

# The Troubled Presidency Of Corazon Aquino

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By [William Branigin](#)

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Less than seven months after she came to power in a largely peaceful uprising that was hailed around the world, President Corazon Aquino is in trouble.

As she heads to Washington for a crucial first meeting with President Reagan this week, the 53-year-old widow, commonly known here as "Cory," remains highly popular among her 55 million compatriots.

But for all her unquestioned sincerity and good intentions, there are signs of growing pessimism about her ability to handle the country's problems. The euphoria that accompanied her "people's power revolution" has largely given way to a sense that these problems may overwhelm her in the difficult times ahead.

Her government increasingly is perceived to be floundering amid the wreckage left by the disastrous administration of deposed president Ferdinand Marcos. But it is also weighed down with problems of its own making. While she holds the middle ground and does her best to referee infighting in her fractious 26-member Cabinet, centrifugal forces inexorably are pulling apart her unwieldy coalition, riven by multiple party loyalties, ideological differences and personality clashes.

Compounding her problems have been new gains by the radical left, the questionable loyalty of some elements in the military, the failure of the business community to make anticipated investments, a volatile labor situation, nationwide feuding over the appointment of more than 1,600 governors and mayors, and the likelihood that the Aquino government will not have effective control of the future Congress.

This assessment is based on interviews with government officials, military officers, communist rebels, church leaders, diplomats and a variety of other sources in

different parts of the country over the last several months.

"Part of the problem is that Cory, having been brought to power as a sort of symbol who presides over warring groups, is not inclined to interfere with squabbles because she wants to be above it all," said a Cabinet minister. "She knows she is very popular, but the danger is that all these squabbles might engulf her."

He added: "There's no doubt that everywhere Cory has gone, she has charmed people. She's honest and conducts herself in a high moral tone. But will she end up like Jimmy Carter?"

Similar expressions of concern have been aired by other prominent Aquino backers, notably the archbishop of Manila, Cardinal Jaime Sin. The spiritual leader of this predominantly Roman Catholic country, the only Christian nation in Asia, Sin was instrumental in mobilizing the church to support the military-led "revolution" that drove Marcos into exile in Hawaii.

"Disunity shows its very ugly head," Sin said in a recent homily aimed at bickering government officials. "The gains of the revolution are little by little being lost."

Like Sin, many of those who have criticized Aquino's government desperately want her presidency to succeed. "I'd like to see her make it; I really would," said one western military attache. "But she's surrounded by tigers and crocodiles."

In an interview Tuesday, Aquino did not deny that pessimism about her government's unity has set in, but she renewed appeals for patience and understanding.

"I guess there were very great expectations," she said. "Many people believed that in the short space of six months, many of our problems would be solved. I guess this has disappointed some of them." On the other hand, she added, many Filipinos "realize that with the enormity of our problems and our limited resources, government cannot really act as fast as it would like to in solving these problems." She indicated that she was banking heavily on increased foreign investment to generate more employment.

Aquino also complained that some of her problems were being exaggerated by an unshackled local press. Manila alone now has 24 scoop-hungry daily newspapers, which compete for circulation totaling only about 2 million.

Indeed, a case can be made for the optimism publicly expressed by the Reagan administration and other U.S. officials, such as Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Richard G. Lugar (R-Ind.), who visited here in August.

Having been vaulted into political prominence by the 1983 assassination of her husband, opposition leader Benigno Aquino Jr., the former housewife clearly has been "growing in the job" and steadily acquiring more confidence as the Philippines' seventh president.

### A Reputation for Honesty

Marcos loyalists still have a potential for disruption and outbursts of violence against the Aquino government, but they pose no serious threat of overthrowing it. The deposed Marcos, who turned 69 Thursday, has been reduced to a grating voice in the Hawaiian wilderness, issuing dire warnings that World War III will erupt in the Philippines unless he returns to power. Equally implausibly, his wife, Imelda, now complains that Aquino is wearing one of the 3,000 pairs of shoes she left behind in Malacanang Palace.

Besides showing greater self-confidence, Aquino has upheld her reputation for common sense, honesty and integrity -- virtues generally agreed to be badly needed in the country today following the Marcos era. And, as much as she says she harbors no ambition for power, Aquino expresses a determination to succeed.

"I am not one to give up very easily," she said in the interview."

Yet, a wide range of sources agree, the reasons for pessimism about her government these days outweigh the positive factors.

In the interview, Aquino said she was a member of no political party, although she ran for president under the banner of her vice president's party. She has spurned suggestions from supporters that she form her own party, explaining that "there are enough political parties and I do not want to add more confusion."

Some supporters fear that this disdain for dirtying her hands in politics will further undermine the effectiveness of her government when Filipinos vote in local and legislative elections set for next year.

"In effect, she is abdicating the political leadership, and this will have very dangerous repercussions in Congress," said the mayor of a large provincial city. "Being an apolitical person, she cannot conceptualize the need for a political organization to support her presidency. The dynamics of governance are not perceived by her. She expects people to follow her because she has good intentions."

In contrast to the directionless drift that is widely attributed to the Aquino government, communist rebels and their leftist allies have emerged as the only unified force with a clear, common goal. The left has recovered, both rebel and military sources agree, from the isolation and disarray it displayed immediately following the Feb. 22-25 "revolution" that brought Aquino to power in the wake of the victory claimed by Marcos in a rigged presidential election.

In a rare public admission of a "major tactical blunder," the Communist Party of the Philippines acknowledged in May that it had erred in promoting a boycott of the Feb. 7 national election, a policy that isolated it from the anti-Marcos upheaval that followed. Now, after a period of "self-criticism and rectification," including leadership changes, the outlawed party and its armed wing, the New People's Army (NPA), have adjusted their strategy and appear again to be making headway in their 17-year-old "people's war."

