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Benigno Aquino: between dictatorship and revolution in the Philippines*

It is one of those surprising ironies of history that Benigno Aquino, the slain Philippine opposition leader, is accomplishing in death what he could never do when he was alive: bringing down the Marcos dictatorship. Perhaps the individual most surprised—and envenomed—by the dramatic turn of events is Ferdinand Marcos himself, whom most Filipinos now regard as the mastermind behind the incredible execution on the tarmac of the Manila International Airport on 21 August 1983.

It is not difficult to image how bitter it must be for the ailing dictator—whose concern about his 'place in history' is well known—to spend his last days with the realisation that his longstanding rival has passed into history as a hero while he is about to enter it as a villain. Costa-Gavras the renowned political film maker could not ask for a more exquisite plot: two master politicians who personify in their personal rivalry, political struggle, and final deadly confrontation the social contradictions and historical options of a Third World country. It is also a story which is laden with the dramatic irony which characterises the best of classical tragedy: the murder immortalises the murdered and destroys the murderer.

Like Marcos, the 50-year-old Aquino was a complex, contradictory figure who was in flesh-and-blood quite different from the devotee of Gandhian non-violence into which some sectors of the Philippine opposition are now converting him for their own political ends. But of one thing there is no dispute: Aquino was a profoundly courageous man. It was this streak of stubborn courage that earned him a death sentence in 1977, after five years of imprisonment had failed to extract from him a pledge of allegiance to Marcos. And it was this courage, wedded to a driving ambition and a deep concern for the strategic interests of his class, that propelled Aquino toward his appointment with history that dog-day afternoon of 21 August.

* All quotations from Aquino which are not footnoted are from private conversations and interviews with the author which took place between January 1981 and July 1983. Quotations from confidential discussions of US agencies after the Aquino assassination were provided by participants and consultants who requested anonymity.

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The Making of a Ruling-Class Politician

'Ninoy' Aquino was first and foremost a ruling-class politician, and his brief but meteoric career provides a striking example of the complex ways in which individual ambition, class interest, and the imperative of popular legitimacy intersect in a particular kind of Third World politician: the bourgeois democrat.

Born to a wealthy and powerful landlord family with a history of involvement in national politics, Ninoy quickly learned to master the rules of ruling-class politics which governed the parliamentary republic from 1946 to 1972. He was elected town mayor at 22, became governor of his province, Tarlac, at 28, and, at 35, earned the distinction of being the youngest person ever to win election to the Philippine Senate.

The system that Aquino mastered was a formal electoral system which was superimposed by American colonial officials on the competition for power among land-based and mercantile elites. These elites fought for political office by mobilising the lower classes through kinship and patronage in a society where political organisation along class lines was still embryonic. Combining the traditional feudal paternalism of the Philippine elite with the worst features of American ward politics, 'democratic representation' in the neo-colonial republic was the art of protecting narrow class interests and engaging in a form of institutionalised looting. The classic expression of the essence of patronage democracy was provided by a former president of the Philippine Senate in a warning to a Philippine president: 'If you cannot permit abuses, you must at least tolerate them. What are we in power for? We are not hypocrites. Why should we pretend we are saints when in reality we are not.'[1]

It was exceptional tactical skill in making and accumulating the 'correct' elite alliances, combined with a populist charisma and the purposely vague rhetoric of 'anti-corruption', 'reform', and 'social justice', that enabled Ninoy to rise rapidly from being a regional politician with an inherited power-base to being the Secretary-General of the opposition Liberal Party by 1969. From this position, Aquino began his quest for the presidency, which he hoped to gain by 1973, when Ferdinand Marcos' second term would have come to an end. It was Aquino's misfortune, however, to have to compete against Marcos, whose Machiavellian ability to operate in the labyrinthine world of elite politics was even more formidable than his.

[1] Quoted in Steve Shalom, 'Counterinsurgency in the Philippines', *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 7(2) 1977.

Aquino's career was determined not only by his mastery of the rules of local politics but of the international ones as well. Success in national politics in the neo-colonial republic was greatly dependent on winning the goodwill of the Americans, whose political, military, and economic presence pervaded their former colony. Ninoy was, at an early age, at ease with the Americans. He received his *early* formal schooling at the hands of the American Jesuits who ran the Ateneo de Manila College, the prime training ground for the children of the powerful and the rich. Once out of school, he became one of the 'Magsaysay Boys', some of the 'best and the brightest' Ateneo graduates who surrounded President Ramon Magsaysay. The latter was a provincial politician whose emergence as a national reformist and populist figure was engineered by the 'legendary' Central Intelligence Agency operative, Colonel Edward Lansdale, during the campaign to defeat the Communist-led 'Huk' Uprising in the early 1950s. Ninoy quickly drew attention to himself as one of the most intrepid of the lot when he successfully negotiated the surrender of the Huk 'Supremo', Luis Taruc, in 1954.[2]

That feat started a long working relationship with the agency which Aquino made no special effort to hide. In one of his most candid interviews, Aquino even called attention to his CIA connection with some pride: 'I've worked with the CIA on many operations—they know I can be very stubborn . . . I was assistant to three Filipino presidents. And once upon a time I headed our own equivalent of the CIA. We had joint operations in Indonesia, we had joint operations in Laos, we were in Cambodia'.[3]

Thus, by the time he had positioned himself for his advance to the presidency, Ninoy was reasonably certain that he was someone Washington—the ultimate arbiter in Philippine presidential politics—could live with, if not support.

Aquino and the Crisis of the Republic

But by the time the presidency was within his reach, the political system he had mastered was on its last legs. It was a system which could only work if certain conditions existed. One necessary ingredient was a reasonable degree of adherence to the unwritten rule of parliamentary

[2] For a CIA account of the exploits of Lansdale and the Magsaysay Boys, see Lansdale's autobiography, *In the Midst of Wars*, New York: Harper and Row, 1972. Descriptions of CIA interference in Philippine parliamentary politics after Lansdale are provided by ex-agent Joseph Burkholder Smith in his *Portrait of a Cold Warrior*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1976.

[3] 'The Philippines: the more things change, the more they remain the same, an interview with Benigno Aquino', *Multinational Monitor*, February 1981, p 17.

politics Philippine-style: that opposing factions of the elite would alternate in power and have their chance to gather and distribute the spoils conferred by political office. In the late 1960s, the rule increasingly became the exception. At the local, regional, and national levels, there was a trend toward the formation of political dynasties which could not let go of the tremendous power that came with elected office and the riches it unlocked. Such a hold could only be secured—or broken by opposing elites—by building up private armies that intimidated voters and stole elections. As elections got bloodier, they also became less legitimate, throwing the system more and more off kilter.

