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Pre-election Impressions

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Dear Peter,

Manila is currently suffering from drought, power black-outs, coup rumors, and election fever. After two weeks here, one is quickly swept up into the flow of military red alerts, prison escapes by renegade soldiers, and the campaign itself. This newsletter reflects the confusing pace of events and I hope will be read with the caveat that what follows are first, tentative impressions.

Election Fever

After leaving Manila International Airport, the first sign that an election is underway are the coconut trees with their trunks bandaged in white campaign posters. Almost every verticle surface is covered with the names and faces of candidates: highway overpasses, thatch roadside stalls, even abandoned cars. Jeepneys, vintage jeeps converted into stretch passenger vehicles, careen through traffic with loudspeakers blaring the candidate's jingles. (One of the more popular tunes is set to "The Caissons Go Rolling Along"). On the smaller side streets, congressional candidates wade through the crowds, followed by their supporters heralding their arrival with bullhorns. Any predictions on the outcome would be foolhardy and superfluous since you will be getting the results before receiving this. Yet, a few points can be drawn from the hubub.

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For one, name recognition is everything. With 83 senatorial candidates running for 24 nation-wide seats and up to 26 congressional hopefuls scrambling for each of 200 local districts, little wonder that the average voter has a hard time naming his or her 25 choices.

The 24 Senate candidates endorsed by the President emphasize that they are "Cory's choice" through radio voice-overs by the President, or pictures of the candidate and President Aquino raising hands together in anticipatory triumph.

Candidates from the conservative opposition have to be a bit more inventive. The posters for Abul Alonto, formerly the number two muslim rebel leader turned assemblyman, feature him scowling out from a 1976 Time magazine cover encaptioned "Muslim Guerrilla." Apparently, he believes that getting his face known through past glory outweighs the possible disadvantages of being associated with the tabloid headlines that scream that the muslim separatists are bringing their terror campaign to Manila.

Second, many people seem to make decisions along other than "rational" or party lines. For example, I met three recent law school graduates who enthusiastically named as their top Senate choice Wigberto Tañada. He is one of the two administration candidates also endorsed by the Partido ng Bayan which is unofficially aligned with the communist party. They support him not because of his program, but because he is a "brod," or fraternity brother from another university. And if Tañada wasn't a "brod," would they vote for him? Their reply: "maybe not."

The young receptionist at the Red Cross office likes opposition leader Juan Ponce Enrile, but she half-heartedly insists that it is not because he hails from her native Ilocos region. She also likes Rene Saguisag, an administration candidate who is not on particularly good terms with Enrile, and sees no apparent contradiction in supporting both candidates.

Amid the banks and hotels of Makati, Manila's financial district, secretaries and computer operators who are picketing in front of the Philippine National Oil Co., giggle and say that they are for Agosto Sanchez, Aquino's labor minister who was removed for being too pro-labor. Meanwhile, on the waterfront, some of the 500 longshoremen on strike say that Sanchez is "too left." They are voting for Blas Ople, labor minister under Marcos, because he's a "centrist."

From random talks with people it appears that one group will vote as a bloc: the left. Watching a May 1 rally of some 70,000 workers one cannot help but be impressed with their organization and discipline as three large streams

of workers march in rank to converge along Manila bay. Large red banners and flags proclaim "Expose and Oppose Imperial U.S. Domination" or "Down With IMF-World Bank Combine" while marchers chant in Tagalog "The KMU is the army of the people." The leftist Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU) labor federation claims about 500,000 members, a figure disputed by independent sources.

Arriving at the rally site, strict discipline disintegrates, however, as some marchers break ranks to slake their thirst with fruit drinks and others wander behind the grandstand to stroll along Manila Bay. Chatting with people in the crowd, one is struck by the consistency, which almost borders on uniformity, of the answers. Have things gotten better under the Cory government? "No, things haven't changed," says Kris a 35 year old construction worker who is sporting dark sunglasses and is reluctant to talk to an American. Who will he vote for? "Seven plus two," the seven candidates of the Partido ng Bayan plus the two administration candidates which it supports.

The elections will be a good gauge of how much support the left has. Depending on one's sources, the left has up to 3.5 million supporters (a liberal newspaper) or may even influence 20% of all villages (the Department of Defense).

Broadside from Pearl Harbor

Before arriving in Manila, I stopped by Honolulu for two days to interview a half dozen military officers and analysts. They were a diverse lot, ranging from a colonel who basically read me the legal code on U.S. security assistance to a former zoologist who was clearly entranced with the minutiae of Philippine history and politics. Their critical assessment of the Philippine military, as well as most Philippine institutions, reflected, in part, their position as individuals who are close to the top generals and admirals in the region, yet are frustrated by their inability to affect events.

