



**THE CURRENT PHILIPPINE CRISIS:
A POLITICAL ANALYSIS**

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SWS Occasional Paper

April 1987

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The Current Philippine Crisis: A Political Analysis

Felipe B. Miranda*

The Aquino government in the Philippines was born out of crisis and continues to be beset with multiple crises. Confronted by active communist and secessionist Muslim insurgency campaigns, violent Marcos loyalist demonstrations and military coup plotters, and, within her own government, political intramurals among ambitious political figures, it is a wonder that Aquino's government has not fallen apart. That the government has managed at all to survive is a testimony to the continuing faith of most Filipinos in President Corazon Aquino and their pragmatic willingness to forgo dramatic improvements in their material conditions within the short run. There is evidence, however, that this faith in their political leader and her government could be eroded if political stability remains elusive and economic recovery consequently is impaired. Thus both political and economic challenges confront President Aquino's government and their successful management promises to be the sole way out of the current problematic situation in the country. The immediate imperative for the Aquino government is the consolidation of its political authority in order that the government may function without a constant threat of destabilization. Towards this end, President Aquino will have to consolidate her authority over the military, a task that might have been facilitated a little by the overwhelming approval recently of the new Philippine Constitution, clearly giving her government a popular mandate to govern.

A Historical Note

It was almost exactly a year ago when Filipinos deposed President Ferdinand Marcos in a dramatic yet peaceful four-day revolution. The "people-powered" overthrow of Marcos was made possible through the collaboration of an increasingly restive, demonstration-inclined general citizenry and an initially small group of military men who had plotted a coup against Marcos. With their coup plans discovered by Marcos' intelligence people and contemplating their imminent arrests by government security forces, the coup plotters decided to publicly announce their repudiation of the Marcos government and apprehensively awaited the punitive response to their mutiny.

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Marcos and his armed forces were foiled, not so much by the mutinous military men as the concerned citizenry who virtually spontaneously adopted their anti-Marcos cause. Between one and a half to two million Filipinos actively demonstrated their support for the anti-Marcos military. With prayers, rosaries, flowers, food, beseeching words and an indisputable willingness to protect the lives of the mutineers with their own, Filipinos stopped the tanks, the armored personnel carriers, the transport trucks and the heavily armed security troops of Marcos. Impressed by the extent of public support for their rebellious colleagues and sensing the intractability of the public demand for Marcos' resignation, most of the military finally repudiated Marcos' authority and cast their lot with the people. Within four days, Marcos had no alternative but to flee the country.

A new government was installed, headed by President Corazon Aquino, the wife of the opposition leader, Benigno Aquino, whose assassination in 1983 sparked widespread popular demonstrations and helped unify diverse groups opposing the Marcos administration. Filipinos perceived her as the real winner over Marcos in the snap presidential elections of February 7, 1986; the popular consensus was that she had been cheated of formal victory through Marcos' resort to the three G's in Philippine politics: guns, goons and gold. The leaders of the military mutiny, then Minister of National Defense, Juan Ponce Enrile, and then Vice-Chief of Staff, Lieutenant General Fidel Ramos, acknowledging the popular perception to be correct, pledged their support to Mrs. Aquino and her new government.

The Marcos Legacy

The Aquino government inherited the Marcos legacy of a broken-down economy and a political system with high levels of stress, violence and, consequently, much instability.

The economy had suffered an unprecedented decline, with gross national product growth rates being negative two years running (1984-1985) and per capita income showing negative growth rates even longer, from 1981 to 1985. Inflation cut down purchasing power by more than half in 1984-1985 alone; capital flight, unemployment, underemployment, disemployment, labor strikes, and mass poverty were all at unprecedented levels. The country's foreign debt was at an all-time high, officially estimated at more than \$26 billion by the end of 1983 and eating up close to half the value of Philippine exports in 1985 for interest service alone.

