village councillors, whose confidence Arroyo has maintained through her adept handling of state funds. With these local officials backing her up, and with the *secondary* support of the leadership of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, Arroyo has been able to deflect fierce criticism and ride wave after wave of opposition attacks on her presidency.

Equally, I will argue, it is the absence or brittleness of links between most anti-Arroyo forces and local political actors that accounts for the former's lack of success. Without such parallel networks, the opposition is limited to options with immediate propaganda impact but little mobilizational value. Or it must resort to elitist attempts to remove Arroyo surgically (for example, the coup or mutiny). Given the historic limitations of such strategies, each failure has diminished the opposition's standing in the eyes of the public, as demonstrated by the jokes following the Makati stand-off.

This essay starts with a discussion of local power and its impact on national politics since the end of the Marcos dictatorship. It then focuses on Arroyo's relationship with local power, showing how she has compensated for lack of political skill and manoeuvrability in Manila through alliances with local political clans and, to a lesser extent, a charisma targeted specifically at the provinces. Next, the absence of such relationships between local power and Arroyo's opponents is discussed, before concluding with a brief reiteration of Arroyo's political durability.

Local Power and National Politics

Twenty years after the fall of Ferdinand Marcos, the Philippines remains the classic example of a flawed attempt by a constitutional order to achieve substantive democracy. It has become the laboratory to test *and confirm* the variety of regimes associated with the weak post-colonial state. Studies cover all levels of Philippine politics, although the sphere most extensively covered is the local level. While typologies differ, these studies generally agree that the exercise of power by local strongmen/women, bosses, and families has been in pursuit of selfish ends.⁴ Rarely does local power become a force for substantive democratization and economic progress. Even reformists are thus tainted, and their regimes of exception do not last long, either reverting to the dark side before the end of their terms or once their successors take over.⁵

Perhaps because national–local ties appear primarily as props to individual or family-centred politics, the current literature spares them little analysis, leaving many questions unanswered: what kinds of relationships developed through time between the local and national? What were the bases of their growth, and what could cause them to break down? Do these ties help explain the persistence of a weak Philippine state? In the current literature, the patrimonial simply trumps the nation and individuals enshrine themselves in state institutions at the national level with the goal of expanding and protecting the power they have accumulated at the local level. Accordingly, the Marcos dictatorship has been portrayed as the ambitious project of an individual and his family to turn the country into its own private domain, to be looted and suppressed on whim.⁶ Ignored in the literature are projects of the dictatorship that tried to bring local power under the control of the national state, to impose “order” through national economic development at the expense of “anarchic” and often illicit economic activities.⁷ The developmentalist president, who once claimed that Philippine underdevelopment could only be reversed if the central state destroyed “the machinations of political leaders and

their oligarch friends”,⁸ has largely disappeared from scholarship and public imagination alike in favour of the “master *cacique*”⁹ that he also was. What remains unstudied are many episodes of central state intervention to destroy nodes of local power, especially in provinces and regions considered opposed to martial law.

A similar caricature has bedevilled another “strong president” — Fidel V. Ramos. Ramos was initially praised for breaking down “nationalist” barriers that slowed the Philippines’ integration into the global economy, trimming and reforming a state bureaucracy that appeared out of control, and imposing Manila’s developmentalist will on the provinces.¹⁰ Near the end of his term, however, the dark side had become more prominent with investigative reports of corruption in high places and self-serving moves by Ramos and his allies to extend his term of office.¹¹ The strong state Ramos pledged to install fell by the wayside as his desire to stay in power led him to compromise with the opponents of such a state — the political clans that controlled the provinces and had entrenched themselves in national institutions like the lower house of Congress.¹² By the time he stepped down, Ramos retained little of the reformist image he and his handlers had carefully nurtured in his first years in power. As this image deteriorated, so did scholars’ interest in his attempts to duplicate — under democratic conditions — Marcos’ state-centred programmes.¹³

At the other end of the spectrum stand Corazon Aquino and Joseph Estrada, now considered the weakest presidents of the post-authoritarian period. The literature on their administrations abounds with tales of indecisiveness, short-sightedness, and a recurring incapacity to impose presidential will on the “anarchy of families” keeping the areas outside Manila under semi-despotic control.¹⁴ These presidents’ most potent weapons were charisma — Aquino’s directed towards a broad community and Estrada’s specific to the poor and underprivileged — which mobilized hundreds of thousands early in their terms. But it proved insufficient to keep them unsullied. Aquino kept her promise to step down after her term, but by then Filipinos had begun to turn their back on the spirit of the “EDSA revolution”.¹⁵ Estrada failed even to weather his first and only major crisis.

The approach of these two presidents to local power reconfirms the insecurity of their regimes. Aquino consolidated her hold on the state through alliances with any political clan that was not overtly pro-Marcos.¹⁶ Her administration also provided the legal mantle under which local politicians would reassert themselves in the post-authoritarian era; Republic Act No. 7160 (Local Government Code of 1991) devolved many administrative powers of the national centre to local governments, increasing their share of internal revenue allocations and giving

them power to tax state corporations operating in their jurisdictions. As a result, some provinces began to enjoy remarkable growth, which equally enhanced the power of the families that governed them.¹⁷ Estrada, whose presidential campaign began with a very weak campaign structure, was even less discriminating, welcoming anyone who supported his candidacy into an election coalition. He was “as accommodating to legislators as Ramos was, [although] he exercised more discretion in dispensing largesse”, in part because of his “personalistic style”.¹⁸ But because he was aware that clan and strongman support was fluid and could easily change from one setting to another, Estrada also increasingly realized that the long-term stability of his presidency would depend on how he could control them apart from just doling out spoils.

