

THE PHILIPPINES

SUMMARY

After the dictator Ferdinand Marcos was overthrown in 1986, development in the Philippines has been dizzying, and sometimes violent, but a civil society with democratic parties, trade unions, and organisations nonetheless developed. In the past twenty years, the country's workers' movement has gained ground, both in unions and politics. Since 2012, the workers' movement has achieved better coordination among organisations and drafted several bills for Congress, including the passing of legislation on reproductive health.

In recent decades, the Philippines has undergone economic transformation. Many government-owned companies have been sold, trade barriers have been removed and global and regional economic cooperation has been advanced. Growth in the most recent decade has been five percent on average annually in spite of the global crisis. Today, the Philippines is classified as a low middle-income country. Nevertheless, society continues to be dominated by a small wealthy elite, while the majority of citizens live in poverty. The gaps in income are great, as are differences between the regions.

The strong economy should be viewed in terms of the rapid population growth that puts high demands on new job opportunities. The Philippines today has the highest rate of unemployment in the region at almost seven percent. Insecure forms of employment have become part of the new labour market. It was estimated in 2013 that 40 percent of all jobs were precarious, short-term positions, temporary services, or underpaid work. The situation on the labour market forces many people to seek work abroad. The Philippines currently has one of the highest shares of migrant workers in the world. Their remittances accounted in 2013 for almost 10 percent of the country's gross national product (GNP).¹

The Philippines has ratified the eight core conventions of the International Labour Organisation (ILO). The country's civil society is well organised and demonstrations are common.² Several human rights organisations report that relations with the government have improved under the current president, Benigno Aquino III.³ The president and the government's neoliberal policies, have however strained relations with the trade union movement. The increased share of insecure jobs contributes to a weakening of the trade unions, since Philippine law only allows permanent employees to join. The union membership rate fell from 30 percent in 1995 to five percent in 2014.⁴

The Philippine people face several challenges if they are to create sustainable democratic development and combat poverty. Important progress has been made in the fight against corruption, but it still permeates the entire society. On the southernmost island of Mindanao,

¹ Country Guide, <http://www.landguiden.se/Lander/Asien/Filippinerna/Ekonomi> (2015-01-13)

² Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2014/philippines-0#.VLVOLCuG-PZ> (2015-01-13)

³ Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, "Mänskliga rättigheter i Filippinerna 2013"

⁴ Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2014/philippines-0#.VLVOLCuG-PZ> (2015-01-13)

negotiations between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, an Islamic separatist group, have resulted in a peace agreement. Violence is nonetheless still a common. Climate change is another imminent threat. In recent years, a number of severe natural catastrophes have occurred that have led to comprehensive property damage and thousands of deaths.

SOCIOECONOMIC SITUATION

Since the 1990s, the Philippine economy has undergone deregulation, and several state-owned companies have been sold to the private sector.⁵ The Philippines joined the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in 1995 and is active, for example, in regional economic cooperation. According to the World Bank, GNP rose by almost seven percent in 2013.⁶ The strong economic growth is expected to continue in the next few years, driven by increasing household consumption and government spending, urged on by low interest rates. The services sector has the greatest share of GNP, 58 percent, followed by the industrial sector at 31 percent and agriculture at 11 percent.⁷ Foreign investment is steadily increasing but is still low compared to neighboring countries. At present, the Philippine economy is the strongest in the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN).

The Philippines is currently regarded as a middle-income country, but resources are unevenly distributed, and the gap between poor and rich is enormous. In the last ten years, population has grown by 15 million, up from 85 million in 2005 to 100 million in 2015.⁸ Many Philippine people live in poverty without any real chance to influence their living situation. In 2012, 42 percent of the population lived on under two US Dollars a day.⁹ A lack of active redistribution policies and strong population growth create roadblocks to the war on poverty. Economic and political life in the Philippines displays elements of clientelism and oligarchy that impede the country's economic development and disregard principles of competition. The deregulation of the energy market, for example, has led to cartel formation and record electricity prices, which hit the poorest members of the population especially hard.

According to the ILO, official unemployment is almost seven percent. There is a large gray area, however, since many unemployed people are not registered by the authorities. Unemployed people instead often end up in the informal, black-market economy, which represents a growing share of total employment. Insecure forms of employment, and contractual or temporary work through agencies have become increasingly common. In 2013, almost 40 percent of all jobs were insecure ones. The low incomes and vulnerability are obstacles to fighting poverty.