Politically, the legitimacy of the regime and in particular Marcos' government was most problematic. Insurgency gained grounds in most areas of the country, with the Communist Party of the Philippines and its military arm, the New People's Army, almost quadrupling its armed membership between 1981 and 1985, from about 6000 to almost 24,000 and a mass base in 1985 estimated at around a million people. The Muslim secessionist groups

in the South continued to be active and talks about possible tactical alliances between the communist insurgents and the Muslim rebels were being bruited around. Armed encounters between the rebels and the grossly demoralized Philippine military were on the increase and most were being initiated by the rebels in progressively larger operational units.

In the major urban centers like Metro Manila, Cebu City, Davao and others, protest demonstrations by sectoral, multisectoral and cause-oriented organizations brought hundreds of thousands of people out on the streets and into confrontation with riot police and military units as they engaged Marcos' government in pressure politics.

General conditions of lawlessness prevailed, with the national crime rate in 1985 being more than 135% that of 1972 when Marcos declared martial law allegedly because of rampant criminality. About half of the respondents in a nation-wide survey in 1985 expressed much fear about becoming victims of robberies on the streets of their own neighborhood as well as in their own homes.

The same survey reflected low levels of trust by Filipinos in their political institutions as well as their government officials. Marcos was trusted by less than half of the respondents and his cabinet members fared worse, with practically every minister tested for enjoying the trust of only 1 out of 4 respondents. It was not only the executive branch that suffered from a crisis of popular confidence; the judiciary and its highest body, the Philippine Supreme Court, as well as the national legislature or Batasang Pambansa were considered trustworthy by less than 1 out of three Filipino respondents.

Finally, the last phase of the Marcos rule was characterized by a feeling of desperation. Filipinos, who usually have a reputation as optimists, in 1985 betrayed serious doubts about the prospects for peaceful change in their society. Less than 1 out of three were willing to rule out the possibility of violence as regards democratic change in the Philippines. This was an ominous sign of the times.

Year One of the Aquino Administration: Objective Conditions and Public Perceptions

In less than a year, the Aquino government has managed to arrest the further deterioration of the national economy. The 1986 GNP after two years of negative growth finally registered a positive growth rate of 0.13%. Foreign exchange reserves have more than doubled to \$2.4 billion in December, 1986, inflation was down to less than 1%, peso purchasing power has stopped dropping and deterioration in real wages has been largely arrested. (As a matter of fact, if one considered the rest of the country other than the Metropolitan Manila area, there has even been a little gain in real wages in the last ten months.)

Some problem areas remain. The foreign debt situation of the country has not significantly improved, largely on account of difficult, protracted negotiations with international finance agencies and foreign banks. Unemployment continues to be high, at roughly the same level as a year ago, and labor restlessness has even increased. There were 571 strikes in 1986, up 54% from 1985's 371, involving 46,000 more workers in 1986 than in 1985. Both local and foreign businessmen have adopted very cautious investment strategies and thus the economy continues to be a bit sluggish.

It is the political situation, however, which appears to have been most volatile in the last twelve months. The libertarian inclinations of the Aquino administration were initially clearly manifested in its decision to free political prisoners, resulting in the release of captured top leaders of the Communist Party of the Philippines and the New People's Army. A policy of national reconciliation with both communist and Muslim rebels, as well as Marcos loyalists, was also activated.

The expansion of the legitimate or above-ground political arena to include diverse and arguably irreconcilable elements has predictably resulted in a lot of political turmoil. Leftist political groups exerted demands on the Aquino government which would have resulted in a radical restructuring of both the economy and the political system in the Philippines. Radical agrarian reform, nationalistic economic programs which would curb the traditional privileges and gross incentives enjoyed by foreign capital, dismantling of foreign military facilities and a basic re-orientation of Philippine foreign policy and security programs were pressed for.

Other political groups, on the other hand, were just as zealous in protecting their economic and political interests. With connections in big business and in the military, rightist groups opposed all the programs stridently called for by the left and assiduously cultivated a cold-warrior anti-communist mentality among their members. Marcos loyalists in particular have projected themselves as staunchly anti-communists and the Aquino supporters as well as more liberal groups to be either outright reds or red sympathizers.

