Democratization and Military Reform in the Philippines

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Abstract: The Philippines are one of the most successful Asian democracies, with regular elections, a broad electorate, and peaceful transfers of power between parties. However, the country’s political development is threatened by multiple armed factions. Muslim insurgents, private armies, and communist guerrillas pose a challenge to democratic rule as each tests state capacity and drives the state to use repressive measures. These threats persist because of the lack of professionalism in the Philippine Armed Forces – a military that is plagued by corruption, abuse of civilians, and ineffectiveness against the insurgents. This essay shows that an essential step in the Philippines’ continuing democratization is to reshape the AFP into a more effective and politically neutral force.

Keywords: The Philippines, Democracy, Military Reform, Elections

Introduction

The Philippines are often considered one of the participants in the third wave of democratization, but its path toward democracy has been erratic. Even before Marcos’ dictatorial reign, the country’s democracy was marred by heavy electoral violence and corruption. In the years leading up to the declaration of martial law in 1972, the government displayed many signs of a healthy procedural democracy. Elections were held at regular intervals, there was high participation, and there were strong political parties. There was also a low rate of incumbency – no president was reelected for a second term between 1946 and 1969 (Kann, 1974: 612). This streak was only broken when Marcos won his second term. However, the country was still substantively undemocratic as it was sharply divided and political violence was rampant. There were insurgencies, many private armies, and a high rate of violent crime that surged during election season (McCoy, 2009: 14). In fact, Marcos’ reelection in 1971 set a record with 223
people killed and 250 wounded (Thompson, 1995: 42). Redemocratization began when Marcos was forced from power in 1986 and while the country is on the right path to development, its progress will be threatened until the government can deal with the country’s numerous militant factions.

Huntington selects the Philippines, along with Brazil, India, and Peru, as one of the most threatened third wave countries. It faces major insurgencies, poverty, socio-economic inequality, a large external debt, and problems created by state economic regulation (S. Huntington, 1993: 253-5). Other specialists on democratization agree with this assessment, and highlight the Philippines as one of the most problematic of the transitioning countries (Diamond, 1999, 2008). These are serious problems, made worse because they reinforce each other. The endemic violence is fueled by inadequate resources for military training, the prevalence of elite-controlled private armies, and mistrust between different classes. The violence, in turn, works to justify class inequalities and social repression. If the Philippines have any hope of continuing along their path of democratization it is essential that politicians address national security in order to put an end to the use of violence by non-state organizations.

The key to maintaining security is a more effective military that is capable of fighting guerrillas and disarming private armies. Hitherto, these goals have been unattainable because of rampant corruption, abuse of civilians, and the politicization of the military. There is a strong need for increased government capacity, but that it cannot be closely attached to a particular person or party as state security forces have been in the past. The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) should be strengthened to fight the guerrillas, but improvements to it must not be made if they risk making it capable of overwhelming the government. The key to improving the state’s capacity to deal with insurgents and private armies, while at the same time strengthening the democracy, is to develop a professional military that serves the president out of loyalty to the state rather than personal loyalty. The military must become a depoliticized bureaucratic force as is common in western democracies. As this essay will show, this is a realistic goal as the country
already receives extensive help from the US military and there is an incentive for politicians at the national level to work toward this objective for their own long-term security.

The Problem of State Incapacity

Charles Tilly's work is a useful starting place in the study of Philippine democracy as he focuses on interactions between security and regime type. He argues that state capacity is one of the primary influences on democratization, however, there is not simply a positive linear relation between capacity and democracy. The interaction between democracy and state capacity is complex, with extremes of high or low capacity contributing to dedemocratization. Weak states are less likely to become democratic because they generally lack strong trust networks, must deal with social inequalities, and have to fight autonomous centers of power (Tilly, 2007; 175). On the other hand, when the government has too much power it can suppress popular movements and control elections. Ideally, there should be some balance of state capacity to ensure that government can perform its duties without overstepping them. This balance is precisely what The Philippines lack.