However, it was not until the presidential elections of November 1969 that the elite consensus on the rules of the parliamentary game irretrievably broke down. That year, Marcos achieved what had until now been impossible in the first twenty-three years of the republic: election to a second term in office. It was a feat that Marcos accomplished by developing alongside the network of political alliances which served as the traditional route to national power another political force: the Philippine Army. By manipulating his traditionally close ties to the officer corps as the Philippines 'most decorated World War II veteran', utilising the promotions system to place his most loyal followers in strategic positions, and providing the army with the biggest slice of the government budget, Marcos was able to create an instrument of personal control which dwarfed the combined private armies of his opponents and allies.

Despite their periodic warnings about 'the approaching dictatorship', most of the opposition elite continued to practise politics in the same old way. The bombing of the leadership of the opposition Liberal Party during a political rally in August 1971 and Marcos' suspension of the writ of *habeas corpus* following it shook the opposition but what fears they had were banished by the confidence that the US would not allow the 'democratic transplant' it had engineered to be destroyed. Aquino warned of a military-backed presidential coup codenamed 'Operation Sagittarius' at the same time that he ebulliently predicted, 'I will be president in 1973'.

Marcos' imposition of martial law on 22 September 1972, was the *coup de grâce* to a dying system of elite control. Yet the larger meaning of this historic shift in the system of class rule escaped the opposition elite who interpreted it as an aberration which stemmed solely from dark personal ambition. The declaration of martial law is, in fact, an extremely interesting example of the way historical necessity works

itself through the driving personal ambition of men who also sense that their actions coincide with a larger imperative. The advent of the Marcos dictatorship was fundamentally a class response to the emergence of a mortal threat to the system of neocolonial domination. It was essentially the 'centralised redeployment' of the formerly relatively dispersed power of the ruling class against the escalating social discontent of the Filipino masses which marked the late 1960s and early 1970s.

With the defeat of the peasant-based Communist uprising by the CIA-sponsored Magsaysay government in the early 1950s, mass discontent guided by radical politics was rendered quiescent for more than a decade as Philippine-style McCarthyism blanketed the country. By the mid-1960s, however, the irrepressible contradictions of a society with the worst social inequalities in Southeast Asia cracked the McCarthyist superstructure, and by the beginning of the 1970s, the country was being wracked by peasant marches demanding land reform, militant workers' strikes, and massive student demonstrations demanding basic reforms, an end to American business privileges, and withdrawal of the US military bases from the country.

Constitutionally guaranteed formal rights were, in short, being invoked by mass movements to push anti-elite and anti-US demands. And with class and nationalist consciousness spreading, the capacity of the elite democratic system to coopt, fragment, and defuse mass demands through patronage politics began to erode swiftly. The mass ferment forced the convocation of a Constitutional Convention in 1970 to which many popular representatives were elected to frame a constitution based on advancing social equality and regaining Filipino control of the national economy. When mass pressure forced the Supreme Court to issue a series of significant judgments ending a number of US business privileges in 1972, it became clear that, like Frankenstein's creature, the formal democratic system was slipping from the control of the interests it had originally been designed to serve.

Marcos fully understood the profound challenge to elite domination represented by the burgeoning movement on the streets, and he cleverly united the apprehensions of the class in command to his personal drive to harness absolute power. And he correctly calculated as well that the United States would not stand in the way. Indeed, it was the US which provided Marcos with the wherewithal to consolidate his new authoritarian order by increasing military aid by over 100 per cent in the first years of martial law. Not burdened with the niceties of state

diplomacy, relieved US business interests explicitly articulated in a telegram to Marcos the policy which the Nixon administration followed in practice:

> The American Chamber of Commerce wishes you every success in your endeavor to restore peace and order, business confidence, economic growth, and well-being of the Filipino people and nation. We assure you of our confidence and cooperation in achieving these objectives. We are communicating the feelings of our associates and affiliates in the United States.[4]

It was a betrayal that stunned Aquino and other members of the opposition elite, who had taken it as an article of faith that the United States would not allow the formal democratic system it had sponsored to be destroyed. But just as they had underestimated the gravity of the internal strains on the system, so did they fail to notice the extent to which the United States had become disillusioned with 'elite democracy' as a method of neocolonial control.

In the context of the ideological war between East and West during the immediate post-war period, formal constitutional systems based on the stable social hegemony of landlord-*comprador* elites had been the preferred form of neocolonial domination. The Philippine political system provided a model which the Americans sought to reproduce elsewhere in the Third World at a time that they were dismantling the old colonial empires of the British and the French. One of the nations Washington targetted was Vietnam, to which it assigned Ramon Magsaysay's mentor, Colonel Lansdale, and his Filipino subordinates to try to forge a Philippine-style democracy in the mid-1950s.

The CIA-inspired assassination of their own man, Ngo Dinh Diem, and his replacement with a military clique in 1963, was a confession that elite democratic systems could not stabilise East Asian countries characterised by higher levels of class and nationalist consciousness and political organisation than existed in post-war Philippines. In the meantime, the effort by the Kennedy administration to counter the shock waves from the Cuban Revolution by opening up the traditional oligarchical democracies of Latin America to the participation of middle-class political elites like the Christian Democrats in Chile merely provided the left with unprecedented opportunities for organising in the electoral arena. US support for the military coup which ousted the populist Goulart government in Brazil in 1964 and its direct intervention in the Dominican Republic to prevent the popularly-

[4] Quoted in Sam Bayani, 'What's Happening in the Philippines?', *Far Eastern Reporter*, November 1976, p 26.

elected Juan Bosch from coming to power in 1965 signified the same American disillusion with the stabilising effects of formal democratic systems. Then the nightmare became reality: the system allowed the ascent to power of a pro-socialist government in Chile in 1970. The US then decisively put itself behind, if not directly instigated, the dismantling of those governments which its ideologues had praised as models for the Third World in the 1950s: the Philippines ('the showcase of Asian democracy') in 1972; Chile ('the England of South America') in 1973; and Uruguay ('the Switzerland of the Third World') in 1974.

The regime which emerged in Brazil in the mid-1960s provided the prototype for the new form of elite, neocolonial control which the Americans were feverishly searching for in response to situations of acute class conflict: a military-technocrat political leadership which depoliticised the lower classes through large-scale repression and tried to forge a social consensus among the middle class, agrarian and industrial elites, and foreign capital through a programme of economic growth via 'export-oriented industrialisation'.

But Aquino and other bourgeois democrats in the Third World could hardly be faulted for their miscalculation of US intentions, since the foreign policy establishment continued to legitimise the US imperial presence through the obsolete ideology of missionary democracy. A pioneering attempt to doctrinally justify the new authoritarian order, however, was provided in 1968 by Samuel Huntington's *Political Order in Changing Societies*, which became a handbook for a new generation of State Department officials. In the 'chaotic' Third World, argued the Harvard professor, the building of strong centralised authority must necessarily precede the question of democratic representation. This was the first step in a process of theoretical justification of the merits of authoritarianism which would culminate over a decade later in the 'Kirkpatrick Doctrine'.

