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Democracy in the Philippines

Maura Wittkop

The Philippines' unstable relationship with democracy is one predicated on external rule, first by colonial Spain and later under the U.S. These effects have continued to the present day. Throughout the late 1990s and early 2000s, the democratic structure in the Filipino government eroded. Outlined by Nancy Bermeo in *On Democratic Backsliding* and Ozan Varol in *Stealth Authoritarianism*, the process of democratic erosion can be seen through the actions of former Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. Beginning in 2001, Arroyo used her power as president to exacerbate the shift of the Philippines government away from democracy.

Democracy in the Philippines

Under the presidency of Fidel Ramos from 1992-1998, the Philippines embarked on a nine-year period of democracy as classified by Freedom House. Freedom House rates measures the freedom of countries using a six-point scale, with one being free and six being not free. During Ramos' presidency, the Philippines was scored a three in political freedom and a two in civil freedom, meaning that they were defined as free by Freedom House.ⁱ This period would continue under the ruling of Joseph Estrada, 1998-2001, and partly under Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, 2001-2010. However, four years into Arroyo's presidency, there was a marked shift away from democracy in the Philippines.

In 1996, the Philippines was ranked as free by Freedom House in both civil and political freedoms, scoring "average" in political freedom and "low" in civil freedoms. These scores remained the same until 2005 when their ranking dropped to "low" in political freedom, suggesting a slight dip in democratic freedoms.ⁱⁱ By the end of 2005, the Philippines no longer met Freedom House's minimum standard of democracy; by 2007, Freedom House no longer classified them as a democratic country. To understand the

democratic breakdown of the Philippines, it is necessary to look at three Philippine leaders: Fidel Ramos, Joseph Estrada, and Gloria Macapagal Arroyo.

Under President Ramos, the Philippines saw a shift towards liberalization in both civil and political freedoms. This transition was attributed to the fear of not being competitive in economic and political spheres.ⁱⁱⁱ Ramos was elected with the support of Corazon Aquino, the current president, and this support won him 23.4% of the popular vote.^{iv} Aquino believed that Ramos would “preserve the gains of the People Power revolution,” a revolution that has roots in the removal of Ferdinand Marcos as leader of the Philippines.^v

As president, Ramos worked to promote political freedoms through the National Unification Commission (NUC). The NUC brought together rightist, leftist, and Muslim political groups to discuss the best way to attain peace. The result of these coalition talks came in December 1992, when 65 detained communist leaders were freed, and 68 rebel soldiers were released. By freeing these prisoners, Ramos allowed for political competition, something that would change under the Estrada and Arroyo presidencies.

Along with his efforts to promote political freedoms, President Ramos also worked to promote civil freedoms. One of his policies, as evidenced by the *Local Government Code*, allowed nongovernmental organizations to be involved in local government.^{vi} This granted Filipinos the ability to be directly involved in their government through non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which furthered the democratization of the Philippines.^{vii} While democratization continued under Ramos, it did not last under President Joseph Estrada.

Estrada had a different plan for the Filipino people. Although Estrada was vice president under Ramos, their two legacies are vastly different. While Estrada was only in power for three years, he began the slow erosion of democracy within the Filipino government. Relying on close friends and cronies who had ties to Ferdinand Marcos, the former Filipino President from 1965-1986, Estrada welcomed corruption into the highest

levels of Filipino government.^{viii} He would hold “midnight cabinets” with a group of cronies to make political decisions while drinking and gambling.^{ix} Going against core values of democracy and freedom of the press, one of Estrada’s cronies was able to buy out a major Filipino newspaper, the *Manila Times*, after Estrada sued the paper for libel.^x He also went after the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* but was unsuccessful in fighting the company and eventually ended his campaign against them.^{xi} Although Estrada was unsuccessful with taking down the *Daily Inquirer*, his attack against freedom of the press did not go unnoticed. Ultimately, Estrada would later resign from his presidency after a national court case uncovered his involvement in making large payouts from an illegal numbers game.^{xii} As a result, Estrada was able to begin the breakdown of democracy in the Philippines without a coup or revolution but rather with under the table negotiations that undermine democracy.^{xiii}

Since Arroyo was Vice President during the Estrada administration, Arroyo was sworn in as the new President following Estrada’s resignation. Despite creating a cabinet using members of the former Ramos administration, she was determined to cut many of the programs and policies that Ramos brought to the Philippines.^{xiv} Arroyo used several mechanisms that eroded democracy in the Philippines throughout her presidency, similarly to Estrada.

