

Editorial

Philippines: Cracks in the barracks

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IT does no good for any administration spokesman to address public fears about a military takeover by arguing, as Secretary Ricardo Saludo did the other day, that the country has never suffered a general failure of elections. Just because it hasn't happened before doesn't mean it cannot happen at all.

In fact, the Arroyo administration Saludo serves can be said to have redefined politics, the art of the possible. Many things commonly thought to be impossible, at least in a republic that takes democratic principles seriously, the administration has conjured into political reality: for instance, the fabricated people's initiative; the blanket policy (a gag order on all officials of the Executive) designed only to frustrate Senate investigations; the willful breaking of the last taboo of the post-Marcos era, through the hasty testing of the imposition of martial law in a troubled province; and the systematic packing of the Supreme Court with loyalist "interpreters" of the Constitution, resulting in last week's startling decision encouraging President Macapagal-Arroyo to violate the Constitution's express ban on election-period appointments.

Not least, there is the administration's almost complete handover of the top military positions to its favorite generals, at the expense of the tradition of seniority and the armed services' long-term interests. Lt. Gen. Delfin Bangit, after a posting as Army chief, has been appointed chief of staff. Maj. Gen. Reynaldo Mapagu has been named commanding general of the Army, by far the military's biggest unit. Earlier, Lt. Gen. Oscar Rabena was designated Philippine Air Force chief, Maj. Gen. Juancho Sabban as Marine Corps commandant, and Maj. Gen. Romeo Prestoza as chief of the pivotal Intelligence Service, AFP or Isafp. All of them belong to the Philippine Military Academy's Class of 1978, which hails President Macapagal-Arroyo as an "adopted" member.

According to the latest tally, seven of the Army's 10 divisions are also headed by Class of 1978 graduates. This is an astonishing statistic, not so much because of the dominance of one class, but because the dominant class is not the most senior. Before Bangit, once the head of the Presidential Security Guard, was appointed chief of staff, many other generals, from the classes of 1977 and 1976, were thought by some in the military to be actively in the running, including at least five three-star officers from the Class of 1976 (including Ben Dolorfino of the Western Mindanao Command) and at least three-star generals from the Class of 1977 (including Raymundo Ferrer, Dolorfino's counterpart in the Eastern Mindanao Command and martial law administrator in Maguindanao). The more junior Bangit got it, however (with his posting as Army chief helping smooth the way).

In contrast, the chief of the Philippine National Police, Director General Jesus Verzosa, a member of Class '76, received a high-profile snub from President Arroyo only the other day, when for some reason the commander in chief decided to skip the graduation rites at the Philippine National Police Academy. Verzosa has taken pains to emphasize that there was no snub, but it is fair to say that even ranking police officials do not believe his denial entirely. Verzosa's sin? He answered a hypothetical question from this newspaper and said he would not follow illegal orders. For reiterating a cardinal republican principle, he has found himself in Malacañang's doghouse.

The administration's dependence on the PMA Class of 1978 places a great, even onerous burden on the chain of command. This is not to say that the privileged members of this class will necessarily follow illegal orders, any more than the majority of justices in the Supreme Court will necessarily reject a motion for reconsideration of the decision on the appointments ban. But because of the long shadow cast by the Arroyo administration's track record in doing the once politically impossible, the generals of Class '78 will labor under the presumption, shared even by other members of the military, that their loyalty is to the person of the President, not to the Constitution. That explains the cracks we hear forming on the walls of the barracks.

P.S.

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