The Manila Peninsula Incident on Hindsight

By PERCIVAL CENDAÑA

The Manila Peninsula incident of November 29, 2007 has taken on quite a myriad of names. It has been called a take-over, a stand-off, a walk-out, a mutiny, a criminal act, a foolish adventure, a farce, a comic opera, a power grab, a coup, an insurrection and another destabilization plot. Even the supposedly mundane task of grappling for a name to label the Manila Peninsula incident reflects the many different ways of how people are making sense of it and from where they are looking at it.

On the one hand, a label is extremely crucial in finding the meaning that might eventually lead to a plausible and acceptable explanation. Three months after the incident, many questions are still left unanswered. But on the other hand, even without the definitive answers, making sense of what happened is interestingly possible especially if juxtaposed with the national political context. This in the end reveals what already is obvious about the politics of this country and everything that is wrong with it.

“Dissent without action is consent”¹

Even the verbs used to refer to what Brig. Gen. Danilo Lim, Sen. Antonio Trillanes IV and other co-accused did on that Thursday morning court hearing vary. Some accounts say they “walked out” while others report that they “strolled out” of the Makati RTC. These two words denote different things: the first is forceful while the latter is leisurely. Whichever of the two verbs is correct, two things remain constant. One, they were not restrained from leaving the courthouse; and two, their security detail joined them in their unhurried march to the Manila Peninsula.

The first hour of the incident gave the impression that a painstakingly well-planned scheme was unfolding because the plotters even went to the extent of winning over their

¹ “Dissent without action is consent” by George Orwell
guards. But then again it is not surprising. As columnist Randy David puts it, General Lim and Senator Trillanes “are highly regarded by their men and by their contemporaries in the officers corps.” Professor David even stressed that “few senior officers in the military today can match their popularity among soldiers.” The two are not only well regarded, they are also not greenhorns in the field of military mutiny.

One of the first questions that begs to be answered is why they did it given that the odds were heavily stacked against them—not much arms to defend themselves with, only a handful of followers, the February 2006 unsuccessful bid wherein Lim allegedly expected soldiers to march with Anti-Arroyo forces and the repeated failure to muster massive public outrage against the Arroyo administration.

Pundits and observers point out to two plausible explanations, each with a quite complex plot involving other allied military forces.

The first theory says that Manila Peninsula is a smokescreen, a necessary
diversion to take away the attention from the synchronized military operations of their allies aimed at toppling the administration. The targets of the offensive could have been the chain of command loyal to the Arroyos, key government officials and the residents of Malacañang.

The second theory identifies Manila Peninsula as the signal, the commencement of concerted efforts of their allies in strategic military camps in what could be described as “mutiny in place.” Basically, the troops in various camps will declare that they are withdrawing support from the Arroyo administration.

In the early evening of November 29, after the surrender of Lim, Trillanes and company, it became apparent that none of the two scenarios materialized. Whatever it is they were planning fizzled out and their action joined the country’s long list of failed purely military-led attempts to overthrow the regime in power.

Observers point out that what happened was a great miscalculation on the part of Lim and Trillanes. In the end, a repeat of February 2006 happened. The other actors in the plot, whoever or wherever they may be, did not deliver their part in the supposedly grand plan.

More severe critics argue that the two were delusional to expect their action to spark massive defections in the military which the plotters say is consistent with their constitutional mandate of being the protector of the people and the state. Critics even went to the extent of saying that the plotters missed an important logistic point if they expect civilian support for the simple reason that the incident took place a day ahead of the Bonifacio Day rallies.

The post-Manila Peninsula discussions revolved mainly around this matter, thus skirting and/or shrouding the more substantial issue of the compelling reasons behind the incident.

“The fighting this righteous cause?”

Government spokespersons during the day of the incident described the issues being raised by those in the Manila Peninsula as both trite and stale. They dismissed the grievances of Gen. Lim and company as recycled opposition rhetoric. The destabilization plot, according to them, disrupts the economic development that is being espoused by the administration.

Fr. Joaquin Bernas characterized the public’s reaction as “while indicating disagreement with the means used by Trillanes and Lim, shows a widespread desire for an end to corruption that has weighed down the current administration.” In calling for the ouster of the regime premised on the illegitimacy of the Arroyo presidency, Lim and Trillanes have laid down their case that in effect reminds the public of the wrongdoings and ills of the current administration. They also reminded the public of how the various legal processes have closed down for the airing of grievances and exacting accountability. This leads to an appreciation that the Manila Peninsula incident should not be at all surprising.

The Manila Peninsula incident happened in the context of the NBN-ZTE deal, the bribery scandal in Malacañang and the sham impeachment complaint filed against President Arroyo. Some contend that it was a logical conclusion to the abuses committed by the administration, from the repeated dismissal of impeachment complaints to the clampdown of democratic and constitutional processes in haunting atmosphere of impunity. The destabilization plot was a result of the refusal of the government to address allegations of fraud and corruption squarely.

