

## Traffic in the Philippines' capital Slowly does it

### Rising car ownership and appalling transport policies block the roads

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AT SIX o'clock on a Thursday evening the most important road in Manila, known as EDSA, has become a car park. Five lanes heading north and five heading south are clogged with cars and buses, many of them pointlessly honking their horns. "Traffic in Manila is not ordinary", says a taxi driver, wearily. He means that it is extreme, not that it is rare.



When people meet in Manila, they talk about traffic. "It rules everything", says Julia Nebrija, a cycling advocate. Some stories are funny, like the one about the transport official, Francis Tolentino, who missed a live TV interview because he was stuck on EDSA, or the one about the archbishop who was so fed up with one jam that he got out of his car and started directing traffic. Business people tell more worrying tales. As commutes grow longer, productivity is suffering, says Jaime Ysmael of the Ayala Corporation, a conglomerate.

Filipinos will vote for a new president in May, and the candidates are trying to blame each other for the parlous state of Manila's roads and public transport. The very fact that one of them, Manuel Roxas, used to be transport secretary was held against him in a televised debate on February 21st. The candidates tout diverse plans, from building more roads to increasing taxes on second cars to moving government offices out of the metropolis. Such is the level of angst that anybody who cracks Manila traffic would have a good shot at the top job.

Even with a perfect transport plan, Manila would probably have a problem. The population of the entire capital area rose from 18m to 23m between 2000 and 2010. It is dense: Shlomo Angel of New York University, who measures cities, estimates that it crammed 274 people into each hectare a decade ago, compared with 64 per hectare in Paris—and Manila will have got only more squashed since. What is more, the capital has an unfortunate hourglass shape. The middle,

which contains the main business districts, is pinched by Manila bay to the west and Laguna lake to the east. Suburbs sprawl to the north and south. So traffic is funnelled, and the funnel often blocks up.

On top of that, Manila's transport plans have been terrible—among the most foolish adopted by any great city. The Philippines has a complex history: it was a Spanish colony for four centuries, then an American one. It is as though Manila has taken the worst aspects of American urban planning and applied them to a dense, Spanish-style metropolis before adding not a few mistakes of its own. It has the jams it deserves.

The city's first fault is its failure to build an extensive, high-volume public transport system. Seven metropolitan railway lines have been planned but only three have been built since work began in the early 1980s, and the connections between them are poor. At rush hour, the queues just to get into the stations are long.

