

# Change and Continuity in Philippine Politics : The Post-Marcos Era\*

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THE demise of Marcos' dictatorship has been a watershed event in Philippine history. Most observers of the Philippine scene and knowledgeable commentators agree that the real momentum that swept away the Marcos dictatorship was provided by the unified and collective action of the Filipino people. Mrs. Corazon Aquino is the new President, but she effectively heads a coalition government comprising of parties and elements who were long identified as Marcos loyalists. The role of the Philippine Armed Forces and that of the Catholic Church in the events are significant developments that are bound to have ramifications on the future course of Philippine politics. As the new government is still picking up the pieces, the revelation is slowly dawning on the Filipinos that there is nothing 'revolutionary' about the historic change that has taken place.

## A PATCHWORK ALLIANCE

The Aquino administration is a patchwork of disparate groupings, ranging from the military and erstwhile political allies of Marcos to liberal anti-

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authoritarian forces. It is to be admitted, however, that the present administration is not under the domination of one man or a clique. Power is now relatively decentralised and is shared by competing sections of the elite, who are brought together by the exigencies of the pre-Marcos political situation. The basic incompatibility could be prepared over in the first few months of the Aquino Presidency. Now the fissures are widening and the various sections, chiefly the military blocs, are openly flexing their muscles. For the time being, Mrs. Aquino by virtue of the popular mandate she got is 'primus inter pares'.

The total dismantling of the machinery left behind by the ousted Marcos dictatorship will take a long time, and its legacy will continue to haunt the new government for the foreseeable future. The economy is in the shambles. Inflation and unemployment are at an all-time high. The issue of the 'American bases' simmer still and progressive opposition organisations which played a crucial part in the overthrow of Marcos now find themselves out in the political wilderness. All the same, the new developments have given the Filipino people an opportunity to once again take their destiny into their own hands. The people were in the process of getting rid of the hated dictatorship on their own, till the precipitate intervention of the military at the behest of the US administration. 'People power' may soon become a reality when the contradictions become more acute in the coming days.

#### THE ARMY AND THE CHURCH

The military establishment and the 'institutional' church have come out with a refurbished image in the wake of the political upheaval. The conservative moorings of both are well known. The army has already been rewarded and Jaime Cardinal Sin, the Catholic primate of the Philippines, has emerged as the political mentor of the new President. The Church hierarchy for the most part of Marcos' twenty year rule was sitting on the fence, while the young clergy had become effective allies of the left in the underground war. The Church, with its belated intervention on the side of the Parliamentary opposition, is seeking once again to play an influential role in national politics. Whether they will be able to arrest the drift to the left in Philippine politics is a debatable question. As Fr. Antonio Ambino, a spokesman for the Catholic Church hierarchy, said: 'Cory (Aquino) can mobilise people without the National Democratic Front. A victory for her would delay the momentum of the revolutionary movement, for there will be new hope injected in the people.'<sup>1</sup>

The Church hierarchy has a lot at stake. The fate of the establishment Church in Nicaragua is a lesson from which the Vatican has drawn its conclusions.

The army under the leadership of the long-serving Defence Secretary, Juan Ponce Enrille, and the new Chief of Staff, Gen. Fidel Ramos, is now

a key actor in the politics of the country. The purging of a few top Marcos loyalists in the armed forces has been welcomed by many, but the retention and elevation of others whose records have been sullied, has not been liked by many supporters of the Aquino candidacy. The army's image needed a polish. Many doubt that Enrille and Ramos are the right people to do this. The American media sees in Ramos a potential 'knight in shining armour'. His past has not been very re-assuring. He has been in command of the Philippine Armed Constabulary whose notorious excesses have not exactly endeared them to the rural populace. The name of the Chief of Staff himself has been linked with the killing of 27 civilians on the island of Negros in September 1985. The army is trying to maintain a high profile in the new government and it has been emboldened by the fact that it was instrumental in hastening the demise of the Marcos dictatorship. An officer corps comprising of young army officers is meanwhile acting as a pressure group under the umbrella of the Reform Armed Forces Group. At this juncture civilian control over the armed forces is minimal. One of the first priorities of the Aquino administration is to try and clip the wings of potential 'putschists' in the army.

