

Philippines Mutineers Point to the Neo-Cons

by Mike Billington

A few dozen young Filipino military officers (average age, 27) with a few hundred soldiers in support, carried out a rebellious military action on July 27 which has dramatically transformed Philippines politics, and focussed attention on the role of the neo-conservative war party in Washington in corrupting and manipulating the Philippine government and military. Coming at a time when Vice President Dick Cheney and Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld are being exposed internationally for the fraud used to justify their war on Iraq, the Philippines events add yet another piece of evidence regarding the crimes of the chicken-hawks in the Bush Administration.

The 321 officers and soldiers seized and occupied a shopping and apartment complex in Makati, the financial district of Manila, at 3:00 a.m. on July 27, while releasing a videotape explaining their action, not as a coup, but to force their grievances to be heard. The action lasted for about 20 hours, when the troops agreed to return to their barracks and face court martial, provided their charges be investigated.

The charges by the rebels are extremely serious, but not surprising to readers of *EIR*, which has documented the role of the Bush Administration, especially Donald Rumsfeld, in efforts to circumvent the Philippine Constitution by establishing a permanent U.S. military presence in the Philippines, part of the neo-conservative game-plan to surround and confront China (see "Chicken-hawks as China-hawks," *EIR*, May 23).

In the videotape, which was played repeatedly on local television, the rebel spokesman, Lt. Senior Grade Antonio Trillanes, charged that Defense Minister Gen. Angelo Reyes and Military Intelligence chief Gen. Victor Corpus were guilty of providing arms to the Abu Sayyaf criminal gang and to the separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Force (MILF) in the southern Province of Mindanao. Even more damning, the mutineers charged General Reyes and General Corpus with being the masterminds behind a series of deadly terrorist bombings in Mindanao—all to the purpose of gaining favor with the United States and justifying an increased U.S. military role in the country. They also charged that more terrorist bombings were being planned, with the possible added intention of justifying martial law, and the cancellation of the scheduled 2004 election.

The First Head To Roll

The rebels demanded the resignations of three senior officials: Defense Minister Reyes, Military Intelligence chief General Corpus, and Police Chief Gen. Hermogenes Ebdane. Ebdane is considered responsible for the astonishing escape from custody of Fathur Rohman al-Ghozi, an Indonesian convicted of terrorist bombings in the Philippines, and thought to be a member of the Jemaah Islamiah terrorist organization. Al-Ghozi simply walked out of prison with two members of Abu Sayyaf on July 14, and is still at large. President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, on July 20, told General Ebdane to find al-Ghozi or resign. The rebels believe the escape may have been orchestrated in order to create further justification for U.S. intervention, and/or for a declaration of martial law.

Although General Reyes had refused to step down, General Corpus announced his resignation on July 29. The Corpus resignation undermined the effort by President Arroyo and Defense Minister Reyes to direct the investigation away from the grievances of the young officers, looking only into the supposed political instigators behind the insurrection. The letter of resignation from Corpus said that, in chess, "when a Queen is beleaguered, it is sometimes necessary to sacrifice a knight to save the game," and acknowledged that "the restiveness will not calm down with my continued presence." He denied having a hand in the Mindanao bombings, but warned that "the current political crisis is far from over."

While Corpus agreed to fall on his sword for the President, several sources in Manila concur that Reyes will also have to go, or the rage in the military, and in the population, will boil over. In fact, Reyes may be encouraged from Washington to fall on his sword as well—not to protect President Arroyo, but to protect Rumsfeld and Cheney.

Just one year ago, in August 2002, General Reyes was welcomed to the Pentagon by Rumsfeld in order to establish a separate chain of command from Washington to Manila in regard to the expanding U.S. military operations in the country. Secretary of State Colin Powell had just completed a tour of the region, assuring the Filipinos that the U.S. had no intention of either participating in combat within the country, nor establishing bases—two issues which were causing intense protest within both the Philippine Congress and the population. But Powell's view was not shared by the civilian leaders in the Pentagon, who, as in the case of Iraq, were more interested in creating a justification for their preconceived policy—here, establishing bases in the Philippines, and confrontation with China.

