

The Philippines was to have become like Japan or Korea. It has remained an underdeveloped country in the hands of the same old families. Demographic growth is proceeding at the same pace as the increase in unemployment, poverty and corruption. Foreign debt is out of control. The Arroyo presidency, which had aroused so many expectations, is proving to be disastrous, not least in terms of human rights

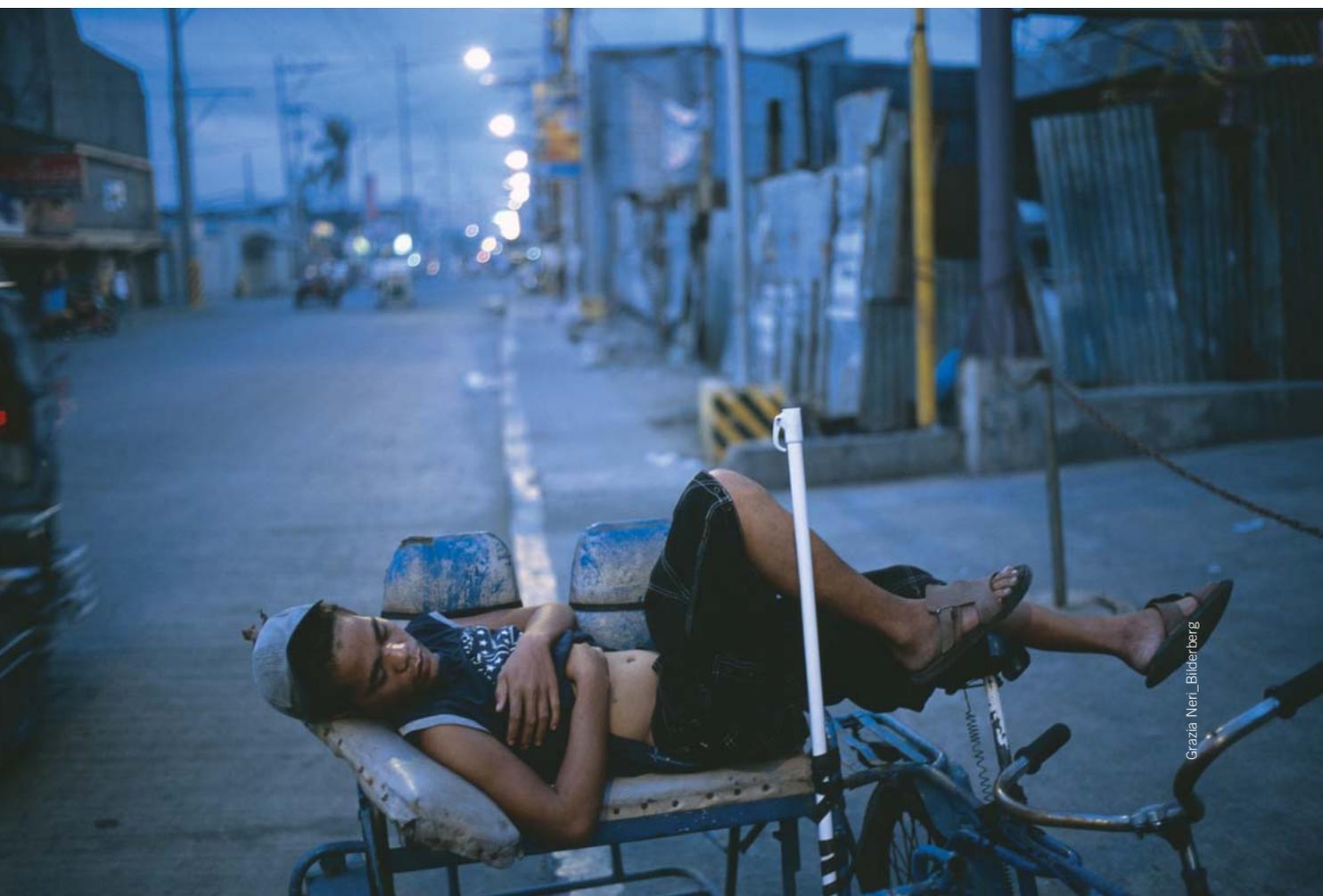
## The Philippines: a big unfulfilled promise

REPORTAGE

by Silvia Sartori

**T**he cock keeps crowing. In villages and the countryside, in the hills and on the beaches, there is at least one cock near each hut bordering every road. Tied with a rope looped twice around its leg, even the cock seems to be resigned to not going any further. It remains nearly immobile in its

restricted space, and meanwhile it crows, at any hour of the day or night (almost as if it wanted to prove its ability to challenge the cliché). In town, in the disorder of these Philippine towns that are a muddle of villas and houses, churches and streets, people and rubbish, the cock is less frequently seen, but





you keep hearing it crow.