The military is still a compact group, the four-day upheaval in February which led to the shifting of military loyalty to Aquino, had only superficially split the army. Most of the officers purged have been those who should have been superannuated a long time ago. Compulsory retirements and appointments in the military, with a few exceptions, are the prerogative of the Chief of Staff, Fidel Ramos, and the Defence Secretary, Juan Ponce Enrille. The purge in the civilian administration, from all available indications is much more thorough and widespread as the government wants to replace the Marcos die-hards in the non-urban areas and assume control over the entire government machinery outside Manila.

#### MASS MEDIA SHOWS DYNAMISM

The mass media, which was once the most vocal in the whole of Asia is once again showing signs of dynamism. The 'crony' press, which flourished under the dispensation of Marcos during the martial law interregnum, is in the process of being dismantled. After the 1983 Aquino assassination, a few Filipino journalists once again exercised their prerogative to attack and expose the government. The Marcos government had again responded with a heavy hand and had temporarily banned opposition newspapers like '*We Forum*' and '*Malaya*'. The February 7 election was important for press and television freedom. In fact, they played a crucial role in monitoring the elections and the consequent exposure of fraud. The role of television was even more dramatic as it provided the Filipinos and the outside world the blow-by-blow account of the tumultuous events. Antonio Nieva, editor of *Bulletin Today*, had said in 1981, after Martial Law was lifted: 'I feel that many newspapermen are working under a trauma. The

lack of press freedom has made many of us, who have worked all these years under a martial law, inclined to censor ourselves automatically.<sup>2</sup> The performance of the press before and after the elections is evidence enough that the Philippine press is back in business and may even play a 'watchdog' role in the politics of the country.

The Information Minister, Teodoro Locsin, has said that the government does not 'intend to have a monopoly over a mass communication in the country'. Though the government has divested the control of Marcos family and crony members out of the proprietorship of influential newspapers and TV stations, it has taken pains to emphasize that the sequestered media will be up for sale again.

## OVERVIEW

To get a better insight into the post-Marcos political set-up, a short overview of recent Philippine history may be in order. The Philippines had opted for a political system closely patterned after the United States two party electoral system. The unabashed quest for political power by the Filipino elite reduced the system into a farce. The infighting for the spoils of office and patronage made a mockery of Parliamentary democracy. The two established parties, the Nacionalistas and the Liberals, were convenient vehicles for the elite politicians to capture and retain power. The *Illustrado* Class, whose members were dominant in both the parties, successfully manipulated politics to secure an absolute stranglehold on power. There was constant changing of political labels by disgruntled and ambitious politicians from 1945 to 1972. The two parties were in and out of power. Most of the leading politicians were in both the parties at one time or the other. Marcos, Salvadore Laurel, the late Benigno Aquino and Juan Ponce Enrille are some prominent examples.<sup>3</sup>

Presidents were constitutionally restricted to two four year terms till Ferdinand Marcos came on the scene. The ambitious Marcos with his second four year term coming to an end, changed the rules of the game with tacit American approval.<sup>4</sup> The declaration of 'Martial Law' in 1972, put 'elite democracy' in the freezer for more than a decade. Even after martial law was lifted in 1981 and a rubber stamp parliament constituted, effective power lay in the hands of Marcos and his cronies. Some sections of Filipinos, even progressive ones, had initially welcomed the imposition of martial law and the suspension of the old fashioned democracy of the first republic. The most notable political organisation was the Communist Party of the Philippines (PKP) (the old anti-Maoist group) under the leadership of Jesus Lava. Sections of the middle class were impressed by the momentary restoration 'of law and order' and were under the misguided notion that the suspension of electoral politics meant the end of endemic violence which would in turn lead to a more hospitable economic climate, both for local as well as international entrepreneurs.

Sections of the left were taken in by the rhetoric of Marcos the politician. A few months after the imposition of martial law, the old Communist Party committed a major tactical error by lauding the progressive characteristics of martial law, which according to the theoreticians of the PKP included 'land reforms, distancing from American imperialism, mixed economy, commitment to the New International Economic order and the ASEAN a zone of peace in the ASEAN region'.<sup>5</sup> Besides, the PKP supremo Jesus Lava, pointed out that the thrust of the Martial Law was against Maoists, clerico-fascists and CIA politicians like Benigno Aquino.<sup>6</sup> Whatever credibility the PKP was left with vanished after its 'political settlement' with Marcos in 1974, which led to the surrender of a few members and an assortment of arms. The old communist party leadership was in the vanguard of a guerrilla struggle which peaked in 1954. The struggle, which was essentially an agrarian uprising against the feudal land tenure system and economic injustice, was one of the more serious attempts in Southeast Asia to dislodge imperialism. But tactical errors by the communist leadership, compounded by the fact that the struggle was confined to central Luzon, doomed the revolutionary effort.