Many Filipinos, both civilian and military, who initially were supportive of national reconciliation policies have become a bit more skeptical about them. The propagandistic ends which ceasefire negotiations have been made to serve, the increasing tension and violence in demonstrations by extremist groups, as well as the persistent destabilization campaigns through a series of coups participated in by some military men have created much public distrust and even exasperation for both extremist groups, leftist as well as rightist, in Philippine politics.

Within the Aquino government itself, serious differences in policy orientations specifically as regards the conduct of labor policies, the handling of officers-in-charge to replace local

government officials and the management of the insurgency problem have led to acrimonious debates, serious charges and counter-charges and finally, demands for the removal of some cabinet members. At least four cabinet members have become casualties of these political struggles.

Finally, the military has been subjected to a great deal of stress as an institution. The basic competing, even conflicting orientations have been along lines of constitutionalism or support for the civilian government of President Aquino and politicalization which calls for a much more active and decisive role for the military in Philippine politics. The second orientation appears currently to bifurcate into two types: (1) that which seriously disagrees with current government policies perceived to be contributory to an increasingly dangerous communist threat, and (2) that which seeks to re-install the Marcos government through the efforts of remaining Marcos loyalists within the military. The success of the Marcos loyalists clearly depend on their abilities to ride on the truly anti-communist sentiments of most military men. There is some evidence of ongoing attempts by the politicalized military groups to at least tactically link with each other towards a more dominant military role in government decision-making. To date the constitutionalists have managed to maintain their delicate control within the military and so far have neutralized military elements involved in coup operations against the government. The inability or unwillingness to severely discipline these errant or "misguided" military men, however, is an indication of the need for further consolidation of the constitutionalists' control within the military.

Public Perceptions

In the midst of the continuing economic and political crisis in the Philippines, a political singularity stands out: Filipinos continue to overwhelmingly support President Aquino and her government. This fact has been charted in the last twelve months by credible surveys done by the Social Weather Stations and Ateneo University. Aquino's public support in October, 1986 was even higher than in the first 100 days of her Presidency, when the euphoria of the February revolution might have precipitated a political honeymoon between her and the general public. The results of the recently concluded plebiscite on the draft Philippine Constitution, suggesting that as many as 8 out of 10 Filipinos support her administration, is only the most contemporary evidence of extensive public confidence. This confidence in the President extends to practically all members of her Cabinet and specially to General Fidel Ramos, the constitutionalist Chief of Staff who has been credited with upholding Aquino's civilian government against politicized military men.

Surveys indicate that popular support continues as Filipinos acknowledge the enormity of their national problems and aver that government really needs more time to effectively address them.

Furthermore, after twenty difficult years of Marcos rule, Filipinos express a pragmatic view as regards how soon and by how much their quality of life could realistically improve. In both the May 1986 and October 1986 nation-wide surveys alluded to above, the respondents largely profess moderate optimism regarding the short-term future (from 1 to 3 years) and the belief that present times would mean no further deterioration in their living conditions.

Although initially (in May, 1986) the public was much supportive of the national reconciliation policies of the government as regards the communists, the Muslim secessionists and the Marcos loyalists, there appears to be a hardening of public attitudes as indicated by an increasing number of respondents in October, 1986 who perceive these policies as being too lenient. In the case of communist and Muslim rebels, even as a significant number (32% of respondents) still resists the idea of taking up the "sword of war" against these opponents should reconciliation policies fail, the plurality (42% of respondents) already believes the government should use armed force on the rebels should ceasefire programs break down. The public mood is further indicated in a recent survey done last February 1987 on Metro Manila reactions to the killing of demonstrators as soldiers and policemen opened fire on the largely peasant demonstrators marching to the Presidential palace. The survey reveals the respondents to be disappointed with the behavior of the demonstrators as they tried to crash the barricades as well as the overreaction of the military and policemen in shooting at the demonstrators. What may be more revealing is the respondents' belief that the leader of the demonstrators, who appears to have lost his temper during the tense confrontation, has great responsibility for the march's tragic consequences.