Aquino and the New Order

Huntington was snapped up eagerly not only by State Department officials but also by Marcos propagandists in search of an ideology. Huntington's 'Order First, Representation Later' was translated into 'Constitutional Authoritarianism' in the Philippine setting.[5] Strong

[5] Huntington was popularised in the Philippines by Marcos' Minister of Education, Onofre Corpuz, who wrote the influential *Liberty and Government in the New Society*, Manila: 1973. See also Ferdinand Marcos, *The Third World Alternative*, Manila: Ministry of Public Information, 1980.

authority and the loss of traditional democratic rights, added Marcos' ideologues, were a precondition for a strong unobstructed effort in national economic development along export-oriented lines.

The debate between 'authoritarian development' and 'democratic restoration' became the poles of what little above-ground political debate was allowed by the martial law regime in its first few years. The situation brought out the best in the ruling-class tradition in the imprisoned Aquino, who steadfastly refused to conciliate Marcos, and when the dictator got rough, defied the death sentence for 'murder' and 'subversion' decreed by a kangaroo court in 1977. Indeed, what little legitimacy the Philippine ruling elite enjoyed among the masses during this period was, to a large extent, provided by the embattled Ninoy, who skilfully exploited his image as a feisty, defenceless David stopping Goliath with non-violent methods, including an epic 36-day hunger strike in 1975.

Aquino's pro-democratic stand, however, might have elicited admiration from the elite but not the support of most of his class. Marcos had correctly calculated that the vast majority of the Philippine national, regional, and local elites would be cajoled or coerced into taking his side. Ninoy and a hardy band of nationally-prominent politicians like former Senators Jose Diokno, Lorenzo Tanada, and Gerry Roxas were a vociferous group of critics, but their Liberal Party allies at all levels deserted them like flies as their armed groups were disarmed by Marcos or their followers bought off. For the hesitant few, the dismantling of Aquino's political machine in his home province, Tarlac, was made into an object lesson, with its key leaders intimidated, imprisoned, forced to go underground, or simply murdered.

While Marcos formed his old and new elite followers into a new party, the New Society Party (KBL), he supplanted both them and civilian administrators with army officers as the key decisionmakers at both the regional and local levels. This new political reality was summed up incisively by a World Bank report:

> Military commanders have, for the first time in modern Philippine history, become an integral part of the power structure, particularly in provincial administration, and through their influence (both personal and official) in judicial and administrative matters.[6]

At the national level, the generals shared power and interpenetrated with the two other groups which formed the internal pillars of the

[6] World Bank, 'Political and Administrative Bases for Economic Policy in the Philippines', Memorandum from William Ascher to Larry Hinkle, Washington, DC, 1980, p 6. This 'political risk' analysis came to be popularly known as the 'Ascher Memorandum'.

regime: Marcos' powerful business cronies, who were able to bring key sectors of the economy under their control through the methods of 'pirate capitalism'; and the US-backed technocrats, who were charged with implementing the programme of authoritarian modernisation directed and funded by the World Bank.

The outlawing of political criticism and the shattering of the elite opposition pushed mass dissent toward the only force which was capable of withstanding the Marcos juggernaut: the left. And as the decade wore on, the key axis of political conflict in Philippine society became that between a massively armed ruling class and the armed left.

Marcos, Aquino, and the Challenge from the Left

To understand the transformation of the Philippine left from the demoralised and defeated band of the early 1950s to the tough, resilient, and expanding movement of the late 1970s requires a brief mention of the dramatic schism in its ranks which took place in the late 1960s.

After its rout at the hands of Magsaysay and the CIA, the disoriented and decimated leadership had adopted the 'parliamentary road to socialism', a line which coincided with the conclusions of the Soviet Communist Party Congress in 1956. By the mid-1960s, however, the peaceful road was coming under heavy attack from a new generation of radicals led by the brilliant José Maria Sison, who were emerging from the reviving nationalist student movement. As these elements joined the party, a fierce inter-party struggle erupted between the 'peaceful road', espoused by the old leadership, and the strategy of 'protracted people's war', proposed by the young insurgents.

Unable to loosen the hold on cadres exercised by the old leadership, the insurgents 'reestablished' the Communist Party of the Philippines in December 1968, and founded the New People's Army (NPA) in March 1969 with 68 men and 35 rifles. The founding document, 'Rectify Errors and Rebuild the Party', was a carefully-argued polemic which traced the defeat of the Huk rebellion not principally to external causes but to internal ones—an adventurist military strategy of swift armed uprising, lack of a coherent policy on the united front, and absence of thoroughgoing political and ideological training of cadres and the mass base. It then went on to chart the strategy of revolution: the character of the current stage of the Philippine Revolution was 'national democratic'—that is, anti-feudal and anti-imperialist—which meant that it could potentially appeal to most classes, from the peasantry to the

'national bourgeoisie', and draw them to oppose imperialism and its local base, the landlord-*comprador* elites. The principal vehicle of the Revolution was a 'protracted peoples' war' in which the main force, the peasantry, would be mobilised and armed to gradually encircle and liberate the urban bastions of imperialism in the final stages of the revolution. Complementing the armed struggle was a flexible application of united-front tactics designed to win as many allies as possible, isolate the main enemy, and neutralise its potential allies. The insurgent leadership was attempting, in short, to apply the lessons of the national liberation struggles in China and Vietnam to the Philippine setting. It would not be until the mid-1970s that revolutionary strategy would acquire characteristics unique to the Philippines.[7]

The three-and-a-half years between December 1968 and September 1972 provided the left with a precious opportunity to attempt to forge a mass base without having to bear the full brunt of the military might of a repressive state. The NPA's assessment that the Filipino peasantry was ripe for revolutionary mobilisation was proven by its rapid building of a base area in the Cagayan Valley of Northern Luzon. The radicalisation of the student ferment in Manila also provided the Communist Party and the NPA with hundreds of new cadres, many of whom were deployed to the countryside for NPA expansion work.

The first years of martial law were the 'heroic age' of the reborn Philippine Left. Its mass organisations in the cities were smashed at the outset of martial law, while the NPA became the target of several massive counterinsurgency campaigns. Yet it had rebounded by 1977. Two critical steps taken by the party in the mid-1970s explain this. One was the decision to boldly create multiple base areas in each of the country's 11 major islands instead of relying on one major base, as had the Huks in the 1950s. The other was to correct doctrinaire and 'ultraleftist' methods of organising in order to broaden the appeal of the National Democratic programme to social groups other than the peasantry and the working class.