The massive US military involvement in crushing the Huks was a precursor to American military involvement elsewhere in Asia.<sup>7</sup>

#### IMPRESSIVE GROWTH OF CPP

The withering away of the old communist party strengthened the breakaway Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its underground military wing, the New People's Army. Though initially influenced by the Maoists and the Cultural Revolution, it has matured into a non-sectarian party waging a struggle on two fronts—the underground as well as the open democratic fronts in alliance with left and non-communist parties. Most observers agree that the growth of the CPP and the New Peoples Army has been impressive. Its Youth wing, the *Kabatang Makabayan* (Patriotic Youth) founded on 30 November 1964 was the major recruiting ground for NPA cadre. This youth organisation was in the thick of the struggle in the final days of the overthrow of the Marcos dictatorship.

The founding of the *Kabatang Makabayan* is an important milestone in the post-war politics of the Philippines. Some revisionist historians even trace the beginning of the Second Propaganda Movement from 1964. The First Propaganda Movement was launched in late 19th century by Filipino exiles and culminated in the revolution of 1896, which resulted in the overthrow of Spanish colonialism. The thrust of the movement was against the overt symbols of American imperialism. One of the founder-members Jose Maria Sison, said: 'In the field of national security, we demand the abolition of the country's dependence on foreign military bases and dictation. We base our concept of national security on the sovereign democratic power of the masses. If they can succeed in freeing themselves from

US imperialist control and from their local exploiters, it will be impossible for another foreign power to subject them to another successful aggression.<sup>8</sup>

The CPP had identified US imperialism, feudalism and bureaucrat capitalism as the basic problems of the Filipino people. The goal of the CPP and its allies was a 'national democratic revolution', while following the broad based strategy of a people's war.<sup>9</sup> Its broad united front, the National Democratic Front (NDF), celebrated its fifteenth anniversary on April 24, and it is already a significant force in Philippine politics with a membership of more than 1 million. Though it boycotted the recent Marcos instituted elections, some of its prominent members like Lorenzo Tanada and Jovito Salango were actively associated with Cory Aquino's historical campaign to dislodge the Marcos dictatorship. Some observers of the Philippines seem to feel that the lukewarm response by the electorate to the boycott call by the left is indicative of the party's limited impact on national politics. But there is evidence that CPP cadres and NDF supporters indirectly helped the Aquino ticket by ensuring that there was no rigging and violence in areas where they had influence.

Speaking about the elections, just before Marcos fled to Honolulu, CPP politburo member Antonio Zumel explained the party's position on the subject. He said: 'The election was intended by the US government and the Marcos dictatorship to attain some degree of stability in the system. Perhaps this was more so in the case of the US than it was for Marcos. They want stability under fascist rule. They probably felt that by calling the elections they could attract the so-called moderate opposition into confining their struggles against Marcos to the electoral arena exclusively.'<sup>10</sup> The party would have liked to see the intensification of the struggle in the streets and civil disobedience, which Mrs. Aquino had started in the aftermath of the fraudulent elections. The assumption of power by Mrs. Aquino, in tandem with Laurel, Enrile and Ramos, seems to have upset their political arithmetic for the time being. But in a way, the outcome justifies their analysis. The CPP had maintained that Washington's current objective is to get the Marcos and Aquino forces to come to some sort of an accommodation.

Crucial cabinet positions are in the hands of ambitious people, who were Marcos loyalists almost to the last days. However, the CPP, for the time being is adopting a cautious attitude of wait and see. The general acceptance by the powerful Catholic Church establishment of the extra-legal forms of struggle has been viewed favourably by the left. It will be all the more difficult for the Church hierarchy and the government of the day to condemn outright 'civil disobedience movements' and mass demonstrations. The NDF had mastered the art of mobilising thousands of street demonstrations in urban areas all over the Philippines.