The location of the three headquarters I visited in Honolulu tells a lot about their role and status. By the water's edge is Pearl Harbor which as headquarters for the Pacific fleet is clearly the most active and has the largest array of radio antennae. Despite the marijuana-breath of the Marine guard who had to while away the hours in the hot sun, security is quite tight with the entrance secured by spiked steel revolving doors monitored by guards in an enclosed control booth. Halfway up the mountain that forms Oahu is Fort Shafter, headquarters for the Army, which has something of the pace and feel of a country club, due in part to the softball field next to the main building. On

top of the mountain surveying the entire island and perpetually enshrouded in rain clouds is Camp Smith, headquarters for all three services. There fitness is the watchword with swarms of officers jogging around the camp in the rare intervals between rain showers.

Sitting in an office overlooking the third base line, one analyst claimed that the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) is about the same as it was under Marcos. Although the top leadership has been "decapitated" with about two-thirds of the present generals new replacements, the rest of the military remains basically unchanged. According to him, there is "still no input of real military expertise" since promotions under Aquino are not based on professional criteria so much as where the officer stood in the past. As an example he pointed to the Air Force Commander, Major General Antonio Sotelo. In what may be one of the fastest promotions in the Philippine military, he was promoted from colonel and Wing Commander of 700 men, to two star general and commander of 17,000 men in about one year. In all fairness it should be pointed out that Sotelo's defection was a key turning point in the February revolution.

Regarding the Chief of Staff, General Fidel Ramos, this analyst criticized him as "weak," lacking in leadership skills, and unable to make military decisions. When faced with two options, Ramos tends to "waffle and make a non-decision." An incident often cited by Ramos' critics is his handling of the January coup attempt in which the four star general went to negotiate with a mutinous colonel. However, most other observers I spoke with maintained that Ramos was in a tough spot and had "done it in the pinch" when decisive action was necessary. One analyst said Ramos plays the role of "a linch pin, not a spark plug." That is, Ramos holds together the various factions of the AFP through mediation instead of exacerbating tensions with dramatic reforms.

To return to our first analyst, he acknowledged that Ramos had taken two important measures in the field. First, Ramos moved most of the combat battalions which had been in Manila guarding Marcos out into the provinces. And second, he consolidated isolated units in the hinterland in order to withstand attacks by the New People's Army (NPA). But, he claimed, there is a "gentleman's agreement" between local army commanders and the NPA to live more or less peacefully together since the AFP has "no fire power to stomp on the NPA," and the NPA for its part is content to continue its organizing activities uninterrupted. When large AFP units go out on maneuvers they are "carefully publicized" beforehand or word leaks out through informers with the result that

the NPA are not encountered. The battalion commander is able to report that the area is pacified, knowing that after he has put in his time and enough "good reports" he will be sent back to Manila.

A glance at last week's newspaper headlines confirms his injunction to view AFP battle reports with healthy skepticism. Less than two hours north of Manila about 500 troops backed up by four helicopters had overrun a large NPA training camp and "encircled" some 300 rebels. Conflicting military reports claimed up to 20 NPA killed including the provincial NPA commander. Yet, local journalists visiting the area reported few signs of fighting and the NPA commander later appeared in a television interview to announce that the news of his death was greatly exaggerated.

The whole affair has been dubbed a "moro moro" in reference to the traditional moro moro (moro, lit. muslim) plays about the wars between the christians and muslims in which the christians invariably win. At a recent press conference, the AFP Vice Chief of Staff said that "the media are partners as well" in creating conflicting military reports and requested that reporters limit their sources to official press releases and not interview AFP field commanders.

I met another pessemistic military analyst in an office where a large computer printout poster proclaimed in block letters: "Colonel North was proactive." Although his observations on the Philippines were quite cogent, they seemed more in line with what one might hear from a Sandinista commandante. Rapidly ticking off points, he said, "The elite doesn't see the seriousness of the insurgency," and "has detailed the NPA problem off to the AFP." Moreover, "the middle class does not understand that their salvation rests on the salvation of the poor, that of 70% of the population. They won't stay and fight and be willing to give up some of their perogatives, but instead will flee to the U.S." Finally, the middle class "doesn't care" and demand enough of the government in terms of honesty and real improvements: "the nationalism of the middle class is weaker than the ideology of the communists."

I asked him for a comparison with the 1950s, when the government "wrote the book" on dealing with an insurgency. His response: "In the 1950s not everyone could leave for the U.S. with a green card. Manila was an endangered oasis ...the elite was so scared that they would lose what they had that they let [reformist President Ramon] Magsaysay encroach on their perogatives." What about a draft, would that make the middle class more involved? "No, a draft would be unenforceable and would gravely embarrass the government [by showing] that it lacks the power to enforce it."

Thus for many at Pearl Harbor, the euphoria of people power and the February revolution has quickly worn off.

In its place is a sense that every Philippine institution, save the NPA, is ineffective and effete. Whether these observations are valid will take a while to find out.