Set down in two now classic documents, *Specific Characteristics of Our People's War* and *Our Urgent Tasks*, the two policies had paid off

[7] Key works in the development of the strategy of the Philippine 'new left' include, chronologically, Jose Maria Sison's 'Struggle for National Democracy', a collection of speeches between 1964 and 1968; the Communist Party's 'reestablishment' document, 'Rectify Errors and Rebuild the Party' (1968); 'Philippine Society and Revolution' (1970), a brilliant reinterpretation of Philippine history by Amado Guerrero, said to be Sison's *nom de guerre*; Guerrero's 'Specific Characteristics of Our People's War' (1974); and the Communist Party's 'Our Urgent Tasks' (1976).

handsomely by the beginning of the 1980s. In 56 of the country's 72 provinces, an estimated 10,000 NPA regulars—some of them in company-sized units—kept Marcos' 250,000-man army stretched perilously thin. In the cities, skilful organising had created intersecting layers of illegal, semi-legal, and legal organisations among workers, students, certain professional sectors, and the Catholic clergy. The National Democratic Front (NDF), the preparatory commission of which was created in 1973, had become a major political reality by the end of the decade. Church sources estimated that, all in all, the NDF had 40,000 active organisers throughout the archipelago and a mass base of about six million Filipinos.

The emergence of the expanding NDF as the spearhead of the popular opposition to Marcos was a source of grave worry to the United States and the opposition elite. After a three-month investigation of political developments on the island of Mindanao, the Philippines' second largest, in early 1982, a US consul cabled the then Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, that in some areas, the NPA had become 'more important than the local government structure'. He concluded: 'This may sound like a worst case scenario but present circumstances are not encouraging and the future is ominous'[8]. The same concern was underlined by the Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia, Paul Wolfowitz, in testimony before Congress: '. . .[T]he growing challenge of the Communist New People's Army insurgency . . . if unchecked could ultimately threaten US military facilities.[9]

The challenge of the NDF elicited different reactions from the opposition elite. Former Senators Jose Diokno and Lorenzo Tanada, two leading figures who had longstanding credentials as nationalists, completed their break with elite politics by closely cooperating with organisations known to be sympathetic to the NDF. On the other hand, notables like former President Diosdado Macapagal and the Liberal Party President, Gerry Roxas, exhibited a reflexive anti-Communism and stridently promoted the view that 'Marcos is driving the country to the Communists' in their effort to persuade the Carter administration to abandon the dictator.

Aquino's stance was the most complex. He was, on the one hand, very sceptical of Diokno's tough nationalist stance, saying 'It will get us nowhere'. On the other hand, he was scornful of the anti-Communist

[8] Confidential airgram from G S Sheinbaum, US Consul, Cebu (Philippines) to Secretary of State Alexander Haig, Washington, 13 April 1982.
[9] Quoted in *Asia Record*, April 1983, p 2.

posture of many of his colleagues. 'I don't understand these people', he said in exasperation when he was in exile. 'We're all united in the objective of overthrowing Marcos. We have differences with the Communists, yes, but we'll worry about them when we're rid of Marcos'.

A populist politician, Ninoy had always prided himself as one who 'could work with the Communists'. Prior to martial law, Aquino was reported to have successfully worked out a *modus vivendi* with units of the New People's Army operating in Tarlac. While in prison, he called for the protection of the rights of José Maria Sison, the reputed chairman of the Communist Party, who was captured in 1977. An effort by Marcos to link Aquino to the top NPA leaders, Bernabe Buscayno and Victor Corpuz, in a murder rap failed because none of the three would say anything against the others. It was an experience which elicited mutual, if cautious, respect.

Aquino proposed a strategy of bringing the left into the electoral process in order to neutralise it. 'They must have the right to participate in elections and compete in the market place of ideas', he asserted. But he also warned, 'If they resort to violence after that, then that's a different story'.[10] It was the image of a man who could communicate with the left while successfully competing with it that Ninoy projected in order to secure American support.

The Frustrations of Exile

It was, however, a proposition that the US would not buy. While Jimmy Carter's State Department was initially critical of the repressive record of the Marcos regime, by 1979 the Democratic administration whose 'human rights policy' at first buoyed the hopes of the elite opposition had become reconciled with the Filipino strongman. It was a reconciliation born of the realisation that Marcos had so effectively decimated the power bases of the opposition elite that he had become the only effective bulwark against the left.

In return for secure tenure over the two huge military bases in the Philippines, Subic Naval Base and Clark Air Force Base, the US agreed to provide Marcos with $500 million in military and military-related aid. To soften the blow on the hopes of the elite opposition, however, the Carter administration pressed for the release of Aquino.

A perfect opportunity presented itself in May 1980, when it was

[10] Talk at Princeton University, Princeton, New Jersey, 20 February 1981.

discovered that Aquino needed to undergo triple-bypass heart surgery which could not be performed in the Philippines. For Carter, it was a face-saving gesture which he hoped would silence the critics who accused him of making the Philippines, like Iran, an exception to his human rights policy. For Marcos, the decision to release Aquino was a gamble worth taking: Aquino in exile might make waves for a while, but the dictator would be rid of the embarrassment of having a highly publicised and popular opponent in prison; once out of the country, Marcos estimated, Aquino would recede to the background.

It was a gamble that the cunning Marcos won. Aquino accepted the offer in the hope that he could more effectively lobby in Washington for an end to US support for Marcos. He banked on a long association with agencies like the CIA and the State Department. But by the time he reached the US, Ninoy found Washington on the defensive against the charge hurled by the resurgent right that it was the pressure for liberalisation from the US which had undermined the solidly pro-American regimes of the Shah of Iran and Somoza of Nicaragua.[11] He found, to his dismay, that the Carter administration was, in fact, attempting to coopt him into the Marcos order: Assistant Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke offered him the prime ministership of the country while Marcos would remain president. He angrily refused.[12]

Aquino then behaved exactly as Marcos predicted he would. He went on speaking tours of the US loudly criticising the regime. Then, in the summer of 1980, his followers in Manila participated in a series of bombings of government buildings and Marcos-linked establishments designed to scare Carter away from Marcos by creating an image of urban instability *à la* Iran. These moves provided the dictator with the perfect excuse for permanently banning Aquino from returning by refusing to guarantee either his personal freedom or personal safety.

It gradually dawned on Ninoy that in leaving the Philippines, he had allowed himself to be tactically outmanoeuvred once more by 'the evil genius'. Publicity tapered off a few months after he settled as a visiting fellow at Harvard University's Centre for International Affairs. And when the Reagan administration took office in January 1981, he realised that exile politics was a lost cause.

The new administration embraced Marcos with a vengeance, with

[11] Key works in the conservative attack were Jeane Kirkpatrick's 'Dictatorships and Double Standards', *Commentary*, July 1979, and Robert Tucker's 'America in Decline: the foreign policy of maturity', *Foreign Affairs*, Winter 1980–81.
[12] 'The Philippines: the more things change . . .', p 16.

