



# Assassination of Aquino linked to power struggle for successor to Marcos

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MANILA

The assassination of Benigno Aquino, at Manila airport Aug. 21, has completely changed Philippine politics. It also makes plain that a return to democracy is still a long way off for this American ally.

Before the killing of the political opposition leader, Ferdinand Marcos was generally thought to be in control of the country, either because of public acquiescence or military strength. Issues like who would succeed Marcos were worrisome but long-range problems.

But the assassination not only destroyed the government's credibility; it created the impression of a tough, ruthless, but perhaps leaderless government.

Marcos is widely thought to be ill, although he denies the rumor. The Aquino murder - widely attributed here to some of Marcos's closest advisers - is seen by observers as part of a succession crisis resulting from Marcos's apparent illness.

The government, however, resolutely maintains its innocence. An investigation of the killing by a five-man, Marcos-appointed commission has begun, with hearings starting today. The credibility of its report may be pivotal to future public acceptance of the Marcos regime and to United States-Philippines relations - including whether President Reagan visits here in November as he now plans.

This reporter's investigation casts serious doubts on the present official account of the Aquino killing, raising questions as yet unanswered. But, first, here is the government's version:

Rolando Galman, 33 years old, a small-time killer from Nueva Ecija, a province north of Manila, was hired to kill Aquino. The contract had been made either by an embittered political rival of Aquino or by the communist underground.

The government, meanwhile, planned to check Aquino's papers upon his arrival from self-exile in the United States and, if they were not in order, send him out of the country on the same plane. (They could not have been in order, as the government had refused to renew his expired passport.)

But no one in the government knew on which plane Aquino was arriving, only that he was arriving Aug. 21. A team from the Aviation Security Command (Avsecom) - 35 men specially trained in anti-hijack and airport security work, backed by an armored van and other vehicles - had then to move to each incoming aircraft, looking for Aquino. This allowed Roly, as Galman was known, and any accomplices to establish the pattern of the security check and plan the killing, according to this government version.

Aquino's plane, China Airlines flight 811, was the eighth plane the security men had checked that morning, said Maj. Gen. Prospero Olivas, the Metro Manila police chief who was in charge of the initial murder investigations. "How can

we plan for security when the people arranging for Aquino's return were using deception?" he complained.

When the China Airlines flight arrived, three men from the Avsecom came on the plane, recognized Aquino, and escorted him off. All three were unarmed, according to the government. They went out of the embarkation tube leading from the plane toward the terminal, opened an emergency exit in the tube and went down the stairs leading to the tarmac. At the foot of the steps Roly, who had been hiding behind the stairs, dashed out, leaned over the escorts and shot Aquino behind the left ear from within 18 inches. Roly then allegedly ran toward the Avsecom armored van near the stairs and was shot dead immediately by nearby guards.

The entire episode was an unfortune slip-up, the government says. Security was caught flat-footed. Inconsistencies in government account

The problem is that very few Filipinos believe the government version. As it stands, it is riddled with inconsistencies and holes. Among them:

The stairs leading from the tunnel's emergency exit to the tarmac offered no cover for anyone. The stairs are open steel steps like those found on a ship; one can see straight through them. Roly crouched behind them would have been immediately visible by security guards surrounding the plane.

The gun that killed Aquino was a Smith and Wesson Magnum .357. It is a heavy-duty pistol, weighing 2.4 pounds and nearly a foot long. It would be very hard to conceal, yet Roly supposedly had tucked it into his shirt and sauntered onto the tarmac. His blue work shirt reached just down to his waist. It did not tuck in and was fairly tapered. And given his slightly pot belly, there was not much room for him to hide his big gun. Photographs of him lying face up on the tarmac show his shirt riding up well over his waist.

Where was his airport identification? None is visible on his body in any of the photographs taken immediately after the killing. And when on Sunday evening after the killing, a small group of journalists watched policemen begin collecting the evidence - shell casings and such - one of the investigators said that they had not yet found any I.D.

Aquino's family and his opposition colleagues say that Manila airport manager Luis Tabuena gave permission for a small group of people, including Aquino's mother and opposition leader Salvador Laurel, to greet Aquino at the arrival gate. When they arrived at the airport, however, they were refused entry to the restricted area. Why was the permission rescinded?

Were the men who escorted Aquino off the plane unarmed? The government tends to cite film taken by Western television teams on the plane for this assertion. The film does not show clearly whether the men have guns or not. It does show that one of the men, probably "Sergeant de Mesa," was not keen to have his face filmed.