Rumsfeld therefore established a joint U.S./Philippines "Defense Policy Board," as a direct channel between himself and General Reyes. In the words of the Pentagon spokesman at the time, there existed several dialogue venues "for uniformed military officers, but no forum for defense officials who are civilians." While this "Defense Policy Board" has

apparently played no significant public role, any serious investigation into the grievances of the July 27 mutiny would require an examination of private channels to Rumsfeld and the Office of Special Plans, the rogue intelligence unit set up in the Pentagon to fabricate the intelligence desired by the neo-conservatives, when traditional intelligence reports failed to conform to their plans.

Military Coups, Philippine Style

While General Reyes is accusing the young officers of the attempted coup which they deny, the fact is that Reyes himself was the leading figure in the *de facto* military coup of January 2001 which placed President Arroyo (and Reyes) in power. Former President Gen. Fidel Ramos, the mentor of Reyes, orchestrated that coup against the elected President Joseph Estrada, on the same model Ramos had used in the 1986 coup against President Ferdinand Marcos. In the 2001 coup—known as “People’s Power, II” but better known as Washington’s “military coup, Philippines-style”—then-Armed Forces Chief General Reyes withdrew Armed Forces support from the Commander in Chief, President Estrada, in favor of Arroyo, despite the illegal and unconstitutional nature of the action.

It is thus most ironic to review certain statements from Anglo-American leaders after the July 27 mutiny was resolved. Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer congratulated the “democratically elected government of the President of the Philippines”—who has, in fact, never been elected. The Foreign Ministry in Singapore denounced the “resort to unconstitutional means by the rebels,” a charge which would be better applied to the coup which placed Arroyo in office. As journalist Gary LaMoshi pointed out in an article entitled “The Day Irony Failed” in the July 29 *Asia Times*, of the five Presidents who have served since the 1986 military coup against Marcos, “only Fidel Ramos entered office via election and left at the end of his legal term.”

Crisis Still Unfolding

The government is desperately attempting to pin the mutiny on either former President Estrada (who is now in prison facing charges of corruption by those who overthrew him), and/or Senator Gregorio “Gringo” Honasan. Honasan, as a young colonel, ran several coup attempts against the post-Marcos government of President Cory Aquino in the 1980s, but is now an elected Senator. He admitted that he has worked with the young officers involved in the mutiny, who adopted his “National Reconstruction Program” as their own, but denies any role in the action—in fact, he intervened with the rebels to encourage them to stand down. There were, nonetheless, reports that Honasan might be arrested.

President Arroyo set up a three-member commission to investigate the incident, but the independence of the group is in doubt, as it is headed by a justice of the Supreme Court,

which voted in 2001 to approve the coup against Estrada—on the patently false basis that Estrada had resigned—and confirmed Arroyo’s claim to the Presidency.

The Senate, on the other hand, has launched an investigation which intends to get at the root of the young officers’ charges. As of July 31, the Senate has called for the officers who led the action to testify before the Senate immediately, and responded angrily to the refusal of the military leadership to allow their testimony. Even Senate President Franklin Drilon, a strong Arroyo supporter, sternly responded: “I would strongly suggest to the Armed Forces that they honor our invitation . . . so we do not have to resort to the more compulsive/coercive process of a subpoena.”

Opposition Senator Aquilino Pimentel described the military stonewalling as “ominous, in the sense that there’s an unseen hand trying to prevent the unearthing of truth.” Senator Pimentel is also challenging the legality of the “state of rebellion” declared by President Arroyo, arguing that such a declaration had no definition under the Constitution. Senator Edgardo Angara called the “state of rebellion” an “invention of the Administration [to] evade the requirements of martial law and the checks by the legislature” and to “eliminate all the safeguards that afford an ordinary citizen his Constitutional protection.”

The military is conducting its own investigation of the mutiny, including the rebels’ charges of corruption within the military.

No Turning Back

The Arroyo government is attempting to display a show of force to squash any discussion or investigation of the crimes alleged by the rebelling officers. The government announced on July 31 that charges of rebellion will be filed against the 321 military men who participated in the mutiny, while similar charges have been filed against a former cabinet minister in the Estrada government, whose home was supposedly used as a staging area for the July 27 action. Others, including Senator Honasan, may also be charged.

But public and official attention will certainly not be diverted from the stinging accusations against the military and government leaders, and their sponsors in Washington, accusations coming from the very youth who have been trained by the military to defend the honor of the nation.

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