Security is one of the defining features of government capacity, and perhaps even the most important one (Tilly, 1985). It is at the heart of the Weberian definition of state as having a monopoly on legitimate use of violence (Weber, 2004; 33) that is widely used by political scientists. The difficulty in dealing with capacity as a corollary of democracy is determining exactly what kinds of increased state capacity might be beneficial in a given context. The Philippines are in desperate need of greater security, yet simply increasing the size and power of the military would likely prove counterproductive as it is one of the greatest threats to the government. The problems of poor civil-military relations and weak civilian control over the military are common among new democracies (Bland, 2001), but few countries experience such a complex interaction between military factions as the Philippines.

The high capacity and low capacity threats to government may be distinct in some countries, but in the Philippines, they reinforce each other. Non-state violence gives politicians
an excuse to increase their own power and bring state resources under personal control. It also justifies the formation of private armies and vigilante groups. Marcos, the country’s exemplar of misused executive power, was only able to declare martial law and retain his office because of the perceived threat from militant factions (McCoy, 2009: 16), and in turn, martial law helped to increase the power of the country’s guerrillas by pushing moderates to endorse anyone challenging state power. On the other hand, misuse of the Armed Forces of the Philippines and the police plays a significant role in increasing support for militant factions.

No recent Philippine politicians can really be described as running high-capacity governments. Marcos had the greatest power of any president during his period of martial law, but even then, he could not disarm the country’s private armies or defeat the insurgents. He ruled by virtue of relative capacity, holding enough power to defend his patrimony but lacking the force to control the entire archipelago. His form of rule – sultanistic governance in which power is maintained by the threat of force and all competing parties are excluded from governing – is what we might expect from a high-capacity regime. Indeed, if he had been more powerful, the problem of his dictatorial rule would certainly have been exacerbated. He shows the risk at the high state capacity extreme of the spectrum without achieving the benefits of stability and unity that may accompany authoritarian rule.

Democracies need autonomous bases of power that can challenge the state when politicians overstep the limits of their office. In most democratic societies, the checks on government power are peaceful groups that can work through state institutions or use non-violent tactics like strikes and demonstrations. Autonomous bases of power are essential for democratic rule, but when these are armed and maintain a local monopoly on violence, as they often do in the Philippines, non-governmental power is antithetical to good government. Thus, political development depends on eliminating these threats, while at the same time not imbuing security forces with excessive power or allowing them to become the basis for dictatorial power.
Security Threats

The importance of improved security can be seen when we look at the preponderance of challengers to the state’s authority and their persistence over decades. The Philippines are a perfect setting for insurgency and local political domination. The size of the archipelago alone – 7,107 islands covering an area of around 300,000 km² – is enough to cause problems for policing. With much of the land covered by thick jungles, there are many places for guerrillas to hide and many remote settlements that can be isolated from national power. Just as important as the geographic predisposition for the development of autonomous bases of powers is the prevalence of military equipment. During the Second World War, Japanese and American soldiers left thousands of weapons in the hands of resistance fighters. These became the armament of the private armies and guerrillas that emerged in the post-war period. Since then foreigners, particularly businessmen, have smuggled in weapons and ammunition to militants (Van der Kroef, 1987). As the supplies left from the Second World War became antiquated, guerrillas and mercenaries were able to replace these with supplies stolen from the national military or purchased from the soldiers (Kessler, 1989). There is also reason to revolt. The country is badly polarized economically, and these class differences are entrenched and ingrained in the popular consciousness (Bello, 2005). For these and other reasons, the country has been host to insurrections for much of the last century and continues to be a battleground.

One of the threats to national security comes from the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) that fight on behalf of the Muslim minority in the country’s southern Islands. While the population base for these movements is likely too small to ever seriously challenge the Philippine government, they have been tenacious fighters and have succeeded in inflicting heavy damages. Marcos concentrated his counterinsurgency forces against the Muslim separatists, realizing that this was one of the most economically costly insurrections (McKenna, 1998; 165). Although no cease-fires have been lasting, the fighting has become less intense since its peak in 1976. Che Man argues that despite its weakening, the movement is likely to continue into the future as it is based in a group
that was once autonomous and which is clearly distinct from the rest of the population. “The persistence of the movements will reflect their will to survive, and their struggles will likely be characterized by periodic resurgence and recedence depending on the internal and external factors which trigger or retard them” (Che Man, 1990; 178-9).