The difficult situation on the job market has led many to seek work abroad. The Philippines has the largest share of migrant workers in the world. In the past 20 years, the number of Philippine guest workers has nearly tripled, from 697 000 in 1993 to 1.8 million in 2013. The income they send home accounts for almost ten percent of GNP.¹⁰ In 2013, a law was passed in the Philippines to improve security for the country's 1.9 household workers. The law is

⁵ Country Guide, <http://www.landguiden.se/Lander/Asien/Filippinerna/Ekonomi> (2015-01-13)

⁶ World Bank, 2013, "Philippine Economic Update: Accelerating Reforms to Meet the Jobs Challenge"

⁷ Country Guide, <http://www.landguiden.se/Lander/Asien/Filippinerna/Ekonomi> (2015-01-13)

⁸ World Bank, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL/countries/PH?display=graph>

⁹ World Bank, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.2DAY/countries> (2015-01-13)

¹⁰ Ibid.

intended to protect workers against abuse, debt traps, and child labour. It also establishes minimum wage, minimum hours, and benefits.¹¹

CURRENT POLITICAL SITUATION

President Benigno Aquino III came to power in 2010 together with his liberal-conservative coalition called “Team PNoy” after winning the election with a slogan about a social contract with citizens. Aquino promised to fight corruption, create new jobs, reduce poverty and increase respect for human rights.¹² These reforms were to be financed by increased international investments, it was said, not higher taxes.

After more than half term, many critics say that important reforms have failed to materialize, particularly in relation to reducing inequality and the significant differences between the country's different regions. Corruption has decreased slightly, but it still permeates the entire Philippine society. Representatives of civil society groups claim, for example, that the so-called bottom-up budget, which was meant to increase civil society influence in the local distribution of resources, has become a way of favoring loyal groups. According to Transparency International, the Philippines ranked 85 of 175 countries in 2014.¹³

The Philippines has had a democratic government with free elections since 1986. The president is head of state and commander-in-chief of the armed forces. The constitution grants extensive presidential power, including the right to proclaim states of emergency in situations of national crisis and to veto bills in congress. The presidential term of office is six years without the option of re-election. Election campaigns are often violent. Behind the violence is usually local conflicts or contradictions between different clans. Also the political violence increases during election campaigns. For example, during local elections in 2013, several local politically active leaders from civil society groups were murdered, including members of the trade union movement.¹⁴

In practice, a small elite dominates the Philippine's political and economic life.¹⁵ The political parties serve as campaign organisations for candidates in presidential elections. The ideological differences between the parties are small, and for their members, personal loyalties play a greater role than the Party program.¹⁶ After the elections, many members of the opposition align with the ruling party, while others form new parties for the next election. Benigno Aquino III is illustrative of political life in the Philippines, which is controlled to a considerable degree by dynasties and personalities. He is a fourth-generation politician and, moreover, son of the former president Corazon Aquino and former speaker Benigno Aquino, Jr. The political elite includes several former actors, whose careers are based more on glamor than political message.

The Roman Catholic Church, business, and the army exercise powerful political influence. The Church has wielded its power, for example, to prevent legislation on sexual and reproductive rights.¹⁷ In 2012, Congress passed a law on reproductive health that the Church

¹¹ ILO, 2013, “Philippines Enact New Law Protecting Domestic Workers”

¹² Country Guide, <http://www.landguiden.se/Lander/Asien/Filippinerna/Aktuell-Politik> (2015-01-13)

¹³ Transparency International, <http://www.transparency.org/country/#PHL> (2015-01-13)

¹⁴ ITUC, 2014, “Global Rights Index: The World's Worst Countries for Workers”

¹⁵ Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2014/philippines-0#.VLVOLCuG-PZ> (2014-09-03)

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Country Guide, <http://www.landguiden.se/Lander/Asien/Filippinerna/Aktuell-Politik> (2015-01-13)

had appealed. Not until 2014, following a decision in the country's Supreme Court, was the law finally passed. The law provides for the legalization of contraceptives and obligatory sex education in schools.

CIVIL SOCIETY

The eight core conventions of the ILO are ratified by the Philippines. Several human rights organisations report that the dialogue with the government has improved since President Aquino took office.¹⁸ The Philippine trade-union movement, however, reports a tougher, anti-union atmosphere. It is common that trade union leaders are subjected to harassment, unfair dismissal and defamation. In recent years, several leaders also been subjected to enforced disappearance and murder. The crimes are rarely investigated by the authorities and impunity is high.

