

## Waltzing with the Army: From Marcos to Arroyo

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The relationship between civilian political leadership and the military has changed in character from the Marcos dictatorship to the Macapagal-Arroyo presidency. The military, ideally a professional and depoliticized institution, found itself in conflicting roles in governance. President Ferdinand Marcos used the military to pursue personal interests. After the first EDSA revolt, the principle of civilian superiority was restored but sections in the AFP responded with a series of coups d'états against the government of President Corazon Aquino. President Fidel Ramos, a former general, found difficulty in limiting the role of the military in government and appointed retired officers in key positions. His government eventually emphasized the role of the armed forces in national development and pushed for the modernization of the AFP, a program sidelined by the previous administration. President Joseph Estrada was more supportive of the military campaign in Mindanao but eventually lost the support of the AFP in EDSA II. So far the administration of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo appears to have a better understanding of the military. The president, a consistent visitor of the military camps, increased the benefits of military personnel and appointed then outgoing AFP Chief of Staff, General Angelo Reyes, as Secretary of National Defense. When pro-Estrada supporters clamored for the latter's return in the so-called EDSA II, the military stood by President Macapagal-Arroyo. Civilian political leaders play a great role in shaping the mindset of and their relationship with military officers. They must be knowledgeable and sensitive to the military culture and psyche. The ability to govern effectively and cultivate the culture within the armed forces that subscribes to civilian authority is necessary for harmonious civil-military relations, particularly for democratic societies like the Philippines.

### Introduction

The relationship between civilian political leadership and the military is one important area in the study of society and politics, hence the growing literature on what is known as "civil-military relations." Civil-military relations (CMR) refers both to "the formal, structural position of military institutions in government" as well as to "the informal role and influence of military groups in politics and society at large, and the nature

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of the ideologies of military and non-military groups."<sup>1</sup> CMR could also broadly refer to "interactions between armed forces as institutions and the sectors of society in which they are embedded."<sup>2</sup> It focuses on the relative distribution of power between the civilian agencies of governance and the government's armed forces.

The issue of professionalism of an armed force impinges on any discussion of civil-military relations. An armed force is said to be a professional force if it develops "expertise in managing violence or in the legitimate use of force," cultivates an ethos that emphasizes "military service to the entire society rather than to particularistic interests," has military cohesion, and accepts supremacy of civilian authority.<sup>3</sup>

Acceptance of and subordination to civilian authority is a key element of civil-military relations in democratic societies such as the Philippines. The idea that an armed force or military force is but an extension of politics highlights the view that civilian government should be in control of its armed forces and not the other way around.

The military, therefore, ought to be professional and not politicized. A politicized military is "an institution where a significant proportion of military men consider it appropriate for the military to be involved in overall government and even to be markedly influential in specific concerns involving the national security."<sup>4</sup>

In this context, this article provides an overview of the changing character of civil-military relations in the Philippines from the Marcos Administration to the Arroyo Presidency. It will point out that civil-military relations in the Philippines has evolved from conditions where the military was intentionally used as an instrument to pursue personalistic interests during the Marcos period to a military which no longer subordinates itself unconditionally even to its commander-in-chief as may be deduced from its withdrawal of support from then President Estrada in early 2001.

## Civil-Military Relations from Marcos to Arroyo

### *Marcos Regime*

Scholars of Philippine politics and military point that civil-military relations suffered during the Marcos period particularly during the Martial Law era. While President Marcos exercised effective personal control over the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), the institutional control of the government's civilian agencies such as the legislature and the judiciary over the military was apparently absent. Immediately after Martial Law was declared, Congress was abolished, judges whom Marcos controlled took over the judiciary, and justices of the Supreme Court were required to sign undated letters of resignation. Marcos adroitly used the Philippine military to pursue his personal political interests.<sup>5</sup>

Professionalism of the armed forces suffered and it became increasingly politicized. It was no longer a force that solely developed an expertise in managing violence, and the ethos that emphasizes "military service to the entire society rather than to particularistic interests," military cohesion suffered, and it was supreme to civilian authority but subordinate to President Marcos.

