

Corazon Cojuangco Aquino, 1933-2009

Part one

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This is the first part of a two-part article.

Corazon Aquino, former president of the Philippines, died of colon cancer on August 1. She had scarcely been dead for thirty minutes when eulogies and encomia began to flood the mainstream media.

Her death took no one by surprise. She had been struggling with cancer for eighteen months and her condition had worsened dramatically in the last six weeks.

News outlets, political groups of all ideological bents, and foreign heads of state had ample time to prepare their response to the passing of this woman. There is no excuse for the lack of historical analysis in the obituaries printed in the international and Philippine press. That they universally hail Aquino as the reluctant housewife, thrust into politics by the brutality of the Marcos regime and swept to power by nonviolent revolution, is shoddy journalism, an admixture of bourgeois cynicism and willful historical ignorance.

Philippine politicians have lavished praise upon Aquino in a truly shameless manner. The parties and petty-bourgeois organizations of the Philippine left have joined the stampede commemorating Aquino, each issuing its own solemn statement of grief at her passing. Two decades ago they shrilly denounced Aquino's 'fascist regime.' Today they laud her as a 'champion of democracy' and 'fierce opponent of totalitarianism.'

Corazon Aquino was a member of the Cojuangco family. The Philippines is dominated by oligarchic interests, familial economic dynasties which emerged during Spanish colonialism. The Cojuangco family owns vast landholdings in the Central Luzon province of Tarlac, including the 10,000 hectare Hacienda Luisita, and an empire of financial interests and agricultural and urban real estate.

This wealth both supports and emerges out of the Cojuangcos' involvement in politics. In addition to Corazon Aquino's presidency, Cojuangcos have been governors, mayors, senators and congressional representatives. This is characteristic of cacique democracy and oligarchic economic rule, and is the legacy of Spanish and American colonialism.

The origins of oligarchy

Spain held the Philippines as a colonial possession for 350 years with no real intention of developing any commercial ventures, industry, mining or agriculture. Manila served as an entrepot, a trading port for the galleon trade. Chinese silks and porcelain were traded for Mexican silver from Acapulco. These items were then sold at exorbitant prices in Europe. Colonial bureaucrats profited by administering and skimming off the top of this trade. The provincial Philippines was controlled almost exclusively by the Spanish clergy, who acquired vast estates.

The Mexican revolution of 1820 effectively severed the Seville-

Acapulco-Manila galleon trade, leaving the Philippines isolated and unproductive. British investors were eager to seize upon the opportunities available to them in the undeveloped Philippines.

Fearful of colonial encroachment and Protestant influence, the Spanish enacted a series of capricious laws preventing foreigners from living outside of Manila. British investors set up commercial houses to facilitate trade, creating banks with sufficient capital on hand to cover letters of credit issued in Europe. They thus had capital sitting idle for much of the year, and were eager to find an outlet for investment. It was illegal to loan large amounts of money to indios, members of the native population.

An influx of Chinese males in the mid-eighteenth century, and a second influx after 1850, filled the economic gap needed for the development of an import-export trade, and provided an outlet for British capital looking for investment opportunities. The immigrant bachelors married indios; their families became Chinese mestizos.

To avoid racial reprisals from the colonial administration and from the indio population, these Chinese mestizo families hispanized themselves, adopting Spanish names, the Spanish language, and artifacts, accents, behavior and culture from the Spanish metropole. Within a generation, all indication of indio and Chinese origin had been erased, with the exception of the Hokkienese *k'o*, a title of respect, which was often incorporated at the end of the new surname—thus, Cojuangco.

The mestizos rapidly developed capitalist agriculture in the Philippines, export-oriented mono-cropping, funded by British capital and employing rural wage laborers and sharecroppers. The mestizos themselves were often tenants on the vast landholdings of the Catholic religious orders. With the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, direct trade with Europe was established. The Philippines became firmly incorporated into global capitalism.

In the wake of the Philippine revolution against Spain in 1896, the United States, eager to have colonial possessions of its own, conquered the islands in a brutal campaign which lasted well into the twentieth century. The mestizo oligarchs had long resented being the possession of a third-rate colonial power and had regarded Spain as a European backwater. They recognized that being an American possession could further their economic and political aspirations and they welcomed the new conquerors.

The United States colonial government eventually dispossessed the friars of their landholdings and the vast haciendas fell into the hands of the mestizo elite. The Americans established a representative democracy of sorts, which they closely monitored, limiting voting rights strictly to the propertied.