The power of Muslim insurgents has declined steadily over the past decade, making them less a priority for the AFP. Nevertheless, it is essential that they devote much of their attention to finishing their work against MILF and MNLF. The MILF still has around 12,000 members (Wiencek, 2005; 251). – enough to continue the fight for years. The fight against Islamic insurgents must also be intensified as a way of guaranteeing continued international aid. The military reforms recommended in the final section can be best achieved with the help of American advisors. The Filipinos need to connect their security trouble with the American war on terror by targeting Islamic insurgents as a way of eliminating a domestic threat while simultaneously gaining more training resources.

The second major threat to domestic security comes from the local officials who maintain their own forces. With the national government often unable or unwilling to provide defense against guerrillas, many governors and mayors are forced to rely on private armies for protection. Moreover, politicians need armed supporters to be viable candidates. They must often defend against rivals vying for the same seat and may be called on to support their patrons in the national government by pressuring constituents to vote for a particular candidate. Thus, there is some need for these private armies to provide security, but they are often abusive and need to be eliminated to allow for fair voting.

Although private armies have become less powerful after repeated attempts to suppress them, no reforms have been sufficient to eliminate them. They were made illegal in 1987 by Constitution (Article 18, Section 24), but little has been done to enforce the ban (Riedinger, 1995; 134). According to Defense Secretary Noberto Gonzales, there are still around 132 private armies in the country, totaling around 10,000 armed members (“Private Armies in the Philippines: Guns and Goons,” 2010). These forces continue to be major
obstacles to democratization as armed followers are often used to intimidate voters and dominate the local economy, and neither the need for these groups nor the material basis that supports them have received enough attention. Clearly, making them illegal has accomplished little as over two decades have passed and the laws have only caused a small decline in their numbers. Amnesty programs and voluntary weapons surrendering have also proved ineffective.

The strategies used against private armies have failed because they do not address the reasons that the armies exist. They are made possible by the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few oligarchs (Wurfel, 1991). Inequality drives this system in which lone individuals and families can afford to employ armed supporters (Sidel, 1999). More importantly, the need for them has not gone away. Without a national armed presence in the provinces dominated by private armies some provinces have little protection against insurgents. There is also no way for politicians to protect themselves and their followers against rivals without private armies or some neutral arbitrating force. The solution to the problem of private armies must be found in improvements to the state's capacity to protect the provinces and ensure fair elections. However, even where security forces are stationed commanders are often so corrupt that they do little to guarantee free elections or protect the local civilian population. Kahl argues that the prevalence of private armies actually increased the intensity of insurgencies. “Taken together, these non-state sources of physical insecurity had the same effect on the growth of the insurgency as those emanating from state-affiliated actors: they increased incentives for the poor to seek out the Communists for protection” (Kahl, 2006; 109). Thus, the private armies are linked to the country’s other security concerns; in order to deal with them the AFP must eliminate the guerrilla forces that justify the existence of non-state security forces.

The Philippines have a long history of communist insurgency. In the years following WWII the Hukabalhaps, who were created to fight against the Japanese, waged a revolutionary war against their own government. The largely peasant army focused on winning militarily and excelled in fighting, even coming close to capturing Manila at their peak in 1951 (Kessler, 1989; 116). The Huk rebellion failed, but it
was replaced by the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and the New People’s Army (NPA). These insurgents became powerful during the period of martial law in the late 1970s and early 1980s when mass discontent with Marcos’ rule and the absence of moderate alternatives drove many to support armed resistance. Since María Corazón Aquino’s reestablishment of democratic rule the communists’ power has declined, but massive economic inequalities are enough to ensure that they have enough popular support to fight the government to a stalemate. The communists continue to be the state’s greatest threat (Wiencek, 2005).

The Huks’ made the mistake of fighting a revolutionary war focused on military victory. Like many other failed revolutionary movements, they prioritized combat effectiveness over all else and this did little to make them seem like a viable alternative for governing. The CPP wisely changed course. Their strategy is primarily oriented toward cultivating mass support rather than fighting (Jones, 1989) and this helps to explain the organization’s longevity. Members are far more interested in building infrastructure in the villages they control and establishing themselves as a credible alternative to the state than in beating the AFP. By contrast, the state still focuses on beating the insurgents militarily. This not only attacks the problem without addressing its root causes but is also a fight that the AFP seems poorly suited for, judging from its past performance.

