

FOCUS

How People Won in Philippines

Before he became vice-president in 1992 and president six years later, Joseph Estrada - who liked to be called by his nickname 'Erap' or 'Buddy' - was known to most Filipinos as a film star. His presidential campaign was rich with promises to root out corruption and to end the so-called 'pork barrel' system under which congressmen are allocated funds to spend in their home regions. His election programme included a commitment to arrest and prosecute criminals, drug pushers and tax evaders and to enforce the law "without fear or favour". Now Estrada is learning his lesson in the worst way. After this people's victory, it may be easier for leaders to keep in mind that public office is a public trust, that power granted by the people can only be used to serve the people.

It's Over

THE final stages of the political drama unfolded in Manila bear an uncanny resemblance to the events 15 years ago that ousted a previous president, Ferdinand Marcos.

Then, as now, it was upsurge in popular protest on the streets of Manila that precipitated the president's departure.

Joseph Estrada, like Marcos before him, was left in no doubt that he had lost the public support he needs to remain in office.

Most of his cabinet transferred their allegiance to Vice-President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, who was sworn in as president while Estrada remained holed up in his presidential palace.

Marcos's fall from power followed the widespread belief that he had rigged the presidential election to ensure him another term of office.

Ruling under martial law, he had already gained unpopularity by assuming dictatorial powers, and within three weeks was forced to flee the country.

For Estrada, the final act turned out to be even shorter, triggered by the collapse of the



impeachment proceedings against him for corruption, which were being heard by the Senate.

The case collapsed when senators sitting in judgement refused to allow the prosecution to disclose details of a bank account allegedly controlled by the president.

Estrada's political opponents, who had orchestrated the impeachment, took their cause onto the same Manila streets

where Filipinos discovered their ability to overthrow an unpopular head of state in 1986.

In an ironic twist, the increasingly desperate President Estrada then authorised the Senate to inspect the bank account to allow impeachment proceedings to resume.

He evidently felt he had a better chance of staying in office that way than seems likely now the protest is on the streets.



In the end, his downfall was brought about once again by popular protest rather than through the impeachment process, leaving him victim of public opinion rather than the rule of law.

The widespread public disillusionment with Estrada, a former swashbuckling movie star, had much to do with his lifestyle.

He had cultivated an image as a friend of the poor, but that has

been dented by the allegations of corruption and personal enrichment.

Newspaper investigations suggest he has lavished his wealth on luxury mansions given to several of his women friends.

As well as his womanising, Estrada stands accused of excessive drinking and gambling

and amassing wealth seemingly at odds his successive public service roles as mayor, senator,

vice-president and president.

He is also accused of favouring a close circle of friends and business associates, of not spending much time acting as president - and of limited effectiveness in that role.

The newspapers have dubbed the current protests 'people power 2'. However, once again it is the defection of the armed forces that has sealed Estrada's fate.

It is a *coup d'etat* Filipino style, in which the military stop short of seizing power but instead transfer their allegiance and thus bring about change of government.

Perhaps the final straw in the unofficial charge sheet is the way the Philippines currency, the peso, has collapsed under Estrada - down more than a quarter against the US dollar last year

This was a decisive factor in getting the business and professional people of Manila to support President Estrada's overthrow.

Source: The Internet

...And Elsewhere

"Slobo, Save Serbia, Kill yourself" was perhaps one of the cruellest slogans used by any political movement in recent history.

It was the issue of Kosovo which transformed the image of Milosevic from a powerful but dull bureaucrat into that of charismatic politician. Manipulating the grievances of Serbs, Milosevic used the emotive issue to progress to supreme power. He became President of Serbia in 1989. It was the reawakening of Serbian nationalism sparked by Milosevic which was to lead to the reawakening of the other dormant nationalisms across the rest of the old Yugoslavia. This was to lead to the bloody war which ripped the federal state apart within a span of four years. During that time Milosevic ran an authoritarian government at home and armed and helped Serb separatists in Croatia and Bosnia. It was a policy that was to end in disaster.