The Manila Peninsula incident in effect is a repercussion of the crisis of institutions. And an institution in a self-inflicted crisis is prone to incidents like this.

Do “not unnecessarily rile the media at this point in time”?

One of the most powerful images from the Manila Peninsula incident, other than the brazen use of force when the military rammed a tank through the main entrance of the hotel, was the line of media people in plastic handcuffs defiantly raising their restrained hands. The military said that they were just being “invited” to Bicutan for processing, an invitation that they cannot possibly refuse.

No wonder, in a hour’s time after the surrender of General Lim and Senator Trillanes, the spotlight of media coverage shifted to their fellow practitioners being held for “processing.” The president’s instruction to government officials on how to handle the media came two days late.

Veteran journalist Amando Doronila captured the indignation of journalists when he said that “never in the past have media people been arrested, handcuffed and manhandled for covering conflict and investigated for involvement in an insurrection, regardless of where the sympathies lie.” Doronila also debunked the administration’s claim that the presence of media was obstructing military operations.

After the incident, the Arroyo government earned another enemy. The battle for the freedoms being waged by media institutions drags up to now as the government continues to try to restrain media from covering events like the Manila Peninsula incident. The hardline stance of the administration as reflected in a recent government memorandum on the coverage of events like the Manila Peninsula incident is effectively laying bare its persistence to have its way in such situations without media documenting their actions.

That single image of handcuffed journalists says a lot about the attitude of this administration towards people’s rights. It is also a very concrete manifestation of the government’s disregard of the citizens’ fundamental civil liberties. This is further emphasized by the imposition
of a curfew in the evening of November 29 without a proclamation of national emergency.

The imposition of the curfew, the government said, was to prevent other mutineers from launching another attack. But observers say that it was mainly directed towards achieving a chilling effect on the public especially those segments critical of the Arroyo government, to show that the administration will and can take drastic measures.

But more pragmatic pundits point out that it was meant to stain the image of Senator Trillanes, who garnered a whopping 11 million votes in the elections. The logic, they say, is for the people to blame Trillanes et al. for the inconvenience of the curfew. Whatever the real motivation behind it, the curfew is a limitation on the freedom of movement, a right guaranteed by the 1987 Bill of Rights.

The warrantless arrests and the curfew violate fundamental rights and are direct assaults on civil liberties. After November 29, the already poor human rights record of the Arroyo got even worse.

**Better to die for the nation and not because of some illness**

Gen. Lim explained to the public their actions on that fateful Thursday morning by saying, “we shall do whatever we can do to prevent any backsliding to the corruption and abuse of power of the immediate past, and advance the cause of truth, freedom, justice, peace and progress for all Filipinos.”

The message, lofty as it is, did not resonate up to the level Gen. Lim and Sen. Trillanes expected. It did not succeed in capturing the sympathy of their fellow soldiers and the general public. Significant segments in the military did not withdraw support from the Arroyo administration and the public did not pour into the streets in protest. But that does not undermine the validity of their cause and the weight of the issues they raised even if the form they chose divided even those critical of the Arroyo regime.

Beyond the substance and rhetoric, the Manila Peninsula incident must also be appreciated not only in the context of the current political conjuncture but also on a more structural perspective. A flawed democracy like the Philippines is prone to events like this. The experience of some Latin American countries and even some of our Asian neighbors like Thailand points out that military intervention as an impulse is fuelled by the instability and lack of credibility of democratic institutions. As such, these democracies are hostage to direct military interventions with the end goal of regime change.

The Philippine experience has brewed its own permutation of power transfer outside the legally mandated processes. The People Power phenomenon as manifested in Edsa 1 and 2 is a porous combination of civilian and military participation. It has been proven time again by the Philippine experience that a purely military intervention is bound to fail as exemplified by the repeated attempts of Gringo Honasan and company during the Aquino regime and up to a certain extent the Oakwood mutiny.

One thing is for sure, the Manila Peninsula incident would not be the last. As long as the political crisis persists and our democracy remains flawed, some forces will always view military intervention as an option to rectify societal ills brought about by corrupt and fraudulent regimes.

**FOOTNOTES**

1 Pronouncement in the media of Brig. Gen. Danilo Lim, November 29, 2007
2 From the statement read during the press conference in the Manila Peninsula, November 29, 2007
3 President Arroyo’s instruction to her top officials, December 1, 2007
4 Bibeth Orteza, screenwriter and breast cancer survivor, during an interview inside the Manila Peninsula, November 29, 2007, said “Sana kung kailangan mo mamatay, mamatay ka para sa bayan, ‘wag kang mamatay dahil sa sakit.”

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