

THE PHILIPPINES

Was it a blunder to declare a 'state of rebellion'?

MAX V. SOLIVEN in Manila

IN the wake of May 1 violent and vicious assaults by the mob on Malacañang and "reports" of a coup plot, that "State of Rebellion" declaration by President Arroyo was an awful mistake. It wasn't necessary.

The government could have dealt with plotters and hysterical crowds resolutely and decisively as, indeed, it did without invoking the spectre of a "state of rebellion."

Do you know what such an announcement of a crisis has done to our image of stability both at home and abroad? It gives the impression that the government is running scared, which is an altogether false impression. Now, what foreign investor or businessman (the heck with the already faltering tourist industry) will come here? When the President of the Republic, no less, sends the dire message that her administration is embattled and this nation is under a virtual "state of siege", then it's curtains for our reputation on the international scene.

The fact is that our nation has been fighting rebellions, right, left and center, ever since Independence in 1946. The late Dictator Ferdinand E. Marcos even used the so-called "rebel threat" as his excuse for imposing martial law in September 1972. Ninoy Aquino, this columnist and thousands of others, for that matter, were arrested on the charge that we "wittingly or unwittingly" contributed to this "subversion" and helped "destabilize" the government. Yet, even with an OV-10 bomber or RAM helicopter gunships attacking Malacañang and Camp Aguinaldo, no other "state of rebellion" or "state of emergency" was ever declared. Now,

after a hail of only a few thousand rocks and stones, attacks with icepicks, dos-por-dos clubs, and lead pipes, we're a nation embroiled in a "state of rebellion?" And what about the bruited-about military conspiracy? Potential putschists didn't even get, as yet, to fire off a single shot. Alas, this weird pronouncement which is neither fish nor fowl, and not even mentioned in the Constitution as such, has given us an international black-eye much worse than the savage pro-Erap rioters did even though they overturned and burned many vehicles, deluged the defenders of the Palace with hails of stones, killed a policeman, seriously wounded another policeman, and raised mayhem in general. Why? Because the declaration by the President of "a state of rebellion" was official. It gives the impression worldwide that our government is under grave threat.

Domestically, too, it provokes fear, even paranoia, that the GMA Administration may be gearing up to declare "martial law", pick up and imprison Opposition leaders, dissenters, and alleged "troublemakers." It's overkill of the clumsiest sort.

Was there a coup plot? Not even just perhaps, but probably so. But there have been Putschist plots and conspiracies before. The President could merely have shrugged confidently and quipped: "I eat coup plots for breakfast." (Pass the sugar, please). That would have told the nation and the world that all's well in the Philippines, God's in His Heaven, and La Gloria remains in excelsis in untrammelled tranquility.

Susmariosep! Even in the Kingdom of Hyperbole, why make a mountain out of a molehill?



Pro-Estrada demonstration...

The Banzai charge on Malacañang in the dark hour before dawn on May 1, at about 2:30 to 3 a.m., was well-orchestrated. It wasn't an impulsive act on the part of the EDSA TRES mob, with the crowd marching from the EDSA Shrine, suddenly inflamed by the hortatory speeches of Opposition and pro-Estrada firebrands. The "attackers", in sneaky fashion, surged practically out of nowhere, obviously well-prepared for violent confrontation.

The attacking horde caught the police guarding the approaches to the Palace by surprise, and the first wave surged all the way to the gate of the Palace itself before the "defenders" rallied and pushed them back outside of Gate 7. The assaulting "forces" had come complete with "ammunition" in the form of piles of rocks and large stones, which they hurled with glee at the shocked troopers and Presidential Security Guards, hurting many of the guards before a counter-attack with tear gas, baton-wielding cops, PSG soldiers and Air Force personnel

drove them back. For hours the battle raged, with the mob the eyes of many glazed with hatred and their teeth grit in stubborn determination giving way reluctantly only in the face of repeated charges by the defenders and reinforcing soldiers, PAF military police, and sailors.

