

THE PHILIPPINES: THE TRIPLE AFTERMATH OF 11TH SEPTEMBER

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From an international relations perspective, the terrorist attacks that hurt the United States on 11th September revealed both the structured organisation of transnational networks and the relative deficiencies and weakness of states. Indeed, some transnational groups take advantage of the weakness of states by exploiting the political space caused by the failure of authority and order. For the Philippines, this interpretation sounds like a warning that will require new actions in a three-pronged approach in three-interlinked areas: a reaffirmation of state induced order, movement in the realm of regional co-operation and a rethinking of Philippine relations with the US.

During the shortened term of former president Joseph Estrada, the Philippines State clearly experienced erosion of its capacity for leadership. With his inability to credibly handle state affairs and military options, President Estrada endangered the little room for manoeuvre the Republic had in its negotiations with Muslim groups, not only the MILF but also Abu Sayaf. This poor record, combined with a degradation of authority, has been exploited profitably by Abu Sayaf members to further destabilise state order and radicalise the negotiation process. This situation of growing tension has to be linked to the spread of Muslim militancy in Southeast Asia, a by-product of the 1997 political and economic crisis in the region, even if its roots are deeply anchored in the area. The close ties between Abu Sayaf and different activists in Indonesia or Malaysia on the one hand (it is public knowledge that Indonesian militants were trained in the Southern Philippine Island of Mindanao) and the manipulation of these networks by a larger pool like Al-Qaeda (Bin

laden's brother in law, Jamal Khalifa, lived in Manila and financed a number of non-governmental organisations in Mindanao), on the other, means two things. First of all, the issue of the Muslim populations' political participation in the national process is not an exclusively internal matter. Indeed, the prime objective of extremist militants is not a better recognition of their local claims but the strengthening of a transnational Muslim community. Secondly, a restoration of public Order is needed if before any serious hope of stabilising this festering domestic problem can be considered. The problem of instability goes beyond Mindanao involving an increase in kidnapping, extortion and bombings throughout the Philippines. The restoration of state order means the acceptance of legitimate authority and a capacity to enforce the rule of law. In this regard the refusal to accept public authority by actors like the Abu Sayaf group can also be interpreted as a revealing a serious failure in political institutionalisation.

The second area requiring a major effort is that of regional co-operation. As a result of the weakness of the Southeast Asian states, the ASEAN process has been severely marginalised. While the economic crisis demonstrated the need for interdependence, each ASEAN member tried to protect its own national interests and turned its back on its neighbours. Regional co-operation, either political co-operation, military exchange or intelligence sharing, has not been at its highest level in the last years. As a consequence, in island Southeast Asia the development of transboundary zones of lawlessness where extremist groups have set up their bases can be observed. This situation now has to be taken into account by governments and it comes as no surprise that meetings between top leaders (as the one between ASEAN police chiefs) have been planned to consider these issues. It is in Philippines' general interest to actively participate in the reinvigoration of this regional framework.

The third area where change will occur can be observed in concerted action with the United States. After 11th September, the Arroyo Administration fully supported the US intervention and immediately offered the use of its naval bases, an astonishing development when one remembers the refusal of the national Senate to renew their lease, nearly ten years ago. The following loosening of the filippino-american security relationship and the subsequent military vacuum in the area can, without doubt, be considered as one of the causes that explains the development of no-law areas. The United States is directly concerned since two US citizens are still held captive by the Abu Sayaf group. After 11th

September a team of 35 US experts on terrorism headed to Manila to advise their filippino counterparts; logistical support has already been provided.

These renewed ties with the United States have, nevertheless, a downside. The long-term risk is that with a weak state, an extremist insurgency and an ally in a self-defence posture, the Philippines is going to fall into that dependency trap it had already experienced some decades ago.

Forthcoming in *Nordic Newsletter of Asian Studies*, NIAS, N°4, December 2001.