

# Philippines: A legacy of instability

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PRESIDENT MACAPAGAL-ARROYO CAN MAKE all kinds of claims about the accomplishments of her presidency, but what she will be long remembered for is the legacy of political instability she leaves behind. So important is stability to the functioning of a democracy that one of the crucial achievements of any administration is the peaceful and orderly transfer of power to a new set of leaders at the end of its term. That is why the election of a new president is always a milestone in the life of a democratic polity, and it is especially significant after a long period of uncertainty. Persistent political crisis burdens the legal system, and, in the long term, it engulfs the rest of society's institutions—the economy, the religious sphere, the civil service, the armed forces, etc.

Our first taste of sustained political instability in the post-war years came with the declaration of martial law. Marcos' second term as president would have ended in 1973, but, having hijacked the ongoing Constitutional Convention, he did not transfer the reins of government at the end of his term in 1973. A new constitution legalized his continued stay in office. From then on, it became uncertain when and how the Marcos regime would end. Having installed itself by arms, it was logical to think that it could only be ended by arms.

But the snap election that Marcos was prompted by the United States to call in February 1986 paved the way for Cory Aquino's unexpected rise to the presidency. Cory did not draw her mandate from the snap election, for she lost it officially. She drew it rather from the peaceful EDSA I uprising that broke out in the aftermath of that stolen election.

Seven failed military coups, including two very serious ones, challenged the new president's right to govern and prevented her from focusing on governance. Thus, it is often said that Cory's biggest achievement was her political survival. I think that her biggest achievement was presiding over the transfer of state power, at the end of her term, to her duly-elected successor, Fidel V. Ramos. That event capped the stabilization of the country's political system.

The margins separating the three front-runners in that election were so slim that, under a less credible Commission on Elections, and under a distrusted presidency, the results would have been violently contested. Yet President Ramos went on to enjoy the benefits of political stability, the seeds of which were planted by a credible predecessor. It is a testimony to the enduring nature of that stability that the winner in the presidential election six years later—Joseph Estrada, who was not the choice of the elite nor of the EDSA I forces—would be sworn in without delay. What happened after that, however, is another story.

Approaching the third year of his six-year term, Estrada became the subject of a televised impeachment trial that threatened to strip him of the presidency. The whole process seemed to be going well until the matter of the second envelope cropped up, triggering a moment of confusion in the impeachment court. An extra-constitutional transfer of power was the last thing the nation needed at that point, yet something like that happened after the impeachment court failed to resume its sessions. That event known as EDSA II put the Supreme Court in an extremely difficult position. It politicized the armed forces once more. It made the leaders of the Catholic Church again assume

roles outside their legitimate function in a modern society. The subsequent arrest of the ousted president sparked Edsa III and brought the country to the brink of civil war. We continue to reap the bitter fruit of that moment of political recklessness.

The political crisis spawned by Edsa II strained the credibility of our legal system. But, more than that, it wiped out all the gains of the previous years by installing a president who spent her entire presidency fighting for political survival.

Instead of treating the remaining years of Estrada's aborted term as a transitional period, President Arroyo magnified the crisis by going for a full six-year term in the 2004 presidential election. Against a popular opponent, she deployed everything within her power—state funds, the police, the military, Comelec operators, etc.—just to ensure victory. This is what the framers of the 1987 Constitution precisely sought to avoid when they banned the reelection of a president. But, not having been previously elected to the position, GMA was not, technically speaking, seeking reelection. The imperatives of presidential survival made the police and the military once more the fulcrum of politics. The more GMA felt threatened, the more she turned to the armed forces for support. The more she bought military and political support, the more unpopular and illegitimate she became in the eyes of the public.

It is well to remember all this today, on the 24<sup>th</sup> year of Edsa I, because, unlike Cory Aquino who could not bear to stay a minute longer in the presidency, GMA is determined to remain an active political player by moving to another position right after her presidency expires. That, to me, is the most important factor that fuels continuing instability in our political system. It colors everything. It forces us to take a second look at events that seem unintended or insignificant, but suddenly acquire meaning when viewed in the light of GMA's congressional bid. It is a concern that begs to be taken into account in our choice of the next president. Who among the current presidential contenders has the will to stop her? That is the question.

**By Randy David**

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