I don't think commentators and complaining Opposition spokesmen were right to call the rioters "unarmed" (walang armas or hindi nagdadalang armas). A huge stone or rock is a terrible weapon which, hurled with precision and force, can crack a man's skull. One protester died when shot in the face, although it was clear that the policemen and soldiers exercised what is euphemistically called "maximum tolerance" (some radio-TV announcers even went overboard and called it "extreme maximum tolerance.") Another was reported to have died, but up to press time the fatality's identity has not been verified.

In truth, given the ferocity of the meleé, it's a wonder that not more were killed but it's early yet, and



...And the police containing them..

more fatalities may still be reported. We saw TV footage of one policeman, staggered by a rain of rocks, fall to the ground, and draw his sidearm, but he hesitated to fire even when dozens of demonstrators ganged up on him and almost clubbed and kicked him to death.

It was fascinating to hear Opposition candidates and other anti-government stalwarts come on the air to deny that they had egged on the mob, or told them to march on Malacañang. Every one of them denied having used inflammatory words like "lusob! lusob!" Must have been look-alikes, then, who were seen and heard screaming those words during the five nights of increasingly large rallies at the EDSA Shrine, in which the pro-Estrada crowd was whipped into a frenzy. In the end, to hear them plead innocence, it was a "mindless" and "leaderless" mob that had thrown itself against the gates of Malacañang in human wave convul-

sions, and raged through Mendiola, J.P. Laurel and the environs of the Palace. What? No leaders? How could it have been a case of spontaneous combustion?

The media, covering the event, came under snarling attack, too. Reporters and cameramen were roughed up, even those cute lady TV newscasters on the spot were given the scare of their lives as stones and other objects rained on their vehicles. Four ABS-CBN vans were attacked, overturned, looted, then burned. One GMA-7 van and other news vehicles suffered the same fate. A police car, an ambulance (with the Red Cross painted prominently on it), and other cars and vans were likewise destroyed, with the patrol car burning ferociously when put to the torch for more than an hour, mercifully without blowing up and hurting bystanders.

In sum, the angry mob's rage knew no limits and spared no one in its path. As soon as one of the

violent demonstrators was collared by the troopers or cops, he or she became meek as a lamb, frightened, protesting innocence, begging for mercy (one could not help noting that the enraged cops, in turn, jabbed them and hit them with night-sticks and clubs when they thought the cameras were not peeking).

There will be no end to sermonizing and a pious analyzing of the assault made by thousands of obviously masa protesters and kapus-palad demonstrators on Malacañang.

Many will cluck their tongues over how the pro-Erap and anti-establishment orators and circus-barkers inflamed the "anti-rich" passions of the mob. There's much talk about the anger and discontent of the dispossessed, the homeless, and the unemployed being "manipulated" by behind-the-scenes agitators who kept themselves safely out of sight.

Indeed, there's a great need to address the inequalities in our society and give the poor a boost up. On the other hand, you don't conjure up "employment" and "fulfillment" for the poor and underprivileged with the wave of a magic wand. If the economy is faltering, how can jobs, a better education for everyone, and a better "future" be manufactured out of thin air?

The riots were, true enough, a wake-up call. But we've said such things over and over again. Even Jesus Christ, rebuking Judas one day, declared, "The poor you will always have with you." Our Lord recruited his dearest Apostles from the masa, from among fishermen

and laborers, even a prostitute, and, worse, a tax collector. But He made it clear that the world will always have it share of "poor" people as well as of pharisees and high priests. The High Priest, His Eminence Jaime Cardinal Sin, showed himself anew yesterday, blessing the EDSA Shrine which had been defiled, he indicated, by the pro-Erap demonstrators, but politically did not blame the poor. Instead, he pointed his irate finger at those who manipulated them, once more calling "the wrath of God" on their heads. The Cardinal's Wrathful God must be working overtime, since He is invoked by His Political Turbulence on every convenient occasion. Just like MacArthur asserting, "I have returned," Sin happily intoned, "We have recovered our EDSA Shrine." For every Sin a moral lesson, I'd say.