The alarming situation of the country's trade union movement has generated international pressure on the country's political leadership. In 2009, a delegation from the ILO encouraged "all government actors to make special efforts to ensure that their actions do not infringe upon the basic civil liberties of trade unionists."¹⁹ The Philippine government responded in 2010 by establishing an authority, the National Tripartite Industrial Peace Council (NTIPC), to address the issues. Nonetheless, since then several union leaders have been killed without anyone being held responsible for the crimes.²⁰

National legislation limits the ability of trade unions to protect workers' rights through restrictions on the right to strike and the right of association. The legal process to start a trade union is complicated, and by law contract workers are not allowed to join a union.²¹ The trade union movement has been hit hard by this development, and the number of members has dropped from 30 percent in 1995 to five percent in 2014.²² Yet the trade union movement has taken a number of strategic steps in recent years to improve its opportunities for influence. Several industrial unions have joined forces in a new trade union confederation, Sentro. A broad union network, Nagkaisa, representing 80 percent of union members in the Philippines, has been created. The trade union movement is an active negotiator and partner in dialogue on all; with employers, industrial representatives and government authorities. The close close relationship with the Labour Party Akbayan has resulted in a number of legislative proposals and an adopted law on reproductive rights and health

The need for a vital trade union movement is great. Laws regulating the work environment and hours are rarely obeyed, and salaries and wages can vary drastically from one region to another. Employers have instituted a system of firing permanent employees in order to rehire them on temporary contracts or enlisting a staffing agency, which is worse for both wage levels and conditions, such as health insurance and paid vacation. In the export zones, the situation is particularly serious because labor laws are frequently disregarded and there is outright ban on union organising and strikes. Philippines also has a high proportion of workers in the informal sector, which in practice are without social protection.

¹⁸ Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, "Mänskliga rättigheter i Filippinerna 2013" (2014-09-08)

¹⁹ ITUC-CSI, 2012, "[Internationally recognized core labour standards in Philippines – Report for the WTO General Council Review of the Trade Policies of Philippines](#)"

²⁰ ITUC, 2014, "Global Rights Index: The World's Worst Countries for Workers"

²¹ Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2014/philippines-0#.VLVOLCuG-PZ> (2014-09-03)

²² Ibid.

HUMAN RIGHTS AND EQUALITY

Many of the human rights challenges in the Philippines are affected by economic factors. A large part of the population do not get their basic economic and social rights respected. The inequality is high, with large differences between rich and poor, urban and rural areas and the different regions. The widespread poverty deprives large portions of the population of power and influence over their lives. According to President Aquino, more than two million people have risen from poverty during his term in power. This claim has been challenged by civil society organisations, for failing to relate the increase in income to price hikes – in electricity rates, for example.

Progress has been made in the Philippines, however, in reaching several of the United Nation Development Program's Millennium Development Goals. These include infant and child mortality, which has been reduced to less than half since 1990. In a report about gender equality in the world, published by the World Economic Forum in the autumn of 2014, the Philippines placed ninth, primarily because of progress in the education of women and their political and economic participation.²³ Recently, a law was passed to improve conditions for the country's household workers, which implies increased security for this highly female group of workers.

Sexual and reproductive health, as previously mentioned, remains a controversial issue. The Roman Catholic Church has a strong influence over society and a conservative influence on social development. A new law adopted in 2014 makes it possible, however, for government-subsidized contraceptives to be distributed to poor couples, for sexual education to be required in schools, and for hospital personnel to be educated in family-planning issues. Women who suffer complications from illegal abortions are also granted the right to medical care.

The Philippines is the country of origin, transit, and final destination for the trafficking of women and children. Several hundred thousand people are estimated to be involved in the country's sex industry. It is common for poor women from the country to be promised household work only to be lured into prostitution. Sexual violence and violence within relationships are the reality for many.

The country's armed forces and national police force are regularly accused of severe human rights crimes. The Aquino administration promised to investigate and charge those responsible for illegal executions, torture, involuntary disappearances, and other crimes against humanity, but in reality, little progress has been made in this area.²⁴ In 2009 an Anti-Torture Act was passed, but no one has as yet been charged with any crime. According to Amnesty International, the national police force was involved in 80 percent of the reported cases of torture in 2013.²⁵ The number of reported illegal executions has fallen, but politically motivated murder still occurs. In poor areas of the country, death squads have been reported engaging in genocide against socially deprived groups. Disappearances still occur, and they rarely result in investigation or legal sanctions.