Vice-President George Bush toasting the dictator in the following fashion: 'We love you, sir . . . we love your adherence to democratic rights and processes'. Bush's gushing remarks were paralleled by a doctrinal effort to make authoritarianism in the Third World respectable and finally to bury the obsolete ideology of missionary democracy after what was regarded as the destabilising attempt of the Carter administration to revive Kennedyite Alliance for Progress policies. The most able representative of the new right-wing thinking in foreign policy was the US Ambassador to the United Nations, Jeane Kirkpatrick who argued:

> . . . [T]he fabric of authority unravels quickly when the power and status of the man at the top are undermined or eliminated. The longer the autocrat has held power, and the more pervasive his personal influence, the more dependent a nation's institutions will be on him. Without him, the organized life of the society will collapse, like an arch from which the keystone has been removed.[13]

'Well, I guess their rhetoric has finally caught up with their practice', Aquino wryly commented after reading Kirkpatrick. Investigated by the FBI at the request of Marcos for allegedly 'exporting terrorism' and harassed by immigration officials whenever he returned from trips abroad, Aquino had had enough of exile. In mid-1981, Ninoy bade farewell to the opposition in exile, only to return—sheepishly—from Tokyo after failing to obtain a 'safe conduct' pass from Marcos. In early 1982, news of Marcos' deteriorating health made Aquino ebullient once more, even manic at times, as he predicted to one and all: '1982 is the year we shall all return to the Philippines'. But by the end of 1982, after Marcos had concluded a state visit to the US, Ninoy was still chafing in what he called 'our American prison'.

By mid-1983, Aquino's political future was in deep trouble. His prime role in the elite opposition was being steadily usurped by two figures: former Senator Jose Diokno and Mayor 'Nene' Pimental. While neither populist nor charismatic, Diokno had gained widespread prominence both internally and internationally for his firm nationalist stance, his unrelenting criticism of the regime, and, most of all, for his energetic defence of the rights of political prisoners. Pimental, a populist and charismatic politician in the Aquino mould, drew national attention when he successfully stopped Marcos' effort to oust him from his office as mayor of Cagayan de Oro City. In early 1983, Marcos unwittingly converted Pimentel into a national hero when he had the latter jailed for allegedly contributing assistance to the NPA.

[13] Kirkpatrick, *op. cit.*, p 37.

Aquino's concern about his political future, however, intersected with a larger worry: that the Filipino people's rapid movement toward the left was nearing the point of no return. His fears were reinforced by increasing coverage of the NPA in the American press which depicted the Philippine left as leading the only growing guerrilla insurgency in an otherwise quiescent Southeast Asia. The movement threatened to sweep away not only Marcos but the whole system of elite control to which Aquino as a ruling-class politician was fundamentally wedded.

He found himself, in fact, adapting to the growing popularity of the left's positions. When he first arrived in the US, for instance, he defended the US bases as necessary to 'protect the region against the Soviet Union'. But prior to his departure, he was reluctantly favouring their 'eventual withdrawal'. Until the end, however, he believed that the anti-imperialist position was misguided. 'You know', he asserted, 'we overestimate the impact of the US on the Philippines. We can manage the US by using the carrot and the stick. We can arrive at more equal terms with multinationals. What we need is more political will and less rhetoric'.

The film *Gandhi* had a strong impact on a political figure shorn of all weapons except courage. An act of non-violence, especially if it was covered by the Western press, would draw international and national attention to both himself and his political alternative to both Marcos and the NPA. By June 1983, Aquino had made up his mind. 'There is no turning back now', he grimly asserted, and in a dramatic farewell to the US Congress Subcommittee on Asia-Pacific Affairs, he stated that his mission was to 'press for two-man negotiations with Marcos for a return to constitutional democracy' before it was too late.

Aquino, of course, realised there were grave risks to his personal safety. But in figuring out Marcos' probable response as a rational politician, Aquino convinced himself that the dictator had only three options:

—He could simply refuse him entry into the country and send him back to the United States. In this event, Aquino would be awarded a great propaganda victory;

—He could jail Aquino again and resume the 'legal' proceedings to execute him. Not only would this return Aquino to centre-stage but the international publicity, as before, would make it politically impossible for Marcos to carry out his death threat;

—He could allow Aquino to enter the country freely, then wait for the appropriate opportunity to have him assassinated in a 'clean' fashion.

Ninoy figured, however, that the more time he had to move about freely, the more political and personal defences he could erect to ward off an assassination attempt.

For Aquino, the ideal scenario—which he felt he had a 50–50 chance of pulling off—was the last one. Immediately after arriving, he would then lead his followers waiting at the airport on a ten-mile march from the airport to the presidential palace in downtown Manila. ' "By the time we reach Malacanang [the palace], we will be 20,000 strong" he mused prior to his departure from the United States'.[14] It was a scene right out of *Gandhi*.

The Irrational Takes Hold

It was Aquino's third major miscalculation in his battle with Marcos, and this time it was fatal. Ninoy's mistake lay in judging Marcos as a rational politician with a reasonable degree of control over developments. By August 1983, neither of these conditions held.

Things were slipping from the control of a dictator wracked by disease. The most serious manifestation of this situation was a bitter struggle for the succession to the throne between two powerful factions of the Marcos coalition. A palace clique led by Imelda Marcos, the president's powerful wife, and the Armed Forces Chief of Staff, Fabian Ver, confronted a group headed by the Defence Minister, Juan Ponce Enrile, and Eduardo Conjuangco, who also happened to be the first cousin of Aquino's wife, Cory. The two sides were roughly matched in terms of firepower and followings within and without the military.[15]

Aquino's coming threatened to upset the rough equilibrium established between the two groups. For while Ninoy's grassroots political machine might have been dismantled by the regime, the latter retained a healthy respect for his ability to mobilise people through his populist charisma. Aquino, in short, could act as a 'wild card' in the succession process, and tip the balance against the Imelda-Ver faction, to which the dictator inclined.

Aquino also erred in overestimating the extent to which Marcos would use rational political calculus to figure out his response to his rival's arrival. Close observers of Marcos have remarked that the few times that the dictator—the apotheosis of the calculating Machiavellian

[14] Interview with Joel Rocamora, associate of the Southeast Asia Resource Center, 4 August 1983.
[15] For the implications of this struggle on the assassination, see Alfred McCoy, 'A Political Death in Imelda's Territory', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 August 1983.

politician—has 'lost his cool' while making political judgments have been in matters involving bitter personal enemies.

Ninoy was not just a bitter personal and political foe. He was the great nemesis himself. This man was defying what the dictator regarded as an implicit agreement when he released Aquino in 1980: that the latter could not expect to be allowed back in if he criticised Marcos abroad. Moreover, Ninoy was coming home, in perfect health, while he was edging toward the grave. In a turbulent post-Marcos succession crisis, this hated foe could still come out on top and claim the empire he had built up over 17 years!

It was most likely this dangerous intersection of bitter personal and political enmity and the volatile succession crisis which pushed Marcos over the edge and led him to order the assassination of Aquino—a conclusion to which most Filipinos, who know how tightly the dictator controls decisions big and small, have come.

The Middle Class Upsurge

But it was a case of Aquino losing the battle—and his life—but winning the war. For the unbelievable execution on the tarmac of the Manila International Airport was the spark which set off the social tinderbox that was urban Manila. What the murder did was to push the cities' large white collar and bureaucratic middle strata as well as their business elites into active opposition to the regime.