Public support for President Aquino appears to be a function of at least three things: (1) the widespread feeling that she has been trying and in many instances has kept her promises as she campaigned for the Presidency in the months preceding the February snap presidential elections; (2) the widespread perception that her government is beleaguered with threats from the left as well as the right and even from within her own government; and (3) the widespread perception that some progress has been effected in the last year as the deterioration of material conditions has been checked and some popular relief may continue to be expected in the form of stabilized prices, improvement in real wages, and the like. Filipinos appear to be contented at the moment counting not only their very modest blessings, but also grateful for the non-deterioration of their many more difficulties.

Even as there is incontrovertible, extensive and unprecedented public support for Aquino and her government, a very serious aspect of public thinking is also revealed in recent public opinion surveys. In these extremely trying times, Filipinos appear to acknowledge in their President one of their last hopes in an attempt to improve their desperate conditions.

Should there be another betrayal of public trust (as happened in the case of Marcos and his government), or perhaps even simply a failure of political will by their leadership, Filipinos could turn to more radical alternatives in effecting social change. In October, 1986, for the first time in post-war Philippine history, an unprecedented majority (51%) confirms their belief that Filipinos could lose their faith in peaceful means of effecting democracy. The paradoxical and frightening thing about this avowal is that at no time during Marcos' dictatorship was this level of potential disillusionment with peaceful alternatives attained. Even the February 1986 revolution itself was a public testimony to the Filipino commitment for peaceful change. It is as if Filipinos wanted to send a clear message to their current political leaders that time is running out and the proverbial Filipino patience is wearing thin. If this is so, then Aquino's phenomenal public support also has a grim aspect to it.

Political Imperatives for the Aquino Government

Aquino's popular support is a huge political asset which the present government cannot long squander without dire consequences. In 1972, the Marcos government gained quite a bit of public support as it provoked martial law through a series of shrewdly-induced crises in the political system. Unfortunately, the political capital gained was systematically dissipated through governmental corruption and ineffectiveness. The fall of the Marcos government in 1986 does not represent the full or even the major cost of squandering public confidence. The cost has to be reckoned in terms of forgone opportunities for human development and greater social justice in the Philippines; or, alternatively, in terms of the greater impoverishment, brutalization, and subsequent cynicism of most Filipinos who suffered Marcos to be their national leader.

The Aquino government cannot hope to endure by taking for granted the impressive popular support it now enjoys. Unlike in the 1972 Philippines of Marcos, the political crises in 1987 are not contrived but far too real; and the Filipinos are no longer as naive nor as docile as when Marcos first tempted them with a New Society in 1972.

Many urgent issues, economic and political, demand the attention and resources of the Aquino government. There is, however, no greater urgency than in ensuring that Aquino's government is, first of all, able to govern. Aquino's fundamental political imperative is the consolidation of her government's political authority.

The recent approval of a new Constitution is a step in the right direction. It gives her government a clear mandate to govern and provides her in particular the formal presidential authority which the flawed presidential election of 1986 formally denied. Her political opponents can no longer ascribe illegitimacy to her government or her position, nor can they

credibly advance the theory of coalition government which makes her only one more, equal partner in a political duumvirate or triumvirate after the February revolution.

Still, the new Constitution only legalistically consolidates political authority for Aquino and her government. The political consolidation of political authority goes beyond formal, legalistic provisions. The singular challenge to this task of consolidation lies in the relationship which Aquino must forge with the military.

Civilian supremacy is the constitutional dictum which the military itself formally avows. Still, given the undeniable presence of military factions, Aquino will have to help ensure the dominance of the constitutionalists within the military. Promotions must be carefully monitored to see to it that the constitutionalists' hands are strengthened. Operational, field commands must be in the hands of constitutionalist officers; anti-constitutionalists must be deprived of effective control over troops, military hardware, and communication as well as other logistical services.