²³ World Economic Forum <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2014/rankings/> (2015-01-13)

²⁴ Human Rights Watch, <http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2014/country-chapters/procent20/121770> (2015-01-13)

²⁵ Amnesty, 2014, "Above the Law: Police Torture in the Philippines"

The Philippines is furthermore one of the world's most dangerous countries for professional journalists. Crimes against journalists are also surrounded to a high degree by exemption from criminal prosecution.²⁶ The National Union of Journalists reported in late 2014 that a total of 30 Philippine journalists had been killed since President Benigno Aquino III took office in 2010.²⁷ Only six of these have led to arrests, two of which were later convicted. The murders are believed to have links to local senior politicians.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

In the Philippines, the effects of global climate change are apparent. Natural catastrophes such as floods and typhoons occur with increasing frequency and greater intensity than before. The effects of climate change and the extreme weather swings create an impending threat, especially for the poorest groups in the population. People who live in poor-quality housing along the coasts and survive by fishing or farming are the most vulnerable. In 2013, the super typhoon Haiyan caused extensive property damage, and more than 7 000 people died or disappeared. People who farmed or fished for a living were especially hard hit when fishing boats and harvests were destroyed.

Toward the end of 2014, yet another typhoon hit the Philippines and also caused great damage. This time the government authorities evacuated over 500 000 people, which contributed to considerably less lives lost than in 2013. Nonetheless local partner organisations estimate that about 40 percent of the reconstruction completed after the typhoon of 2013. Climate change is causing long-term damage to the entire society and its economy.

CONFLICT

There is a high level of violence in the Philippines. The situation on Mindanao is particularly difficult, as local clans are feuding with each other for land, natural resources and political positions. The problem is compounded by the wide availability of weapons which leads to local conflicts turns into acts of violence affecting the civilian population and in particular women and children. The region is also the poorest in the country.

Peace negotiations between the government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) have improved the situation for human rights somewhat, but civil society organisations still witness of military personnel using illegal executions, forced disappearances, and torture.²⁸

In 2014, a peace agreement was signed, which has resulted in a bill expected to be adopted by Congress in 2015. The new law will mean that five provinces in Mindanao, which currently represents Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao, are replaced with a new region called Bangsamoro.²⁹ In exchange for far-reaching autonomy, the separatists are expected to hand over all weapons to the authorities, among other measures.

²⁶ Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2014/philippines-0#.VLVOLCuG-PZ> (2015-01-13)

²⁷ Human Rights Watch, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2015/01/08/dispatches-deadly-start-2015-philippine-journalists> (2015-01-13)

²⁸ Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, "Mänskliga rättigheter i Filippinerna 2013" (2014-09-08)

²⁹ Country Guide, <http://www.landguiden.se/Lander/Asien/Filippinerna/Aktuell-Politik/Muslimskaprocent2oseparatister> (2015-01-13)

OTHER DONORS

Since typhoon Haiyan hit the Philippines in November of 2013, several international donors that work with humanitarian aid, reconstruction, and occupation have been established in the country. These include the United States Agency for International Aid (USAID), the Red Cross, Plan International and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

Since the Philippines is considered to be a middle-income country, Sweden and other donor countries have phased out their bilateral aid to the country. Nonetheless, several Swedish organisations continue to be active in the country, such as ECPAT, Save the Children, the LO-TCO Secretariat of International Trade Union Development Co-operation, the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation (SSNC) and We Effect.

Other donors that support activities similar to the Palme Center include The Trade Union Solidarity Centre of Finland (SASK), The Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions (LO Norge), Oxfam, individual and international trade unions such as the Building and Wood Workers International (BWI).

PROGRAMME OBJECTIVES

Overall and interim goals for the Philippines Programme have been developed in close cooperation and dialogue with Palme Center's member organisations engaged in the programme and our local Philippine partner organisations. The goals are aligned with the strategies, needs, and capacity of each organisation.

Overall objective

Civil society groups have increased their influence in democratic processes.

Intermediate objective 1

Increased respect for the rights of workers.

Intermediate objective 2

Civil society groups participate actively in decision-making on all levels.

Intermediate objective 3

Organisations within the programme increase their capacity.