

line-up but, on 7 March, also said that those involved in the suit challenging the April Umno election results, those who refused to accept the results and those working against the formation of Umno Baru would be refused even ordinary membership.

Presumably, Razaleigh is among those barred, though the prime minister did not say so specifically.

The crowds in Kelantan gave Mahathir an elaborate welcome complete with ceremonial trays of saffron rice and gold leaf. Mahathir was presented with a red warrior's head-dress, and his wife adopted as *Ibu*, literally mother — a term of affection and respect. Ironically, given the aim of the *Semarak* campaign, the presence of riot police kept the ordinary folk and their leaders apart. Security was essential given the rumours, alluded to by Mahathir himself, that his life was in danger in Kelantan.

Yet another rumour making the rounds was that the Sultan of Kelantan — a relative of Razaleigh — would officiate at another gathering at about the same time as Mahathir's, purportedly to see where his executive councillors owed their allegiance. Dismissing the rumour as untrue, a Kelantan politician suggested that this was probably the Kelantanese way of at least hinting at reluctance to attend Mahathir's rally without actually boycotting it.

At the rally, Kelantan chief minister Datuk Mohamed Yaacob, a Mahathir appointee, took on Razaleigh's allies in the Kelantan state assembly when he brought up the opposition Parti Islam's (Pas) plan to introduce a no-confidence motion in himself as leader of the state legislature.

The Pas move is an obvious challenge by proxy. Of the 26 Umno assemblymen from the total of 39, more than half are said to support Razaleigh. The opposition Democratic Action Party, which is predominantly Chinese, called for an emergency sitting of the federal parliament in February also to press for a no-confidence motion. This was hastily countered by a mass, televised pledge of loyalty to Mahathir — organised by the Umno backbenchers' club — of all National Front MPs to preempt defections.

Even as Tanjung Puteri tested Johor Malays' feelings towards Umno Baru, the new party also tested the loyalty of Musa's allies. The National Front director of operations was none other than Johor Baru MP Datuk Shahrir Samad, a

staunch and vocal Musa ally. Yet Shahrir realised that whichever way the election went, he stood to lose. If he delivered, Mahathir would get the credit. If they lost, he and his team would be accused of sabotage or, at least, blamed for not working hard enough.

The importance of the by-election to Umno Baru was heightened by Mahathir himself flying in for half a day, delivering three speeches by nightfall — an unusually high profile presence for a prime minister at a state by-election. Some Johor Umno campaigners were worried that Mahathir's flying visit would do more harm than good because it would focus local Malay attention on the Umno split. They had purposely kept the campaign localised and low-key. Perhaps taking the cue, Mahathir himself stuck to local housing and education issues and barely alluded to Umno's own recent problems.

But the cracks in the party were obvious. Shahrir was conspicuously absent at the airport rally to welcome

BERNAMA



Razaleigh: conspicuous absence.

Mahathir, though he joined Mahathir later when the latter officially opened a group of four-year-old flats. But that night, Shahrir was again absent at a Chinese New Year dinner where Mahathir was guest of honour.

Tanjung Puteri is an urban, working-to-middle-class constituency, divided between 51.1% Malay voters, 42.4% Chinese and 6.2% Indians. Razak, a popular local lawyer with a grassroots touch, has had a record of voicing working-class complaints and fighting against municipi-

pal red tape. Yet it was the PSRM, without a single parliamentary seat, which brought up such national issues as poverty, corruption and last October's mass detentions, while National Front campaigners spoke of clogged drains and the commercial prospects of selling more fried noodles to Singaporean tourists.

Tellingly, the only wider issue of relevance on which Razak remained silent was the basic platform of his party, socialism, by tradition a difficult concept to sell in Malaysia with its feudal roots and capitalist ambitions. Razak's Achilles heel, however, was his demonstration in November 1986, when he lay on the railway tracks in protest against Israeli President Chaim Herzog's visit to neighbouring Singapore. Umno too had protested against the visit, but not as dramatically, and now that Malaysia and Singapore are coming closer again, Umno was keen to paint Razak as anti-Singaporean, knowing that Razak depended on local Chinese votes. ■

LABOUR

A domestic problem

Filipino maids oppose a ban on working abroad

By James Clad in Manila

President Corazon Aquino's blanket ban on Filipino maids going abroad, though aimed at improving conditions for thousands of domestic workers, is having a perverse effect. Her 20 January decision, which went into effect on 1 March, has caused dismay at home while angering countries which rely on the workers. The ban effectively discriminates against low-skilled migrants — whose remittances are an important source of foreign exchange — and may even breach the Philippine constitution, which guarantees migratory freedom.

Even the source of legal authority for the ban remains unclear. The Saudi Arabian Government, the largest importer of Filipino domestics, was still waiting for a copy of the regulations six weeks after the ban was announced. Authorities in Hongkong and Singapore, the second- and third-largest employers of Filipino maids, hoped for clarification from a visiting mission led by Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) director Tomas Achacoso during the first two weeks of March.

The ban, implemented by Labour Secretary Franklin Drillon, emerged without coordination with the foreign affairs and other departments. Shortly after the ban, Drillon said firms exporting "entertainers," overwhelmingly to Japan, would no longer be permitted to do business. The embassies affected learned of the decision in newspapers.

Labour under-secretary Patricia Santo Tomas told the REVIEW that, since October last year, Aquino has taken a personal interest in reports of bad treatment of maids and entertainers working abroad. Santo Tomas said the ban is to apply only temporarily, as a pre-condition for getting better host-country protection for women workers.

