The role of the Iron Butterfly

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She is known to her troubled countrymen as the “Iron Butterfly.” And as the authoritarian wife of the president of the Philippines, Imelda Marcos has proven herself worthy of the title. Indeed, her ambition and ruthlessness as a politician have convinced many Filipinos that she will try to succeed her seriously ill husband. A former beauty queen crowned the “Rose of Tacloban” (after her home town), she was at her husband’s side last week when he appeared on national television to deny any involvement in the murder of opposition leader Benigno Aquino. That was a fitting display of familial unity. Many opponents of the Marcos regime now fear Imelda as much as they fear her husband. The first lady, or “FL,” as she is called in Manila’s society columns, explains her interests in public life with a unique combination of charm and menace. “Filipinos realize,” she once declared bluntly, “that I am a nomonkey-business girl.”

The trappings and perquisites of power are clearly important to her. She holds the office of governor of Metro Manila, acts as minister of human settlements and even serves on the powerful 15-member presidential Executive Committee. It is that panel which will decide who will succeed Marcos after his death, and the president has made certain that Imelda will maintain her seat. She has risen to the political pinnacle with dizzying speed. But many insiders doubt that her qualities of leadership will ever measure up to her flamboyance and unalloyed ambition.

From the beginning, the Marcos’ marriage had a strongly political flavor. Imelda was the product of a family of judges, governors and ministers who controlled 550,000 votes in the central Visayan Islands group. She was a poor relation with little formal education and was often forced to sleep in a garage as a child. Nevertheless, in 1954 she exploited her beauty and family name to earn an introduction to Manila society. There she met Marcos, then a dashing young congressman. During the early years of their marriage there was little indication that Imelda would play anything other than a traditional role— as mother of their three children and administrator of a household of 35 servants. But during her husband’s 1959 senate campaign, she threw herself openly and actively into politics. When he decided to run for the presidency in 1965, she arranged his campaign schedule and worked on his speeches. Finally, after Marcos declared martial law in 1972, Imelda began to emerge as a polit-

ical figure in her own right. Her headlong rush for power at the side of a political strongman has led to inevitable comparisons with Eva Perón, the first wife of former Argentine president Juan Perón. Imelda, however, balks at the comparison. “I was never a prostitute,” she once snapped.

Like Eva Perón, Imelda’s steady acquisition of power has not produced a solid record of achievement. Unlike the fabled Evita, Imelda’s popular support, like her husband’s, has waned sharply in recent years. Many Filipinos complain of corruption in and around the opulent Malacañang Palace, the presidential residence. Asked how the first family managed to become so wealthy during the years of martial law (reliable estimates put their worth at more than $1.6 billion), Imelda replied, “Some are smarter than others.” In Manila she is known for her “edifice complex”—an urge to build prestigious 1 monuments—which has been expensive in economic and human terms. Imelda’s $10-million film festival centre was built so hastily that part of the structure collapsed during construction, killing 35 workers. To fund her many ; civic beautification schemes, Imelda ¡has often tapped tax revenues. But 1 when even her husband has closed the nation’s meagre coffers to her, she has resorted to a system she calls the “Bureau of Imelda Revenue.” The bureau is actually a network of wealthy individual and corporate contributors who are beholden to the Marcos regime for their success. Her projects are often bizarre—like a palace built entirely of coconuts. At other times they are designed with heartfelt compassion for the poor. One project, known as the National Livelihood Movement, created $500 million in cheap loans and venture capital for struggling small businessmen and farmers. Still, critics of that plan say it has failed to change the fundamental inequalities in a society in which the average weekly income is $12.

Imelda’s extravagant personal style has both amazed and infuriated Filipinos. When she and her husband travelled to the United States last year for an official visit, Imelda arrived in New York with 300 suitcases and 40 assistants. Her globe-trotting shopping sprees are legendary. She once bought her husband a luxury jet, then she had to store it in Hawaii to avoid upsetting Filipinos who were concerned about the nation’s grinding poverty.

Despite her personal denials that she is interested in succeeding her husband—who will be 66 on Sept. 11 — Imelda remains a prime candidate. She t will likely face strong competition from £ members of the military and close Mar§ cos aides, like Defence Minister Juan Ponce Enrile. In the event that she is overpowered, she may take refuge in a sprawling 50-acre estate the presidential couple bought for $1 million on Long Island, near New York. But her ability to remove enemies and potential threats is widely known. And for the Iron Butterfly of the Philippines, the final flight to the top may be imminent.

-JARED MITCHELL in Toronto, with correspondents ’ reports.