The military was deprofessionalized so to speak. The expertise of its officers as managers of violence was diluted because they were made to serve as "managers of the civilian bureaucracy" rather than prepare and train to defend the Philippines against security challenges.

While other factors such as the "general trend towards... the involvement of ... military establishments in national political management" after the end of World War II, the Marcos Administration hastened the politicization of the AFP's officer corps.<sup>6</sup> Miranda observes that President Marcos:

(E)xpanded the range of functions [that the] military legitimately could perform in ... national development strategies, enhanced the military's institutional prestige, and improved the pay and material conditions of military men... he cultivated politically valuable military officers, managed their military and post-military career towards more gainful opportunities and maximized personal gains.<sup>7</sup>

By emphasizing military loyalty as the major criterion for appointment and promotion in the military organization, Mr. Marcos created a military subordinated to his person but not to institutions of civilian authority.<sup>8</sup>

### ***Aquino Presidency***

The Aquino Presidency signified the return of the control of civilian institutions in Philippine society. It also meant reorienting the AFP towards acceptance of the principle of civilian control over the military and redefining its role from a protector of the regime in power to a defender of the Philippines and the Filipino from security challenges.

The consolidation of civilian supremacy over the military, however, was difficult for the following reasons. First, it is believed that some groups within the military, particularly those who launched coup d'etats against Mrs. Aquino's administration may have found it difficult to transfer their subordination from Marcos to Aquino because of the personalization of civilian control under the persona of Marcos. Secondly, they could have found it difficult to subordinate themselves to a new commander-in-chief who was a woman and a widow of Marcos' principal opponent. Thirdly, there was also an apparent lack of political support from Mrs. Aquino's allies who merely saw her as a rallying symbol against Marcos but to be sidelined when Marcos was deposed. Thus, the rightist factions of the military saw the overall disarray in the civilian government as a justification for her removal from office even through unconstitutional means. Fourthly, the allies of Aquino from labor, human rights, and other left wing groups further widened the gap between her and the AFP. Lastly, the failure of Mrs. Aquino's peace initiatives with communist rebels and Muslim secessionists, something that the military vehemently opposed, was seen as another indication of the futility of her policies.<sup>9</sup>

The series of actual and attempted coup d'etats launched against the Aquino administration undermined the consolidation of civilian control. While some of the reasons of the coup plotters were legitimate concerns shared widely within the military establishment, the conduct of these coups indicated that factions within the AFP such as the group belonging to the Reform the Armed Forces Movement (RAM) simply found it difficult to submit themselves to civilian control.

Consequently, Mrs. Aquino undertook moves to accommodate the military. She let go of some of her cabinet members associated with labor and human rights. The Aquino Administration also shifted to a policy of total war against the communist insurgents. The civilian government also addressed some of the legitimate concerns of the military such as low pay.

Her government also divested the AFP of police or law enforcement responsibilities except in areas where local Communists and Muslim secessionists had a significant influence and presence. This was made possible through the passage of Republic Act (RA) 6975 in 1990, which established the Department of Interior and Local Government and created the Philippine National Police (PNP) that is civilian in character. However, RA 8551 of 1998 would later return the primary responsibility of addressing Communist insurgency and Muslim secessionism to the AFP.

### ***Ramos Administration***

During the Ramos administration, the government attempted to promote constitutionalism among the ranks of military officers. While seniority was still an important consideration in the promotion of officers, performance particularly in defending the Constitution and established civilian political institutions was also considered important.

