

# Democracy, National Security and Foreign Policy: A Philippine Perspective

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## Introduction

As Samuel Huntington in his book *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century* points out, the wave of democratization has swept the world and it continues to do so to this date, with the Philippines being one of the countries undergoing the process of re-democratization starting in 1986. In its most basic sense, democratization is the process by which a society adopts democracy as its way of life and its system of government. Having said that, it now becomes an imperative for us to examine what exactly is democracy.

Democracy could mean many things. However, in its most basic sense, democracy boils down to what the Greek words comprising it mean – *demos* (people) and *kratos* (rule of). Democracy therefore means rule of the people. But then again, this seemingly simple meaning of democracy – rule of the people – is not at all that simple. On the contrary, it is quite complex.

This concept of the “Rule of the people” could be seen either from a nominal perspective or from a more substantive viewpoint. Nominally, the people rule when there exists in a society an “institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for the people’s votes” (Schumpeter 1976: 269). Huntington supports this view when he argues that the primary criterion for democracy to exist is the “equitable and open competition for votes for political parties without government harassment or restriction of opposing groups” (Huntington 1991). Elections regularly held and relatively free, are also considered to be at the very heart of democracy when Robert Dahl enumerated the procedural minimal conditions of democracy. These include to wit: (1) control over government decisions about policy is constitutionally vested in elected officials, (2) elected officials are chosen in frequent and fairly conducted elections in which coercion is comparatively uncommon, (3) all adults have the right to vote in the election of officials, (4) all adults have the right to run for elective offices, and (5) citizens have a right to express themselves without danger of severe punishment on political matters broadly defined (Robert Dahl as cited in Schmitter and Karl 1993).

In simple terms, democracy exists at least nominally when the people are given the right to choose their own set of leaders through the electoral exercise. And the elections should

be made to reflect the true will of the people so that the winners in the contest are indeed the leaders the people want.

From a more substantive perspective, however, democracy could not only be reduced to the conduct of regular elections whereby the people choose their leaders. For a society to be considered substantively democratic and therefore the people rule, the government must be responsive to the needs of the people, particularly their welfare and well-being. Over the long-term a noticeable improvement in the people's lives should be noticed (See Miranda 1993: 85-112).

The reason why I wanted to examine democracy along these so-called nominal and substantive perspectives is because in my subsequent discussion in this presentation, I will examine the role that the Armed Forces of the Philippines has played in Philippine democracy both at the nominal level and the substantive level.

### **Democracy, Elections and the Philippine Military**

As I previously mentioned, for a society to be considered democratic, the people must be given the opportunity to select their leaders. Thus, elections must be held and held regularly. For us Filipinos, elections have always been considered very important, so important that the mere insinuation that elections are not going to held could practically move Filipinos to go out into the streets to demand that elections push through. From my perspective, Filipinos are ready to counter anyone seeking to prevent the conduct of elections. And in this context, the AFP has played a key role in ensuring that elections are held and held honestly, credibly and peacefully.

In the last national and local elections held in May 2004, for example, the AFP organized what is called Task Force HOPE – HOPE standing for honest, orderly and peaceful elections – to support the Commission on Elections (COMELEC). This was particularly significant considering the fact that in addition to the usual violence that erupts during elections perpetuated by rival candidates, the local insurgents and criminal groups “have [recently] joined the frenzy, using the electoral process as a means of acquiring funds, logistical capabilities and influence from some candidates, demanding financial/materiel support from candidates in exchange for access to voters ... [and harassing] the opponents of their favored candidates, apparently in an effort to ensure the victory of their supported candidates.” (Gonzaga and Ordinario 2004: 4)

Specifically, the AFP, through Task Force HOPE, secured over 180,000 precincts nationwide and transferred 300 ballot boxes safely from the Senate Building to the Batasang Pambansa, where the votes for the president and the vice-president were counted. Military personnel safeguarded government officials, COMELEC personnel and COMELEC-approved candidates and provided troops to keep the peace in places needing additional security personnel. In specific terms, the AFP deployed an additional 200 Philippine Marines to Cavite, 200 Philippine Navy personnel to Zambales, and 60 Philippine Marines to Camarines Sur. Also, as part of the implementation of the COMELEC gun ban, the task force confiscated 8 high powered and 21 low powered

firearms to include 300 rounds of ammunition. In Marawi City, the task force also deployed 192 officers and enlisted men to act as Board of Election Inspectors, as per COMELEC instruction. Lastly, it assisted in the safe transport of COMELEC officials and necessary paraphernalia using M35 trucks and Philippine Navy vessels, and conducted 250 sorties of military aircraft to aid in the conduct of elections.

