

Philippines: After the State of Emergency, a chronic crisis of the regime

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On February 24th, 2006, a state of emergency was imposed in the Philippines, then lifted a week later. It was a serious measure. The discretionary powers which the presidency, the police and the army were endowed with correspond, with only slight differences, to the regime of martial law that Ferdinand Marcos decreed in 1972, the prelude to thirteen years of dictatorship. It provoked so much opposition (also within the political and military establishment), that the presidency had to agree to rapidly put an end to it, which however did not mean a return to normal conditions.

The Philippine regime is in chronic crisis. This crisis was opened up more than twenty years ago, in 1984, with the assassination of Ninoy Aquino the principal bourgeois opponent of Marcos. It was then a crisis of the dictatorship, overthrown in 1986 by a combination of military rebellion and a pacific mass uprising, but which has become a permanent feature.

The fall of the dictatorship initiated a real process of democratisation that was never completed. The tendency was reversed over the years: towards the re-establishment of an authoritarian government, against a backdrop of the social violence of neo-liberal policies and the re-militarisation of the country in the name of anti-terrorism.

So, the proclamation of the state of emergency was not an isolated act. It was part and parcel of a whole series of « calibrated » measures that aim at still further reducing the democratic space that was opened twenty years ago. The fact that the state of emergency was decreed on the day when demonstrators were celebrating the 20th anniversary of the EDSA uprising, of the fall of the dictatorship was particularly symbolic.

However, the re-establishment of an authoritarian state in the Philippines is running up against several obstacles, starting with the divisions within the army itself and those between the “big provincial political families” who hold a large part of real power. The presidency evoked the existence of a « plot » fomented jointly by the Communist Party of the Philippines and right populist military factions to justify the proclamation of the state of emergency. Repression hit first a few rebel officers and heads of legal organizations identified by the regime with the CPP.

The said « plot » denounced by Gloria Arroyo looks quite evanescent. What is real, nevertheless, is that the army, the Administration and all political institutions have been the arena of numerous factional conflicts. This is one of the principal factors that explain the chronic instability of the regime.

The current president, Gloria Arroyo, is having real difficulty in overcoming these divisions within the political and military establishment. Guilty in the eyes of the population of massive electoral fraud, she has lost all popular legitimacy and authority. It was above all to protect her personal position that she decreed the state of emergency, relying especially on the police, in the absence of

sufficient backing from the army. She has the support of Washington and the powerful Catholic hierarchy, but not more.

The regime's stabilization faces a second obstacle : the depth of the social crisis which has created popular resistance all over the country. The incompetence of the successive governments has been such that the clientelistic electoral system no longer functions normally, at the national scale at least (the situation is different in the provinces). A sign of the times, « outsiders », more than once, were elected presidents (Fidel Ramos, Joseph Estrada...) during the past decade.

In these conditions, the militant Left retains a real ability to mobilize. Indeed, it contributed to overthrowing several presidents ! But it has also been weakened by the murderous degeneration of the Communist Party (Maoist) and the resulting division within the popular forces. Consequently, a certain political cycle has repeated in these twenty years : governmental incompetence, open crisis of the regime, mass mobilizations, fall of the presidency... to the advantage of a bourgeois alternative —unstable, temporary, full of contradictions, but bourgeois. The big political families have remained masters of the game and the popular sectors have been dispossessed of their victory. This type of cycle is not specific to the Philippines. One knows how this can be demoralizing in time. The ultra-sectarianism of the CPP adds to this failure and this is not the least of the problems posed today.

In reality, Gloria Arroyo decreed the state of emergency through weakness; she had to lift it quickly for the same reason. The power crisis is far from being overcome. But it does not mean that the democratic struggle has been won. New measures will be taken, with the help of Washington, to impose an authoritarian regime. The Philippine Left will need international solidarity to confront these new measures.