The country’s autonomous bases of power serve as justifications for strengthening the central government, thereby harming democracy, and must therefore be eliminated. Yet, simply disarming these groups would leave the government unchallenged and the country open to the dominance of another strong executive. More importantly, the country’s security forces do not yet have the ability to defeat any of these movements, but this is largely the consequence of its own mismanagement. For decades, the country’s military and police forces have been as threatening to the well-being of ordinary citizens as the non-state militant factions.
A Troubled Military

Much of the state’s poor response to insurgence can be explained by the low level of professionalism. The lack of financial resources and inadequate numbers of soldiers contribute to the government’s vulnerability, but even those soldiers who are in the field have proved ineffective at fighting the insurgents or disarming the private armies. Therefore, the problem cannot simply be solved by adding more soldiers since those that are in the field are often misused whatever their strength. Politicians have often tried to improve their fighting capacity with better weapons, but this approach is also misguided. While sophisticated weaponry would certainly help the AFP, improved material capacity to wage war will be insufficient for victory as long as the soldiers themselves lack the professionalism to necessary to employ their weapons effectively and win the battle for public support. Security forces face three fundamental problems: they lack legitimacy, they use poor counterinsurgency tactics, and they are often politicized and put into the service of one faction of politicians working against others. Each of these problems is rooted in the behavior of the AFP officer corps.

Although the Philippine military is a domestic force, it is so alienated from the population that it faces many of the same challenge that an outside occupier would, especially in those regions where the population desires independence. Like any counterinsurgency force, the AFP must work for legitimacy by winning the support of the host population. Until the soldiers are seen in a positive light, they have little chance of discouraging cooperation with the guerrillas and hence little chance of winning the war. Like the American military during the Vietnam War or the French in Algeria, the Armed Forces of the Philippines fight a losing battle for popular support and their failures are largely attributable to this. However, unlike the Americans and the French, the AFP has not been winning militarily (Pobre, 2000; Magno, 1986). Thus, it is doubly disadvantaged.

The trouble seems to be with prioritization. The AFP focuses on fighting rather than earning the people’s trust – a strategy that has repeatedly led to failure for counterinsurgent forces (Ellis, 1995; Feifer, 2009; Joes,
1992; Nagl, 2005). Much of the communists’ success is due to their focus on providing local security and services – acts that win the support of local civilians (Jones, 1989). By focusing on a futile war of tracking down the highly mobile guerrillas, they have not only missed an opportunity to build grassroots support in the neglected villages, they have often provoked more anger by abusing the people. There are numerous reports of soldiers attacking civilians for information and even for fun – a problem that the Philippine government has recognized, but not resolved. Reid reports that “Officials themselves complained that the military could more effectively win over the people if soldiers refrained from drunken brawls with the locals” (Reid, 1995; 115).

The police likewise suffer from a lack of legitimacy. Abuses of power and corruption are common. Some officers even work for the country’s private armies or work as part-time enforcers for criminals, leading to rampant criminal behavior among the police. “Over the past decade, out of a police force of 98,000 nationally, over 2,000 officers have been dismissed for crimes including murder. It is reported that over 5,000 more are ‘under investigation’”(Steinberg, 2000; 218). This suggests that between 1990 and 2000 between 2 and 7 percent of officers may have been engaged in illegal activities and even this estimate might be low since it only accounts for incidents that were discovered. “In many cases, the police functions as an armed representative of the private interest of local powerholders. Policemen are used as private enforcers of strongmen and local elite’s interests on a regular basis” (Kreuzer, 2009; 52).

