

# Philippines Elections Show No Solution Ahead

by Mike Billington

The May 10 Presidential elections in the Philippines are moving slowly towards a final vote count (official tallies are not expected until mid-June), with all generally agreeing that President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo will be declared the winner, but only by a small margin over her closest opponent, actor Ferdinand Poe. With five candidates in the race, Arroyo will likely wind up with less than 40% of the vote, to Poe's 36%. There is widespread unrest over the conduct of the election, with accusations of fraud from several highly credible sources, and rival poll-monitoring agencies showing Poe in the lead. Mass demonstrations are planned, and coup rumors are rife. This dark outlook only adds to an economic situation in which the internal debt crisis is out of control, even while the global financial bubble is exploding.

The Philippines has been without national leadership since the U.S.-orchestrated military coup against President Ferdinand Marcos in 1986—for which Paul Wolfowitz, the architect of the current disaster in Iraq, likes to take partial credit. President Corazon Aquino, placed in office after the coup against Marcos, did as she was told by the man who ran the coup, Gen. Fidel Ramos, who in turn did as he was told by his sponsors in Washington and New York—until he became President himself, selling the nation wholesale to Enron and its like in the 1990s.

When Joseph Estrada, a former action-hero movie star who had served as a Senator and Vice President before his election as President in 1998, proved to be unwilling to impose, on the population, the full scope of this sellout to the globalization mafia, another “election Philippines-style” was staged, with a mob on the street fronting for a military coup under U.S. direction—with General Ramos and his circle again pulling the strings. Then Vice-President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo was installed as President, and immediately privatized and deregulated the power sector, and generally pledged the nation to full International Monetary Fund (IMF) control, while also lending her support to the neo-conservative war machine in Washington.

## A Divided Nation

The May 10 election forced Arroyo to risk her position before the electorate, even as the national economy is in shambles, with one-third of the national budget going to debt ser-

vice, half the population living on less than \$2 per day, and the budget sustained through remittances from the one-fourth of the workforce which has been sent overseas to work (including 3,000 laborers in Iraq). A divided opposition, however, was unable to unite behind a single candidate against Arroyo. As a result, three candidates strongly opposed to her policies are polling over 50% between them, but Arroyo is officially, at any rate, leading her nearest rival, action-movie star Poe.

Poe, unlike his friend former President Estrada, had no experience of any sort in government before this campaign. Although he had many leading nationalist economists and patriots around him, he chose to say virtually nothing about his plans for the nation, relying on his popularity as an actor to defeat the extremely unpopular Arroyo. Whatever the final official vote count, and whatever the evidence of fraud, it is clear that he failed to rally the population around a mission for the nation. The result is a nation fiercely divided, a military on edge (not unlike many in the U.S. military, angry over the consequences of Dick Cheney's pre-emptive war doctrine), and an economy ready to implode.

While it is widely asserted that the Philippines, unlike Argentina, will not be cut off by the IMF—out of gratitude for its subservience to the IMF and to the Washington neo-con cabal—that belief ignores the collapse of the U.S. speculative bubble itself. Also, the protectors of Arroyo's government in the Pentagon—Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz et al.—may soon find themselves out of a job—even before the U.S. election—as more ugly realities of their beast-man policies are revealed daily.

The Philippines Catholic Church, too, is divided at the top over the crisis. The Church under Cardinal Sin, who is now retired, had given its full support to the “people's power” charade for the overthrow of Marcos and Estrada, but other voices are heard today. Archbishop Oscar Cruz, the former President of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, said on May 24 that “It will be very, very difficult days ahead of us. If she [President Arroyo] wins—and, most probably, she'll win—she'll find it hard to govern, because there will always be questions on the credibility of elections.” Asked about the accusations of fraud, he responded: “Nobody is beyond suspicion.” He added that President Arroyo had lost her “moral ascendancy” when she reneged on her December 2002 pledge to the nation that she would not seek re-election.

The anger among the poor—which is the majority in the Philippines—over the possibly tainted electoral loss by Poe, widely perceived as their candidate, is exacerbated by the devastating impact of the economic crisis. On May 24, the Arroyo Government approved an increase in bus and “jeepney” fares by as much as 37%, due primarily to the spike in gas prices. Manufacturing output collapsed in March by 11%, further exacerbating the unemployment rate, which is already the highest of the 11 largest Asian economies.