The cock's crow is the melancholy soundtrack of a country that seems to have slipped sadly and abruptly into the final acts of a tragedy – whose epilogue the actors themselves, accustomed as they now are to the convulsive repetition of an identical scenario, no longer make any effort to stop and reverse.

No one expected such a prospect in the middle of the past century. The World Bank and the international financial community predicted a new “Japan of the future” and the United States boasted about this “model of democracy” (of theirs) all over Asia.

Just over 50 years later, the former are set on collecting debts that have spiralled upwards in the course of the years, while the latter are busy strengthening their alliance with the country that has meanwhile become a strategic partner in the “war on terror”.

The country is strangled by a deformed mechanism produced by dictatorships and people power revolutions, by a political system in which elites of movie stars and billionaire families continue to compete for power, playing games inherited from a feudal past to safeguard and perpetuate their own interests. Development programmes, genuine reforms

and the fight against poverty and corruption remain indispensable ideals to which every political candidate, old or new, makes reference. Once they are in power, however, the mechanism gets jammed all over again.

The degeneration is due in part to the fact that, historically, no politician has ever been concerned with building a “Philippine State”. Subjected first to over 300 years of Spanish colonisation and then to half a century of a “friendly occupation” by the Americans, the Philippines only began to learn to come to terms with itself from 1946 onwards, although the U.S has continued to keep an eye on it and “supply assistance”. The beginning of independence was hardly fortunate, with the arrival in 1965 of the dictatorship of Ferdinand E. Marcos, who adopted martial law for most of his regime, restricted civil liberties and undermined the establishment of rule of law *in fieri*.

Today, the Philippines is a string of islands populated by about 87 million inhabitants, a third of whom live on less than a dollar a day and half of whom are less than 21 years old. The population has doubled in the past 30 years and continues to grow at a rate of 2.36% a year, which could lead the country to a population of 200 million as early as 2042. The



\_Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, after the renewal of her presidential mandate, was accused of having influenced the election returns in her favour. Half of her cabinet resigned and she faced impeachment

archipelago stands out as one of the Asian countries with the highest demographic growth and is the twelfth most densely populated country in the world. Unemployment continues to hover at worrying levels, with estimates of up to 20% of unemployment among the working-age population. Ten million Filipinos have already emigrated to find work and one million others follow their example each year. Meanwhile, the gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen, with over half of the nation's GDP in the hands of the fifteen richest and most powerful Filipino families. In 1985, on the eve of the first people power revolution, the top end, equal to 10% of the population, owned 37% of national wealth, while only 5% trickled down to the poorest 20% of the population. Over 20 years later, the 10% niche continues to control 36% of national wealth, while the poorest 20% still struggles to go beyond 5 percent. Per capita wealth has remained virtually frozen at the

same levels as in 1980 in terms of purchasing power parity. And, while poverty affected just under 37% of the population in 1997, over 40% of Filipinos lived in abject poverty in 2002. Access to drinking water was considered a privilege for 81.4% of people in the period from 1999 to 2002 alone; it is considered a privilege for 80% of people today. These figures are certainly not reassuring, and, rather than hint at possible emancipation, trends indicate that the country may sink even deeper into the muddy furrows of misery and underdevelopment.

### Unfulfilled promises

I leave the city of Cebu, capital of the eponymous island, to travel in the direction of some of the islands in the Visayas. As one leaves the city centre, there is a progressive explosion, a rash of vegetation against the background of a pure blue sky. There are bursts of green and masses of shacks, coloured only by the strips of washing hung out on the barbed wire that delimits each garden. Rudimentary gazebos dot the landscape, makeshift meeting points for neighbours. There is a church, a chapel, a pillar with its capital. In the heart of the rural areas, smoke rises from burning brushwood, piles of leaves and coconut shells chopped in two and burned to be used as cooking fuel. A goat, a cow, a pig, each with rope tied around one leg. Increasingly ramshackle straw huts. Endless hencoops, their boundaries marked out and protected with barbed wire and light bulbs. Wedges of land that would seem to compose an African rather than an Asian jigsaw puzzle. Half-naked children play on the road, inventing games out of thin air, and run to wash themselves in the river, leading even younger brothers and sisters by the hand. Hezal, 12, has a brother and eight sisters. Only one of his sisters is older than he is. In the morning, he goes to school like the other children. You see them, dressed in uniform with a few notebooks in their hands, walking quickly across the beach, slowing only to examine the new faces that have come to their village. Like his 47 classmates, Hezal speaks excellent English. His parents are unemployed and his mother helps her sister in a restaurant in the evenings. The roads are perpetually thronged with transport of every kind: bicycles, motorcycles



and mopeds, the characteristic tricycles and the omnipresent *jeepneys*. Hordes of young boys and men keep asking if you need a ride, but they are not too insistent. From time to time they take a nap under the leafy branch of a tree, sheltered from the sun. Like the country in which they live, they seem resigned to a wheel that continues to roll in an unchanging direction, and meanwhile they give themselves up to a baking-hot sun and a bit of pop and country music. One reads the abandon, the loss of drive and spirit of enterprise, in many of these faces. Those who still possess these qualities flee. They flee to the city or, if they are lucky, they go abroad.