But beyond assisting in the conduct of elections, a more important issue at hand is whether the AFP believes in the sanctity of elections and therefore accepts and respects the result of the electoral exercise and subordinates itself to the civilian political leadership, which represents the people's choice. This is important, for when the military of a society no longer subordinates itself to the civilian political leadership, that particular society could no longer claim to be democratic.

There is an observation that the Philippine military has become politicized in the sense that a "significant proportion of military men considers it appropriate for the military to be involved in overall government" (Miranda 1992, 3). The politicization of the military is largely attributed to the regime of then President Marcos, when he "...expanded the range of functions [that the] military legitimately could perform in ... national development strategies, enhanced the military's institutional prestige, and improved the pay and material conditions of military men... he cultivated politically valuable military officers, managed their military and post-military career towards more gainful opportunities and maximized personal gains." (Miranda 1992: 11) Apparently, when Mr. Marcos emphasized military loyalty as the major criterion for appointment and promotion in the military organization, he created a military subordinated to his person but not to institutions of civilian authority (Hernandez 1997: 45).

Nonetheless, I firmly believe that the AFP has taken steps to make itself a professional force by meeting the four criteria of a professional military force as laid down by Carolina Hernandez in her article "The Military and Constitutional Change: Problems and Prospects in a Redemocratized Philippines" written in *Public Policy*, a journal published by the Center for Integrative and Development Studies of the University of the Philippines. These are (1) development of "expertise in managing violence or in the legitimate use of force", (2) cultivation of an ethos that emphasizes "military service to the entire society rather than to particularistic interests", (3) military cohesion, and (4) acceptance of the supremacy of civilian authority (Hernandez 1997, 44).

The assumption of Mrs. Aquino as president of the Philippines in 1986 signified the return of the control of civilian institutions in Philippine society and started the reorientation of the AFP towards acceptance of the principle of civilian control over the military and redefining its role from a protector of the regime in power to its rightful role of defending the Philippines and the Filipino from security challenges. I must admit though that the "series of coup d'etat launched against the Aquino administration undermined the consolidation of civilian control ... [and] indicated that factions within the AFP such as the group belonging to the Reform the Armed Forces Movement (RAM) simply found it difficult to submit themselves to civilian control" (Quilop 2001:94). The promotion of constitutionalism was emphasized during the Ramos presidency with

seniority and performance particularly in defending the Constitution and established civilian political institutions becoming both equally important considerations in the promotion of officers (Quilop 2001:95).

While some observers may not have welcomed the military leadership's decision to withdraw its support from then President Estrada in January 2001 at the height of people's protests for his resignation, arguing that it signified the AFP's inability to subordinate itself to its civilian political master, the Philippine military felt that it had to do what it did for the people. We must remember that the role of the armed forces is not to defend a particular administration in power but the people themselves. And at that particular juncture of our history, the AFP felt that it was incumbent upon itself to withdraw support from a commander-in-chief whom the people felt was no longer credible to govern them. As one observer of the Philippine military notes, "the AFP decided to withdraw its support from the Estrada Administration, whom it may have felt to have lost the 'moral ascendancy' to govern given all the anomalies then being unearthed" (See Quilop 2001: 97).

The supremacy of civilian political authorities is a principle that members of the AFP continues to adhere to. This in spite of the Oakwood incident in 2003 when junior officers of the Philippine military occupied a hotel in the City of Makati and demanded the resignation of the President who is their commander-in-chief and the secretary of national defense. Now known as the Oakwood mutiny, observers see this incident as indicative of an AFP that finds it difficult to subordinate itself to its civilian political masters. I disagree for the simple reason that the junior officers in Oakwood do not represent the majority of the armed forces of the Philippines but merely a small faction of it.