Despite their broad electoral coalitions, Aquino and Estrada were stymied when they pursued policies inimical to local elite interests. For example, Aquino’s legislative allies supported the use of generic drugs, implemented *urban* land reform, and strengthened anti-rape and child exploitation laws. But they vehemently opposed her comprehensive *rural* land reform programme and blocked civil society advocacy of an anti-dynasty law that would weaken the power of political clans.¹⁹ Estrada’s fall was sparked not by opponents, but by his own decision to legalize and centralize the operation of a hitherto illegal and decentralized numbers game (*jueteng*), a move that angered a close ally who controlled *jueteng* operations in northern Philippines. Ilocos Sur governor Luis “Chavit” Singson’s exposé became the spark that led to Estrada’s ouster.²⁰ As the crisis grew, regional and local officials kept their distance from Estrada, partly because they shared Singson’s concerns over the destruction of a local source of booty.²¹

Arroyo in Context

When Arroyo took over the presidency from an ousted Estrada, then “won” another six-year term in 2004, she showed that she had learned from her predecessors’ experience with local power. The foremost of these lessons was in the handling of state revenues. Under the pretext of addressing high priority concerns like paying the country’s external and internal debts, past presidents had routinely held up internal revenue allocations owed to the provinces under the Local Government Code. But the pay-off came during elections, when local leaders — sensing their momentary leverage as vote-getters for the party in power — demanded the release of their allocations. Such give-and-take characterized the Aquino, Ramos, and Estrada presidencies.²²

In contrast, Arroyo has kept the flow of funds open to all but implacable opponents and thereby gained the loyalty of provincial governors and city and town mayors regardless of party affiliation. In her speech of gratitude to local officials for supporting her in 2004, she pointedly mentioned “releasing all the Internal Revenue Allocation and Local Government Service Equalization Fund to the municipalities”. She also announced that she was “condoning [cancelling] their debts to the national government” so they could better contribute to the country’s economic performance.²³ The not-so-subtle message was that as long as local officials supported her, money would flow; as long as money flowed, their provinces and their power would be secure. They have responded quite well to this approach.²⁴

Where Arroyo’s allocation of state revenue has been effective in gaining the support of political clans, charisma has helped keep voters enthralled. The Manila dailies generally portray Arroyo as dour and arrogant, wont to temperamental outbursts directed particularly at subordinates — faults she would eventually concede.²⁵ In the provinces, however, Arroyo projects a different persona: that of a big sister or young mother who can talk to her children *in their own languages*. Indeed, a powerful iconic strength of Arroyo is her facility in speaking the country’s major languages.²⁶ The first polyglot president, she has skilfully tapped this talent when campaigning in the provinces, somewhat offsetting her increasingly negative ratings in nationwide poll surveys.²⁷

With linguistic bonding legitimizing patronage ties, Arroyo has confidently deflected legislative and electoral attacks with the force of numbers. Such has also been the fate of two attempts to impeach her.²⁸ In the critical elections of 2004, when Arroyo faced a potentially strong challenge from an ageing but popular movie star, her victory was ensured not only by corrupt election officials, but by Muslim political clans who were rewarded with the right to govern the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao, the regional body created by Congress as an institutional canopy for provinces with Muslim majorities.

The presence of the military leadership in Arroyo’s camp has thus not been critical, but largely ancillary to the fundamental partnership of this president and local power. The generals are called in to quash attempted coups, but after the confrontations withdraw to the barracks to allow Arroyo and her politician allies to restore the *status quo ante*. This is hardly new: Marcos used the same tactic to deal with the military, asserting his “civilian supremacy” and relegating them to supporting roles until a bunch of young colonels changed the rules in 1985. Ironically, this is another lesson Arroyo has learned from a predecessor.²⁹

The strength of Arroyo's power nexus does not mean it experiences no tremors. Filipino political observer Manuel Quezon III noted how factional infighting at the local level threatened to break Arroyo's coalition on the eve of the 2007 legislative and local elections. Only a brokered truce preserved the coalition's majority in the lower house of the legislature, an outcome, Quezon warned, that could easily unravel.³⁰ The latest rift — reflected in growing animosity between Arroyo and House Speaker Jose De Venecia after the latter's son exposed a bribe attempt by an Arroyo ally to favour a Chinese company's bid for a multimillion peso national broadband network — seems to confirm Quezon's prediction.³¹ But on closer examination, the quarrel appears confined to the top level with little reverberation down the line, as the majority of congressmen, provincial governors, and city mayors continue to draw on Arroyo's patronage and reciprocate by protecting and defending her administration.³² When a reformist provincial governor publicized the "gift money" handed to members of the Union of Local Authorities of the Philippines (ULAP) after a meeting in the presidential palace, officers of the association vigorously deflected public criticism away from Arroyo.³³

Arroyo's Opponents and Local Power

Such tactical advantages allow Arroyo to continue to prevail over her political rivals. Anti-Arroyo politicians remain an insignificant but noisy minority in the House of Representatives and retain a tenuous hold over some provinces and cities. Their attempts to revive the impeachment charges against Arroyo have failed time and again, thwarted by a pro-Arroyo majority.³⁴ They do control the Senate, but so far their use of the upper chamber's investigative and treaty-approving powers has not made any dent on Arroyo's armour, despite revelation after revelation of corruption involving allies and relatives of the President.³⁵ These days, its dominant members have become more concerned with preparing for the next presidential election than going after the President.³⁶

With the Chief Justice leading the way, the Supreme Court has likewise shown signs of judicial activism, holding the government accountable for the extrajudicial killings of leftwing activists and using its mantle to create some form of human rights legal shield.³⁷ The government lost some propaganda points to as a result of the Court's postures, but these were not enough to destabilize Arroyo. With the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and other left-wing forces still unable to deliver the massive protests to back up the legal rulings, these legal counter-measures appear to have very limited effect.