And if they were unarmed, why? The government had been warning of death threats against Aquino for months.

Where did the three escorts go? None of the pictures taken seconds after the shootings show any signs of the three men: They are not among the men, for example, who are pictured pulling Aquino into the Avsecom van or among the troops with guns in hand and aimed in various directions standing only a few feet away.

How did the alleged killer know that Aquino would be brought down the emergency exit? Assuming for a moment that he had observed the pattern of Avsecom checks, the security men had not escorted anyone off the other planes.

There is, however, considerable doubt that the security men checked other planes with such care - or that they needed to.

An Air France flight from Bangkok arrived shortly before the China Airlines flight. Aquino was booked on that flight yet the check, according to one informed source, was perfunctory. No Avsecom van was seen.

There are, in fact, indications that the government knew exactly which flight Aquino was taking to Manila.

A long-time airport employee interviewed by this writer claimed that official photographers and a government television team were told to assemble at arrival gate eight - the gate at which the China Airlines flight eventually parked - at approximately 11.30 a.m. This is about 11/2 hours before the plane arrived. All official cameramen, the source maintained, were assigned to gate eight. None were sent to other gates. They were ordered to remain at the terminal end of the embarkation tube. From there it was physically impossible to see the killing. When the shooting started, however, the photographers apparently ran to the terminal windows to take their pictures.

The official photographers, the source said, were told to go to the gate by Col. Vicente Tigas, an officer of the National Intelligence and Security Authority (NISA), currently attached to the President's Office of Media Affairs. Colonel Tigas and airport manager Tabuena went to the door of the plane before Aquino was taken off and would perhaps have been in a position to witness the killing. Linger questions

Moreover, The Christian Science Monitor has learned that someone was trying very hard to discover how and when Aquino was returning to Manila.

Three days before Aquino's arrival, a well-to-do Filipino family visiting

Singapore was unnerved to find itself under surveillance by two men they assumed to be Filipino intelligence operatives.

As coincidence would have it, the family had the same surname as members of the Aquino clan. They feel that they were being watched on the suspicion that they were part of the Aquino advance party. On that day Aquino was either in Singapore, or in the nearby Malaysian town of Johore Baru.

Many other questions remain to be answered. The Aquino family, in particular, wants to know why the bullet that passed through Aquino's head was moving in a downward direction. Roly was 5 feet 7 inches (assuming that the revised height was correct; originally he was described by the authorities as 5 feet 4). Aquino was 5 feet 9 inches, according to the family, and was wearing thick-heeled boots that would have given him another inch of height.

One logical explanation of this is that Aquino saw a gunman coming toward him and instinctively ducked. The government has not suggested this yet, though.

Suspicion still hangs over the three men who escorted Aquino off the plane and then were not spotted at the murder scene. They seem to have had Aquino well covered: one apparently walking on each side of him, another probably behind. Suspicion of these or other Avsecom troopers is reinforced by a simple fact: An Avsecom sergeant, in a casual chat with this reporter, mentioned with some pride that the sidearm his outfit carried was "the latest - Smith and Wesson .357 Magnum" - the same type of gun allegedly carried by Roly.

An analysis of the government version leads one to conclude that, if Roly was hiding under the emergency exit stairs, Aquino was the only person unaware of this. Marcos ally confirms doubts

It also seems to suggest that the attitude of the Avsecom security team was not so much laxity as complicity. (The team and the Avsecom commander, Gen. Luther Custodio, were restricted to barracks pending investigations soon after the assassination. General Custodio has since been relieved of his command.)

Soon after the murder a former senior official, still in a position of some prominence and still apparently an admirer of the President, asked this reporter over lunch to outline speculation about the murder. He listened carefully, with neither outrage nor, it seemed, skepticism. When this reporter finished his speculation, he quibbled politely at one of the names mentioned but did not take issue with the general account.

Theorizing by more informed political observers is only slightly more charitable to Marcos than reaction in the streets. Most of them - from the communist underground to supporters of the President - feel that he had nothing to gain from the murder.

Many observers, however, feel that Marcos was not in control when Aquino returned. They suspect that the President is gravely, perhaps terminally, ill, and that his illness had reached some sort of crisis just before Aquino returned. The murder, according to this widely held theory, was ordered by close advisers of Marcos who hoped to succeed Marcos and who had everything to lose if Aquino, the shrewdest and probably most popular politician of his generation, came home and rallied the moderate opposition.