Edna is 36 and has six children: the oldest is 16, the youngest three. Her husband is a carpenter and she recently started working for a foreign restaurant. She works the night shift, going home a short time before her children leave for school. She was formerly a public-sector employee in the municipality, and in the province before that. She liked that job; she liked her colleagues, and the working hours were better suited to her family life. Then, however, one of the "lords of the area" took away her job to give it to someone who had been ruined in an electoral campaign. In compensation, he found her the job at the

restaurant of a Swedish friend. Edna has a sister who has been working as a maid in Italy for the past two years. She dreams of following her one day and then returning to the Philippines to open up a shop of her own. She is obsessed with the problem of her children's education: with the cost of living continuing to rise and the scarcity of schools nearby, she is terrorized by the thought of not being able to ensure that her children will go to high school and university. Regret still burns fiercely within her at the thought of having had to abandon her university studies. She had been obliged to get married, and the first children had arrived soon after. In a country where the overwhelming majority of people are Catholic and where the Church continues to wield an authority that cannot be tarnished, contraceptives remain taboo. "My husband would like more children", says Edna, "but I am against the idea. I think it's a bigger sin to bring other children into the world and not manage to educate them than to use contraceptives". Few families in the social category to which Edna belongs are of the same opinion. Among the middle and upper classes it is now normal to have two children or three at most, and sometimes even only one. In the poorer classes, on the other hand,



\_In the poorer classes, those who continue to make up the overwhelming majority of the population, families have six to eight children on average, while among the middle and upper classes it is now normal to have two or three children at most

which continue to make up the overwhelming majority of the Filipino population, families have six to eight children on average. As one young Filipino says ironically, what is underway is a family planting rather than a family planning policy.

Edna's eyes had lit up for a second at the thought of the forthcoming elections in May – local and Senate elections. That spark of light revealed a desire for revenge and an illusion, as intense as it was fleeting, that her vote would really count and would contribute to changing the situation. It seemed to want to say: “Yes, everything is rotting, but in May it will be our turn to make ourselves heard, and our voices will not go unheard”. Then realism, the irrevocable warning of experience, got the upper hand once more and swept away the easy illusions.

Edna is convinced that elections are an extremely important and useful practice, the fundamental ring that links ordinary citizens to those who decide their fates. “However”,

she adds, “as things stand, the elections are only a waste of money. The old and new politicians do nothing but quarrel among themselves without finding solutions to the country's problems. And candidates who are not rich enough have no chance of occupying key positions”.

There is a common sensation, like hers, of a lack of confidence in the fate of the Philippines in the near future. “The country's situation is getting worse”, many locals tell you. Political analysts call this people power fatigue – the painful, hopeless tiredness of the people – the same people who readily took to the streets in 2001 and, moved by a power they believed they had, fought with the support of the army to change the order of things.

### Arroyo: a disappointment

The people are now both tired and wiser. They have understood that the public *coups de théâtre* by politicians, the government and Cabinet shuffles, are purely cosmetic. One player succeeds another; one family member replaces another. The faces change, but they always end up playing the same dirty game. Gloria Macapagal Arroyo has not disproved the perverse mechanism; if anything, she has taken it to new heights. Vice-President of the Philippines during the Estrada Presidency in 1998, she became President three years later in what is even now considered a dubious manner, following the street revolution of 2001, known as EDSA II, which ousted the well-known movie star from the scene. She was then re-elected in 2004, once again with methods that were anything but transparent. Shortly after the renewal of her mandate, in fact, a scandal revealed her attempt to influence the election returns in her favour. When the bomb exploded, half of her cabinet resigned and she faced impeachment.

*A question of karma*, said Estrada.

Meanwhile, as is sadly typical in the Philippines, Arroyo re-established the game: on the one hand, she said she wanted to promote the legal course of the process of impeachment while, on the other, she continued to sidestep and quash it. And, as is sadly typical in the Philippines, the possibility of her removal from power, which set the country abuzz for several months, was avoided because of the inability of the opposition to present a valid and unanimous alternative rather than any particular skill on Arroyo's



own part in responding to the accusations against her.

