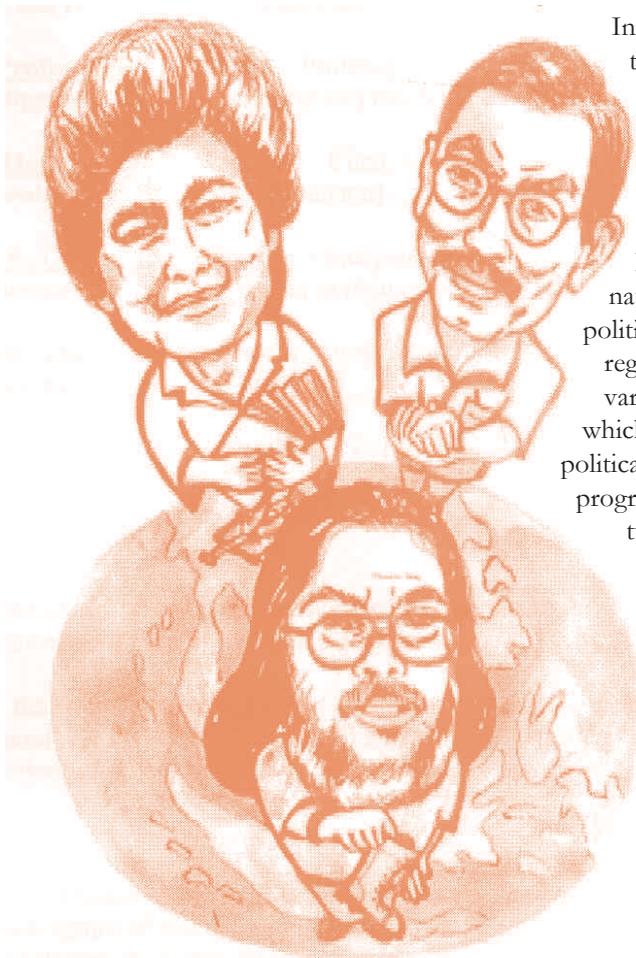


# Political Space for Advocacy in the SouthEast Asian Region

*In March 2007, the South East Asian Committee for Advocacy (SEACA) will release a book based on their project, "Research on Political Space for Advocacy in the South East Asian Region."*



In Southeast Asia today, political space is present in widely varying degrees, reflecting not only the heterogeneous nature of existing political systems in the region, but also the varying levels in which the project of political modernity has progressed. This in turn, affects civil society's capacity to engage with governments for advocacy and claim-making.

Various internal factors unique to specific countries have also impacted on the democratic space of Southeast Asian countries—liberation movements in Burma, in the Indonesian provinces of Aceh, the Maluku, and West Papua, in southern Thailand, and in Mindanao, southern Philippines. There are also the fragile democracies currently in various states of crises—Cambodia, East Timor, and Vietnam. Furthermore, countries including Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand are saddled with their current and historical political problems.

This research project, through the upcoming book, is hoped to deepen civil society's understanding of the context of advocacy in the region, particularly the political space in which policy and programs are negotiated between citizens and the state.

*The following are excerpts from SEACA's upcoming publication on the political space for advocacy in the South East Asian Region. This paper titled, "The Future of Philippine Democracy," is written by Randy David (Professor of Sociology, University of the Philippines), one of the book's contributors.*

What Filipinos accomplished peacefully in 1986, we now remember as the spontaneous exercise of popular sovereignty. There is a lot of truth in this description, but it does not tell the whole story. The other side of the story is the role that the armed forces played in effecting a change in government. People power would not have been possible without the military. The experience was akin to eating the dangerous fruit of knowledge. The fiction of representative democracy and popular sovereignty was exposed.

In 1986, it was not difficult to rationalise the forcible ouster of the dictator Ferdinand Marcos from Malacanang. He had lost legitimacy after he railroaded the ratification of the 1973 constitution which gave him enormous powers, and there was no doubt that he had stolen the snap elections of 1986.

But when people power was re-staged in 2001, the international community reacted by questioning the constitutionality of driving out a sitting president who had yet to be convicted in an ongoing impeachment trial. Even as the participants of EDSA II congratulated themselves for achieving what was thought to be another peaceful transfer of power, there were lingering doubts about the propriety of the military withdrawal of allegiance from a sitting president.

The ghosts of these adventurous episodes in our recent history continue to haunt us today. They come in the form of difficult questions. If it was right to force Joseph Estrada out of Malacanang in 2001 for plundering the public coffers, why is it wrong to oust Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo (GMA) today for the even more grievous offense of stealing a presidential election? If it was right for the Catholic bishops to demand the resignation of an incompetent and immoral president and mobilise people to demonstrate in 1986 and in 2001, why are they not demanding today the resignation of a president who had made a mockery of the democratic process? If it was right for the armed forces in 1986 and in 2001 to intervene in the political sphere, why was it wrong in February 2006 for them to attempt to do the same thing? If it was right in 1986 to set aside the Constitution in order to give way to a revolutionary government with such powers as were needed to dismantle the structures of authoritarianism, why would it be wrong today to seize the government and set aside its Constitution in order to establish a transitional government that would, once and for all, dismantle the system of elite rule and pave the way for the formation of a truly just and free society?

There are no easy answers to these questions. Nothing in the theory of

democratic politics can justify the continuation of a political system that excludes the vast majority of its people from any meaningful participation in government because of their poverty. The administration of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo is possibly one of the worst examples of this discredited type of elite rule, which increasingly has no place in the modern world. And yet, every right-thinking Filipino will tell you today that the simple replacement of GMA with another politician of the same stripe - without touching the fundamental rules of elite politics will achieve nothing. This lies at the root of our people's failure to convert their present distrust for GMA into an active support for any movement seeking to dislodge her. They know that if the process succeeds, another people power will likely lead to exactly the same form of rule presided over by maybe an even more bankrupt opposition.

One can understand this cynical attitude. The middle class, in particular, do not seem convinced that the answer to the crisis is a revolutionary government led by the Left. They are

scared of the turbulence that a leftist revolution might bring. They have seen how revolutionary models of society have collapsed over the years.

Is there a middle ground then? An alternative that calls for sweeping reforms in government in the name of social justice and modernity, but does not threaten people's fundamental rights to property, life, liberty, and due process? An alternative that seeks to restore accountability and competence in government, while calling upon the people to examine and change their own personalistic habits in the name of order, progress and responsibility?

If there is such an alternative, personified by leaders and social constituencies active in the present political stage, how should we put it in place? Is it by snap election? Is it by people power combined with military intervention? Is it by regular elections? Is it by Charter change?

These are important questions and they beg for answers. It may be useful to take one or two steps back so that we can see from another perspective the type of reforms being sought.

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*SEACA is a programme that focuses on advocacy capacity building of civil society organisations in South East Asia.*