### **Democracy, People's Well-Being and the Philippine Military**

As I noted at the start of this presentation, democracy does not only mean having the regular conduct of elections. Neither does it mean simply having a military subordinated to civilian political authorities. Democracy in a more substantive level means seeing that the well-being and welfare of the people improve over time.

It is in this context where the AFP has not only confined itself to preparing for armed conflict with foreign aggressors or fighting insurgency by merely using its guns but has also gone to assist the government in what is known in the Philippines as development programs and projects aimed at improving the lives of our people.

The AFP has gone beyond mere armaments and weaponry as far as its role in our society is concerned. It does not only apply force but provides social services to our people as well, something that is important considering that insurgency, which remains the foremost challenge to our security, is bred by socio-economic grievances our people may have against the government. The AFP therefore involves itself in civic and humanitarian activities, where its units either on their own or with the armed forces of other countries, provide medical services, construct hospitals and schools, and improve roads, among

other projects. Humanitarian assistance and disaster relief particularly during calamities have also been integrated in the mission of the Philippine military.

Through the various civic action projects of the AFP, the Philippine military has become a partner in our people's development. We have instituted the AFP's Community Assistance and Reform Empowerment Services (CARES) program centering on community organizing and establishment of people's cooperatives. Through this program, the AFP has in fact supported the national government's development program namely the Kapit Bisig Laban sa Kahirapan (KALAHI) and the Strong Republic School (SRS). In addition, the AFP, together with the U.S. forces have been engaged in similar projects such as medical, dental and veterinary action programs, usually within the context of the combined exercises that Philippine and U.S. troops conduct. The most recent of such collaborative activities between Filipino and U.S. soldiers is Project Bayanihan, which emerged from the Balikatan Exercises and undertaken in Mindanao, an area considered to be the breeding ground for terrorists. Project Bayanihan was meant to improve the "socio-economic conditions in Southern Philippines and thereby help reduce if not eliminate terrorist threats in the area" (See Mandocdoc and Pazaraba 2004: 10-11).

On another note, putting premium on the well-being and welfare of the people necessitates one fundamental thing – respecting their human rights, the most basic of which is their right to life. How could a government claim that it is for the people and the people "rule" if their human rights are not taken care of? It is in this regard that the Philippine military has and continues to inculcate among its officers and personnel the value of respecting human rights. While some may accuse the AFP of violating the rights of the people, this is simply not accurate. It is never a part of either our government's policies or the military leadership's directives to disregard the rights of our people. In fact, my perception is that the enemies of our society, whether the insurgents or the terrorists, have actually made use of our zealotry in respecting human rights to their advantage, using "human rights" as a convenient camouflage for going about their activities to undermine our society.

### **Democracy, National Security and Foreign Policy**

Going back to the premise of this presentation that democracy basically boils down to the "rule of the people", democracy therefore means that the people have the right and should be accorded the opportunity to discuss and examine fundamental issues, specifically those that pertain to national security and foreign policy. This is the beauty of democracy – the voice and opinion of the people are heard.

But of course, this could also become a pitfall or constraint for democracies; that with the need to hear the opinion of people, efficiency at times may be sacrificed. Let me state at the onset, nonetheless, that I would rather live in a democracy where processes could be tedious but my opinion could be aired than to live in a society where things are very efficient and yet my voice is not assured of being heard.

It is in this context where almost all national issues are extensively discussed in my country, sometimes too extensively, that what results are delayed formulation and implementation of policies. Even within the government, various government agencies and personalities often times debate with each other.

Take the case of the AFP modernization program, for example. The AFP had to “muddle through” a tedious political process in having our Congress approve the program. Note that we had proposed a 10-year modernization program for the AFP as early as 1988. The need for multi-year funding compelled us to seek Congressional approval. However, it wasn’t until February of 1995 that Congress finally passed Republic Act 7898 or the AFP Modernization Act, which further stipulated that a specific modernization program be submitted to Congress for its approval. It took more than a year after that, until the end of 1996, for said program to be approved through a Joint Resolution (No. 28) by our two houses of Congress.