Erap and Jinggoy are in Sta. Rosa, while Senator Johnny Ponce Enrile et cetera are under "arrest." So that was the purpose of that "state of rebellion" pronouncement: In order to give the government the opportunity to nab JPE, Gringo Honasan, Ernie Maceda et al. (Has Gringo been located yet?)

In any event, those "arrests" could have been made without any melodrama. How long can the authorities keep these fellows under "arrest" without proving that they had conspired to mount a coup d'etat? We'll have to see what surfaces in the days to come.

Courtesy: The Philstar

CHINA

Academic question

ALLEN T. CHENG

SORRY honey, there'll be no Dongding oolong tea this time. That's what one Beijing-based political scientist had to tell his wife recently. He had been sending a trip to Taiwan in May to study political developments on the island. The scholar had promised his wife that he would bring back one of the most sought-after Taiwanese products in mainland China: oolong tea leaves picked from the cliffs of the famous Yusan Mountain. But he had to abruptly cancel the visit. "It's best that I stay away," he says. "I don't want to risk my or my wife's life. It's certainly not worth it."

The way the Taiwan expert tells it, it sounds as if he has been threatened by terrorists. He hasn't, but the source of his fear is hardly less intimidating: his own government. In recent months, Beijing has arrested several foreign-based Chinese academics on charges of espionage. Some of them have links with Taiwan, and the Beijing academic, who asked not to be named, thinks the message is clear: If you study Taiwan politics, or accept grants from Taiwan foundations, or try to publish work that sheds too much light on China in international academic circles, then the government will nail you as a spy. "As we say in China, you kill the rooster to scare the monkey," he says. "The Chinese government wants to send a message not only to us mainland scholars who study Taiwan, but to all foreign China scholars."

Why would Beijing's leaders be sending such aggressive signals, just as China hopes to win the bid for the 2008 Olympics and entry into the World Trade Organization? Try paranoia. From Beijing's perspective, the world seems a fairly unfriendly place these days. U.S. President George W. Bush's decided tilt toward Taiwan has raised Beijing's hackles, and last week, the U.S. decision to sell sophisticated arms to Taiwan heightened tensions. Bush then raised the stakes, baldly claiming in TV interviews that he will back Taiwan if conflict erupts with Beijing. "I'm prepared to do what it takes to help Taiwan defend herself," Bush told CNN. "The Chinese need to hear this message."

Domestically, Beijing's leaders have reason to feel nervous, too. Disgruntled peasants and workers sporadically take to the streets in protest against corruption and factory shutdowns. The Falungong spiritual movement hasn't subsided, despite Beijing's draconian crackdown. The recent release of The Tiananmen Papers, exposing internal strife in the Communist Party during the student movement of 1989, has embarrassed the leadership. With Beijing feeling assaulted on all fronts, the question is: Where will the leaders lash out next?

Despite his tough rhetoric, Bush declined to sell Taiwan the Aegis missile-defence system that Taipei had requested. Instead, the U.S. offered four Kidd-class destroyers, eight diesel submarines and 12 P-3

Orion submarine-hunting aircraft. In turn, though the Chinese were still refusing to return the U.S. spy plane that collided with a Chinese fighter jet, sparking a Sino-U.S. standoff, Beijing seemed to be playing down the arms sales news, with only a relatively muted protest.

Further injuring China's sensibilities were overseas trips planned by Taiwan's leaders. Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian requested to make a stopover in the U.S. during his impending tour of Latin America, while former president Lee Teng-hui applied to visit Japan for a medical checkup. Beijing protested, and the People's Daily ranted that Lee's Japan trip was "traitorous to China's interests." The rhetoric didn't prevent both visas from being granted.