There will be no dearth of issues in the coming months and years, around which the Filipinos can be mobilised, the most volatile one being the question of American 'bases'. The new administration, in fact, has been very ambivalent on this issue. The CPP and the NPA seem to be in no great hurry. As Satur Ocampo, a leading theoretician of the CPP said recently: 'I cannot altogether deny the fact that the Marcos dictatorship, its ways of dealing with the people through the use of armed forces, deception, fans the revolutionary fire, and that provide fertile ground for the recruitment of the NPA and the CPP. But then it is not correct to say that the CPP and the NPA anchor its growth and the possibility of success on the continuance of the Marcos dictatorship'.<sup>11</sup> At this juncture the CPP and its allies are more concerned about strengthening the peoples' capacity to defend themselves and to cope with the economic crisis.

The vanguard role these organisations played in the struggle to oust the discredited Marcos regime was viewed with alarm by the Reagan administration. This is one of the reasons why some of the influential advisors of President Reagan seriously believed that the communists were the only alternative to the Marcos regime. The communists themselves were under no such illusion. Their effort at present is to make political conditions favourable for a coalition government that would include sections that have been hitherto denied a share in power.

#### US AIMS DURING THE MARCOS PERIOD

The US policy on the Philippines has been consistently aimed at preserving the political status quo since political independence was bestowed on the Philippines in 1945. Power was transferred to an 'elite' whose subservience to US interests has been unmatched elsewhere in Asia. Parallels can be only drawn with countries in Latin America. The farce of elite two-party democracy ended with the imposition of martial law on September 21, 1972.

The popular disillusionment with the elite rule manifested itself in several ways. The main targets of popular wrath were the various neo-colonial agreements the Philippine government was forced to enter into with the US, notably the basing facilities enjoyed by the armed forces of the US. Martial Law was the weapon devised by Marcos and his mentors in Washington to counter the growing politicisation of the Filipino masses.

The US was successful in securing some of its immediate goals. The dictatorial powers usurped by Marcos forced the opposition to go underground. At the same time, the opposition learned to adjust to the situation and adapt to new forms of struggle and organisation. By 1977, the opposition had regained its momentum. In the meantime, the Marcos regime had got further enmeshed in the apron-strings of US imperialism. In the



1970's Western multinationals in the Philippines went through a period of unprecedented expansion. Not surprisingly, US investments in the Philippines were the highest in the Southeast and Far East Asia region. The Marcos regime had lowered the protective tariffs and ensured the cheapest labour force in Asia. Foreigners investing more than \$ 200,000 were even given the option of acquiring Philippine citizenship.<sup>12</sup>

The most important tangible gain provided to the US by Marcos was a further extension of lease of the existing American bases. On June 1, 1983 a new military bases agreement was signed between the US and the Government of the Philippines. The concessions given by the Philippine government under Marcos will be one of the bitter legacies of his 20 year rule. In exchange for the barter of Philippine territory, the Philippine government was compensated with a \$ 475m economic support fund, \$ 125m in direct military assistance and \$ 300m military sales credit.<sup>13</sup>

Significantly, the US under the terms of the Bases agreement, further reinforced its military presence in the country. Under the provisions of the treaty, the US could legally hold on to its bases till 1991. A further 10 years grace period has been given to the Americans. Besides the Philippine government has been shrewdly given 20 years repayment time by the US on the military sales credit agreement. This in effect means that US can exert great economic pressure on the Aquino government and its successors.

Marcos in his benevolence also gave the US the green signal for the installation of medium range nuclear missiles. Under the terms of the agreement, prior consultations were only required 'for the establishment by the government of the United States for long range missiles in the bases'. No wonder that the then American ambassador to the Philippines, Michael H. Armacost, expressed gratification about the 'expeditious and amicable' manner in which the accord was signed. He added, 'I am satisfied with the results which I believe place US and Philippine relations on an even firmer footing'. It should be remembered that the US bases of Clark and Subic occupy a total area of more than 82,000 hectares and 13,600 American army personnel are permanently placed there. It is almost 'a state within a state'.<sup>14</sup>

The invaluable help the Marcos dictatorship was rendering to the US made him an almost indispensable asset to successive American administration. Even after the Aquino assassination influential people in the Reagan administration would have even liked him to continue for another year or so and then make way for a strongman in the mould of Marcos. But the recent events forced them to revise their blueprint and implement a contingency plan to retrieve an almost impossible situation.