To grasp the full significance of this development, one must realise that ever since the beginning of martial law, the regime had assiduously cultivated the middle class as a support base. Marcos' projection of strong authority to dispel the 'chaos' and 'lawlessness' of the 'old society' was meant to appeal to one side of this traditionally volatile class: its yearning for political and economic stability. Prior to martial law, the idea of a man on horseback 'disciplining an undisciplined people' had circulated widely in this class and, curiously, coexisted with the antithetical yearning for a real democratisation of the society. To douse middle class concern over the loss of political rights, Marcos asserted that economic prosperity was contingent on the temporary suspension of these rights, the 'abusive' exercise of which had led to the 'democratic stalemate'.

It was in order to keep the rural middle strata on his side that Marcos stopped the land reform programme in 1974 when land reform agents met great resistance from the schoolteachers, clerks, retired officers, and small merchants who constituted the overwhelming mass of

medium landowners.[16] The urban middle class, on the other hand, was assured that opportunities for social mobility would be opened up by an economic development programme based on the attraction of massive amounts of foreign capital. Middle-class prosperity was the promise of what Marcos' PR men called 'the Revolution from the Centre'.

It was a formula that worked . . . for a while. Though suspicious of Marcos and resentful of the extravagant ways of Imelda, the middle class was nevertheless neutralised and rendered quiescent by policies which sustained economic growth at 6 per cent a year while keeping inflation—the great scourge of middle class psychology—within tolerable limits. It was the Brazilian model of depoliticisation: so long as the middle strata felt that their living standards were rising, they would turn a blind eye to the fall in living standards among the peasantry, labour, and the urban poor.

The collapse, beginning in 1979, of the export-oriented, foreign capital-dependent economic strategy from a combination of external recession, mismanagement and corruption, and growing resistance from the victims of development, triggered the alienation of the middle strata, whose ranks were hit hard by rising unemployment and whose pocketbooks were worn thin by inflationary pressures resulting from World Bank/IMF-imposed devaluations of the *peso*.

The bitterness created by the gap between the promise and the dismal consequences of the 'Revolution from the Centre' was expressed in this fashion by one middle-class intellectual who apparently had believed the earlier rhetoric:

> Marcos launched a revolution from the center. If it was indeed a revolution from the center, it would have survived. It would have brought a lot of people from below to the middle class. There would have been this broad belt of stakeholders in the new society which would have been its impregnable defense mechanism. This didn't happen. *Anong lumitaw?* [What emerged?] The new oligarchs. So it would appear that the revolution sold out to the Commies.[17]

It was a process of disillusionment that heartened Aquino, whose hopes of coming to power someday were bound up with support from the urban middle groups. 'The trade-off (between the loss of political liberties and economic development) no longer works', he asserted. 'Now, you have both political repression and economic depression'.[18]

[16] This is the conclusion of 'Agrarian Reform in the Philippines', a summary of the discussions in a seminar on the Marcos agrarian reform sponsored by the US Agency for International Development in Washington, DC in December 1977. See especially pp 12, 13.

[17] Jose Romero, member of the executive committee of the Makati Business Club (MBC), quoted in *Who Magazine* (Manila), 2 November 1983.

[18] Talk at Yale University, Connecticut, 10 May 1983.

On another occasion, he declared: 'Economics is Marcos' Achilles Heel'.[19]

Aquino was also elated by another development: the alienation of the national capitalist class from Marcos. In the early years of martial law, the dictator had tried to keep these national entrepreneurs who enjoyed the privileges of a protected internal market on his side by resisting World Bank/IMF pressure to bring down tariff walls. When the multilateral agencies issued the ultimatum to deprotectionise in 1979, however, Marcos complied, forcing the national entrepreneurs into opposition. A World Bank report candidly painted the situation into which it had forced its client:

[T]he elimination of protective tariffs and special subsidies has led to great dissatisfaction within the industries targeted for 'streamlining.' Therefore, in the Philippines, where the additional element of strongly perceived favoritism to Marcos' personal friends has created considerable resentment, the local business community has several reinforcing reasons to try to undermine the policy directives of the current government.[20]

It was the 'strongly perceived favoritism to personal friends' that prompted two other sectors of Manila's business class to join the national entrepreneurs threatened by the elimination of protectionism: the traditional local financial elite, which had tight links to the US financial world, and key American foreign investors.

Initially supportive of Marcos for establishing a 'sound business climate' in the early 1970s, the local financial elite and foreign investors began to worry when Marcos' cronies were able to secure control of key industries, like sugar, coconut, construction, and energy. The rapid expansion of these conglomerates was fuelled by the contraction of foreign and domestic credit. When this hothouse borrowing created a major financial crisis in 1981, Marcos' severely indebted friends were left high and dry and bankrupt, provoking a sigh of relief among their business rivals.

Marcos, however, would not allow his cronies to die. He persuaded the World Bank and the IMF, which now had the last word on foreign credit to the heavily indebted regime, to allow the establishment of a US$600 million 'rescue fund' for his cronies, then promptly overshot the level of financing agreed upon with the two institutions. The rescue scandal shattered whatever confidence was left among the financial elite and foreign investors.

[19] Quoted in Robin Broad, 'Philippine Crisis Leaves Investors Wary', *Multinational Monitor*, November 1983, p 6.

[20] World Bank, *op. cit.*, p 8.

'The Philippines will never solve its economic problems,' a prominent member of the financial elite with close ties to foreign capital warned the regime publicly, 'unless the administration demonstrates in unequivocal terms that it is prepared to abandon its failed policy of favoritism and to start dealing a fresh deck and an even hand'.[21] Reflecting foreign investors' disillusionment with the regime, one of the leading 'political risk analysis' firms serving multinational corporations warned its clients against making 'any long-term commitments in the Philippines'.[22] In the meantime, the big US private banks which held the bulk of the country's $22 billion debt drastically scaled down their loan programmes out of fear that instability, unbridled corruption, and economic stagnation had made the Philippines a major credit risk.

The US Examines Its Options

Aquino hoped to bring about a middle-class/business alliance to set against the National Democratic Front's influence among the peasantry, workers, urban poor, religious clergy, students and selected professional sectors like teachers and health workers. And it was, in fact, such a force that came spontaneously and suddenly into being after his assassination.

The post-Aquino ferment has been produced by the confluence of two movements: the spontaneous surge of the newly politicised white-collar and bureaucratic middle sectors and the 'conscious' response of the organised sections of the student population, lower clergy, selected professional strata, and the urban poor. While the NDF provides the political leadership for the latter groups, which have been the targets of its urban organising work for over a decade, the ideological and political direction of the middle-class movement continues to rest, if unsteadily, with the elite oppositionists grouped in UNIDO (United Democratic Opposition), centre forces in the Church hierarchy led by the outspoken Archbishop of Manila, Cardinal Jaime Sin, and the local financial elite dominated by the billionaire banker, Enrique Zobel. The two movements even have their two distinct geographical headquarters. Demonstrations 'uptown', in the plush Makati financial district of Manila, are invariably led by the financial elite and traditional elite politicians, while mass actions 'downtown', at the Manila Post Office and other more popular sites, are usually mobilised or strongly influenced by NDF forces.