However, Ramos' penchant of appointing retired military officers to key positions in government appeared to have defeated his government's attempt to limit the AFP's role in government. Limiting the military's role in politics is essential because as Hernandez argues: in the transition period towards the consolidation of civilian authority, a "redistribution of power between the civilian and military authorities in favor of the civilian is necessary."<sup>20</sup> The occupation by retired military officers of key civilian positions does not contribute towards this end. This is so because "even after retirement, military officers continue to be identified professionally, institutionally, doctrinally, and emotionally with the military."<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, while the government initially attempted to limit the military's role in government, it eventually emphasized the role of the AFP in national development activities. Thus, the officers, rank-and-file and resources of the AFP were expected to be made available to national

development related activities. In such a context, the military establishment could be involved in policy-making, which some fear could eventually open channels for the AFP's involvement in politics. For example, it has already been observed that the military's involvement in the process of governance during the Martial Law period of Mr. Marcos has "corrupted the fundamental distinction between civilian and military functions," something, which contributed to the politicization of the military.<sup>12</sup>

In order to further accommodate some people in the AFP, the Ramos presidency also offered a general amnesty program that enabled AFP officers involved in coup d'etats to return to the military service, receive back wages and even get promoted.

The most significant development during the Ramos administration was government's approval of a modernization program for the AFP that aims to make the AFP a professional, capable and credible force in ensuring the security of the country. The military officer corps who felt that the legitimate need of the AFP to be well equipped, something that was sidelined during the previous administration, welcomed this.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Estrada Presidency***

Some observers would say that the Estrada Administration took the right step towards consolidating civilian control over the military by appointing a civilian to serve as Secretary of National Defense (SND) if only to symbolize "civilian supremacy." However, conflict between the SND and some AFP general officers developed during the early years of the Estrada administration because of the general officers' dislike of the Secretary's management and leadership style. There arose perceptions that he could not appreciate the military institution, culture and tradition. They criticized him for opting to report to the media the issue of mismanaged funds of the AFP Retirement and Separation Benefits System (RSBS) instead of taking up the issue with the concerned officers.

Worse, even Mr. Estrada himself was seen as unappreciative of the value of the military institution. This was highlighted when in 1999, he chose to attend the wedding of a former sexy star instead of attending the centennial celebrations of the Philippine Military Academy, the country's premier institution for military training.

The military also apparently felt bad when the President initially suspended the acquisition of weapons under the AFP Modernization Program in 1998 because of the economic crisis that the Philippines was suffering from. However, in 1999, he ordered the resumption of weapons acquisition program and made available to the AFP some P5.4 billion for the procurement of weapons to augment the AFP's deteriorating capability. Furthermore, in the first half of the year 2000, he adopted a "total war" policy against the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) after the MILF occupied several towns and blocked a national highway in Mindanao. He subsequently ordered the AFP to retake the MILF's camps in Mindanao, something which the military successfully accomplished. The MILF's main camp, Camp Abubakar fell to the AFP's hands in July 2000. Estrada also directed the AFP to go after the Abu Sayaf Group (ASG), particularly when the ASG took 21 hostages from a resort in Sipadan Island in Malaysia. While the military operations subsequently led to the rescue of some of the hostages, others were eventually freed when ransom was paid.<sup>14</sup>

Estimates indicate that the government spent over P1.2 billion for the MILF campaign and possibly a similar amount for the ASG operations.<sup>15</sup> Some sectors believe that these military operations endeared Mr. Estrada to the AFP. Some military officers may have approved of Estrada's decision to adopt a total war policy against the Moro secessionist rebels, something that the previous president who was a military man himself decided not to pursue.<sup>16</sup>

In January 2001, however, the AFP decided to withdraw its support from Estrada after an estimated one million people trooped to the EDSA shrine to demand for his resignation. This public outcry came after 11 senators perceived to be allies of Estrada, decided not to open an envelope believed to contain evidence against the president who was being impeached on four charges – bribery, graft and corruption, betrayal of public trust, and culpable violation of the Constitution. The AFP decided to withdraw its support from the Estrada Administration, whom it may have felt to have lost the "moral ascendancy" to govern given all the anomalies being unearthed then.