Alberto Fujimori in Peru looked to be in a fairly commanding position. He had overcome domestic and international criticism of his election victory. But everything began to unravel with the broadcast of one short video tape. The tape, obtained by the opposition, showed powerful intelligence chief, Vladimiro Montesinos, apparently bribing an opposition member of Congress. The broadcast of the video caused a dramatic change in the political atmosphere. For the first time, there was evidence of potential criminal activity against the president's closest and most controversial adviser. Within days, President Fujimori surprised the country by announcing that new elections would be held and that he would step down early.



Editorial in Manila Times on January 20, 2001

The People's Direct Judgment

WITH the impeachment trial effectively scuttled, how will the allegations against President Estrada be proven or belied? How can we revive the process mandated by the Constitution, on which we have pinned our hopes for the resolution of a grave controversy?

The prosecution panel resigned because it said the Tuesday night 11-10 vote on the opening of a second set of evidence portended the final outcome! 11 senator-judges voting in favor of the President. But the defense lawyers are also complaining because while the prosecution kept piling up points during the 22-day trial, the defense has not presented a single witness. The defence still has to build its case.

The conditions set by the parties for the resumption of the trial look difficult. The prosecutors said they would return to the trial only if Mr. Estrada testifies, a scenario that the acting press secretary and the presidential spokesperson have rejected. The House could constitute a new panel, but there would be few takers. Re-starting the trial with new faces does not look promising.

Because the President has rejected the option of a resignation, the alternative is to allow the people to make their own direct judgment. This could be done through the national elections for members of the Senate on May 14. The final judgment on Mr. Estrada's guilt or innocence will be made on that day.

The elections, especially of the 12 senators, will be a genuine referendum on the President and his administration. Had the impeachment trial gone its course, its final verdict could still be overturned by the popular vote. In the estimation of the world, the May 14 vote will be more decisive than the sentence of the senator-judges.

A 12-0 sweep or an impressive win for the administration party will vindicate the besieged President. A crushing defeat delivers the wrath of a disappointed people.

Filipinos have also organized themselves through rallies at Edsa and the Mendiola environs. The demonstrations, which seem to be growing daily, are a forceful reminder that a large segment of the population wants a change of leadership. Estrada believers, on the other hand, are urging immediate reforms.

The rallies are welcome and should be given full expression. We are alarmed however by calls to sedition and public threats on the life of the President. No one can publicly threaten a government official whether a senator or a chief executive without being called to account for his statement.

We are also concerned over plans to shift the focus of the mass actions from Edsa to the presidential residence in Manila. Our information says leftist-led rallyists plan to march to the Palace, surround it, isolate and place it under siege. The scenario risks a confrontation with pro-Estrada partisans who have stood watch at the Mendiola Bridge or the presidential security force. We hope, for public safety and the good of the nation, that this does not happen.

The Rat who Sank the Ship

Cecil Morella of Agence France Presse in Manila

IT took a self-confessed crook and bagman for dirty money to boot out former president Joseph Estrada and cast light on the corrupt underside of Philippine democracy.

A slightly embarrassed Luis "Chavit" Singson, whose revelations triggered the impeachment process and subsequent uprising against Estrada, is basking in the aura of accidental stardom after seeing his estranged friend pushed out of office.

"I never imagined it would end this way," said the provincial governor, who went to see a priest before he got the courage to accuse the country's most powerful man of taking about 11 million dollars' worth of illegal gambling bribes and government kickbacks from public projects.

As Singson himself freely admits, he was goaded into ratting on Estrada after he was excluded from a legal, money-spinning version of a centuries-old illegal lottery called "jueteng" to which millions of Filipinos are addicted.

Despite his chequered past, Singson's accusations became political bombshells because he was widely known to be a drinking buddy, gambling partner and political ally of Estrada until they had a bitter falling-out.

What the quarrel triggered was one of the most serious corruption scandals in the Philippines. Estrada's impeachment, a groundbreaking trial, and an army mutiny that spelled the president's political doom.

The evidence raked up in the month-long

trial threw dirt on many other prominent personalities in politics, business and the police, and showed how the banking system and even a presidential charity had supposedly been exploited to launder millions of dollars in dirty money.