[21] Jaime Ongpin, Letter to the Editor, *Fortune*, 24 August 1981.
[22] BERI, S A, 'Force 83 Report on the Philippines', New York, 15 March 1983, p 2.

Linking the two movements are Cory Aquino, the slain senator's wife, and two nationalist figures who have broken with elite politics but continue to enjoy enormous prestige with their former colleagues, former Senators Diokno and Tanada. It is an uneasy coalition: on a number of occasions, the business executives have sponsored demonstrations with pro-US slogans to differentiate their politics from that of the radicals. The left, on the other hand, has teamed up with Tanada and other 'bourgeois personalities' to set up the National Alliance for Justice, Freedom and Democracy which seeks 'the dismantling of the US-Marcos dictatorship ... and the establishment of a coalition government based on a truly democratic and representative system'.[23] But the NDF has also issued strong warnings against attempts by the US to split the movement.

There is a third actor, whose movement will probably be the decisive element in the urban ferment. Between these two relatively 'conscious' and organised forces lies the majority of Manila's vast urban mass—the struggling lower middle-class sectors of clerks, small stall-owners, small transport-operators; unorganised workers; and unorganised residents of the city's expanding shantytowns. This great 'mobilisable' mass, which formed the bulk of the five million marchers and mourners at Aquino's funeral in late August, is deeply anti-Marcos but continues to await the 'political formula' which can move it into decisive and sustained street protest. It is the base for which the upper-middle class opposition and the National Democratic Front are now quietly competing while preserving the broad unity against the dictatorship. This is a struggle that the NDF, with its class-based programme and eleven-year organising experience appears to be confident of winning. But sharp competition there is and will be, if we are to take the word of one energetic middle-class leader:

> What's happening in Ayala [site of many demonstrations]? These are the managers at work. They were the radicals of the 1970s who are now putting on a coat and tie but who still aspire for a better life. This is the revolution from the center. Yet these managers are found not only in Makati [the business district] but in the government bureaucracy. Note that movements like JAJA, ATOM, and other groups are led by managers. You see management and corporate tactics at work where you can mount 20,000, 30,000, a million funeral cortege. That's a reflection of the management behind the protest movement. That is the leadership of the opposition.[24]

The US has not been a disinterested observer of this process. Initially

[23] Nationalist Alliance for Justice, Freedom, and Democracy, 'Primer,' Manila, 5 November 1983.
[24] Jose Romero, member of the executive committee of the Makati Business Club, quoted in *Who Magazine*, 2 November 1983.

taken aback by the rapid political deflation of an erstwhile ally, the US foreign policy establishment has been actively debating the preferred 'scenario' for a post-Marcos transition. In 1982, even before the Aquino assassination, the Central Intelligence Agency had recruited Philippine academic specialists to elaborate on possible alternatives to Marcos. The CIA effort was expanded into an 'inter-agency' venture after the assassination, with CIA, State Department, Pentagon, and congressional officials participating in a flurry of marathon meetings on the 'Marcos problem'.

The internal debate hit the press on 3 October, the same day President Reagan decided to cancel a November visit to Manila. In an opinion piece in the *New York Times*, the former US Ambassador to the Philippines and CIA officer William Sullivan recommended that the US 'take action, however messy, to assist a peaceful and democratic transition in the Philippines'.[25] The *Wall Street Journal* attacked the Sullivan line saying, 'Not only does Mr. Marcos have enemies worth fighting; he is waging his fight with a skill that gives us little reason, now at least, to count him out'.[26]

The Sullivan proposal, which is said to be favoured by professionals at the middle levels of the CIA and State Department, received a great boost when the US House of Representatives passed a resolution, by a resounding 413 to 3 votes, calling for a 'thorough, independent, and impartial investigation of the Aquino assassination' and 'genuine, free, and fair elections' to the National Assembly in May 1984.

In the debate on the resolution, Representative Steven Solarz, author of the resolution, bluntly stated the anti-leftist objective of the 'constitutional democratic option':

> I think that these [May 1984] elections may well constitute a historic watershed in the history of the Philippines. At a time when there is growing support in the country for the Communist-dominated New People's Army . . . this may well be the last opportunity to demonstrate to the Filipino people that peaceful change is possible in their country.[27]

By mid-October, another force of immense consequence threw itself behind the electoral alternative: Marcos' major international creditors, who were worried that the massive flight of capital triggered by the Aquino assassination, which had reduced foreign exchange reserves from $2 billion to $435 million—less than the equivalent of one month's imports—in two and a half months' time, had damaged the regime's

[25] *New York Times*, 3 October 1983.
[26] *Wall Street Journal*, editorial, 6 October 1983
[27] *Congressional Record*, 24 October 1983, p H8566.

ability to repay its now burgeoning $24.9 billion debt. Political reform, a consortium of the Philippines' biggest creditors told the regime's representatives in New York, had become an essential condition for the restoration of a good business climate, and they refused to grant more loans until 'political changes' took place.[28] In Manila, the American Chamber of Commerce, which had been among the first to congratulate Marcos for imposing martial law eleven years earlier, now joined other business bodies to demand 'political reforms, restoration of democratic rights, and an end to pervasive militarisation'.[29]

From the standpoint of its proponents, the 'peaceful electoral option' provides a chance for the US to clothe itself with the mantle of Aquino in order to split the opposition and isolate the National Democratic Front. The urban middle strata would provide the base of a government legitimised by 'free elections'. In the opinion of some State Department and CIA officials, because of the weakness of the traditional elite opposition, the 'professional sectors' of the officer corps would have to be drawn in to serve as a prop of the government, as would the current group of technocrats who continue to enjoy the confidence of the international banking community and whose presence would serve as a guarantee that the country's enormous debt would be repaid.[30]

There are, however, several formidable obstacles to this scenario.

One is the White House itself. Reagan and his trusted advisers are known to make foreign policy from their 'hip pocket', ignoring or going against the advice of the professionals and experts at the CIA and the State Department. The policies of the White House toward the Third World continue to be characterised by reflex anti-Communism, by a strong preference for strongman repressive allies, and by a belief that liberalisation is the ante-chamber to revolution. The conviction is strong in this circle that elite democratic systems are obsolete as mechanisms of pro-US social stabilisation and that it was precisely Carter's pressure for liberalisation which undermined both the Shah and Somoza. And, at a time when the administration has fundamentally redefined US foreign

[28] 'Bankers Say Marcos Must Move', *New York Times*, 29 October 1983.

[29] 'Marcos Blames Businessmen for Economic Crisis', *Washington Post*, 11 November 1983.