Democratic Erosion

As president, Arroyo deployed several strategies that slowly transitioned the Philippines from being designated “free” to “partly free” by Freedom House throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. In Nancy Bermeo’s *On Democratic Backsliding* she outlines two methods of democracy erosion: executive aggrandizement and strategic manipulation of elections.^{xv} Arroyo used both of these methods to erode democracy in the Philippines.^{xvi} According to Bermeo, executive aggrandizement occurs when “elected executives weaken

checks on the executive power one by one, undertaking a series of institutional changes that hamper the power of opposition forces to challenge executive preferences.”^{xvii} Manipulation of elections occur when actions are taken to tilt the electoral playing field in favor of incumbents, in this case Arroyo herself.^{xviii} These two methods are exhibited by the way Arroyo rose to power, and how she later maintained power in the 2004 presidential election.

On the twentieth anniversary of the downfall of the Marcos regime, several junior officers and civilians attempted to overthrow the government. In response, Arroyo used the Filipino military to create an “all-out war” on the communist insurgency in the country.^{xix} This war allowed Arroyo to “legitimately” target many political activists and leaders, clearing the field of political opposition.^{xx}

Arroyo was determined to regain legitimacy in the 2004 presidential election through the use of strategic manipulation to create a wide margin of victory for herself. In the 2004 presidential election, Arroyo skillfully funded local politicians throughout the Philippines archipelago to gain support, tilting the playing field in her favor.^{xxi} Throughout the election, Arroyo was criticized for disrupting the integrity of the process; these allegations centered around her “improper use of public funds, manipulation of government programs, and tampering with vote counts.”^{xxii} Arroyo was able to survive this criticism with the help of corrupt election monitoring groups, which claimed that the elections were “free and fair.”^{xxiii} Since the election monitors were supervised by Arroyo, their claim were biased and illustrated how Arroyo used her power to maintain her position as president.

Ozan Varol offers more insight into the erosion of democracy through what he calls “stealth authoritarianism”; he defines this as “a way to protect and entrench power when direct repression is not a viable option.”^{xxiv} One mechanism that enables stealth authoritarianism is judicial review. Although judicial review is usually used to create checks

on other political branches of government, it offers three ways for authoritarians to avoid being detected as they erode democratic rule.

Using judicial review in a corrupt manner, authoritarians like Arroyo can consolidate power, bolster democratic credentials, and avoid accountability. 2001 marked the year that the Philippines fell victim to stealth authoritarianism. Once Estrada resigned halfway through his presidential term, Arroyo relied on the Supreme Court of the Philippines' decision to state that since she was Vice President under Estrada, she was the rightful successor.^{xxv}

While many questioned the legitimacy of her claim to Presidency, Arroyo used the Supreme Court ruling to back her claim that she was taking over the presidency legitimately. This weakened the balance of institutional power that is necessary in a democratic state. Varol argues that bolstering democratic credentials can occur in two ways: legitimation and ruling against an incumbent to appear democratic.^{xxvi} Arroyo used judicial review to bolster democratic credentials by gaining legitimacy through the courts.

Arroyo also used traditional methods to undermine democracy. Throughout the Philippines' history, revolutions and other political movements relied heavily on local support of villages, towns, and provinces.^{xxvii} This support often caused the rise or demise of political leaders. Patricio Abinales argues that the weak link between opposition forces and the political leaders of local governments allowed for Arroyo to gain and hold onto power throughout her presidency.^{xxviii} Furthermore, Arroyo was able to find and maintain an equilibrium between governing the state and appeasing her allies at a local level.^{xxix}

One way that Arroyo was able to find a balance between ruling the two was through funding. Arroyo allocated funding to provinces in the Philippines if they did not oppose her, which allowed her to gain loyalty from the leaders of these provinces.^{xxx} With her policy of forgiveness of local debts to the state, support for her only grew. She was also able to gain voter support through the use of rhetoric. Because Arroyo could speak several languages

spoken throughout the Philippines, she targeted individual groups who couldn't communicate through the primary language, Filipino. She also cultivated the image of herself as a mother or older sister to rural community in the Philippines, someone who can talk to them and understand them through their own language.^{xxxix}

Although Arroyo had the support of some Filipinos, she continued to face opposition throughout her time in power. Since the courts ruled that Arroyo was the rightful successor to Estrada, under Chief Justice Hilario Davide, the court would eventually rule against elite interest. This led to Arroyo undergoing renewed scrutiny from the public as many corruption scandals came to light.^{xxxix} On the twentieth anniversary of the People's Power movement, the protest that overthrew Ferdinand Marcos and his regime, an anti-Marcos political group and unsatisfied political and military leaders attempted to oust Arroyo as President.^{xxxix} The uprising quickly fizzled out and Arroyo declared a state of emergency.^{xxxix} This declaration granted Arroyo more power to control the nation as she no longer had to go through legal means to enact change. According to Jan-Werner Müller, a German political philosopher and historian at Princeton University, a crisis can be used by populist leaders to frame a situation as an existential threat which allows these leaders to insert legitimacy into their actions.^{xxxv} Using this logic, the uprising allowed for Arroyo to reassert her legitimacy by consolidating her control.

