

Marcos Seen As Saint By Cult Members

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ABRA, Philippines - A picture of the "Sacred Heart of Jesus" in a Philippine chapel has the familiar features, including the heart ringed by a crown of thorns. But there's one startling difference: The face is that of the late Philippine strongman Ferdinand Marcos.

Although vilified by many as a ruthless dictator, Marcos is worshipped by hundreds of cult followers in the mountains of Abra province, 200 miles north of Manila.

"We regard him as a saint," said cult leader Rodolfo Cabusao, a 51-year-old former tailor.

Wearing white cassocks, cult members - mostly impoverished peasants - sing prayers in a thatch-roofed chapel adorned with portraits of Marcos along with traditional religious figures.

Their behavior is in sharp contrast to the thousands of people nationwide who held pro-democracy rallies recently on the anniversary of Marcos' imposition of martial rule 27 years ago. They burned an effigy of the late president's widow, Imelda, near the presidential palace.

Cabusao says cult followers do not want to be dragged into the political conflict surrounding Marcos. Instead, cult life is focused on a self-sustaining mountain retreat where members grow rice and vegetables and raise money by selling orchids.

The group began as one of several small nationalist cults, collectively called the Rizalian Brotherhood, which have long venerated Philippine national hero Jose Rizal as a reincarnation of Christ.

It began worshipping Marcos soon after the former dictator died in September 1989, when Cubasao says Marcos appeared to him in an apparition and proclaimed himself God's disciple.

Cabusao maintains he has found Bible passages to support the claim and says Marcos also fits the description of the government leader cult founders prophesied would deliver God's promises of love and prosperity to millions of Filipinos.

"We worship him. We believe the crimes he's been accused of were not really committed by him, but by his men," said Saniata Guarin, Cabusao's sister and head of an Abra elementary school.

Marcos was driven from power in 1986 by an army-backed "people power" revolt that ended his 20-year rule and sent him into exile in Hawaii, where he died three years later.

Succeeding governments have accused the Marcoses and their associates of human-rights abuses and of plundering billions of dollars.

The Philippines is Asia's only predominantly Roman Catholic nation.

Abra's Catholic bishop, Artemio Rillera, said he was unaware of the cult but said he would look into its activities and try to persuade its followers "to practice the right manner of worshipping God."

"If they claim that a human person is God, that's idolatry, that's false," Rillera said.

During worship services, cult members in Abra flank their altars with large Philippine flags. When they pray, they raise their right hand to their chest - a sign of respect for the flag - instead of making the sign of the cross.