The arrests sent shudders throughout academic circles in the mainland and beyond. "An atmosphere of paranoia and fear has descended on the campus," says a colleague of Li at the City University of Hong Kong. "The feeling is that if he can get arrested, any of us can." Hong Kong-based academics now report greater difficulty in getting visas to enter the mainland. A protest letter, signed by 400 China scholars from 14 countries, was sent to Chinese President Jiang Zemin decrying "the deterioration of the climate for academic exchange and research."

In arresting the scholars, Beijing may be looking for the source that leaked the party documents in The Tiananmen Papers. With tensions high over arms sales to Taiwan, Beijing could also be on a witchhunt

for spies. Chu Yun-han, vice president of Taiwan's Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation, says that he has personally met both Gao and Li, but that neither of them received any money from his foundation. Political scientist Philip Yang of National Taiwan University notes: "[Beijing] is concerned about the control of information, in particular information passed on to anyone with 'ties' even purely academic ones with Taiwan."

Internal power struggle could also explain the clampdown at a time that seems to be working against Beijing's longer-term goals. The intelligence-gathering Ministry of State Security, according to one well-connected Beijing-based analyst, may be trying to assert its influence. The ministry, whose job includes vetting academics and officials travelling abroad, was humiliated when a People's Liberation Army colonel who had been administering an academic exchange program defected to the U.S. in December. By cracking down on scholars, the state spy-catchers may be trying to remove a blot from their record. According to the analyst, the State Security Ministry is muscling into the territory of the Ministry of Public Security, which oversees the police. "Its top people want to curry favour with the leadership, particularly with Jiang," he says.

Beijing may also have solid reasons for its paranoia. Pockets of social unrest are contributing to an uncertain domestic situation, and there are signs the economy may be heading for a downturn. On April 15, government troops opened fire on villagers protesting against taxes in Jiangxi province, reportedly killing two and wounding up to 38 more. In Nanjing a few days later, more than 1,000 people gathered to demonstrate against the forced relocation of their homes and shops. In Shijiazhuang in central China, four people were recently sentenced to death for their roles in a series of bombings that killed 108 in March.

Courtesy: The Internet edition of Asiaweek.

INDONESIA

President or princess?

What does the future hold for Megawati Sukarnoputri, Indonesia's upwardly mobile vice-president?

MOST of the world knows only two things about Indonesia's vice-president: she is the daughter of Sukarno, Indonesia's first president; and she does not have much to say for herself. Yet Megawati Sukarnoputri will almost certainly move another step closer to the country's top job. That is when Indonesia's parliament will convene to consider a second censure motion, centred on a pair of financial scandals, against the current president, Abdurrahman Wahid.

If they approve it, as looks likely, Mr Wahid will have one last formal chance to sway parliamentary opinion. But sometime between June and August he will probably face impeachment by Indonesia's constitutional assembly the country's supreme body, consisting of the 500 members of parliament plus 200 more delegates, mostly from regional assemblies. As parliament prepares to meet, and the country braces for the possibility of violence, Miss Megawati's fortunes have come full circle.

In October 1999, Miss Megawati was fighting back tears on the floor of Indonesia's parliament after being beaten to the presidency by Mr Wahid. She had some reason to cry. Earlier in the year, her party had outpaced all others at the polls, winning 35% of the votes in the first free elections since the 1950s. But when she refused to negotiate with other parties, Mr Wahid, whose party had finished a distant fourth, stitched up a majority in the fractious constitutional assembly. When Miss Megawati's supporters began to riot, she ignored the stab in the back from an old friend, regained her composure and accepted the vice-presidency, calling on her backers to honour the result. She thus transformed a humiliating defeat into one of her finest moments.