This act of the AFP may have drawn positive reactions from those who saw this as indication that the military no longer observes unquestioned loyalty to the chief executive, thus making it difficult for any President to

secure his position by relying on the military. After being used by Marcos to pursue his own personal interest, the AFP did not allow Estrada to use the military institution to preserve his political life, as some may contend.

However, others point out that this act by the AFP may have sent the signal that a president's hold on the presidency is now dependent on the support of military, something which the military may exploit and take advantage of.

### ***The Macapagal-Arroyo Administration***

At the beginning of the Macapagal-Arroyo Administration, the military may have gotten some positive reactions as a result of its leadership's decision to withdraw support from the Estrada administration that was perceived to be corrupt and incapable. Others may have also welcomed the recognition of the vice-president as Estrada's successor by the AFP's top leaders instead of grabbing political power themselves.

However, the AFP's image was soon tarnished because of allegations of anomalous purchase of military equipment and perceived infighting among top military officers for the AFP's highest post. President Macapagal-Arroyo, wanting to avoid the problems that resulted when Marcos extended the tenure of some generals, decided to rescind an order of her predecessor extending the term of then incumbent Chief of Staff, General Angelo Reyes, who was due to retire in April 2001. Amidst this infighting among ranking military officers, the President made a relatively early announcement of her choice to be the next Chief of Staff of the AFP, presumably to prevent further squabbles among the possible candidates.

There are also perceptions that the Macapagal-Arroyo Administration may have been conscientiously taking steps to court the military's continued support. The President has visited military camps, increased the benefits of military personnel, and appointed then outgoing AFP Chief of Staff, General Reyes, as Secretary of National Defense. Other military officers, perceived to have helped Mrs. Arroyo, were also given positions in the new administration.

In late April 2001, the country's anti-graft court ordered Mr. Estrada arrested for plunder. His supporters subsequently gathered at EDSA, with their demands ranging from a house arrest for Estrada to the resignation



of Arroyo and reinstatement of Estrada. With a great number of people trooping to EDSA, leaders of Estrada's supporters called on the military to withdraw its support from Arroyo. The military, however, chose to stand by the government. Such support was clearly manifested when the military together with the police defended Malacañang against the rioting supporters of Estrada who stormed the palace after gathering in EDSA for six days since Estrada was arrested. This once more highlighted the importance of the military's political support to the civilian government.

### Issues for Consideration

The Philippine experience with civil-military relations, as discussed above, brings forth some key issues that may be worth considering. The first key issue pertains to keeping the military subordinated to civilian authority, a key characteristic of a democratic society such as the Philippines. In this regard, two corollary issues come forth. First is the socialization of military leaders into adherence to the supremacy of civilian authority. Second is the ability of civilian political leaders to govern effectively.

Socializing the military into accepting civilian control is important. As S.E. Finer correctly observes, "Instead of asking why the military engage in politics, we ought [to] ask why they ever do otherwise...The military possess vastly superior organization. And they possess arms." Thus, the question should not be "why the military rebels against its civilian masters, but why it ever obeys them."<sup>17</sup> In this regard, McCoy points out that the "military obeys only when it wants" and an important question to ask is what is it that "makes an army willing to subordinate itself to civil authority."<sup>18</sup> McCoy himself provides a possible answer by pointing to the socialization of an army's officer corps as a key factor. An officer corps socialized into accepting its status as being subordinate to civilian authority may be relatively expected to respect civilian authority and enforce the policies formulated by political leaders.

Socialization does not only occur inside a military academy and other training institutions. While education and training in the academy plays an important role in shaping the mindsets of cadets that are to become military officers after graduation, the political and military environment they become part of when they serve as regular officers equally shape their mindsets.

Civilian political leaders, therefore, play a great role in shaping the mindsets of military officers. Marcos' practice of promoting military officers based on their personal loyalty to him and not on merit did not only deprofessionalize the military establishment but also encouraged military officers to engage in political maneuvers to endear themselves to Marcos. Furthermore, his practice of involving the military in non-military functions induced military personnel to become involved in political and policy decision-making functions, thereby making the military a politicized force.