Corazon Aquino is not exactly the kind of sanitized successor the US had in mind as a replacement for Marcos. But they have reasons to be satisfied with the composition of the top leadership of the government. Juan Ponce Enrile, one of the closest confidants of Marcos almost till the very end, retains his post of Defence Secretary. He is the same man who deli-



vered the votes in the home province of Cagayan to Marcos in the February elections. He is one of the cronies who benefitted enormously from being associated with the deposed President. In fact, he was in the running for the post of Vice-President on the Marcos ticket. His ambitions to occupy the top post is not a secret in the Philippines. He and the new Chief of Staff, Gen. Fidel Ramos, are the Marcos' men who are bound to play decisive roles in the Aquino government.

The Vice-President, Salvadore Laurel, concurrently occupies the post of Foreign Minister. In effect, this means that the crucial posts are held by former Marcos loyalists. Mr. Laurel himself broke with Marcos only in 1981. He had welcomed the imposition of 'Martial law'. The post of Vice-President has been re-introduced for the first time since 1972. Laurel, Enrille and Ramos are strong votaries of the continuation of the US role in the Philippines.

#### THE POST-MARCOS SCENE

The US role in the entire drama was evident to observers, but the massive involvement of US covert agencies is less known. The assassination of Aquino in 1983 gave them the opportunity to indulge in it even more blatantly. The US State Department and the Congress pressurised Marcos to set up an 'independent commission of enquiry' to investigate the assassination and at the same time stepped up their efforts to 'reform' the Philippine Armed Forces. The American media started showing its preference for Lt. Gen. Fidel Ramos to take over the reigns of the Philippine Armed Forces. The State Department also changed its tune on the issue of fair and free elections. Till 1983, the US had consistently maintained that it would not lend its voice in demanding a 'free' election as this would constitute undue interference. In the May 1984 elections to the rubber-stamp National Assembly, friendly opposition politicians were influenced to participate on the understanding that adequate representation would be given. It is widely believed that without US Marcos acquiescence, the moderate opposition would not have been able to get the 40 out of the 200 seats at stake.

The 'lessons' of Iran and Nicaragua were not lost on the Reagan administration though it can be debated whether they have drawn the correct conclusions. Initially, to prevent Marcos meeting the fate of Somoza or the Shah, the US further tightened its direct control over the military and took emergency steps to arrest the economic slide. After 1984 it accelerated the disbursement of \$ 50 million in emergency aid to bail out the Marcos 'crony' regime. The military, on whom the Americans are reposing their maximum trust, are being trained by elite US military advisers both in the Philippines and America. Annual joint military exercises are being given more importance. The \$ 105 million military aid package for the Philippines in 1985 and the accelerated disbursement of \$425m out

of the \$ 900m rent for the American bases can be viewed as part of the continuing efforts of the US to build up the military as an effective anti-communist fighting force and a key factor in Philippine politics.

Much more is at stake for the US in the Philippines, even in comparison to what it lost in Nicaragua and Iran. The threat to US hegemony in the Southeast Asia region, according to American experts, will come from a radicalized Philippines, especially if American access to the bases are blocked. A secret study by an inter-agency task force of the United States Government in 1984, came to the conclusion that 'our interests in the Philippines are worth a high priority and costly efforts to preserve.'<sup>15</sup>

In retrospect, some of the conclusions of the inter-agency report make interesting reading. It had called for the replacement of the Marcos regime. The paper notes that 'Our... assets could be lost if we come to be seen as favouring a continuation of the Marcos regime to the exclusion of other democratic alternatives'. It is evident that the US was already laying the groundwork for a transition from the Marcos regime. This was one of the interesting points underlined in the report.<sup>16</sup> The US policy makers after 1983 were always striving to impose a power sharing arrangement with Marcos loyalists and reformist politicians. The present government is such a set-up, at least for the time being. It is a regime that is much more acceptable to the Filipino masses and the international community than the deposed Marcos dictatorship. From the US point of view, the Philippines has become 'stable' once more for US bases and business interests.