The courts, despite their growing bias towards the executive, still drew a line concerning cases dealing with democracy and the exercise of fundamental freedoms. This is why the Philippine courts decided to strike down Arroyo's declaration for a state of emergency following the attempted coup.^{xxxvi} The growing bias towards the elites from the courts resulted in a loss of trust in the Philippine court system.^{xxxvii} The abuse of the court system under Arroyo was another way in which she was able to undermine the principles of democracy.

The Philippines' process of democratic erosion and eventual breakdown follow both Bermeo and Varol's guidelines of democratic backsliding and stealth authoritarianism. Arroyo utilized many of the mechanisms of democratic backsliding and stealth authoritarianism outlined by both authors: executive aggrandizement, strategically manipulating elections, and using judicial review. Although these mechanisms help describe the process of erosion, they only partially explain how Arroyo undermined democratic rule.

Theories of Eroding Democracy

Ellen Lust and David Waldner provide six theories as to why democracy erodes in any given country. These include political leadership, political culture, political institutions, political economy, social structure and political coalitions, and international factors.^{xxxviii} The erosion and eventual breakdown of democracy in the Philippines can be described using political institutions, social structure, and political coalitions.

Filipino democracy was eroded using political institutions in a few different ways. The civil society of the Philippines saw a rise in support for democratic principles in the 1992, 1998, 2004, and 2007 elections, as voter turnout was also highest in these years.^{xxxix} Although democracy appeared to be on the rise during these elections, the political institutions created were a result of U.S. colonization attempting to pave the way for democracy within the Philippines. With the influence of the U.S., Filipino political institutions disenfranchised the masses, had powerless political parties, institutional weaknesses, and saw the abuse of high public offices.^{xl} These institutional flaws of the electoral process masked erosion of democracy with the façade of representing all Filipinos.

During Arroyo's presidency, she dissolved horizontal accountability by weakening the power of the judicial branch. At the very beginning of Arroyo's term, the Supreme Court

often ruled in in her favor.^{xli} Following the Court's decision to not support Arroyo after an attempted coup, she began her quest to weaken the Courts.

Arroyo attacked the Supreme Court by impeaching Chief Hilario Davide Jr. after the courts struck down her state of emergency. Davide's impeachment sent a strong message to the judiciary as well as to other justices on the court, and after Davide was removed from his position of Chief Justice, the Supreme Court was again perceived as being biased towards the executive.^{xlii}

The social structure of the Philippines also helps to explain the erosion of democracy within the country. Lust and Waldner describe the social structure as a way of looking at various groups within the country to find areas where potential conflict could occur, and examining the implications of these groups and their conflicts.^{xliii} The Philippine Constitution of 1989 allowed for the increased power of civil society in policy development.^{xliv} This decentralization of power has been argued to promote the interest of local elites, allowing for areas to maintain dynastic family power.^{xlv} Emma Porio argues that this happens through "networked governance practices," or the practice of incorporating civil society organizations by giving them a role in city governance.^{xlvi} This allows elites to create alliances with civil society which maintains their power.

Along with this decentralization of power, the Philippines has traditionally favored the elites over the middle and lower classes.^{xlvii} With the 1987 Philippine Constitution, however, there was a shift of power to the middle and lower classes.^{xlviii} Since the Philippines has a history of a social division with the elite class holding a majority of the power, it is understandable why the Philippines has struggled to maintain democracy. Elites threatened by the prospect of democracy aim to use their power to combat democratic development in the state.

Daron Acemoglu argues that democracy looks after the interests of the majority while non-democracies tend to look after the interests of a specific group, like the elite.^{xlix} This supports the argument that the Philippines was moving away from democracy, as the interests of Arroyo and her elite group were being prioritized. Acemoglu would consider the Philippines to be nondemocratic because of the high influence that the elites have within the country. The elites that Arroyo favored during her time as president once again highlights the way in which the Philippines shifted away from democracy. Acemoglu lists eight factors that can be used as determinants of democracy: civil society, shocks and crises, income and composition of wealth, political institutions, inequality, the middle class, globalization, and political identities and the nature of the conflict.^l Although civil society in the Philippines was effective in the past, current civil society lacks the development and cohesiveness that allows for structural change to occur. Acemoglu articulates that civil society that is not developed and well-organized will delay democracy indefinitely.^{li} Civil society in the Philippines faces challenges in working together to promote democracy in the country.

Although Acemoglu says that democracy is more likely to occur in times of crisis, the Philippines' example suggests that this is untrue.^{lii} As mentioned earlier, on the twentieth anniversary of the People's Power movement, a new revolution was planned in Manila the . Rather than prompting the creation of a democratic nation, Arroyo cracked down the revolution and called for a state of emergency to combat the uprising. This was not conducive to the creation of a more democratic regime in the Philippines.