Viewing the Arroyo presidency from the perspective of its national–local alliances also helps explain why the military “uprisings” against it have failed. The “mass support” that is critical to any military action against a regime in power did not materialize: no thousands of protesters trooped in from around Manila and its surrounding provinces; no surges of “people power” occurred in the further-flung provinces. The 2003 Oakwood mutiny, the attempted coup of January 2006, and the more recent takeover of the Manila Peninsula hotel were unable to muster the civilian support they needed because political clans refused to mobilize their constituents against Arroyo. Other recent events can also be understood through this prism, two of which are worth discussing here: the furore over the assassination of left-wing activists and the progress in peace talks between Muslim separatist rebels and the government.

Since 2001, hundreds of activists and cadres belonging to legal organizations of the CPP have fallen victim to Mafia-style executions.³⁸ These “extra-judicial killings” have occurred mostly in the provinces and their targets have been relatively unknown beyond their organizations. The loudest condemnation of the killings has come from the national dailies and human rights groups, both based mainly in Manila, and from representatives of the United Nations and Amnesty International.³⁹ In the provinces — where the assassinations are taking place — the anger has hardly been audible. The national and international media has identified this silence as apathy and indifference and blames it for Arroyo’s ability to eliminate opponents with impunity.⁴⁰ Unfortunately, this argument assumes “protest fatigue” without probing why people turn their backs on protest politics and why the CPP in particular — the most experienced of anti-state actors at protest mobilization — has been unable to rouse “the people”. Neither does it try to understand the contexts in which apathy unfolds.

One should not ignore the possibility that elites are keeping people off the streets, of course, given their determining role in local politics. In areas where clans are in open warfare with communists, preventing public protest goes along with the physical elimination of radicals. But in areas where there is no outright war, it is, ironically, the CPP’s own *modus vivendi* with local power that prevents the mobilization of protest. In these cases, the Party has formed alliances of convenience with political clans in which the two parties help each other win legislative seats.⁴¹ The Party’s New People’s Army (NPA) even receives “revolutionary taxes” from clans to allow them unmolested reign over their localities.

These opportunistic compromises have ironically affected the CPP’s ability to expand its urban networks. The communists have always emphasized that the effective growth in the cities and towns must be anchored on politicizing “the

masses” through continued political education and mass mobilization. This means cadres must exploit every political opportunity that could bring people out on the streets. In most cases, these protest actions are focused on “national issues” (American presence in the country, corruption at the top levels of government, “militarization”). But as the power of the political clans was restored, more episodes of repression and domination affecting the communists’ constituents were being perpetrated at the local level. This situation has created a dilemma for the CPP: will it order its cadres to broaden their agitation to include the clans, warlords, bosses and strongmen, or will it, in the interest of the electoral alliances, keep the protests centred only on national issues? There is very little evidence of the former, suggesting that the communists prefer not to break the political agreements they signed with the clans.⁴² But the political consequence has been serious: since its revival after a major split, the CPP has yet to achieve any breakthrough in organizing mass protests at the provincial and town levels. This vital component in projecting a national presence (the other is the increases in NPA attacks) is being frustrated not only by the failure of the CPP to re-capture the popular imagination, but also by these political compromises that prevent the Party from turning against its local “tactical allies”.⁴³

The other development that bears examination in the light of national–local alliances is the off-and-on discussion since 2005 between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Philippine Government over a lasting ceasefire and eventual agreement on the future of the Muslim minorities. The MILF became the “voice” of Muslim separatism when an older rival, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), signed a peace pact with the government in 1996 and was subsequently weakened by serious disagreement inside its leadership. Displaying panache and an unusual creativity, the MILF has compensated for some major military setbacks and its limited fighting space by mustering an assortment of unlikely international “supporters” of negotiations — from Malaysia and Brunei to the United States, Japan, and Canada — which subtly pressures the Philippine Government to grant more concessions to the rebel group.⁴⁴ This has worked so well for the MILF that there is now *de facto* recognition by these governments of the group’s right to create its own homeland (the current formal term is Bangsamoro Juridical Entity, or BJE), which could be attained through various means, including an outright partition of Mindanao island. The interest of these governments has also kept the BJE idea on the negotiating table despite the Philippine government’s repeated backtracking.⁴⁵

Despite these tactical gains on the MILF’s part, the government still retains the upper hand by virtue of its firepower, military backing from the United

States, and, within Mindanao, continuous suspicion of non-Muslims towards the strategic goals of the MILF.⁴⁶ After 2004, President Arroyo was able to slip one more ace up her sleeve — the support of important Muslim political clans. Since witnessing the MNLF's disastrous administration of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) and aware of the critical significance of these provinces to the outcome of many national elections, Arroyo renewed her faith in the traditional Muslim families that had dominated "Moro Mindanao" before the rise of separatism in the late 1960s. In the 2004 elections, several municipalities in the ARMM region turned out nearly 100 per cent in her favour. Following the election, Arroyo "handed" ARMM to the most powerful of these clans, the Ampatuan family, which has since dominated regional politics.⁴⁷