One of the first major concessions made by the new administration is the assurance given to the US on the question of the bases. The new government has decided to honour the 1983 'bases' agreement with the US, signed by the Marcos government without taking the Filipino people into confidence. President Aquino has not made any commitment to the Americans after 1991, the Year when the lease expires. The popular movement against the bases, which are the regional headquarters for CIA communications and counter-insurgency, has been a consistent feature in Philippine politics since the 1950's. The new President may have to take steps to re-inforce Philippine sovereignty.

Resolving the vexed question of the 'bases issue' is not the only priority problem the new Aquino administration will face. Ex-President Marcos has left the economy in a shambles. The external debt is generally estimated to be around \$ 25 billion. Mrs. Aquino will have to renegotiate with the IMF and the other leading western banking institutions. The Philippines rank among the most indebted nations in the world, ranking fourth after Brazil, Mexico and Argentina. Before the middle of 1986, the new government will have to come to an agreement with the IMF, if it has to find a new source of financing. The World Bank in its latest report predicts that the country would continue to depend largely on multilateral and bilateral aid.

The New People's Army and its front organisations are cautiously analysing the post-Marcos political scene. The Aquino administration's

offer for conditional talks is being viewed with suspicion as there have not been any tangible concessions on the part of the Government. The much publicised Government plan for direct talks with the NPA is seen by many as an attempt to isolate the left. The military leadership has already come out with thinly veiled criticism of the Government's policy of offering a 'velvet glove' to the insurgents. They would very much prefer to resort to the old 'mailed fist' policy. The rationale for the NPA to accept a blanket amnesty offer is not being provided by the Government.

The political demands of the democratic left and NPA have not been even partially met. They want an in-depth investigation of military abuses, corruption, unconditional release of all political prisoners, repeal of all repressive laws and abuses, and the setting up of a mechanism to ensure the accountability of civilian and military authorities to the people.

The Aquino administration, if it wishes to impress upon the left, the genuineness of its intentions, will have to revamp the military, reduce its budget and try to demilitarize Philippine society. At this juncture, given the Aquino administration's dependence on the military, it is unable even to contemplate reforms on such a scale. Even on the subject of the renewal of US bases, the Government refuses to take a categorical stand. The stand of Mrs. Aquino on the subject is not yet clear. The military component of her administration, as represented by Enrile and Ramos, has been stressing the importance of the bases vis-a-vis Philippine security. In fact, Fidel Ramos was recently reported as saying that sacrificing the bases simply to create the right atmosphere for talks with communist insurgents may not be a wise move.

Jose Maria Sison, echoing the views of the left, says that the Government should see to it that the bases must go at the earliest and not later than 1991 (the year in which the US lease expires). The military bases are fundamental to US-Philippine relations.

The abrogation of the old constitution and the parliament, both legacies of the Marcos era, and the concentration of sweeping powers in the hands of the President, is a justifiable action, though it has come in for extension. The provisional charter announced on 25 March replacing the old constitution, will be in force for only a year. The new constitution will be subject to a plebiscite and a new parliament will also be in place within a year.

With the overthrow of the Marcos dictatorship, Philippine politics has entered an exciting if unpredictable phase. Though Mrs. Aquino is not known for her anti-imperialist credentials, her government's commitments at this juncture to the process of political liberalisation and democratisation, gives the Filipino people once again the opportunity to assert their right and fight for fundamental reforms. The political fissures within the Philippine society have been accelerated in the wake of the recent events. There is also a concerted attempt by the representatives of the big business, the Church hierarchy and land owners, who are well represented in the Aquino government, to roll back the hard won gains of the Filipino

people. The contradictions even within the Aquino administration, are getting acute, as is evident from the criticism Mrs. Aquino is facing from within her own alliance, on the issue of the few democratic reforms she has implemented. Though Mrs. Aquino has still a long way to go in her efforts to totally dismantle the institutions left behind by the Marcos dictatorship, atleast a beginning has been made.

## NOTES

1. 'Bishops in open defiance', *Far Eastern Economic Review* 27, February, 1986
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6. *Liberation*, official international publication of the National Democratic Front of the Philippines, May-June 1985.
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15. "The NSSD;US policy towards the Philippines, (Washington, 1983). Unpublished Document.
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