Singson testified how another Estrada friend allegedly gathered together the country's "jueteng" operators to pay the president protection money equivalent to three percent of their monthly turnover, and how Singson himself supposedly delivered attaché cases full of money every fortnight to the presidential palace.

He recounted how he allegedly stole about 2.6 million dollars in tobacco taxes for Estrada and helped deliver the cash in shopping bags to the president's house.

During the trial, Singson asked for immunity from prosecution for himself and some of his employees who admitted collecting bribe money for Estrada.

But he reiterated on Friday, that he was not afraid of facing charges, stressing: "I've always said it would be an honour to go to jail with president Estrada."

Other witnesses spoke of how the president earned a fortune from a trader friend later indicted in the country's worst stock manipulation scandal, and of how the leader allegedly shielded this friend when securities regulators had him in their sights.

The daily hearings, which became the country's most popular show on television and radio, detailed how the president and

his lawyer allegedly tried to legitimise the funds by putting them into bank accounts, one of them holding more than 60 million dollars, using false names.

Witnesses recounted how friends of the president supposedly took steps to cover up the paper trail by assuming ownership of these assets using methods which bordered on forgery.

"Marcos was smart. Estrada was smarter," senior prosecutor Joker Arroyo said when comparing Estrada with the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos, the only other Filipino leader toppled by a military-backed popular uprising.

But the ventilation of the alleged crimes in the press helped galvanise public opinion against Estrada. When the senator-judges voted to exclude potentially damning evidence last week, their action sparked huge protests which invited military intervention.

The military and police brass finally informed Estrada on Friday that he had lost their support, triggering the mass resignation of his cabinet. When he refused to step down, the Supreme Court removed him by judicial order.

"I feel vindicated because my only weapon was the truth," the self-proclaimed bagman Singson said after Estrada left the presidential palace for the last time.

"Eradicating 'jueteng' is a simple matter provided we have a sincere leader," he added.

Editorial in the *Phil Star* on January 20, 2001

People's Wrath

Early last night [Friday], Joseph Estrada continued to hang on to the presidency, clutching at straws as the ground continued to give way under his feet. His supporters tried to seek refuge in twisting the law, persuading him to push for snap elections in May even if they knew this would require a constitutional amendment.

Around him the world had collapsed. The crowds at EDSA had grown bigger. Earlier in the day his defence secretary and military chief of staff had withdrawn their support, turning the tide in the mass outpouring of outrage over the suppression of evidence in his impeachment trial. The defections of Orlando

Mercado and Gen. Angelo Reyes triggered a wave of Cabinet resignations. It also gave a major boost to the battered peso, which made its biggest single-day gain ever, closing at 47.50 to the dollar.

At Camp Crame, ranking officers took over the headquarters of the Philippine National Police, forcing the President's favorite cop, Director General Panfilo Lacson, to announce on television "the most painful decision" of his life - a withdrawal of support from Mr. Estrada. At the Ninoy Aquino International Airport, presidential crony Jaime Dichaves managed to beat a hasty exit, fleeing to Hong Kong with his family. The President's top defense lawyer, Estelito

Mendoza, also left.

By nightfall, armored personnel carriers entered the Malacañang Palace compound, then left after several minutes, bringing the President with them. Thus did Joseph Estrada leave the Palace that had served as his office and residence for two and a half years the shortest stint among all the popularly elected presidents of the Republic.

Only 15 years ago, another discredited president had left Malacañang under cover of darkness, in ignominy, chased out of power by an angry people. Those who aspire for high office in this country should have learned their lesson from people power in 1986. The lesson was obviously

lost on Joseph Estrada, who won by a landslide despite being an unabashed Marcos loyalist with all the vices in the book. The past two and a half years have been marked by presidential hubris - a belief that power is a license to do anything without fear of public accountability.

Now Mr. Estrada is learning his lesson in the worst way. After people power II, it may be easier for national leaders to keep in mind that public office is a public trust, that power granted by the people can only be used to serve the people. Abuse this power and you face the people's wrath.