During its heyday, the MNLF had anchored its rebellion in a twin commitment to rid the southern Philippines of the repressive, centralizing, pro-Christian government in Manila and the traditional families whose collaboration with Manila since the late American colonial period was a root cause of Muslim backwardness. It accomplished neither, being bogged down in an inconclusive war with the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and betrayed by traditional elites who had initially showed interest in an alliance against Marcos.⁴⁸ The MILF has learned from this mistake and adopted a live-and-let-live relationship with traditional elites. Both sides have gone out of their way to prevent their armed groups from clashing, knowing how devastating this would be in terms of casualties.⁴⁹ A weakened MILF would become easy prey for the AFP, while a weakened political clan would become vulnerable to aspirant rivals and old foes. The MILF has therefore avoided "fighting on several fronts" and alienating purported constituents who remain loyal to traditional leaders.⁵⁰ But what is good for the MILF has also been good for the government. With the power of the traditional elite unchallenged by the supposedly radical MILF, Arroyo has been able to rely on the former, and as noted above, they proved very reliable allies in delivering the "Muslim vote" in 2004.

All (Philippine) Politics is Local

These predicaments illustrate the dilemma of the anti-Arroyo opposition. On the one hand, its vocal presence in Manila continues to attract the attention of media and the metropole's chattering classes. National coverage of anti-Arroyo politics remains high, thanks to a largely sympathetic media corps.⁵¹ The image of a president besieged by the opposition is then picked up by international media outlets, which portray the Arroyo regime as marked by "political instability and [slow] progress

on reforms”.⁵² Academics elaborate with their bleak prognoses, perpetuating the idea of perennial political instability. Consider the ominous opening in this 2006 assessment by social and behavioural sciences professor Frank Cibulka:

In 2006 the Philippines passed through another year of severe political weather with forms of instability accompanying attempts, whether by constitutional or unconstitutional means, to remove the embattled President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo from office... The country’s political stage hosted an appearance of almost all the political strategies characteristic of a weak post-1986 Philippine state: attempts at presidential impeachment and military coup, declaration of state of emergency, political violence, failed constitutional reform, and continuation of the communist and Muslim insurgences. *In many ways, Philippine politics appears to have become frozen in its perpetual state of varying levels of crisis.* Political instability is becoming expected and almost institutionalized (emphasis added).⁵³

On the other hand, the ruckus raised in the capital and the image of instability projected internationally do not conform with the remarkable stability of the regime as seen “from below”, where Arroyo has faced *not a single serious challenge since assuming the presidency*.⁵⁴ All the “strategies” mentioned above failed (no coup has succeeded since 1986 and, as mentioned above, the third attempt to impeach Arroyo fizzled out), or were too small and limited to effect a change in regime or state form. In fact, it is the opposition’s position that has been perennially fragile, arising from its inability to compete against Arroyo at the local level, where the “fighting” is intense, dispersed, and so “provincial” that it does not invite the same curiosity as political battles in Manila. The desperation most observers have come to associate with the 29 November 2007 Manila Peninsula takeover — in which the appeal of thirty “rebels” for “people power” fell on deaf ears — merely underscores the extent to which the opposition has lost mass support in both the capital and the provinces.

If we situate recent struggles within the state and between state and social forces (including communist rebels) on a broader historical canvass, we can see how decisive has been the local factor in their outcomes. Events like the nationalist revolution of 1896, the consolidation of American colonial rule and subsequent Filipinization of the colonial state, the birth of the Republic and suppression of the first communist rebellion, and even the Marcos dictatorship and “historic” People Power Revolution of 1986 cannot be completely understood without considering how they played out in the towns, cities, and provinces. At the same time, placing the local at the centre of political analysis may provide the key to deciphering

the enduring puzzle of the weak Philippine state with the uncanny ability to plod through one national crisis after another.

While it may be true that the state's weakness is primarily the result of social forces expropriating state resources and programmes to advance patrimonial interests, it is also precisely this appetite for plunder that enables those in control of the national state to secure support from social forces and to "govern".⁵⁵ National state actors craft mutually beneficial compromises with local political clans, strongmen and women, warlords and bosses wherein they make state largesse available in exchange for fidelity to national authority.⁵⁶ This is how Philippine presidents back to the 1930s were able to stay in power and to rule, with the exception of Estrada. Gloria Arroyo is simply continuing a tradition, although her position is perhaps much stronger since the pact has been institutionalized and legitimized by law. Moreover, the continuous and increasing flow of remittances from Filipinos working abroad prevents the depletion of resources that could instigate a breakdown of fidelity at the local level. The state takes a percentage of these remittances through various mechanisms, but even when revenues are low due to poor tax collection, national state leaders can rest content because the bulk of funds goes directly to family recipients and keeps communities relatively stable. Finally, Arroyo's endurance is assured by the dysfunction of the political parties and movements arrayed against her. Only the CPP has the potential to match her nationwide network, but in its current stage of "the strategic defensive", it would take years, even decades, to set up a parallel radical structure.⁵⁷

A pro-government columnist predicted that the President would complete her term, and there is no reason to doubt it.⁵⁸ However, she is mistaken in attributing this to "protest fatigue", a label whose popularity is directly proportional to the users' lack of curiosity about its factuality. Arroyo's staying power lies elsewhere, and this is in the way she has struck a balance between governing the country and pleasing her bevy of allies at the local level. As long as this concord is unshaken and appropriately bolstered by the support of military, police, and international allies and by the acquiescence of rich and middle-class Filipinos, Arroyo, despite her consistently low popularity, will remain secure in her post.⁵⁹ As a leader who has somehow found a way to tap on the very sources of state weakness — the proliferation of powerful local social forces and their ability to affect national state policies — and turn these into props to strengthen one's hold on national power, Arroyo may well become the model that her successors could emulate.