The passage of the Act and the approval of the program “involved conflict, bargaining, compromises and accommodation between Congress and the AFP and among the officials of these government institutions who were involved in the process” (Quilop 2003: 5). There were also sectors in the Philippines that opposed the program to modernize the AFP, arguing that it would be better for the government to channel its limited resources to providing social services to the people rather than procuring weapons and armaments for the military. The process of having the AFP modernization program approved was indeed a very tedious one, but something that we were prepared to go through as we in the armed forces recognized this as part and parcel of living in a democratic society.

Another example would be the case of the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) between the Philippines and the U.S. The final negotiation between U.S. and Philippine officials took place in January 1998 with the VFA being signed the following month. However, after then President Estrada submitted the document to the Senate in October 1998 for its ratification, it took more than six months before the Senate ratified it. It was ratified in May 1999, after the Senate conducted public hearings on this issue and the Senators had lengthy debates on the benefits and disadvantages of having the VFA. There was actually a strong opposition to the ratification of the VFA emanating from left-oriented groups and other members of the so-called “civil society”.

Our value for democracy, which as I have pointed out earlier boils down to the principle of “rule of the people” is reflected in our foreign policy as well. The pillars of our foreign policy are the following: (1) preservation of territorial integrity and sovereignty, (2) pursuit of economic development, and (3) protection of overseas Filipino workers (See Albert 2004). The first pillar is a primordial concern for all states, whether democratic or non-democratic. In short, it is a given. But what is more important and what is unique to our case, I believe, are the two other pillars – pursuit of economic development and protection of overseas Filipino workers – which communicates to foreign countries how we give primacy to the welfare of our people. By explicitly including economic development and protection of our overseas Filipino workers, our government has tried to

operationalize the principle of “rule of the people” in its foreign policy agenda, an indication that the bottom line for democracies is to make things work for the people because they “rule”.

The third pillar of our foreign policy has in fact been tested in the recent case of Angelo Dela Cruz. The decision of our government to pull out our troops from Iraq earlier than scheduled in order for Mr. Dela Cruz to be saved from being killed by his hostage-takers was an indication that when push comes to shove, our government would prioritize the welfare of our people over anything else. While some observers did not approve of the government’s decision to pull out its troops from Iraq citing dire consequences as a result of that decision, the government stood firm in its stance that the life of a Filipino is the priority.

This case also shows how the government remains sensitive to public opinion, which is another important element of a democratic society. If the people were to rule, their opinion must be heard and must be responded to. Thus, when the public demanded that we pull our troops out of Iraq in order that the life of a fellow Filipino (Angelo Dela Cruz) be saved, our government decided to send our troops home earlier than scheduled. This does not mean that the government is subservient to what the public wants. It simply shows that our government is sensitive to what our people demand even in the formulation of our security and foreign policies.

Simply put, the democratic transition in the Philippines has affected both the public and internal government debates on security issues as well as priorities. Policies, particularly those that impact on our national life could no longer just be formulated by the government and imposed upon our citizenry. Our people demand that they be consulted with regard to these fundamental issues. And it is our democratic set-up that accords our people the opportunity to be consulted before a policy gets approved and subsequently implemented.

With regard to government spending, our democratic context has induced our government to prioritize social welfare and services over spending for defense and the military. For example, the amount allocated for the defense establishment for fiscal year 2005 is roughly 5% of our national budget. Even if one includes the funds allocated for the modernization program of the AFP, the total defense budget would still be approximately 6% of the national budget. This is relatively low compared to the amount allocated for education which is approximately 12% of the national budget (See the General Appropriations Act of 2005).

For some commentators and observers, this amount allocated for defense is very meager and it does not actually support the concept of “strong defense spending”. But this of course is in line with the provision of our 1987 Constitution which calls on the government to prioritize education. It is therefore expected that the education department has the biggest allocation among all government agencies. We should not forget too that given our government’s policy to honor paying our foreign loans, including those

contracted during the time of President Marcos, more than 40% of our annual budget goes to debt servicing.