A related problem is the AFP’s heavy politicization. Marcos used the military and police as an extension of his personal power, expanding each and concentrating them around Manila to serve as personal guards. He recreated state security forces by politicizing them and promoting loyalists rather than the most talented. There is strong evidence to suggest that high-ranking officers collaborated in the assassination of Senator Benigno Aquino on August 21, 1983 (Hernandez, 1985) – violently supporting one official against another. In the years following Marcos’ rule, the military has ceased to be so uniformly dedicated to a single politician, but it has continued to threaten national stability by intervening in politics. The transition to democracy was
itself a sign of the political power of AFP officers. The AFP played a key role in removing Marcos from power; simply withdrawing their support was enough to leave him nearly defenseless against protestors after the fraudulent 1986 election. However, this only compounded the problem that Marcos started. The ranks were already packed with officers used to acting based on personal ties, but the transition to democracy allowed them to feel a greater sense of influence over the political sphere. They had a positive role insofar as the intervention made the country more democratic, but it established a dangerous precedent. In the years following Aquino’s ascension, officers’ new sense of entitlement led them to attempt at least seven attempted coups between July 1986 and December 1989 (Thompson, 1995: 168).

Subsequent presidents have also found it difficult to ensure their own safety against the forces that are supposed to protect national interest. On July 27, 2003, an attempt to remove President Maria Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo from power showed how fragile the country’s democracy still is.

Since Marcos, presidents have tried to eliminate the promotion based on loyalty system, but have only succeeded in moderating and displacing it (Croissant, 2009). Now, every officer ranked colonel or above is appointed by the president and confirmed by the Commission on Appointments. Like any confirmation process, this one has a tendency to eliminate some of the best candidates because of their unpopularity among those who make the final judgments. “Nomination may have been based on the political judgment of professional peers, but confirmation was strictly political” (Wurfel, 1991: 80). Not only does the politicized army threaten to destabilize the government, it also diverts the attention of top commanders from military operations and these are in desperate need of reconsideration.

Finally, the Philippine Armed Forces have not been very effective in combating the guerrillas. Most units lack the capacity to perform raids deep into the jungle as such missions require a level of unit cohesion, morale, and initiative among the lower ranks that is undermined by corruption and the mutual mistrust that it creates between officers and their subordinates. Even under martial law, the AFP and Philippine Constabulary were far too weak to control the entire country. When Marcos declared martial
law in 1972 the AFP only had around 65,000 men and the Philippine Constabulary 25,000 – far too few to make its presence felt across the country (Kann, 1974; 622). It has been substantially enlarged since then, growing to around 153,000 (Global Security). Nevertheless, numerical strength has not made a decisive difference.

The military has made a noteworthy effort to fight insurgents by matching their tactics. Long Range Reconnaissance Patrols have been particularly adept at fighting in the jungles. Because of their use of unconventional tactics, forces like these are probably the best hope for winning militarily, but without reliable commanders, the special units are prone to using their autonomy for private gain. The prevalence of “lost commands” is a prime example of how counterinsurgency operations granted a great deal of autonomy have drifted away from their original mission and abused their power (Ugarte, 2009). One such group was created by Colonel Carlos Lademora to fight against communist and Muslim guerrillas in Mindanao. The men were selected for their suitability for unconventional warfare, but clearly the selection did not include a thorough test of loyalty. “In time, moving beyond Agustan and creating its own unauthorized spin-off bands with the same name, its operations became indistinguishable from the random death squad activity, terroristic vigilantism, extortion, gambling, and criminal racketeering characteristic of other armed gangs” (Van der Kroef, 1987; 9). Worst of all, Colonel Lademora, continued to affirm that he operated on behalf of the Philippine government. In cases like this, the use of unconventional forces has only contributed to the erosion of legitimacy.

The military is supposed to fight the country’s guerrillas, but in practice, it does much to aid them by driving more civilians to join their ranks. In the Philippines, there is a strong correlation between government excess and extremism – the pinnacle of communist power was reached under martial law precisely because authoritarianism provoked a strong reaction. “The communists had always smugly described Marcos as their best recruiter, and his sudden exit in 1986 – and the rise of the popularity of Aquino – threw the movement into disarray” (Jones, 1989; 7). Thus, we must guard against attempts to improve
security that may inadvertently make the population feel more threatened. The improper conduct of politicians like Marcos and officers like Lademora only contribute to the problems they purport to be solving, even though this may win some small military victories.