Her experience also provides the most crucial lesson that any anti-state actor or movement must keep in mind: that the success of their political project could

only come if they first confront political power not in Manila, but beyond the national capital.

Notes

- ¹ Other leaders of the group were retired Catholic bishop Julio Labayan, former president of the University of the Philippines Francisco Nemenzo, and Jesuit priest Robert Reyes. Detailed reports of what happened can be found in the website of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. See *Inquirer.net* <<http://www.inquirer.net/specialreports/makatistandoff/>>.
- ² The joke moved from the web to the mobile phone, where SMS-crazy Filipinos spread it further. Another joke — funnier and more tasteless — listed the “Top ten reasons why they should have gone to Victoria Court instead”, a reference to a popular Manila “love/sex hotel”.
- ³ In fact, there has been no let up in the comedic drumbeat against Arroyo, which in its combination of wit and nastiness remains unsurpassed. Arroyo’s diminutive physique has been a favourite target; everyday political laughter often revolves around her image as a nasty *duwende* (dwarf).
- ⁴ Among the prominent works on Filipino political clans, landed elites, warlords, strongmen, *caciques*, and bosses are: Benedict Anderson, “Cacique Democracy in the Philippines: Origins and Dreams”, *New Left Review* 169 (1988): 3–31; Temario Rivera, *Landlords and Capitalists: Class, Family and State in Philippine Manufacturing* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines, 1994); *An Anarchy of Families: State and Family in the Philippines*, edited by Alfred W. McCoy (Quezon City and Madison: Ateneo de Manila University Press and University of Wisconsin Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1994); *Boss: Five Case Studies of Local Politics in the Philippines*, edited by Jose F. Lacaba (Manila: Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism and the Institute for Popular Democracy, 1995); John T. Sidel, *Capital, Coercion and Crime: Bossism in the Philippines* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); and Mina Roces, *Kinship Politics in Postwar Philippines: The Lopez Family, 1946–2000* (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1991).
- ⁵ On these reformist politicians, see Jennifer Conroy Franco, *Elections and Democratization in the Philippines* (New York: Routledge, 2001); and Takeshi Kawanaka, *Power in a Philippine City* (Tokyo: Institute of Developing Economies, 2002).
- ⁶ See, for example, Albert Celozza, *Ferdinand Marcos and the Philippines: The Political Economy of Authoritarianism* (Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1997); and Belinda A. Aquino, *Politics of Plunder: The Philippines under Marcos* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines National College of Public Administration and Governance, 1999).
- ⁷ Marcos’s technocrats are now writing memoirs to show how committed they were to “national development”, only to be derailed by politics. The latest of these

recollections is Geronimo Z. Velasco, *Trailblazing: The Quest for Energy Self-Reliance* (Manila: Anvil Publishing, Inc., 2006).

- ⁸ Ferdinand E. Marcos, *The Democratic Revolution in the Philippines* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall International, 1974), pp. 133–34.
- ⁹ The term was coined by Benedict Anderson, who in his “Cacique Democracy in the Philippines” says (p. 20):

The Marcos regime, which began to entrench itself long before the declaration of Martial Law in 1972, was an instructively complex hybrid. From one point of view, Don Ferdinand can be seen as the Master Cacique or Master Warlord, in that he pushed the destructive logic of the old order to its natural conclusion. In place of dozens of privatized “security guards”, a single privatized National Constabulary; in place of personal armies, a personal Army; instead of pliable local judges, a client Supreme Court; instead of a myriad pocket and rotten boroughs, a pocket or rotten country, managed by cronies, hitmen, and flunkies ... But from another viewpoint, he was an original; partly because he was highly intelligent, partly because, like his grotesque wife, he came from the lower fringes of the oligarchy. In any case, he was the first elite Filipino politician who saw the possibilities of reversing the traditional flow of power. All his predecessors had lived out the genealogy of mestizo supremacy from private wealth to state power, from provincial bossism to national hegemony. But almost from the beginning of his presidency in 1965, Marcos had moved mentally out of the nineteenth century, and understood that in our time wealth serves power, and that the key card is the state. Manila’s Louis Napoleon.

- ¹⁰ Paul Hutchcroft, “The Philippines at the Crossroads: Sustaining Economic and Political Reform”, *Asia Society Asian Updates*, November 1996, <http://www.asiasociety.org/publications/au_philippines.html> (accessed 12 November 2007).
- ¹¹ On the positive performance of Ramos, see Emmanuel de Dios and Paul Hutchcroft, “Political Economy”, in *The Philippine Economy: Development Policies and Challenges*, edited by Arsenio M. Balisacan and Hal Hill (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2003), pp. 54–55; and Peter Krinks, *The Economy of the Philippines: Elites, Inequalities and Economic Restructuring* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 210–14. On corruption during the Ramos era, see Donald Kirk, *Philippines in Crisis: US Power versus Local Revolt* (Manila: Anvil Publishing Inc., 2005).
- ¹² See the sections on “The Presidency and Congress” and “Local Governments” in *Betrayals of the Public Trust: Investigative Reports on Corruption*, edited by Sheila S. Coronel (Manila: Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, 2000), pp. 98–195, and 276–306. See also Alfred W. McCoy, “‘An Anarchy of Families’: The Historiography of State and Family in the Philippines”, in *An Anarchy of Families*, p. 19.
- ¹³ Wilfrido Villacorta, “The Curse of the Weak State: Leadership Initiatives for the Ramos Government”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 16, no. 1 (1994): 67–92.
- ¹⁴ On the Aquino period, see *From Marcos to Aquino: Local Perspectives on Political Transition in the Philippines*, edited by Benedict J. Kerkviet and Resil B. Mojares