The Philippine Navy

Tucked in between Manila's modest sized yacht club and the Philippine Cultural Center, an imposing crab-shaped structure, is the headquarters of the Philippine Navy. The contrast between the small, trim, grey Navy buildings and its neighbors reflects the Navy's present status. The sloops and pleasure cruisers of the yacht club appear newer than the Navy's seventeen largest ships. And just as the immense cultural center, a white elephant built by Imelda Marcos in 1969 at a cost of \$40 million pesos, dwarfs the Navy buildings, so too past expenditures for flashy Air Force fighters have overshadowed spending on Navy ships.

Last week, I was asking a Philippine Navy officer about his efforts to curb corruption in Navy procurement when he said, "let me show you something." He pulled out a photocopy of a business check made out to him for 15,000 pesos (about one quarter of his salary). The check is a thank you from a company which recently won a Navy contract. He said he returned the original check to the contractor saying, "Look friend don't do it to me. I gave you work because you were the best at the lowest cost. If someone else is cheaper, I'll change."

He gets these checks almost weekly, photocopies them, returns them, but does not report it since it is "useless." The problem, he said, "is how to tell them no in a diplomatic way," without embarrassing them. "So I tell them, 'If I need help, I'll write.'" It is all a part of the tradition of helping one's friends, he explained, and the checks have not slackened up since he was promoted to clean up Navy purchasing. None of the companies which send checks are American. The Japanese companies which send checks are apparently more business like and less personal in their style, calling the checks "rebates."

The officer is an interesting fellow. A former underwater demolitions expert who trained U.S. personnel during the Vietnam War, he is fiercely nationalistic and sees himself as something of an anomaly: an officer who is not on the take. (A retired commodore who handled logistics is now under investigation by a military antigraft board.) He lives in the officer's quarters with his wife and three children (a reliable indicator of wealth is the size of

an officer's house or lack thereof). His daughter is currently in college and his two sons are attending the military academy after finishing public school because they "get a free education and can expect a job when they get out." Both of his parents were school teachers. He claimed that most military officers are from the middle or lower middle class since "the upper class can't stand the military."

What follows is a brief rundown on the state of the Philippine Navy pieced together from the demolitions expert and his counterpart in Honolulu who deals with the nuts and bolts of U.S. military aid.

The Navy has 26,000 personnel; is top heavy with 2 to 3,000 commissioned officers; and has about 200 ships of which 30% to 40% are operational, according to the Philippine officer. Some U.S. officials put the figure even lower at 10% and claim that "operational" merely means that the ship can leave the pier, much less carry out its mission. Back in the early 1960s, the Navy had an operational readiness rate of perhaps 75% to 80%. An American officer ascribed the decay of the Navy to declining funds and a cut off of U.S. technicians in 1981.

Currently, the Navy is stretched thin trying to fill requests for support and troop transport, as well as trying to interdict various smugglers and gun runners. These officers argued that its role should be expanded in a country of some 7,100 islands strung over 1,000 miles. As one said, "People refuse to understand that the Philippine Navy plays a vital role in shifting troops and support."

Over the next few years the role of the Navy is likely to increase. Two weeks ago, Admiral James Lyons, commander of the U.S. Pacific fleet, told reporters that "there is no question in my mind" that the Soviets are supporting the NPA. Last March, the Pentagon for the first time mentioned "unconfirmed reports" of weapons shipments, possibly from North Korea or Vietnam. At present, Admiral Lyons' statement as reported by the press appears a bit premature. General Ramos has declined to confirm whether there have been arms shipments. Many people here, however, assume that it is only a matter of time before the NPA receives arms from abroad. Two days after Admiral Lyons' statement, a spokesman for the communist-led National Democratic Front in Lybia said that the NPA expected to receive external aid from "anti-imperialist forces," without specifying individual countries.

With 21,596.7 statute miles of coastline to patrol, the Philippine Navy faces a formidable task. If the Navy gets all the U.S. aid it requested for ship repairs and construction can it interdict possible arms shipments? The demolitions expert laughed and called it a "longshot."

U.S. aid for increasing the mobility of the Philippine Armed Forces, or rather the lack of it, has been in the headlines recently. The vote by the House of Representatives to cut this year's military aid in half to \$50 million is seen as coming out of the blue. AFP spokesman, Colonel Honesto Isleta, summed up the frustration in the AFP when he told me, "They owe us a lot [for the U.S. bases] that's my basic concern. So why don't they just cough up the money." The demolitions expert was more dramatic but expressed an urgency shared by other officers: "There is still time, help us now [because] in two to three years from now help will be useless. You will do the fighting." Whether or not Congress later reverses its decision, the vagaries of congressional budget making are not well understood nor appreciated here.