The government says 80,000 domestic workers went abroad in 1987 alone, while 33,000 entertainers went to Japan last year. The total global figures of those now working abroad in each of these categories is hard to pin down, however. One-fifth of 450,000 overseas contract workers (OCWs) currently registered with POEA are maids, but many thousands more stay abroad illegally. In Japan alone, where organised criminals have a strong hold on the business, illegal entertainers may number 50,000 or more.

The female proportion of Filipino

migrant workers has been creeping upwards in recent years. In 1987, more than 174,000 women (about 40% of total migrants) went abroad in various categories — mostly as maids. Currently, about 54,400 Filipino maids work in Asia, more than half of them (29,800) in Hongkong and about another 16,600 in Singapore. Another 25,000 maids are now registered in the Middle East, predominantly in Saudi Arabia. All in all, nearly 90% of Filipino maids abroad work in Asia or the Middle East.

Can Aquino put a lid on strong demand abroad, and at home, for this trade? Ordinary market economics would suggest that it is unlikely. An officially acknowledged 11.3% unemployment rate rides on top of under-employment, amounting to at least another 33% (the government's figure) of the country's 23.3 million workforce. One Labour Department report candidly described women migrants as "fugitives" from a nation that "has become a virtual country of maids, cheap domestic labour prone to international abuse and exploitation."

Hundreds of "travel agencies" line this city's alleyways, poster-festooned firms offering women a chance to earn, even as maids and entertainers, three to four times as much overseas as they can make at home. This applies even to women with university-level skills.

Migration abroad has become a major factor in the economy. Remittances have brought perhaps US\$1.5 billion home annually in the 1980s.

More seeps into the country via cash or through outside accounts. Aquino herself has said that "the amounts they [migrant workers] pour into our economy have provided our country a buffer against total economic disaster." Drillon adds that the migrant labour trade must continue to "absorb part of the vast numbers of unemployed and under-employed."

The Philippine Government still enforces former president Ferdinand Marcos' decrees requiring migrant workers to remit home minimum percentages of their pay; if they do not, Philippine embassies abroad will not endorse their passports. But the ban could crimp these hard-sought earnings. If diplomatic repercussions slow down recruitment in other migrant-worker categories the damage could become severe. When in Riyadh at the end of February, Philippine House of Representatives speaker Ramon Mitra was told that Filipino worker remittances from Saudi Arabia totalled US\$600 million just during 1987.

Maids' earnings are estimated to support at least five dependants back home. Denying another 80,000 domestic worker contracts this year means frustrating these hopes and needs. This hard social fact explains why the ban has

put Aquino's social-welfare instincts on a collision course with economics.

It has certainly provoked the recruiters, who point to "packages," negotiated with Middle East employers especially, which have as one "component" the delivery of maids as well as higher-skilled construction workers. One group, the Overseas Contractors of the Philippines, criticises Aquino's ban as too draconian. It says the blanket-ban approach failed when, in 1982, former labour minister Blas Ople took the identical step but backed off when the Gulf states talked of closing off all migrant workers from the Philippines.

The ban exempts maids finding jobs with employers having diplomatic status — a move that means high-status Filipinos posted abroad will not have to go without domestic help. The denial of only two kinds of overseas employment, open in practice only to women, has prompted unfavourable reaction.

"How could the government have the heart to disallow under-employed Filipinos — most of them women —

the ban and that Brunei, Malaysia and the United Arab Emirates will be making some changes in their practices. Meanwhile, the clamp on the entertainer trade has prompted talks with Japan, with some tightening of Japan's immigration controls suggested.

"At present Singapore remains one of the countries in Asia which offer the least protection or legal provision for the Filipino migrant community," says a 1987 publication by the London-based Catholic Institute for International Relations. The 137-page report also describes Singapore's migrant worker laws as "among the most restrictive and repressive in Asia."

Philippine POEA officials say Singapore's rules prohibit foreign work-permit holders from marrying Singaporeans or permanent residents without government approval. They cite another rule that requires pregnancy tests every six months and another which requires each maid's employer to post a bond to the government — which



from seeking badly needed jobs abroad when the country has little to offer in return?" asked the *Manila Chronicle*, echoing a sample of local dismay. One migrant-worker pressure group, Kaibigan, cites the alleged "unconstitutionality" of the ban. Under the country's basic charter, approved by plebiscite in February 1987, Filipinos are free to travel abroad without restriction.

It seems the hasty ban may now have prompted second thoughts. For Saudi Arabia and elsewhere, the ban will be lifted selectively, Achacoso told the REVIEW. All that is necessary is for countries in the maid-trade to show a readiness to extend their own worker protection laws to Filipino migrants, he said. He backed away from earlier comments that only bilateral agreements to achieve the same thing will result in lifting the ban.

Achacoso said that he has already recommended exempting Canada from

is forfeited if the maid becomes pregnant or marries in breach of the law.

But apart from legalities, can a blanket ban work in such a high-demand, high-supply situation? Santo Tomas recently hinted that the ban can be little more than a stop-gap measure to tighten some safeguards, while Drillon said: "We are trying just to contain the haemorrhage as far as the welfare problem is concerned."

► *Emily Lau writes from Hongkong:* Manila's ban on Filipino maids working in Hongkong may soon be lifted following discussions between Hongkong Government officials and Achacoso on 5 March. Achacoso said the ban could be lifted for Hongkong if there was a bilateral agreement with Manila or if the Philippine Government was satisfied that there were enough safeguards to protect the workers. □