In addition, Acemoglu suggests that a highly divided society creates issues for democracy because of the perceived threat to the elites.^{liii} Elites will oppress the people to avoid democracy at all costs, as seen in the Philippines. The elites' hold of power in local governments, and the alliances between Arroyo and local elites, allow elites to hold significant power and decrease democracy at the local and national levels.

The Future of the Philippines

The future of democracy in the Philippines is still unclear. As of 2020, Freedom House considers the country to be “partly free” since their civil liberties and political rights continue to be scored “low.”^{liv} Since Rodrigo Duterte was elected as President in 2016, the Philippines has continued to move further away from democracy. Duterte’s violent war on drugs allows him to create coalitions with communist groups and the Filipino police force, giving him the support he needs to wield his power undemocratically.^{lv}

Samuel Yu’s piece, *Political Reforms in the Philippines: Challenges Ahead*, argues that there is a way to reform the political landscape of the Philippines through economic development.^{lvi} Robert Dahl argues for increased political participation, asserting that, previously, political participation was only available to the elites.^{lvii} Since most of Duterte’s support came from the middle class and the elite, it is important to establish that all Filipinos have the right and ability to vote.^{lviii} Dahl argues that political participation and civil liberties are a necessity for democracy to thrive within a country.^{lix} Political opinions and widespread representation can only occur with an increase of political participation.

Furthermore, Acemoglu emphasizes that the middle class of a society can act as a buffer between the elites and the citizens.^{lx} For nations that are transitioning from nondemocracy to democracy, the middle class can act as a driver of democratic practices.^{lxi} Should the middle class ever achieve this power, they will be able to dissuade the elite from repressing democracy while also supporting policies that benefit both the middle class and the elite, thus driving the beginnings of a true democracy in the Philippines.

Although the Philippines is not democratic today, there is still a chance that the country can change with the next election. From the original People’s Party movement to their successful removal of Ferdinand Marcos, the Philippines has had an unstable relationship with democracy that continues today. While the Philippines strived for

democracy under Ramos and Estrada, it quickly shifted away again with the rise of Arroyo and her manipulation of the election system, the breakdown of horizontal accountability, and securing a coalition to support her. Through these actions, Arroyo stripped the Philippines many democratic principles and values, which eventually resulted in the breakdown of democracy in the country. Today, current president Rodrigo Duterte continues to attack democracy through his “war on drugs,” once again shifting Filipino institutions and public opinion farther away from a true democracy.

ⁱ *World Atlas*, s.v. “List of the Presidents of the Philippines,” accessed March 27, 2020, <https://www.worldatlas.com/articles/presidents-of-the-philippines-through-history.html>.

ⁱⁱ *Freedom House: Freedom in the World Rankings*, s.v. “Philippines,” accessed March 27, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/country/philippines>

ⁱⁱⁱ Jeffery Riedinger. “The Philippines in 1993: Halting Steps toward Liberalization,” *Asian Survey* 34, no. 2 (1994): 2-6, accessed March 13, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2645114>.

^{iv} Alex B. Brillantes, “The Philippines in 1992: Ready for takeoff?,” *Asian Survey* 33, no. 2 (1993): 3, accessed March 13, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2645334>.

^v *Ibid.*

^{vi} *Ibid.*, 229.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, 2,7-8.

^{viii} Carl H. Lande, “The Return of “People Power” in the Philippines,” *Journal of Democracy* 12, no. 2 (2001): 91-92, accessed March 15, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2001.0029>.

^{ix} *Ibid.*

^x *Ibid.*

^{xi} *Ibid.*

^{xii} *Ibid.*

^{xiii} Nancy Bermeo, “On Democratic Backsliding,” *Journal of Democracy* 27, no. 1 (2016): 4-5, accessed January 28, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2016.0012>.

^{xiv} Carl Landé, “The Return of “People Power” in the Philippines,” *Journal of Democracy* 12, no. 2 (2001): 97, accessed February 9, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2001.0029>.

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^{xvii} *Ibid.*, 10.

^{xviii} *Ibid.*, 13.

^{xix} Paul D. Hutchcroft, “The Arroyo Imbroglia in the Philippines,” *Journal of Democracy* 19, no. 1 (2008): 147, accessed February 10, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2008.0001>.

^{xx} *Ibid.*, 147-148.

^{xxi} Hutchcroft, *The Arroyo Imbroglia in the Philippines*, 145.

^{xxii} *Ibid.*, 145.

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^{xxv} Hutchcroft, *The Arroyo Imbroglia in the Philippines*, 145.

^{xxvi} Varol, *Stealth Authoritarianism*, 1687-1693

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^{xxviii} *Ibid.*, 294.

^{xxix} *Ibid.*, 304.

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