The Marcos loyalists in particular have to be weeded out. The ones who can be prosecuted for corruption or graft or gross human rights violation must be identified and formal cases filed against them. Those who are not as vulnerable may be allowed to resign or retire from the military; those who choose to remain in the military must be reassigned to areas and military duties which minimize their ability to foment instability. There must also be provisions made for others who show consistent signs of constitutionalist conversion; such military men may be re-integrated into full military duties, responsibilities and corresponding authority, privileges and material benefits.

The sincerely disaffected anti-communists, who also are not merely fronting for either Marcos or any other politically ambitious patron, may be turned towards constitutionalism by seeing to it that the military is not denied its legitimate influence in the making of policies affecting insurgency. It is not in the interest of Aquino's government to isolate the military in the political and economic effort to neutralize insurgency. By involving the military at all stages of counter-insurgency operations, the probability is increased that there will be greater understanding, more coordinated effort and less political tension should the civilian authorities effect tactical negotiations or agreements with the rebels.

The military is an institution that functions hierarchically. It is vital for military men to always have a clear conception of the operational chain of command, within the military as well as beyond it. One of the current problems of the Philippine military is the obfuscation of this chain of command, as a result of the political challenges to the legitimacy of the Aquino government itself as well as the presence within the military of politicalized officers linked to ambitious

political patrons.

The popular ratification of the new Constitution might help somewhat in fortifying the doctrine of civilian supremacy and clarifying the military's civilian chain of command. But within the military, the strengthening of the constitutionalists demands no less than a purge of politicalized military men who are unable or unwilling to breakaway from their political patrons. It is specially important that those who participate in actions which destabilize the present government, either in overt or covert coup operations, be prosecuted and severely dealt with.

There are long-run strategies for developing a constitutionalist military, among which would be the professionalization of its officer corps, the upgrading of its recruitment policies, and the improvement of the compensation and material benefits for the members of the military. In the short-run, however, there is nothing more urgent than the clarification of the operational chain of command and the imposition of strict discipline. These are two items which could have immediate returns, in particular to a civilian government whose President indubitably enjoys the mandate of her people. At the very least, "misguided" military men tempted to conduct "unauthorized military exercises" in patently civilian centers will not yield to temptation three times within three months.

It is obvious that the consolidation of authority within the military requires decisive and even risky action by President Aquino, as well as the constitutionalist military men who work with her government. To persist with policies that betray unwillingness to clearly discipline the anti-constitutionalists, purportedly to keep the armed forces unified, is to misunderstand the nature of the crisis of command within and over the military. These policies will serve to maintain the crisis and, instead of unifying the military, will precisely encourage multiple challenges by armed factions who become contemptuous of the indecisiveness of the authorities.

(Military men appear to appreciate leaders who manifest decisiveness and willingness to take risks in patently crisis situations. The appeal to many military men of some civilian political patrons as well as the apparently impulsive core members of RAM probably is partly accounted for by this perception of their decisiveness and risk-taking personalities. On the other hand, their contempt is clearly reflected by the allusion to some of their highest military superiors as being "wobbles", which is an improvisation over another Taglish term graphically denouncing the lack of an essential attribute of manhood.)

Beyond her own cabinet and the military, President Aquino's consolidation of political authority will ultimately depend on the effectiveness with which her government addresses the distressed conditions of her constituency. This is necessarily a long-term process, given the widespread poverty and the gross social inequities in the Philippines. Much lead time is needed

even by a decisive leadership in activating resources to minimize not only material poverty, but the poverty of spirit which keeps a nation from helping itself towards sustained economic and political recovery. That poverty of spirit, it must be hoped, does not afflict the very leadership itself. It would be a tragic waste of public support if the leadership's decisiveness should be unable or unwilling to transcend the highest levels of oratory.

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2/9/87