### A Questioned Approach to Insurgency

Elements of the country's 250,000-member armed forces, meanwhile, appear to be growing increasingly frustrated with what they see as the Aquino administration's naive approach to the insurgency and communist influence in government. Some officers close to Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile, the Philippines' leading anticommunist crusader, now openly discuss the prospect of staging a military coup sometime in the future if the perceived leftward drift becomes intolerable.

"If Cory Aquino is seen as continually being soft on communists to the point they become too strong, she will have to contend with a military that is very agitated," said a member of an armed forces reform movement that spearheaded the revolt against Marcos. "If the military has to launch a corrective movement, I don't think it will be bad for the Filipinos," he added. He said there would be "no martial rule" and that the military would "just kill a few NPAs."

The economy, so damaged by the "crony capitalism" and outright plunder of Marcos' 20-year rule, has shown signs of improvement. But there is widespread concern that the gains may be too small and come too slowly to resolve some of the underlying causes of the insurgency.

Contributing to this concern is the realization that the United States, for all its goodwill toward the Aquino government, will apparently prove incapable of supplying the massive aid that many here had hoped would amount to a new Marshall Plan for the Philippines.

Part of the problem is that the business community, which provided crucial support for Aquino in the February election, is mired in a Catch-22 situation. Businessmen are reluctant to invest because of uncertainty arising mainly from the communist insurgency. But progress in undercutting the insurgency depends largely on an economic turnaround, which requires business confidence and new investments. An exasperated Aquino made matters worse, some businessmen believe, by publicly scolding the business community in a recent speech, accusing it of timidity.

A major worry for the business community has been the wave of strikes it has suffered since Aquino assumed the presidency and installed a leftist human rights lawyer, Augusto Sanchez, as labor minister. Many of the strikes have been called by the militant Kilusang Mayo Uno (May 1 Movement), a labor federation dominated by the Communist Party. So far this year, the Labor Ministry has recorded 428 strikes, a figure that already exceeds the 371 strikes called in 1985.

Another source of trouble for the Aquino government is the Constitutional

Commission, a 48-member body appointed by Aquino in May to draft a new constitution that will pave the way for local and legislative elections, probably early next year.

The commission, beset by bickering and long-winded debates between a minority leftist bloc and a more conservative majority, has missed an informal Sept. 2 deadline set by Aquino for completing its work. In the process, it has delved into areas that some critics feel would be better left to a legislature, such as setting the ratio of foreign equity in business enterprises, a subject of intense debate that led to a walkout by the leftist bloc amid condemnation of what it called "the tyranny of the majority."

So many clauses are being inserted into the charter, wrote one critic of the commission, columnist Maximo Soliven, that "I am surprised that up to now nobody has suggested that the draft constitution prescribe the brand of toothpaste to be used by every Filipino."

According to a Cabinet minister and other political sources, the commission may already have thrown a major obstacle in front of the Aquino government by passing a provision for a bicameral legislature consisting of a nationally elected Senate and a House of Representatives elected by district. The sources said that, based on past experience, such a system was likely to prove tedious and time-consuming. Senators have tended to spend their time posturing as future presidents, they said, and district -- instead of province-wide -- elections of representatives have served to perpetuate the dynasties of political warlords. A unicameral legislature might be more suitable for the Philippines, these observers said.

"The purse and legislation will be controlled by Congress, and it will be the most independent one you've ever seen in the history of the country," said a Cabinet minister. Given the fractious political situation and splits in the Aquino coalition, he predicted, "The government will lose control of Congress and will not be able to accomplish anything. In the end, the bicameral system will be more conducive to a stalemated government."

## Controversial Appointments

Perhaps the most divisive factor in the Aquino government has been the appointment of "officers in charge" to replace the 74 governors, 60 city mayors and 1,520 town and village mayors elected or appointed under the Marcos government. The appointments have been the responsibility of the minister of local governments, Aquilino Pimentel Jr., an ambitious former mayor who was once jailed by Marcos on subversion charges for allegedly helping communist rebels.

Pimentel is a leader of the PDP-Laban party, a left-of-center group headed by the president's brother, Jose (Peping) Cojuangco. Members of the United Nationalist Democratic Organization, a rival party known as UNIDO and headed by Vice President Salvador Laurel, have accused Pimentel of appointing a disproportionate number of his own party members as governors and mayors to further his own presidential aspirations. Pimentel denies this.

Nevertheless, it is clear that the fortunes of Laurel's UNIDO have waned under the Aquino government, and he has openly broached the prospect of allying with a conservative opposition group, the Nacionalista Party, in the forthcoming local and congressional elections. The latter party was formed recently by a protege of Defense Minister Enrile and is widely viewed as a vehicle for his own presidential ambitions. Most of its members are defectors from Marcos' once-powerful New Society Movement party, which split after his ouster.

All this raises the likelihood, according to political analysts, that the PDP-Laban will line up in the next elections with the newly formed Partido Ng Bayan, which is essentially a legal communist party put together by Jose Maria Sison, the founding chairman of the Communist Party of the Philippines, and Bernabe Buscayno, alias Commander Dante, the original leader of the communist New People's Army. Both were released from prison by Aquino.

At the Partido Ng Bayan's founding congress in Manila on Aug. 30, Sison said the party's participation in elections would be "secondary" to "extralegal forms of struggle," which he did not define. Party officials said they expected to win 20

percent of the 1,900 positions that will be at stake in the local and congressional elections.

According to leaders of the communist underground, the formation of the Partido Ng Bayan reflects a major shift in Communist Party strategy.

"To us, it doesn't matter how you win power," one party official said.

NEXT: The insurgency

 **0 Comments**

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