Aquino let it be known before his arrival that he believed that time was running out for Marcos. Official messages from Manila - notably Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile's cable of Aug. 2 - asking him to delay his return by 30 days, convinced Aquino that something was wrong. He met the government halfway: instead of returning Aug. 7, he came back on Aug. 21. "He said that as long as

Marcos was in full control of the situation, he didn't think anything would happen to him," his widow, Corazon Aquino, said later. Marcos associates: likely culprits?

Suspicion about Marcos's health - and fear that there is a vacuum of power at the top - remain widespread. This suspicion has almost certainly accelerated the struggle for power among Marcos's closest associates, especially in view of the absence of any clear succession plans coming from Marcos himself.

The likely culprits in the Aquino murder are therefore thought to be among those closest to Marcos. Three figures seem to be under the most suspicion by both pro- and anti-Marcos observers here: two Marcos relatives, Gen. Fabian Ver and Mrs. Imelda Marcos; and Eduardo Cojuangco, a close confidant of Marcos.

Gen. Fabian Ver is chief of staff of the armed forces of the Philippines and a cousin of Marcos. He is also head of the National Intelligence and Security Authority. Avsecom is one of a number of military units under his direct operational command. Until a few months ago, Ver's power and closeness to the President was matched by another senior officer and relative, Gen. Fidel Ramos, commander of the Philippine Constabulary, the Philippines' domestic army. In the last few months, however, General Ramos's power has been drastically reduced: units of the Constabulary have been disbanded, others placed under the command of General Ver's general headquarters.

Similarly the power of Defense Minister Enrile, who has long been a rival of Ver, has been whittled away in favor of the chief of staff.

Faced with the erosion of their power base, Enrile and Ramos are both persistently reported to have offered their resignations. President Marcos, however, has reportedly refused to act on them.



General Ver is no stranger to strong-arm tactics. The so-called "lost command," more properly known as the Security Unit of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, has been accused of multiple atrocities by church sources and other groups. It is believed to be under the control of General Ver.

Aquino is known to have long feared that, if anyone planned to kill him, Ver would be the planner. And when, the night before his return to Manila, ABC television's James Laurie told Aquino that Ver was in charge of airport security, "Aquino's face turned pale as ash," Laurie said.

Imelda Marcos has long denied any ambition to succeed her husband, but few observers have taken her disclaimers seriously. She is already minister of human settlements, governor of Metro Manila, and a member of the executive committee that is supposed to ensure an orderly transition of power should the President die or be incapacitated. Twice last August Mrs. Marcos made comments to opposition leader Laurel that can either be interpreted as warnings or threats. On Aug. 2 and Aug. 15, Mr. Laurel says that Mrs. Marcos told him, in front of witnesses, that if Aquino returned he might be killed. Mrs. Aquino says Laurel passed these remarks on to her husband. "Mrs. Marcos is very angry with you," she said Laurel told him.

Mr. Cojuangco is from the same province as Aquino and is a cousin of Mrs. Aquino. He is from one of the richest families in the Philippines and is thought to be one of those most favored by the President to succeed him. He is a long-time political adversary of Aquino. Asked recently to characterize Cojuangco's feelings for Aquino, a member of the Aquino family replied simply, "hate." Speculation has linked Cojuangco's name with political violence in the past.

Last year when a nearly successful attempt was made on the life of Emmanuel Pelaez, an influential pro-Marcos political leader, it was noted that the attempt

came as Pelaez was involved in a bitter dispute with Cojuangco and Defense Minister Enrile. None of the attempted killers has been arrested, however, and no motive ever publicly given for the attempt. Since then Cojuangco is thought to have broken with Enrile and moved closer to General Ver.

Like most senior government officials, Mrs. Marcos, General Ver, and Mr. Cojuangco have not commented publicly on the assassination. The only comment seems to have come from Prime Minister Cesar Virata, however, who said in a Reuter interview that government officials may have been involved in the killing.

At the very least, suspicion and skepticism of the government will linger on. Many people, including prominent supporters of the government, fear that worse things may follow if the suspicions turn to anger.

The government could do much to dispell the suspicions and defuse the anger. It could, for example, offer conclusive proof that Marcos is in good health. It could allow a totally independent investigation of the murder. And it could allow genuinely fair elections. None of these things seem to be forthcoming at the moment, however.

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