

26 years on, Filipinos ask: Who ordered hit on Ninoy?

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MANILA, Philippines - As the last soldiers convicted for their part in the assassination of opposition leader Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino Jr. walked free this week, Filipinos asked: who ordered the hit that changed the face of Philippine politics?

Conspiracy theories have run rife for the past 26 years since Aquino was gunned down on the tarmac of the Manila airport after returning home from exile in the United States.

Everyone from the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos and his shoe-loving wife Imelda to the CIA have been implicated by conspiracy theorists.

Aquino’s murder in 1983 led to widespread street protests that culminated three years later in Marcos’ downfall. Aquino’s widow, Corazon, was installed as

president, restoring democracy and redrafting the constitution.

Fourteen military and airport security men were convicted and jailed for their part in the assassination but no one has ever been charged with ordering the killing.

Even as they walked free on Wednesday, the 10 soldiers who were convicted in 1990 over the killing maintained their innocence. Two other soldiers convicted for the murder were freed earlier, while two others died in detention.

The Marcos government had said that Rolando Galman, an alleged communist hitman, shot Aquino dead and was then killed by the soldiers, but few believe the former dictator's version of events.

After being freed this week, Ernesto Mateo, an Air Force sergeant who headed the team charged with protecting Aquino, said he wants to meet with the Aquino family and "explain to them personally what happened."

"Let the Aquino family move to re-open the case. I am willing to meet them and help all of us find the truth," the 57-year-old Mateo said.

Ninoy Aquino's son, Sen. Benigno "Noy" Aquino III, says the family remains convinced there was a

conspiracy behind his father's murder.

While he declined to give any names, Senator Aquino said he agreed investigators should search for Air Force captain Felipe Valerio, who was then in charge of the Aviation Security Command.

Valerio fled overseas when Marcos fell and is believed to be in the United States, but no one has ever tracked him down.

Public defender Persida Acosta, who acted as lawyer for the freed soldiers, said that while they were glad to be free, "they are afraid because some of the conspirators are still at large."

However, she refused to specify who these conspirators are except to say the government should also seek the extradition of Valerio.

Mateo was quoted by local media as saying another convicted soldier, ex-sergeant Pablo Martinez, who was freed by Arroyo earlier, had told him that a powerful Marcos ally was behind the Aquino killing.

Former President Aquino, who is suffering from cancer, has long maintained that Marcos himself was behind the murder. However, during her presidency, she did not interfere in the case to avoid accusations of partiality.

Many analysts argue that a cunning political manipulator like Marcos would not be so foolish as to have the hugely popular Aquino murdered.

Marcos was also known to be sick at the time and may have been unaware of what was happening, they say.

Another possible suspect and a key Marcos loyalist, military chief General Fabian Ver, died in Thailand in 1998.

Other names mentioned as being behind the killing include prominent businessmen.

Former solicitor general Francisco Chavez, writing in the *Inquirer* said: “It speaks volumes of the sordid state of the Philippine justice system that the true author or authors of that grisly crime have remained scot-free and worse, have been allowed to resume political, social and economic relevance.”