

The Bases as Turning Point

The bases question has glided to center stage in a political theater grasping for a hold on the future. Whichever way the question is resolved, it promises to be a crucial turning point in the flow of political events.

Two important political moments define the dynamic of the debate: the expiration of the Military Bases Agreement (MBA) on 18 September 1991 and the general elections scheduled for 1992.

The Philippine Constitution provides that the stay of the bases can only be extended by a treaty concurred in by the US and Philippine senates. Should the Congress, in the interest of wider popular participation, require it, the treaty may be submitted for popular approval through a referendum. Without a duly ratified treaty in place, the stay of the bases beyond the expiration of the existing MBA shall, very clearly, be in violation of the Constitution.

Majority of the Philippine senators have indicated their disinclination to renew the lease on the US military facilities. The chamber has passed a resolution calling on the Chief Executive to serve the US a notice of termination at the soonest possible time.

President Aquino, for her part, convened the Legislative-Executive Bases Council and appointed University of the Philippines president Jose V. Abueva as its chair. The Council is established on the basis of Joint Legislative-Executive Resolution No. 1. It is tasked with designing an appropriate conversion plan for the military bases complex in anticipation of the phasing out of US military presence.

As of this writing, House of Representatives Speaker Ramon Mitra has initiated moves in the lower house calling for a plebiscite ahead of negotiations for a possible treaty. A plebiscite, according to Mitra, will establish the will

of the people regarding the bases question. Both Senate President Jovito Salonga and Lakas ng Demokratikong Pilipino (LDP) head, Sen. Neptali Gonzales, have opposed the Mitra initiative on the grounds that it will weaken the role of the Senate in the treaty-making process and undermine the negotiating position of the country.

The conventional political opposition, with the exception of Vice-President Salvador Laurel, has favored the expulsion of the US military presence after the termination of the MBA. Opposition Sen. Juan Ponce Enrile has advocated not only non-renewal of the bases pact, but also the scrapping of the RP-US Mutual Defense Treaty.

The sharpening political debate on the fate of the US bases occurs in the context of shifting domestic public opinion and a surge in nationalist sentiments among Filipinos. Public opinion polls show, simultaneously, an increasing pragmatism among those willing to consider the possibility of extension and an increase in the number of those wanting foreign military presence to be terminated immediately.

The possibility that the base facilities may be converted to more efficient economic use has proven quite attractive to those who have adopted a pragmatic view on the bases question. A number of studies on possible alternative uses of the base facilities has been done. These studies shall be consolidated into a conversion plan by the Legislative-Executive Bases Council. Should such a plan appear viable, it could further erode public support for the retention of the base facilities.

Rising Filipino nationalism is a factor aspiring politicians cannot ignore. Sen. Joseph Estrada is an illustrative case. His unwavering opposition to the continued stay of the bases has won him public approval even in a national constituency where a large number are willing

to consider extension. The latest polls rank him second in public approval ratings, a notch ahead of President Aquino.

Conventional wisdom among politicians states that the tag "American boy" shall be a serious liability in future national elections. Thus, even Secretary Fidel Ramos, who favors continuation of US military presence, is careful to couch his position in terms of a "smooth transition" favorable to the national interest.

Considering recent nationalist rhetoric about the desirability of expelling the bases and the increasing attractiveness of alternative economic uses, any move to extend the lease on the bases shall have clear political costs. Such a move shall provoke a strong nationalist backlash coming from the conventional opposition as well as the cause-oriented political groups.

For President Aquino, a personal judgment on which option shall prove less costly shall have to be made soon.

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