

A wave of anger against corruption

By Michael Richardson

ASIAN nations expressed relief when the political crisis in the Philippines ended in a largely peaceful transfer of power last month.

But analysts and some officials in the region warned that the same wave of public anger against corruption that had forced President Joseph Estrada from office and brought in Vice President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo to replace him could spread to other Asian countries where graft has become a corrosive, and potentially explosive, political issue at a time of economic slowdown.

Political corruption is the biggest issue in many Asian countries today, George Yeo, Singapore's trade and industry minister recently observed. Clay Westcott, a governance specialist at the Asian Development Bank in Manila, says that as much as one-third of public investment in many Asia-Pacific nations was being squandered on graft.

As a result, a wave of anti-corruption sentiment is sweeping through the region. Mr. Westcott points to recent cases where senior officials in China, Indonesia, Pakistan, Vietnam and Thailand as well as the Philippines had been forced to resign or face criminal charges for abusing public office for private gain.

Mr. Estrada — whose impeachment trial for allegedly taking millions of dollars in bribes from illegal gambling collapsed last week when allies in the Senate blocked the opening of his bank accounts — is to face formal investigation for economic plunder, an offence punishable by death.

China last month replaced its justice minister, Gao Changli, reportedly for involvement in graft and other "economic crimes," and expelled three members of Parliament for corruption and absenteeism in an intensifying campaign to deter venality.

As in Vietnam, Chinese officials portray the campaign as a matter of political survival for the Communist Party.

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mal social services, no reliable public administration and no prospect for any sustainable development. Corruption will remain rampant, preventing good governance, keeping the country poor, and bringing about abuses and injustices that will lead to political and social crisis and instability."

In Indonesia, President Abdurrahman Wahid is facing two corruption inquiries in Parliament. Mr. Wahid denies impropriety and says his political opponents — including those afraid of being punished in anti-corruption cases brought by his government — are trying to discredit and weaken his hold on power.

One inquiry involves the theft of \$4.1 million from the national food agency, Bulog, by people claiming to have acted on Mr. Wahid's behalf. They included his masseur, Alip Agung Suwondo, who was questioned by Parliament recently. The second inquiry focuses on Mr. Wahid's acceptance, outside government channels, of a \$2 million donation from the Sultan of Brunei for relief in the Indonesian province of Aceh, where separatists are waging an armed struggle for independence.

If either of the two inquiries conclude that Mr. Wahid was criminally implicated, it could lead to lengthy impeachment proceedings, creating further political instability that would undermine an already fragile economy in the world's fourth most populous nation.

Similarly in Thailand, Prime Minister-elect Thaksin Shinawatra — who is the country's richest man and whose family-controlled companies account for more than 13 percent of the Thai stock market's \$30 billion capitalization — faces trial before a constitutional court for improperly concealing some of his assets when he was a minister in a previous government. Mr. Thaksin says that it was an honest mistake and that he forgot to disclose the assets.

But analysts say many Thais, even some of those who gave Mr. Thaksin's party a large majority in the election this month, were fed up with corruption and would turn against the new government if it failed to deliver on its campaign promises of heavy public spending to stimulate the flagging economy.

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Mahathir bin Mohamad, lamented recently that the dominant party, which he heads in the governing coalition was being corrupted by money politics — the same allegation made by critics against Mr. Thaksin and his party, Thai Rak Thai. "I have persuaded, I have appealed, I have cried and I have prayed," Mr. Mahathir said at a party meeting. "Please, expose those who give bribes. Compile the evidence and expose them."

The Malaysian opposition leader, Lim Kit Siang, says that Mr. Mahathir, who turned 75 in December and has been in power since 1981, was feeling isolated and under pressure to institute real reforms. "He has become the last survivor in this region who refused to step down or yield to popular demands for far-reaching political, economic and social changes," said Mr. Lim, chairman of the Democratic Action Party.

The latest global report published by Transparency International, a leading anti-corruption campaign group, showed that Asia generally fared poorly in surveys that ranked countries by the level of bribery of public officials perceived by business executives, country analysts and the general public.

Singapore ranked 6th and Hong Kong 15th among the 90 countries surveyed. Japan was 23d, Taiwan 28th, Malaysia 36th and South Korea 48th.

Mr. Yeo, the Singaporean trade minister, said the key to Singapore's political stability was the absence of corruption in its political culture. "Policies are formulated to benefit Singapore as a whole and not particular interest groups which finance political parties," he said.

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China has said that just as it ordered the military out of business activities, it also seeks to divest the Communist Party and state bureaucracies of their business interests as part of a package of reforms for ailing state-owned enterprises.

A root cause of the widespread venality in Asia, analysts and opposition politicians said, is widespread poverty and low official salaries, combined with close and mutually profitable links between governing political parties and big business, both private and state-owned.

The Cambodian opposition leader, Sam Rainsy, said in Phnom Penh: "As long as government employees are not paid a livable salary, there can be no rule of law, no provision of mini-

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"The electorate and the new government may find all too soon that there are no quick fixes for the economy, especially as the struggle against corruption and bad debtors continues to plod along," said David Fernandez, an economist in Singapore.

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