

Estrada, not People Power II, Weakened Democracy in the Philippines

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TOKYO - Many people in the Philippines breathed a sigh of relief as Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo was sworn in as the new President a month ago. They had had enough of Estrada's corruption, cronyism and incompetence. After the collapse of the impeachment hearings, they took to the streets and swept Estrada out in another showing of people power.

However, the U.S. media in particular has often been more critical. Reports highlighted that a mass protest and the subsequent defection of the army had toppled an elected President. Similarly, in his TIME article, former president Estrada notes that People Power II "has irrevocably damaged the democratic institutions" in the Philippines.

So, was it People Power II or Estrada that weakened democracy? This article draws on new evidence from a United Nations University (UNU) governance survey in the Philippines undertaken, by coincidence, in the two months prior to Estrada's ouster. The survey provides a comprehensive picture of changes in governance at the national level over the last five years. Overall, the findings point to a clear, widespread and significant deterioration in the quality of governance during the Estrada administration.

The survey focuses on perceptions of governance for 30 indicators within six arenas. The arenas of governance are political participation in society, the legislature, the executive, the bureaucracy, the relationship between the state and the market, and the judiciary. The respondents included senior representatives from the government (executive, legislature and judiciary), business, media, church, NGOs and academia. The ratings of governance quality were made on a scale of 1 to 5, where a higher score indicates better rules.

While the findings are still preliminary, they do point to some interesting issues. Of most significance to the ongoing debate, the overall rating for the quality of governance in the Philippines has dropped markedly over the last 5 years. The current rating is 2.56, down from an average 2.95 five years ago. A drop in ratings was seen for all six arenas. Ratings fell for 25 out of the 30 indicators.

Not surprisingly, the fall in the average rating in the executive arena was particularly sharp – from 3.09 five years ago to 2.34 now. Most importantly, the ratings for two key indicators - government commitment to "the personal security of citizens" and to peaceful resolution of internal conflict" - both dropped significantly. In addition to the ratings, the comments of expert after expert provide a damning indictment of the Estrada era.

The other arena where the fall in ratings was particularly marked was regarding the relationship between the state and the market. The ratings fell from 3.13 five years ago to 2.53 now. The experts perceived that there was a drop in the degree to which "regulations apply equally to firms" – many noting "cronyism was prevalent." This supports

economic data showing that Estrada had put the whole Philippines economy on the brink. Foreign investment had dried up, government finances were a mess and the value of the peso was crumbling.

Some international commentators have argued that the role of the military – in allowing Estrada’s removal – essentially made People Power II a “de facto coup.” But, the armed forces didn’t step in to run the country. The massive crowds preceded (and prompted) the withdrawal of the military support for Estrada. It was a peoples’ coup not a military one. The military was forced to choose between the people and the president. One can only wonder at what would have been the result (and how the international media would have responded) if the military had indeed supported Estrada.

Interestingly, experts in the UNU Survey gave the military a relatively good rating (3.3) and this did not decline in the Estrada years. There was the perception that the military was subordinate to a civilian government. One commentator noted “the military respect the will of the citizens” – a view certainly borne out by subsequent events.

Ms Arroyo has already moved in an impressive manner to repair some of the harm caused by the Estrada regime. “My first responsibility is to deliver good governance,” she said at her press briefing on 13 February. Her first executive order was to ban her relatives from engaging in business with government. She has stopped the all-out war in Mindanao and appointed a Vice-President from the troubled island.

It clearly would have been preferable if Estrada had been removed through the constitutional processes of impeachment and conviction. But, how do you resolve such a situation when “normal constitutional means” and “due process” are seen as so corrupt? When a number of Senator’s refused to admit key evidence in Estrada’s trial, there was no course left for people but to vote with their feet. People power is a blunt tool, but it may be necessary in situations of extreme abuse of the institutions of state.

The case of the Philippines does highlight the rather simplistic lens often used to view and judge political shifts around the world. It takes a lot of time and effort to develop well-functioning political systems and the Philippines is a particularly young democracy by any standards. Although elections are clearly important, democracy involves much more. There is a need to take a broader and more nuanced view.

In the recent TIME article Estrada asks of his ouster: “If this can be done to me, who is safe?” Given the evidence presented above, the answer is simple: “The people of the Philippines!”

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