- (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1991). The Estrada administration has not been closely examined, perhaps because it did not last long. The nearest to a summation of the Estrada presidency is *Between Fires: Fifteen Perspectives on the Estrada Crisis*, edited by Amando Doronila (Manila: Anvil Publishing Inc., and The Philippine Daily Inquirer, 2001).
- ¹⁵ Emmanuel S. De Dios, “Philippine Economic Growth: Can it Last?”, in *The Philippines: New Directions in Domestic Policy and Foreign Relations*, edited by David G. Timberman (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998), pp. 51–53.
- ¹⁶ See, for example, the case of the Remulla political clan in Cavite, a province south of Manila. John T. Sidel, “In the Shadow of the Big Man”, in *Anarchy of Families*, edited by McCoy, p. 145. See also, Eric U. Gutierrez, Idelfonso G. Torrente, and Noli G. Narca, *All in the Family: A Study of Elites and Power Relations in the Philippines* (Quezon City: Institute for Popular Democracy, 1992).
- ¹⁷ “Local Governments”, in *Betrayals of the Public Trust*, pp. 276–306.
- ¹⁸ Sheila S. Coronel, Yvonne T. Chua, Luz Rimban, and Booma B. Cruz, *The Rulemakers: How the Wealthy and Well-born Dominate Congress* (Manila: Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, 2004), pp. 133.
- ¹⁹ Jose J. Magadia, *State-Society Dynamics: Policy Making in a Restored Democracy* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2003), pp. 21–42 and 93–112.
- ²⁰ Amando Doronila, *The Fall of Joseph Estrada: The Inside Story* (Manila: Anvil Publishing Inc., 2001).
- ²¹ It is notable that none of the major provincial leaders rallied to Estrada. Everyone waited on the sidelines.
- ²² “Getting the IRA right”, *Newsbreak Online*, 21 November 2006, <http://www.newsbreak.com.ph/index.php?option=com_jcs&task=add&Itemid=88889180> (accessed 12 November 2007).
- ²³ “GMA thanks local gov’t executives for supporting her bid in 2004 Presidential polls”, <<http://www.news.ops.gov.ph/archives2003/oct10.htm>> (accessed 11 December 2007).
- ²⁴ Policy Study, Publication and Advocacy (PSPA), Center for People Empowerment in Governance, “Pork barrel, perks help pro-Arroyo clans to dominate House, LGUs”, *Davao Today*, 5 June 2007, <<http://davaotoday.com/2007/06/05/pork-barrel-perks-helped-pro-arroyo-clans-to-dominate-house-lgus/>> (accessed 2 December 2007).
- ²⁵ “PGMA to continue improving on her temper in 2006”, Office of the Press Secretary, Republic of the Philippines, <<http://www.news.ops.gov.ph/archives2005/dec27.htm#PGMA%20to%20continue>> (accessed 23 November 2007).
- ²⁶ Arroyo is fluent in Cebuano, the language of central Philippines and most of Mindanao island. (See, for example, “Mindanao soon to be breadbasket of the nation again”, Office of the Press Secretary, Republic of the Philippines, <<http://www.news.ops.gov.ph/archives2004/jul01.htm>>, accessed 28 December 2007.) She also speaks Ilonggo, the language of west-central Philippines (“GMA hails Bishop Fortich’s concern for

peace, the poor”, Office of the Press Secretary, Republic of the Philippines, <<http://www.news.ops.gov.ph/archives2003/july15.htm>>, accessed 28 December 2007), Pampango (her father’s language), Ilocano (the language for most of northern Philippines) (In a speech in Ilocos Sur, a northern province, “[s]peaking in fluent Ilocano [the language of the north] throughout her 30-minute speech, Arroyo said attaining the First World status would mean getting to the grassroots. ‘We have to tackle the real issues of hunger and poverty more aggressively,’ she said.” *Inquirer.net*, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/breakingnews/nation/view_article.php?article_id=109386>, accessed 28 December 2007), Pangasinense (another northern Philippine language), Spanish and Tagalog. It appears she inherited her mother’s knack for language. See <<http://www.macapagal.com/em/index.html>>, accessed 28 December 2007.

- ²⁷ In 2004, the Philippines’ leading survey group, the Social Weather Station, reported that Arroyo’s rating in Metropolitan Manila went from “from –7 in August to –27 in October” and “from +3 to –18” in the rest of the Luzon islands, while it “remained positive in the Visayas (from +48 in August to +19 in October) and Mindanao (from +11 to +7).” The trend turned negative in 2006, declining in the Visayas from +6 in September to –7 in November; in Mindanao from –12 to –8 in the same period. Her “net satisfaction” in Manila, however, rose from –41 to –16. In 2007, she continued to lose support from the Visayas and Mindanao, with dissatisfaction “worsening” in Luzon. See “PGMA’s Satisfaction Rating of –6 is Second Lowest of her Presidency”, 25 November 2004; “GMA Net Satisfaction Slips to –13 Again, Fourth Quarter, 2006; and “PGMA’s net satisfaction rating is –11; net trust in FG Jose Miguel Arroyo is –37”, September 2007. Social Weather Survey, <<http://www.sws.org.ph/>> (accessed 14 December 2007).
- ²⁸ On the impeachment proceedings against Arroyo, see *The Daily PCIJ* (blog of the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism), <<http://www.pcij.org/blog/?cat=12>> (accessed 14 December 2005).
- ²⁹ Patricio N. Abinales, “Life after the Coup: The Military and Politics in Post-Authoritarian Philippines”, *Philippine Political Science Journal* 26, no. 49 (2005): 34–35.
- ³⁰ Quezon wrote: “In the end the House race, taken as a whole, did result in a big victory for the ruling coalition. But it was a mixed victory: 94 Lakas and 46 Kampi won overall; 26 seats went to the Nationalist People’s Coalition or NPC (generally in alliance with the administration). The party affiliations remain fluid, though: a Sun-Star report on May 30 placed the results at 92 for Lakas and 65 for Kampi! The opposition in its various manifestations thus garnered anywhere from 20 to 40 seats.” Manuel L. Quezon III, “An Abnormal Return to Normality”, *I Report Online*, 6 June 2007.
- ³¹ On this controversial deal, see <<http://www.inquirer.net/specialreports/nbndeal/>> (accessed 14 December 2007).