But the socialization of military officers into subscribing to civilian supremacy may not be enough. The ability of civilian political leaders to effectively govern is also an important factor; otherwise, the military may well be invited to intervene in politics. Political leaders must know how to run the government and deliver on their promises to improve the well-being of the people.

Civilian political leaders must also be knowledgeable and sensitive of the military culture and psyche. Military leaders apparently have an aversion to leaders who are insensitive to or unappreciative of the way the military establishment works. They may feel that it is not appropriate to subordinate themselves to people who do not know how to run the institution. For example, rumors of a coup d'etat kept on circulating during the Estrada presidency apparently because the dismal performance of the government and apparent dissatisfaction of the people could encourage the military to take charge of "saving" Philippine society from further deterioration.

A second key issue which may be examined has something to do with what could be termed as "accommodating the military." This does not refer, however, to the civilian government giving in to the demands of the military leadership at all times. Rather, it means understanding the unique psyche and culture of the military as an institution, thereby enabling the civilian agencies to interact appropriately with the armed forces.

A third issue worth examining pertains to the issue of civilianizing the military. This means that the military officer corps and rank and file should be exposed and be made to interact with their civilian counterparts as

much as possible. This is to prevent them from developing the mindset that they are apart from the civilian government or from the society itself.

A fourth issue which could also deserve some attention pertains to clearly defining the appropriate role for the military. An armed force's primary function is to defend the country against external and internal armed threats. While contributing to national development projects can also be a function of the armed forces, this is merely secondary. Making the military overly active and visible in other areas outside of its primary concern strains the limited resources of the AFP thereby making it less efficient and effective in performing its primary task. This could lead to demoralization among its personnel. In addition, such situation could eventually pave the way for military leaders to be involved in political decision-making, something which they are not supposed to be involved in actively, if only to signify that they are merely enforcers of decisions political leaders make.

Fifth and related to the preceding point concerns the appointment of retired military officers to key positions in the civilian government. This practice led to disillusion other career civil servants and could enable retired military personnel to sustain their involvement in political decision-making. Civilians are not receptive to this practice because as Hernandez notes, even after they retire from military service, "military officers continue to be identified professionally, institutionally, doctrinally, and emotionally with the military."<sup>26</sup> Thus, they do not shed off their military image and identified mindset even after they return to civilian life upon retirement.

Finally, the issue of professionalizing the armed forces thereby facilitating its adherence to constitutionalism has to be seriously looked into by the civilian government. Professionalizing the military should start by having a clear definition of what is the primary role or function of the armed forces. But more importantly, it means giving the armed forces the wherewithal to perform its primary function. This means training its officer corps and enlisted personnel appropriately, developing relevant and proper doctrines, and most of all equipping them adequately so that they can defend the country and its people from armed threats.

### Conclusion

Harmonious relationship between the civilian political leaders and the military depends on both the civilian government and the military. The civilian government being in control of the military should adopt policies and programs to make the armed forces a professional and a depoliticized force. Programs that specifically develop the military's capability to perform its constitutionally mandated task should be implemented. Meanwhile, the AFP's role should be clearly defined and focused on meeting challenges to the security of the Philippines. The absence of a clearly defined role for the military or worse making it perform functions different from what it was meant to do could lead to disillusionment and disappointment among its personnel. This could encourage the military to intervene in politics.

On the other hand, the military must also consciously undertake programs to make itself a professional force. It should focus on enhancing its capability to defend the country against challenges to its security rather than in involving itself in various activities, which may be contributing to developmental projects, but which prevent it from pursuing its role as a defense force. Meanwhile, its leaders must instill in the rest of the officer corps and enlisted personnel the principle of constitutionalism and civilian supremacy over the military.