One of the big questions now looming over Indonesia is whether Mr Wahid will return the favour if he falls. Last fortnight he threatened, not for the first time, that his supporters from East Java would run amok if parliament unseated him. Yet despite their current rivalry Mr

Wahid and Miss Megawati have a long and close relationship, dating back to when her father was president and his was a revered Muslim cleric. They fight like brother and sister, and the almost-blind Mr Wahid likes to make jokes at the expense of his vice-president's intellect ("I can't see and she can't speak" is one), but in the end they have always managed to hold together their two groups of supporters, both drawn largely from Java's poor.

That is one reason Miss Megawati has remained so silent publicly, even as her party prepares to dispatch Mr Wahid. And it is also why a deal between the two, in which Mr Wahid retains his title but hands over most of his authority, cannot be ruled out. However, a deal like that was tried last year, and has conspicuously failed to stick. But if, as looks increasingly likely, she does take over some time this summer, Miss Megawati's troubles will only just be beginning. She will inherit the same problems that have plagued Mr Wahid for the past 18 months, steadily softening him for the kill.

Some of those problems, such as the widespread violence and the volatile currency, seem to cry out for a bit of stability. That could give the silent and stately Miss Megawati an advantage over the erratic and combative Mr Wahid, who sometimes gives the impression of saying the first thing that comes into his head. Yet standing back and letting things settle may prove more destabilising for the world's fourth-biggest country. Many of its troubles, including corruption and useless courts, will yield only to firm action. Others, such as Indonesia's troublesome generals and determined separatists, must be tackled with a wider range of political skills than either the president or his deputy has so far displayed.

Not everyone is thrilled by Miss Megawati's typically Javanese indirect approach. For one thing, it reinforces the perception that she is more of a crown princess, her only political asset her father's name, than a genuine presidential contender. But though it raises fears

about how she would govern, that cautiousness also has its advantages. If she should replace Mr Wahid in a few months' time, her willingness to do it slowly and by the book whether out of caution, respect for the rule of law, or, as some say, a fear of bad karma would set a better precedent than a hastily arranged ousting of Mr Wahid. Miss Megawati is said to be haunted by the fate of her father, who was kept a virtual prisoner in Bogor Palace after he had been toppled and rarely allowed to see his devoted daughter. She of all people has no desire for the mistreatment of presidents to become a national habit.

Nor is Miss Megawati's attachment to her father's legacy entirely bad. She is likely, for example, to champion the same secular approach to governing the largely Muslim country that Mr Wahid has. That, though, poses difficulties of its own. For now, she has the backing of fiercely Islamist politicians, including the constitutional assembly's speaker Amien Rais. In 1999, they said that a female president was inconsistent with Islam, and backed Mr Wahid. Now they have changed their reading of the texts, but Miss Megawati knows that, once they have eliminated her predecessor, they will eventually turn on her: Mr Rais's huge ambition and propensity for plotting is one of the salient features of Indonesia's political landscape. The Islamists already have their eye on her third husband, Taufik Kiemas. His entre-

preneurial flair, it was reported last week, has made the two of them the richest political couple in Indonesia.

Besides secularism, Sukarno's name also stands for nationalism and for an uncompromising, centralised approach to Indonesia's territory. That could lead her to crack down harshly on secessionist movements in Aceh and Irian Jaya, exacerbating the problems there. It will thus be interesting to see how she handles the armed forces. Though her own supporters have been the victims of their past brutality, she has shown few signs of reigning them in. The top generals clearly prefer her to Mr Wahid.

Lastly, there are the nagging questions about Miss Megawati's intelligence. Other countries have got by with presidents who fail to grasp the details, so long as they hold to the right principles and know how to delegate well. But with Miss Megawati, who makes George Bush seem like an intellectual, Indonesia would be taking a big gamble. Still, one of her firmest principles over the past two years has been an insistence that she would not negotiate over the presidency, but would hold out until she could have it on her own terms. As Mr Wahid squirms, that is beginning to look more clever every day.

Courtesy: The online edition of The Economist of London.