

ESTRADA OUSTED FROM PHILIPPINE PRESIDENCY

Manila, January 20, 2001

Reuters reports that Vice-President Gloria Macapagal ARROYO took over as the new president of the Philippines today after the disgraced incumbent Joseph ESTRADA was ousted amid mass street protests recalling a 1986 "people power" revolution.

The Supreme Court stripped Estrada of his office after the military's senior command, the police and most of the cabinet defected and joined protests which then swelled to hundreds of thousands of people outraged by the collapse of his impeachment trial on charges of corruption.

Arroyo choked back tears as she took the presidential oath before cheering supporters at the EDSA shrine in Manila, the stage of the people power movement that toppled dictator Ferdinand MARCOS.

"The Filipino has done it again on the hallowed ground of EDSA," she told the crowd, praising the peaceful "people power two" that helped sweep her into office over only a few dramatic days.

"I accept the privilege and responsibility to act as President of the Republic," she told the jubilant masses. "I do so with a sense of trepidation and a sense of awe."

Although the crowds on the street were much smaller than in 1986, Estrada's position was severely weakened when the military and police withdrew support and shifted allegiance to Arroyo on Friday. Most of his cabinet also resigned and sided with his opponents.

Defence Secretary Orlando Mercado said his downfall was orchestrated by military chief General Angelo Reyes to prevent an outbreak of widespread and potentially bloody clashes as the numbers of protesters in the streets increased.

"Angie (Reyes' nickname) wouldn't have moved if he did not have it all ironed out," Mercado told Reuters.

He said the turning point came when the Senate impeachment court voted 11-10 on Tuesday to reject prosecution evidence that Estrada had amassed 3.3 billion pesos (\$60 million) since he became president in June 1998.

ONLY A HANDFUL OF LOYALISTS

Reyes was careful to cloak his moves with civilian support, but it was clear that the withdrawal of military backing pushed Estrada to the wall.

Left with only a handful of loyal ministers, Estrada and his family left the presidential palace by river barge about two hours after Arroyo was sworn in.

Until late on Saturday, he was in his private residence in another part of the capital and swore he would "live and die" in the Philippines. However, rumours swirled that he was preparing to flee abroad, possibly to the United States.

Ombudsman Antonio Desierto said he would begin pre-trial investigation of Estrada on charges of criminal plunder on Monday. The charge is punishable by death.

As president, Estrada was immune from lawsuits but with his ouster, he can now "be criminally investigated" and prosecuted, Desierto told reporters.

At the palace's pier, reporters shoved and fought to catch a last glimpse of the Estradas as they boarded the barge. Estrada's son, Jinggoy, appeared to be holding back tears.

Forcing a smile, Estrada said "Salamat!" or "thank you" in Filipino and gave a final salute to his guards.

Earlier, he said in a statement he had "strong and serious doubts" about the legality and constitutionality of Arroyo's appointment, but said he would leave for the good of the country.

"I do not wish to be a factor that will prevent the restoration of unity and order in our civil society," he said.

The downfall came soon after tens of thousands of protesters surged towards the presidential palace, where Estrada had been holed up and was fighting for time.

The protests were mostly peaceful but in a final push through barricades and police, some protesters were slightly hurt.

Presidential security forces had earlier warned of bloodshed if the protesters were to storm the palace.

"I'm proud that we can still prove to other parts of the world that we can go to the streets fighting for our rights without any violence," said anti-Estrada protester Raul Car Uri.

The Supreme Court stepped in and said Estrada was unfit to govern. Chief Justice Hilario Davide then administered the oath of office to Arroyo, 53 and a mother of three.

Arroyo, the daughter of a former president, thanked many people for helping her to power, including former President Corazon Aquino - who led the 1986 uprising against Marcos and was the only other woman to occupy the country's top post.

She denied there had been any deal with Estrada and said the law would take its course.

U.S. SUPPORT

The U.S. Embassy in Manila welcomed Arroyo's appointment.

"We have had an exceptionally strong working relationship with new President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo in the past, and are looking forward to working with her to strengthen U.S.-Philippine relations even further," the embassy said in a statement.

In the impeachment hearings, Estrada faced removal from office if convicted of any one of the charges against him - corruption, bribery, betrayal of public trust and culpable violation of the constitution. He pleaded not guilty.

Prone to controversy since he became the 13th president of the largely Roman Catholic country on June 30, 1998, Estrada was opposed by the church which was mortified a man who had owned up to womanising, gambling, drinking binges and fathering several children out of wedlock should be elected president.

His movie star past and upfront personality helped win him massive support, especially among the nation's poor, but he was never accepted by the political elite.

Arroyo made thinly veiled attacks on Estrada's lifestyle and persona in her acceptance speech, saying she would "promote a work ethic and a dignified lifestyle" and saying performing was more important than grandstanding.

By coincidence, Arroyo was sworn in as the 14th president of the Philippines only hours before George W. Bush was to take the oath in Washington - and both are children of former presidents.