For centuries, political philosophers have asked the question: *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes?* (Who will guard the guardians?). The answer lies on the capability of the civilian government to govern effectively on the one hand and the cultivation of a culture within the armed forces that subscribes to civilian supremacy over the military on the other hand. These are the necessary ingredients for a harmonious relationship between civilian political leaders and the military, particularly in democratic societies such as the Philippines. ❁

## Endnotes

- 1 See Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. viii.
- 2 Johanna Mendelson Forman and Claude Welch, *Civil-Military Relations: USAID's Role* (Washington DC, USA: Center for Democracy and Governance, 1998), p. 7.
- 3 Carolina G. Hernandez, "The Military and Constitutional Change: Problems and Prospects in a Redemocratized Philippines," *Public Policy* Volume 1 No 1 (October-December 1997) : 44.
- 4 Felipe B. Miranda, *The Politicization of the Military* (Social Weather Stations Occasional Papers, March 1992), p. 3.
- 5 See Carolina G. Hernandez and Maria Cecilia T. Lbarra, "Restoring and Strengthening Civilian Control: Best Practices in Civil-Military Relations in the Philippines" (Unpublished report for the Institute for Strategic and Development Studies, Inc., December 31, 1999), p. 3.
- 6 For a more detailed discussion of these factors, see Miranda, *The Politicization of the Military*, pp. 6-8.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 11.
- 8 Hernandez, "The Military and Constitutional Change," p. 45.
- 9 These factors are enumerated and thoroughly discussed in *ibid.*, p. 47-48.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 53.
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 See Miranda, *The Politicization of the Military*, pp. 6-8.
- 13 While initial plans to modernize the AFP started during the Aquino Administration, these plans failed to take off. De Castro identifies several factors which delayed the modernization of the AFP such as the following. Congress during Aquino's administration hesitated to give the AFP a blank check to pursue a modernization. Even the Ramos Administration initially did not prioritize the AFP's modernization as it was focused on economic growth. This changed however when in 1995, China constructed structures in Mischief Reef in the disputed Spratly Islands being contested by six countries including China and the Philippines. Another factor that delayed the modernization program was the clash between Lisandro Abadia, the AFP Chief of Staff during Aquino's Administration until 1994 and Senate Committee on National Defense Chairman Orlando Mercado. While Abadia insisted that the AFP procures equipment primarily for conventional warfare, Mercado wanted the AFP to procure equipment for environmental protection as well. This prompted Mercado to sit on the proposed modernization program. In 1994, Arturo Enrle, who was more willing to accommodate Mercado's position took over as Chief of Staff paving the way for Mercado to endorse the modernization of the AFP. See Renato De Castro, "The Military and Philippine Democratization: A Case Study of the Government's 1995 Decision to Modernize the AFP," in Felipe B. Miranda (ed.), *Democratization: Philippine Perspectives* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1997), pp. 241-279.
- 14 See Christopher A. McNairy and Charles E. Morrison (eds.), *Asia-Pacific Security Outlook 2001* (Tokyo: Japan Center for International Exchange, 2001), pp. 134-135.
- 15 For a more detailed discussion of this point, see Raymond Jose S. Quilop, "The Uneasy and Costly Road to Peace in Mindanao," *Panorama* 3/2000 (Published by Konrad Adenauer Stiftung), pp. 19-33.
- 16 This personal perception of the author resulted from his informal dialogue with several AFP officers in his capacity as a senior researcher/analyst of the Office of Strategic and Special Studies, Armed Forces of the Philippines.

- 17 S. E. Finer, *The Man on the Horseback: The Role of the Military in Politics* (London: Pall Mall, 1962), pp. 5-6 as cited in Alfred W. McCoy, *Closer than Brothers : Manhood at the Philippine Military Academy* (Manila: Anvil Publishing Inc., 1999), p. 5.
- 18 *ibid.*
- 19 Hernandez, "The Military and Constitutional Change," p. 10.