- ³² Norman Bordadora, “House Ok’s impeach case, but only in form”, *Inquirer.net*, 13 November 2007, <<http://www.inquirer.net/specialreports/nbndeal/view.php?db=1&article=20071113-100540>> (accessed 5 December 2007).
- ³³ See “Editorial: Follow the Money”, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 18 October 2007. ULAP consists of representatives of the different “leagues” of provincial, city, and town officials nationwide. See its website <<http://www.ulap.gov.ph/about.html>> (accessed 10 December 2007). ULAP was also a vocal opponent of the impeachment charges against Arroyo, issuing a resolution condemning the move. See the fervent defence of Arroyo by outgoing ULAP president, Bohol province governor Erico Aumentado at <<http://www.ulap.gov.ph/speecheba.html>> (accessed 18 December 2007).
- ³⁴ “House kills this year’s impeach against Arroyo”, *Inquirer.net*, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/breakingnews/nation/view_article.php?article_id=103298> (accessed 15 December 2007).
- ³⁵ The Senate has sided with civil society activists, blocking some of Arroyo’s attempts to open the economy further, by taking its time in debating the merits of international agreement like the Japan-Philippine free trade treaty. Donna Pazzibugan, “Senate rejection of JPEPA seen”, *Inquirer.net*, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/inquirerheadlines/nation/view_article.php?article_id=91225> (accessed 27 December 2007). On opposition from civil society groups, see Alecks P. Pabico, “JPEPA to encourage trade in hazardous and toxic waste”, *The Daily PCIJ Blog*, <<http://www.pcij.org/blog/?p=1264>> (accessed 20 December 2007).
- ³⁶ Gil C. Cabacungan, Jr., “Mar Roxas says he can do better job than Arroyo”, *Inquirer.net*, 17 August 2007, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/breakingnews/nation/view_article.php?article_id=83234> (accessed 31 December 2007); and Gil C. Cabacungan, “Lacson stands in Estrada’s way”, *Inquirer.net*, 31 December 2007, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/inquirerheadlines/nation/view/20071231-109523/Lacson_stands_in_Estradas_way> (accessed 31 December 2007).
- ³⁷ Tetch Torres, “SC issues writ of amparo to protect activist and kids,” *Inquirer.net*, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/breakingnews/nation/view_article.php?article_id=97946> (accessed 10 December 2007).
- ³⁸ See the 2007 Report of the pro-CPP human rights group Karapatan, <http://stopthekillings.org/stknpv2/files/karapatan_2007hr_report.pdf> (accessed 11 December 2007).
- ³⁹ See Carmela Fonbuena, “Seeing Red”, *Newsbreak*, 2 July 2006; “UNRep hits military for ‘unconvincing theory’”, *Newsbreak*, 20 February 2007; Lou Janssen Dangzalan, “Lawmakers challenged to act on human rights abuses”, *Newsbreak*, 25 May 2007; Glenda Gloria, “Dirty war by the AFP”, *Newsbreak*, 25 June 2007; and Philip Alston, “Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, including the right to development: Report of the special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitration executions, mission to the Philippines (addendum)”, <http://www.inquirer.net/verbatim/A-HRC8-Philippines_Advance.pdf> (accessed 12 December 2007).