Hence another great opportunity was wasted, ending only with the sowing of further reasons for lack of confidence and pessimism – for Gloria had everything it took to succeed, without needing to resort to short cuts or stratagems. The daughter of one of the first Presidents of the newly independent Philippines, with a degree in economics from a U.S. university, she had an entirely suitable profile. She had come to power in the name of four principles/objectives: first, the eradication of poverty in ten years; second, the establishment of a moral model of government; third, the carrying out of genuine reform and a “dialogue with the people” and fourth, the development of a model leadership.

Today, it is debatable, to say the least, whether hers has been a model leadership. Corruption continues to spread and the models of corruption are none other than the President’s husband, son and brother-in-law, who are today involved in a *jueteng* (a popular numbers game) scandal. The paradox – a paradox that has now wrapped itself around the roots of the Philippines’ political system – is that Arroyo continues to declare war on the

vices of a system of which she herself is the product and that she, with her conduct, is continuing to nourish.

Thus the president continues to lose credibility and may well go down in history as one of the Philippines’ least popular leaders. This also explains why the Philippines do not resemble South Korea or Japan today. A country that has never accomplished genuine agrarian reform and has thereby never been able to release the potential of internal demand, which remains suffocated by a public debt of alarming proportions (over 70% of GDP); where political stability appears to be continually compromised and where poverty shows no signs of improvement is a country that does not reassure foreign investors. The Japanese, the Taiwanese and all the other players who invest in the Asia-Pacific region are not inclined to risk large sums in a nation that will not manage to pay off Marcos’s debts before 2025. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the remittances of Filipinos working abroad are a hundred times larger than the sum of foreign direct investment.

Another recent scandal has confirmed the feudal *imprimatur* of the current Philippine government and revealed the vulnerability of its rule of law even more clearly. The Arroyo



\_The Arroyo regime is not far from the record number of murders committed in Marcos's time (left: Imelda Marcos). A U.N. inquiry has named General Jovencito Palparan (above) as one of the accused.

regime has witnessed a record number of 834 suspicious homicides, a figure that is worryingly close to the pace of events in Marcos's time, when about 3,000 opponents were murdered during 20 years of brutal dictatorship. Although the police continue to talk of fewer than 117 deaths, the situation makes the Philippines resemble Afghanistan, the most dangerous Asian country for journalists. On a global scale, this is the most dangerous non-war zone for the press, for journalists are the most frequent victims of these homicides – a further paradox considering that the Philippines boasts one of the freest presses in Asia.

Given the gigantic dimension of the phenomenon, the President has established an ad hoc commission to shed light on the events. The United Nations High Commission for Human Rights was also invited to set up its own investigative committee a few weeks later. The Melo Commission and the Altson inquiry have reached similar conclusions, which reveal that the Philippines' army and police were

heavily involved in the killings. Some of the leading names in the military sphere, particularly the now-retired General Jovencito Palparan, figure on the list of the accused. The scandal, which has only just begun, already promises to be tinged with a number of different shades.

It is embarrassing, considering that no later than last June, Gloria herself had publicly lauded the General's efforts in the fight against Communist rebels and, in general, has never skimped on praise for the work of the Philippines' police and security forces. It is delicate in terms of the international repercussions that could follow. In compliance with the Leahy amendment, in fact, the United States could cut down – or cut off altogether – its (copious) political and military aid to the Philippines if the investigations, which are destined to continue, were to demonstrate the government's direct responsibility in these practices of systematic abuse of human rights. It is disconcerting, because once again, and despite the evidence, the government seems to be concentrating its attention on attempts to deny figures, counter accusations, improvise explanations and institutionalise escape routes rather than on therapies to heal the illness. The "Philippine Daily Inquirer" sorrowfully asks: *How far can the President go in bringing those responsible for these extrajudicial murders to trial if Army officials and her own Ministry of Justice persist in denying the existence of the problem?*

Thus yet another good opportunity risks being wasted. And the cancer continues to spread.

In Manila, meanwhile, it is the twenty-first anniversary of the first EDSA revolution, which dethroned the dictator Marcos in 1986. With the passing of the years, the number of people concerned with returning to protest in the streets and commemorate the glorious popular exploit keeps decreasing. Those few, however, continue to leave a sign. A first message reads: *There is no true democracy where there are political murders. There is no good government where there is a "Hello Garci"* (a slogan referring to the election-rigging scandal of 2004). Further ahead, another slogan reads: *Edsa I: 21 years of betrayal of popular hopes by the elite.* The creed of a betrayed people is summed up in an epitaph: *Here lie Edsa I and a people's hopes for change: 1986-2007.*