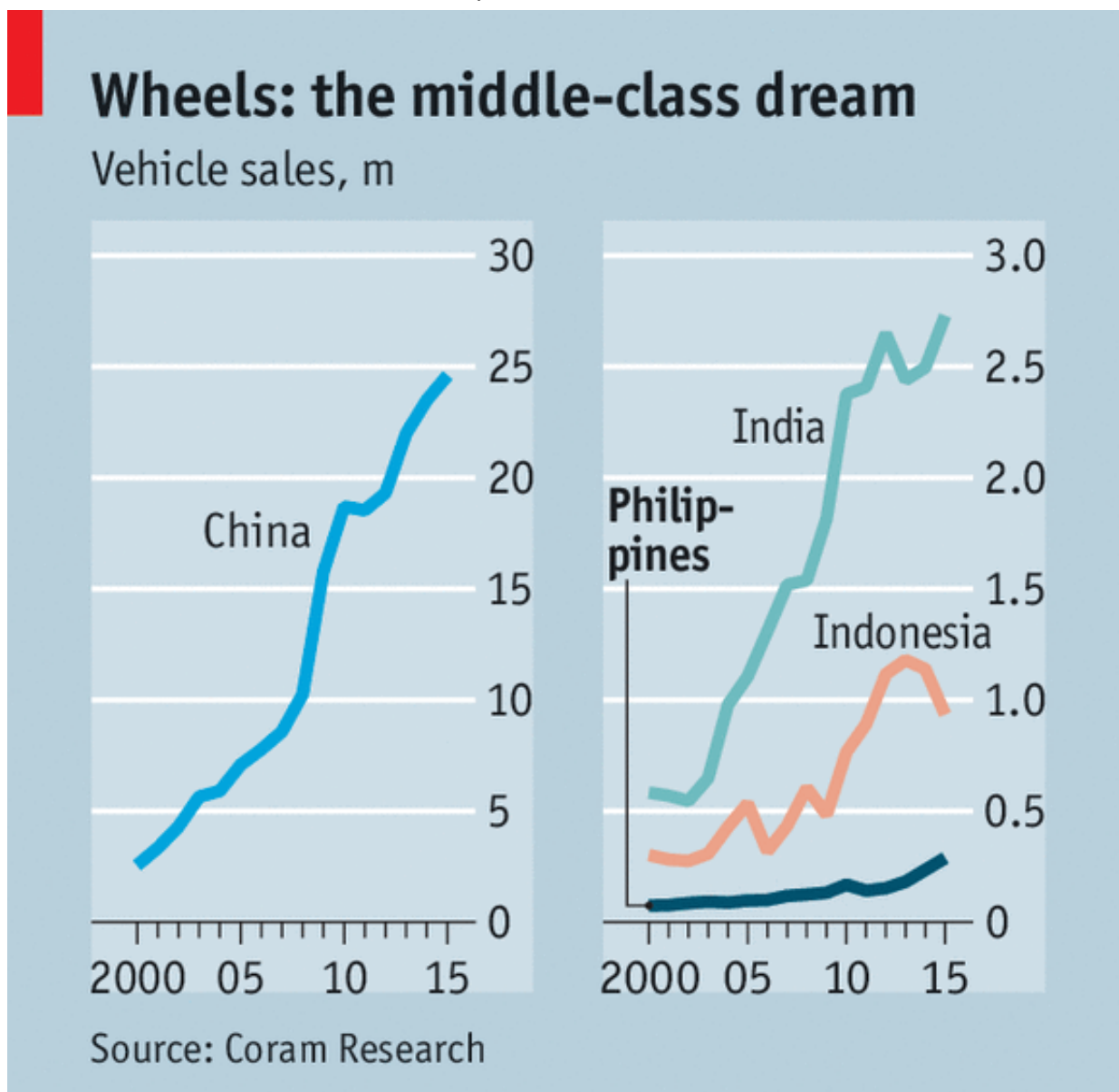
If Manila has too few trains, it probably has too many buses. Hundreds of small operators ply the roads—the fruits of a radical liberalisation in the 1990s. EDSA alone is served by 266 bus companies, while 1,122 operate somewhere in Manila. Competition and plentiful supply should be good for passengers, except that drivers are paid partly based on the number of fares they collect. So they race each other to busy stops and then loiter for as long as they can, blocking other drivers.

Yet the biggest reason Manila's roads move so slowly is that so many people now drive. The economy of the Philippines grew by 5.8% last year, and a swelling middle class is buying lots more cars (see chart). Driving, nicer and often quicker than public transport, is encouraged by minimum-parking rules, imported from America, which oblige developers to provide lots of parking spaces. Cars are thought to carry about 30% of people in the metropolis but account for 72% of traffic.

Road transport in Manila is commendably diverse. As well as cars and buses it has motorbikes with sidecars and perhaps 50,000 Jeepneys—stretched Jeeps that can hold more than a dozen passengers each. Yet many roads are tightly restricted. Buses are often kept out of the smarter business districts, and some are barred from EDSA at rush hour. Gated housing developments ban all vehicles without residents' stickers, forcing drivers around the edges. That seems increasingly bizarre, since some of those leafy suburban developments now lie next to booming business districts. Yet the armed guards will probably stay. China's government announced this week that gated communities should stop blocking traffic, only to retreat following an outcry. And China is not a democracy, unlike the Philippines.

Belatedly, Manila is trying something sensible. In December the Philippines approved a "rapid

bus”  
route  
in  
north-  
east



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Manila, with buses travelling along dedicated lanes. Similar systems have worked well in Brazil and China. Karl Fjellstrom of the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy, a New York outfit, says he looks for three things when assessing whether a city is suited for a rapid bus system: traffic congestion, demand and physical infrastructure (that is, wide roads). Manila scores highly on all three.

So perhaps the city will unblock. But Manila will need to be both clever and quick if it is to start moving again. A combination of fast growth and dismal planning got it into a jam. If the second cannot be changed, the first comes into question.

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