[30] Almost all consultants or participants we talked to who have been attending the 'interagency discussions' on 'post-Marcos scenarios' emphasise the stress placed by US policymakers on the role of the military professionals and the technocrats as 'stabilisers' in the 'transition'. If General Ramos is the Pentagon's preferred man in the Philippine military, Prime Minister Cesar Virata is the bankers' favourite in the technocracy. Virata has already distanced himself from Marcos by saying in public that he does not 'rule out' the possibility that people high in the government were responsible for the assassination, and by his publicly expressed opposition to Marcos' threat to reimpose martial law following the late September demonstrations in Manila.

policy from merely containing national liberation forces to 'rolling them back' from states where they have come to power (like Grenada), it is unlikely, say some observers, that the administration would prove sympathetic to an exercise which might bring the left closer to power.

Another key obstacle is Marcos himself. Supporters of the electoral option are hoping for an early demise—from natural causes—of the dictator, for they realise, as one specialist puts it, 'there is no way Marcos will go except in a coffin'. While they see the dictator playing a 'stabilising role' in bringing the country to the May 1984 National Assembly elections, his presence in any 'arrangement' thereafter would only discredit it.

A third complicating factor is the likely resistance to any 'peaceful transition' from the Marcos base—the army, cronies, and local and regional satraps grouped together in the New Society Party (KBL). With or without Marcos, this sector will demand strong guarantees for the privileges and positions which it has acquired through fraud and force.

Sizeable numbers of Marcos loyalists see as their insurance policy a post-Marcos government led by the Army Chief of Staff, Fabian Ver, who now doubles as chief of Marcos' praetorian guard, and the First Lady, Imelda Marcos, the first providing the repressive muscle, the second the political base. Since Ver and Imelda are extremely unpopular, this possibility is a nightmare which some US planners are determined to prevent.

Ver is seen as a 'political', as opposed to a 'professional officer'—that is, one who made it to the top through connections to the First Family and whose position is dependent on a network of similar political appointees to key military positions. US hopes of controlling the army are based on the discontented professionals, represented by the Vice-Chief of Staff Fidel Ramos, who have had traditionally close ties with the Pentagon through US-sponsored military training programmes and education at US military schools. A great many of the professionals are captains and colonels commanding units in the field who are doing the actual fighting against the NPA, while the 'politicals' are either in comfortable general staff positions or connected to urban-based units charged with protecting the dictator. 'If Marcos dies and Ver moves, the professionals won't leave the barracks if the Americans say so', says a consultant to the Defence Department, reflecting the Pentagon's belief that without Marcos, the professionals would gravitate toward direction

from the US, which provides the military aid which keeps the counterinsurgency machinery working.

A fourth problem in the electoral scenario is the state of the elite opposition. Not only has this sector been severely weakened by Marcos' effective work of demolishing their grassroots political machinery, but, with the loss of Aquino, they are without a credible unifying figure. Former Assemblyman Salvador Laurel, the head of UNIDO, is discredited by a past of corruption and opportunism. Mayor Nene Pimentel of Cagayan de Oro City is an attractive populist figure, but one unlikely to be accepted by the older, entrenched elite politicians, at least for the time being. The man who approaches Aquino's stature, former Senator Diokno, is one who has repudiated old-style politics and refuses to cut any deal with the Americans. Moreover, the elite opposition realises that to be seen making a deal with *any* faction of the Marcos coalition—including the 'cleaner sectors' like the military professionals and the technocrats, whom the Americans find indispensable in a post-Marcos tradition—would be the kiss of death in the mass movement.

Economics is the fifth major obstacle to the parliamentary democratic option. Economics, to paraphrase Aquino, is the Achilles heel not only of Marcos but of any would-be successor government. There is no way any US-supported regime can avoid making the regular payments on principal and interest on the massive external debt contracted by the regime, which is estimated to hit $26 billion by the end of 1983. Some calculate that these payments now come to $3 billion a year.

In the aftermath of the Aquino assassination, the government suspended principal payments for three months beginning in late October 1983 and is now in the process of concluding a standby agreement with the International Monetary Fund which would provide it with $650 million to pay off arrears to the private banks and cover the costs of necessary imports. Future private loans, which are necessary to keep the regime from declaring bankruptcy, have been made contingent on the application of the severe austerity measures—cutbacks on imports, big reductions in government spending, heavier taxes, wage cuts—which go with IMF 'stabilisation' programmes.

The banks have, in fact, thrown themselves behind the electoral option out of fear that the regime has lost the legitimacy necessary to impose austerity successfully. In other words, to succeed, austerity must be 'democratised', or applied by a government with some legitimacy derived from elections. There is no easier way, however, to erode the

legitimacy of a parliamentary government, even among the middle classes, than for it to act as a collection agent for the IMF and the private banks. This is a dilemma which haunts would-be parliamentary successors to dictatorships not only in the Philippines, but also in Brazil, Argentina, and Chile.

In his more lucid moments, Aquino could presciently sketch the grim scenario for a post-Marcos parliamentary government:

> Look, you have a situation when Marcos falls, you come in, the communists back off, and people expect you to make miracles. How do I put back three million jobs? How do I bring down the price of gasoline, for Pete's sake . . . So the people will say, 'Jesus Christ, you're the guy we waited eight years for? You're even worse! . . . The thing I can say is, the first guy that will come in will be blown out in six months. Then a second guy will come in and he'll be blown out in six months.[31]

The Turbulent Future

The immediate future then holds out the dismal prospect of a series of unstable US-supported governments—authoritarian or parliamentary—composed of changeable sets of officers, technocrats, and elite democrats, each unsuccessfully attempting to stop the historic momentum of the Philippine polity toward the left.

Hungry for power after eleven years of deprivation, some sectors of the elite opposition are only too likely to walk into the parliamentary trap. Only one actor in the Philippine political drama fully comprehends the unfolding scenario—the National Democratic Front (NDF), the political force which both Marcos and Aquino regarded as the strategic threat but attempted to deal with in radically different ways.

The NDF has stated that it is not willing to be drawn into a premature bid to seize state power at this point. The lessons of the disastrous strategy of 'swift armed uprising' adopted by the old left in the 1950s are much too deeply ingrained. Despite the migration to the cities, its spokepersons have reiterated that the dynamics of the armed struggle in the countryside, where 60 per cent of the population live, will continue to be the principal determinant of the decision on when to make the definitive drive for state power. That will wait until the movement has achieved the political following and military power—the 'critical mass'—to pass on to what NPA strategists call 'the strategic offensive'—a phase characterised by a final massive campaign conducted by large regular NPA units to destroy the Philippine military on the rural battlefield, coordinated with uprisings in Manila and other urban

[31] 'The Philippines: the more things change . . .', p 16.

centres. Liberation Day *à la* 1975 in Vietnam is a few years down the road, say the leaders of a movement which has attained a reputation of carefully calibrating its advances to its actual strength.

And it will be at that point that the United States, having failed to stabilise the social situation, with either the formal democratic mechanism or the authoritarian solution, will have to confront once more the issue of whether or not to openly intervene with troops to destroy another national liberation movement in Southeast Asia.