The Path to Reform

On the surface, autonomous bases of power appear to be conducive to democracy and perhaps even necessary to it. However, not all autonomous power is of the same kind. The problem for the Philippines is that much of the power at all levels is in the hands of self-interested elites and militants. The country’s challenge is to cultivate alternate bases of power in spheres that will not resort to violence against the state and that cannot accumulate the level of wealth that permits raising an army and reducing the power of the elites who dominate regional governments. Only by doing both of these simultaneously can state capacity increase without risk of becoming authoritarian. At present, few institutions seem like plausible candidates for filling this role. However, the potential for a healthy democratic public sphere would be greatly improved by the creation of a professional military that can drive out armed competitors and resist cooptation by politicians who want to attack peaceful competition.

Military reform, focused on the creation of a professional, apolitical officer corps should be the Philippines’ first priority in their continuing project of democratization. Such a force would need to focus on overcoming the mistakes outlined in the last section. Implementing a meritocratic promotion system would make the AFP more effective against the guerrillas. In a meritocratic military, the officers with the best performance could rise to the top without being subjected to political screening. This would also discourage officers from becoming involved in politics, thus reducing the risk of corruption and allowing them to focus on restoring national security. By eliminating the politicized promotion system, officers would no longer have to worry about winning a popularity contest and would thus be free to make unpopular decisions like disciplining corrupt subordinates or
waging a less glamorous, but more effective counterinsurgency focused on winning popular support.

Reform must also be directed at making the AFP capable of resisting political pressures. Officers should be trained to act as agents of a semi-autonomous organization that is answerable to the government, but that does not simply serve elites. “The government has traditionally employed the AFP to protect elite interests, not to ensure the national defense. Thus it has functioned as the primary tool to frustrate social reform” (Kessler, 1989; 105). This history of conservatism is one of the reasons why the AFP is widely distrusted. When officers are taught to respect individuals and see authority as something inherent in particular people rather than the offices they hold, the foundation is set for them to shift personal alliances. “Civilian control is thus achieved not because the military groups share in the social values and political ideologies of society, but because they are indifferent to such values and ideologies” (S. P. Huntington, 1956; 381).

Military reform is even in the interests of the Philippine politicians. As Marcos’ case shows, a military of personal loyalties is an unreliable ally. Even after all his efforts to fill the top ranks with supporters, most soldiers sided against him in the uprising that removed him from office. For the executive, an army that acts out of personal loyalty is no more reliable than an apolitical force and perhaps even less so. In many cases, officers promoted based on personal ties have been quick to defect against the politicians who tried to buy their loyalty (Munck, 1987), whereas the bureaucratic armies of the western democracies, whose loyalty is to the state and not a particular person, rarely mount insurrections. The mistake Philippine politicians make is to act as though loyalty can only be based on a personal relationship. They cultivate connections among the top ranks and use personal loyalty as the basis of advancement in order to guarantee their own security, but their security would be better served by a military that is loyal to the office of the executive rather than to the individual holding that office.

Politicians at the national level also have reason to depoliticize the army for their own protection. Philippine presidents have a low rate of incumbency, and even those
who do win a second term will at some point be forced to leave unless they declare martial law or otherwise subvert the democratic process. This means that the ability to use the AFP as if it were a private army is limited. Command will always shift to new leaders and this could potentially threaten any president who used the time in office to politicize the military. However, a president who works to make the AFP into a neutral force can leave office knowing that it will not pose a threat to personal security just because command has changed.

Likewise, a more professional AFP is in the interests of allies, especially the United States. Since 9/11 the American military has steadily increased aid to the AFP, sending equipment and advisors to help train counterinsurgency forces (Che Man, 1990; McKenna, 1998). While these soldiers do not take part in the fighting, they are taking an active part in helping the AFP develop better relations with the country’s Islamic minority (“American Forces in the Philippines: Front-Line Vets: Drawing Lessons from a Rare Success,” 2010). The close ties between the AFP and US military can facilitate more than just operational training; it can also help to show soldiers in the AFP a different kind of military culture, and over the long term this kind of training would be far more valuable than any tactical lessons. Because a stronger military would improve security and threaten Islamic insurgents, the Philippine government can likely secure more American aid and advisors to support this project.

References


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