- ⁴⁰ “A failed mini-coup”, *The Economist Intelligence Unit Briefing*, 3 December 2007, <http://www.economist.com/displayStory.cfm?story_id=10238253> (accessed 17 December 2007).
- ⁴¹ Nathan Quimpo, “The Left, Elections, and the Political Party System in the Philippines”, *Critical Asian Studies* 37, no. 1 (2005): 16, 18.
- ⁴² Communists have mainly targeted village leaders who openly support the military. For a more recent example, see “Village exec killed, soldier hurt in Palawan rebel attacks”, *Inquirer.net*, 30 December 2007, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/breakingnews/regions/view_article.php?article_id=109511> (accessed 30 December 2007). Rarely were mayors and governors attacked. An exception was former Cagayan provincial governor Rodolfo Aguinaldo who was killed for the “blood debts” he accumulated while being with the military. Aguinaldo was known to have tortured political prisoners. See “Unsolved Murders”, *Newsbreak Online*, 22 October 2006, <http://www.newsbreak.com.ph/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1367&Itemid=88889308> (accessed 30 December 2007).
- ⁴³ There is also the cost of mobilization. For a simplistic cost-benefit analysis of the CPP’s mobilizing capacities, see Alexander R. Magno, “The Insurgency that Would Not Go Away”, in *Whither the Philippines in the 21st Century?*, edited by Rodolfo C. Severino and Lorraine Carlos Salazar (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007), pp. 324–25.
- ⁴⁴ On why the MILF sought out the United States, see Abhoud Syed M. Lingga, “The U.S. Role in the Mindanao Peace Process: Bangsamoro Perspectives”, presentation delivered at the symposium on the U.S. Role in the Indonesian and Philippine Peace Processes, Asian Center, University of the Philippines, 27 November 2003.
- ⁴⁵ Marites Danguilan Vitug, “GRP backtracks on self-determination offer to MILF”, *Newsbreak*, 21 August 2007. After agreeing “in principle” to the MILF’s position on “self-determination”, the government recently proposed that any peace talks be considered as part of the Philippines’ constitutional process, which immediately led to an MILF boycott of talks. Carlos H. Conde, “Filipino talks with separatists seriously set back”, *International Herald Tribune*, 16 December 2007, p. 3.
- ⁴⁶ I explored these advantages in Patricio N. Abinales, “Sancho Panza in Buliok Complex”, in *Whither the Philippines in the 21st Century?*, pp. 289–98.
- ⁴⁷ “Magindanao political clan pledges support for GMA’s administration”, 5 June 2004, Office of the Press Secretary, Republic of the Philippines, <<http://www.news.ops.gov.ph/archives2004/jun05.htm>> (accessed 15 November 2007); Jowell Canuday, “A clan rules ARMM”, *Newsbreak*, 11 September 2005, <http://www.newsbreak.com.ph/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=649&Itemid=88889006> (accessed 12 December 2007). See also Benedicto Bacani, “MNLF loses the ARMM: A setback for peace?”, *ARMM in Transition Series*, Institute for Autonomy and Governance, Notre Dame University, Cotabato, 1 (15 August 2005), pp. 4–5.

- ⁴⁸ On the durability of these Muslim traditional elites, see Eric Gutierrez, “In the battlefield of the warlord”, and Francisco L. Gonzales, “Sultans of the violent land”, in *Rebels, Warlords and Ulama: A Reader on Muslim Separatism and the War in [the] Southern Philippines*, edited by Kristina Gaerlan and Mara Stankovitch (Manila: Institute for Popular Democracy, 2000), pp. 39–84 and 85–144.
- ⁴⁹ See, for example, Carolyn Arguillas, “Rebels vs. Politicians”, *Newsbreak*, 27 August 2006, <http://www.newsbreak.com.ph/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1568&Itemid=88889172> (accessed 12 December 2007).
- ⁵⁰ On the tensions between separatists/fundamentalists and traditional powers, see Thomas M. McKenna, *Muslim Rulers and Rebels: Everyday Politics and Armed Separatism in the Southern Philippines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), pp. 234–54.
- ⁵¹ Media coverage of communist criticism of Arroyo is particularly high. When journalists seek out the “militant voice”, they almost always go to representatives of the CPP’s legal organizations, as well as politicians identified closely with the Party.
- ⁵² “The jeepney economy revs up”, *The Economist*, 16 August 2007, <http://www.economist.com/displayStory.cfm?story_id=9657147> (accessed 1 December 2007).
- ⁵³ Frank Cibulka, “The Philippines: In the Eye of the Political Storm”, *Southeast Asian Affairs 2007*, edited by Daljit Singh and Lorraine C. Salazar (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2007), p. 257. Cibulka sees strength only in the economy, but economists warn that unless fiscal reforms as well as “structural policy reforms affecting public utilities and infrastructure as well as land and natural resources” are implemented, economic growth will remain limited. Gerardo P. Sicat, “Philippine Macroeconomic Issues and Challenges”, in *Whither the Philippines in the 21st Century?*, p. 169.
- ⁵⁴ One could see the 2004 presidential election as a major test of Arroyo’s ties with local power, but it should also be pointed out that even without the evident manipulation of votes in Muslim Mindanao, Arroyo would still have won by a comfortable margin over her rival, the ex-movie star Fernando Poe, Jr. *The Economist* noted: “Elections are a dirty business in the Philippines, and Mrs Arroyo’s supporters privately concede that the opposition probably would have found evidence of tampering if Congress had accepted its demands for a more thorough review. Indeed, in at least one precinct, she won more votes than there were voters... But Mr Poe is assumed to have used similar tactics — and cheating probably did not occur on a sufficient scale to account for Mrs Arroyo’s winning margin of over 1m votes.” “Bad Losers”, *The Economist*, 24 June 2004, <http://www.economist.com/research/backgrounders/displaystory.cfm?story_id=2796999> (accessed 15 December 2007).
- ⁵⁵ See note 4.
- ⁵⁶ A young scholar suggests that patronage politicians are also influenced by a “moral code” that explains, among other things, their support for national state actors.

Unfortunately, space and time preclude me from exploring this alternative approach in this essay. See the fascinating account of northern Philippine local politics by Pak-nung Wong, “Technologies of the Strong: State Building in a Northeastern Philippine Frontier”, Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oxford, 2006.

- ⁵⁷ The Party is not fully recovered from its 1992 split. See Part II of Dominique Caouette’s voluminous study on the CPP, “Persevering revolutionaries: Armed struggle in the 21st century, exploring the revolution of the Communist Party of the Philippines”, Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, 2004.
- ⁵⁸ Belinda Olivares-Cunanan, “Arroyo safely ensconced until 2010”, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 13 December 2007, p. 5.
- ⁵⁹ “PGMA’s net satisfaction rating is -11; net trust in FG Jose Miguel Arroyo is -37”, September 2007. Social Weather Survey, <<http://www.sws.org.ph/>> (accessed 14 December 2007).