The Philippine Navy had planned on about \$14 million in aid for ship repair and the construction of 77 foot fast patrol boats. Over the next five years it was to purchase 35 of these craft. With the aid cut in half, the naval officer maintained that while the U.S. "practically gives us everything that we want, there is a big difference between [your] giving and [our] receiving." As a stop-gap measure, the Navy is now putting outboard motors on 100 bancas (traditional wooden-hulled boats). Each 42 foot banca will hold 20 people and cost about 75,000 pesos (approximately \$3,700). The officer smiled and noted with some satisfaction that the 80 horsepower motors are Japanese built and cost only \$250 each.

North of Manila at Subic Naval Base, Philippine and U.S. personnel are jointly overhauling Patrol Craft Escourts. These are good sized ships, 184 feet in length and 922 tons fully loaded, but rather slow with a maximum speed of 15 knots. They are being repaired at a cost of about \$4 to \$5 million each. After jointly repairing two of the ships at Subic, the Philippine Navy hopes to retool and repair the rest at its own navy yard at about half the labor cost. But even with the full amount of U.S. aid, the Philippine officer pointed out that it will be a long process. "These ships have been neglected for fifteen years, no way can they be repaired overnight." The ship now being repaired was built in 1942.

The cut in military aid appears to have also added some strain to the normal give and take in U.S.-Philippine negotiations over military hardware. Honolulu is conducting a mobility study of the Philippine Navy, as well as the entire AFP, and recommended that it be streamlined from 200 ships to 90. According to a U.S. officer, the Navy should spend a million dollars to set up two or three "validation teams" which, with U.S. technical assistance, would make an inventory of "what's good and sell the rest immediately." From Honolulu's perspective, it is a perfectly logical step so there is some puzzlement as to why the Philippine Navy has been less than enthusiastic.

Like any institution, the Philippine Navy is reluctant to cut its inventory by half. The Philippine officer was emphatic that the U.S. study is "wrong," adding that "we are relying on our own numbers." According to him, many officers throughout the AFP see the mobility survey as "prying open the military to find out what we have...they are holding us not only by the throat, but also by the balls."

Another area of contention involves amphibious tracked vehicles (LVTPs). The Philippine Marines has a good number of them but few of them work. The Marines want to repair them, putting in new diesel engines, and use them for troop transport, at a cost of \$15 million. Honolulu's mobility study, however, found that there was no need for the vehicles.

An American official involved in the program gave me several reasons why an LVTP is the wrong vehicle for troop transport: it is too heavy to cross many bridges, it is armed with a howitzer which is useless against a guerrilla force, and a rocket propelled grenade can knock it out. A truck would be more efficient he claimed. He believed the reason for the request is that "a flag officer wants to do a favor for the Marines. It would be better if he bought them all new helmets."

On the Philippine side, amphibious vehicles are seen as vital due to the Philippines' terrain. The request is not a sudden whim. For several years now, the Marines have been pushing for LVTPs. In fact, there have been plans for over ten years to use LVTPs loaded on a transport ship to move two battalions anywhere in the archipelago within 36 hours.

As with such disputes, there are good arguments on both sides and cultural factors tend to complicate the issue. Part of it may stem from the turnover of U.S. military personnel in Manila whose function is to smooth out discord. "It's a big problem," the demolitions expert explained, "they really don't know the culture and the environment here...so every time they fail, [they] ask what have I done?" After a while, however, things seem to sort themselves out. He spoke warmly of a recently departed American officer with whom he had "a very good relationship."

"Croupmorers"

By the time you receive this, you will have undoubtedly also received news of the ongoing coup attempts in Manila. Reporters here have been receiving incessant anonymous phone calls describing impending coups, all of which makes for tension and gives the government the jitters. Although a few of these are serious, and will be covered later, most are the work of "croupmorers."

At a recent press conference, Colonel Honesto Isleta, AFP spokesman, displayed the Filipino penchant for verbal wizardry or bad puns, depending upon one's perspective. He blamed the coup reports on coup-rumor-mongers or croupmorers. As the colonel explained:

The strategy is like this. I call a lady, then I, the croupmorer, immediately say, "Do you know that Ramos was ambushed in Santa Mesa [Manila]?" And this lady who receives the call will be surprised and asks, "What? What time? What happened? How?" And then the caller now will say "Well, you know Lucy..." She says, "Wait a minute this is not Lucy." "Oh I'm sorry, wrong number." and immediately he puts down the phone. And this Lucy now says, "Hey, I got something that I should not get so I better call another friend." And then this friend calls up another and this goes on until one guy says, "I better call Rod Navarro." [a pro-Marcos radio announcer] And he calls Rod Navarro who without confirming goes on the air. And then all of Mindanao hears that General Ramos has been ambushed.

Such is the stuff that coups are made of. The trick here is to separate the coup-makers from the croupmorers.

Sincerely,



Erik Guyot

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