It is in this context where the problem of support for strong defense spending has been specifically noted in the Philippine-U.S. Joint Defense Assessment, which was undertaken in 2003. Consequently, the JDA recommended that a multi-year defense budget be established in order to address our defense requirement in “operations, maintenance, training, recapitalization and equipment modernization” (See *Janes Defense Weekly*, October 29, 2003). This is crucial considering that the bulk of the amount allocated (more than 70%) for the defense department is actually spent for personnel services, with only around 29% being left for maintenance and operating expenses while a measly 1% is goes to capital outlay.

But this is not to argue that it would be better for us to shift to a non-democratic form of government if only for defense matters to be prioritized. While non-democratic governments may find it relatively easier to focus on other programs at the expense of programs that directly benefit their people, even democratic societies could also allocate relatively bigger resources for their armed forces if their economies are healthy enough such that the fundamental debate between guns and butter becomes less of a concern. This, I think, is the bottom line. Going back to the case of the modernization program of our armed forces, the reason why the original US\$ 6.6 billion (@ P50/US\$ 1) program was divided into two sub-programs, with the first amounting to US\$ 3.28 billion and the second one amounting to US\$ 3.33 billion, was the seeming inability of the Philippine economy then at time to support the entire US\$ 6.6 billion program. The caveat was that the second sub-program would be implemented if the Philippine economy could support it. This resulted from the realization of the members of Senate that it “would not be in the best interest of the country for Congress to appropriate [the entire US\$ 6.6 billion] when it is not sure where this sum could be [generated]” (Quilop 2003, 7).

Given the state of resources allocated for our defense and our military, it is sad to note that these are not enough; in fact, they are barely enough to meet the increasing challenges that my country faces. Although the Philippines faces quite a number of security challenges, three major ones could be identified. These include territorial disputes in the South China Sea, the insurgency problem, and terrorism.

This may not the forum to discuss in detail these security concerns as we are all familiar with these issues, except perhaps for the insurgency problem, which as some observers opine as being unique for the Philippines considering that the Philippines is one of the few remaining countries facing an insurgency. Nonetheless, it is sufficient to point out that these security concerns of the Philippines are also aligned with U.S. priorities.

Peace and stability in the South China Sea is definitely to the interest of both the Philippines and U.S. This has been evident in the policy pronouncements of the U.S. government stating that the U.S. desires a peaceful resolution of the dispute over the area. Terrorism is definitely well within the priority of the U.S. given the 9/11 terrorist attacks. And it would be in the best interest of the Philippines and the U.S. to work closely in

combating terrorism considering the fact that the local terrorist group Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines is linked to the regional Jemaaah Islamiah (JI) which is also closely linked to the global terrorist network Al Qaeda of Osama Bin Laden.

While insurgency may be a domestic and a local concern for the Philippines, it would also be in the interest of the U.S. to be a partner of the Philippines in addressing this problem for the simple reason that insurgents, more often than not, also use terrorist tactics in fighting established governments. In other words, insurgency breeds terrorism. And in the Philippines, there is in fact a very thin line separating the insurgents from the terrorists. The case of the Abu Sayyaf clearly illustrates this. While they claim to a legitimate insurgent group fighting for the self-determination of Muslim Mindanao, they have nonetheless used terrorist acts in pursuing their supposed cause. Even the communist insurgents in my country and the other secessionist groups such as the Moro National Liberation Front and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, have on some occasion used similar terrorist acts to pursue their cause such as bombing public places thereby hurting civilians and instilling fear among the civilian population.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, allow me to reiterate once again the point which I have made at the start of this presentation: that democracy in spite of its “one thousand and one meanings” boils down to what the two words comprising it mean – *demos* (people) and *kratos* (rule of). Democracy therefore means rule of the people.

Whether at the nominal level of looking at this principle or at a more substantive level, the Philippine military has played a role in ensuring that the people “rule”. And as was shown previously, this principle of “rule of the people” is reflected as well in the way we formulate our national security and foreign policy.

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