

05/06/2004

Securing peace for Mindanao with some help from Malaysia

By John Teo

IT now seems almost certain, one month after Filipinos went to the polls, that their current President, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, has won her own mandate for a full six-year term.

An election that is supposed to signal a new beginning for the troubled Philippine nation has not, however, got off to a very promising start.

The main opposition presidential candidate, Fernando Poe, has still not conceded defeat; instead he is making largely unsubstantiated claims of massive fraud robbing him of victory.

With barely 40 per cent of the votes going for Arroyo, based on current counting, and less than a million votes separating her from Poe, the political polarisation that lies at the root of Arroyo's political troubles the past three years will not easily be overcome.

Indeed, it was by sheer leveraging of the massive advantages of incumbency that Arroyo got this far.

What should have been the Philippine President's natural constituency, the nation's middle-class, was divided in its support, believing that she betrayed its causes by compromising with disgraced former President Joseph Estrada who still commands a cult-like following among the country's poor and who personally endorsed Poe as his "successor".

It was fear of a Poe victory that made some middle-class voters grudgingly vote for Arroyo. For Malaysia, as for indeed much of the outside world, Arroyo's victory must be a great relief.

It takes quite uncommon courage for a weak leader such as Arroyo to continue pushing for autonomy for the country's southern Muslim minority and to work closely with Malaysia to forge a durable peace with various Muslim Moro factions against a backdrop of general international as well as Philippine antipathy towards "Muslim terrorists".

With Arroyo, hopefully, securely ensconced inside Manila's Malacanang Palace for another six years, Malaysia has little time to lose in helping to deliver on a promise of early peace in Mindanao, without which other promises of development aid and economic prosperity will flounder.

Constructive engagement in earnest between the Philippine and Malaysian Governments to secure Mindanao's peace may also bring the dividend of greater appreciation on the part of other countries, particularly Thailand, the other country with which Malaysia shares a troubled border region, that a complex milieu of issues and concerns alienates Muslim minorities from non-Muslim central governments just as it alienates Muslims generally from the rest of the world.

Solutions that do not comprehensively address the whole panoply of issues and concerns bothering Muslims worldwide are bound to provide only temporary relief at best.

A final and lasting peace in Mindanao will also show to the world how a responsible and Muslim-dominated Government in Malaysia can contribute constructively in helping solve a trans-border problem in its own corner of the globe.

I hope a Malaysian group will this year nominate Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad for the Nobel Peace Prize, if none has already done so, for quiet and untiring efforts through at least three Philippine administrations to bring the Mindanao peace process to its meaningful and lasting conclusion.

We must realise that none other than Muslims themselves desperately need an international role model to inspire them always to choose the long and

narrow path of peace.

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