Even by the Second World War, only 14 percent of the population had the right to vote. The bicameral legislature which the Americans set up in Manila provided the opportunity for the oligarchs to dole out coveted positions in the rapidly expanding civil service, thus extending their power of patronage within their region. Every family sought to have members seated in government.

In the aftermath of the Japanese occupation and the Second World War, the Americans granted nominal independence to the Philippines, retaining substantial economic control over the islands through a system of parity agreements. With the end of direct American political control and the dramatic weakening of the central state, oligarchic politics entered its heyday. Familial dynasties acquired private armies, drawn from rural and urban lumpen elements. Elections were no longer simply corrupt. They were bloody affairs in which rivals were murdered and voters were routinely threatened.

During the American colonial period, many of the leading families had built their wealth upon special access to the United States market. Gradually in the post-independence period, tariffs and trade barriers were set up which cut sharply into profits.

The elite compensated for this by manipulating the state's financial power. "Under the guise of promoting economic independence and import-substitution industrialization, exchange rates were manipulated, monopolistic licenses were parceled out, huge, cheap, often unrepaid bank loans passed around, and the national budget frittered away in pork-barrel legislation. Some of the more enterprising dynasties diversified into urban real estate, hotels, utilities, insurance, the mass media, and so forth." (Benedict Anderson, "Cacique Democracy in the Philippines," in *The Spectre of Comparisons*, London: Verso, 1998, p. 208). Politicians learned to mouth nationalist phrases, vacuous words serving sordid ends. It was during this heyday that Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino and Ferdinand Marcos entered politics.

Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos

Marcos was highly intelligent. Both he and his wife had limitless ambition, and they rose from the lower levels of the oligarchy to dominate Philippine politics. Marcos ran a charismatic campaign against cacique politicians and their private armies, and against communism, a largely non-existent and manufactured menace in the Philippines in the 1960s.

He won the support of the urban middle class, aspiring to be technocrats within a functioning, orderly state. Marcos was from the Ilokano-speaking region of the northern Philippines, and he won the support of the Ilokano peasantry and some sections of the urban poor. This was the class base of support for Marcos which brought him to power in 1965.

Ferdinand and Imelda, working in tandem, used the office of the president for their personal enrichment with stunning success. Imelda, simultaneously beautiful and grotesque, flitted about the globe, meeting with world leaders and shopping. Ferdinand entrenched his political power by dramatically expanding the armed forces and promoting through the ranks Ilokano officers beholden to him. The upper echelons of the military led lives of luxury once reserved only for the cacique leaders. When Marcos confiscated corporations from political rivals during martial law, he would place them under control of trusted generals. The military was simultaneously politicized and riven by Marcos' ethno-nepotism.

Imelda Marcos conducted much of the Marcos' foreign policy. She met with world leaders and gained support—military, political and financial—employing diplomatic machinations and personal chicanery. She could seem naive when it served her purposes. She wheedled, flirted, and haughtily demanded. She met privately with five American presidents, and became the confidante of Nancy Reagan.

She and her husband had a far better understanding of the ins and outs of American politics and policy than any American had of theirs. They used this to their advantage, manipulating American politicians to serve their ends, playing upon anticommunist fears, and always coyly flirting with the possibility of not extending the lease on the American bases in the

Philippines. The Marcoses contributed \$1 million dollars to Nixon's 1968 election campaign, and another million in 1972. The money, of course, came from the coffers of the Philippine state.

Marcos bought his second term in office in 1969, spending on his campaign so egregiously that inflation in the Philippines increased 18 percent. To cope with inflation Marcos demanded, and received, \$100 million in prepayment on the rent of the US military bases in the Philippines.

The Philippine constitution, directly modeled after the US, imposed a limit of two terms on any president. The impending election of 1973 loomed large in Marcos' mind. He attempted in 1971 to force a revision of the constitution, eliminating term limits. He encountered trenchant opposition from rival political families, headed by Ninoy Aquino, and failed in the attempted revision. Thwarted in his legal machinations, he resorted instead to a declaration of martial law.

Working with a council of generals and two civilians, Eduardo "Danding" Cojuangco—cousin and bitter rival of Cory—and Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile, Marcos plotted his declaration. He received advice from Suharto's generals, who had seized power in Indonesia in 1965 in an unmitigated blood bath, slaughtering 500,000 to one million members and supporters of the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI).

In August and September, 1972, a string of bombings occurred in the dead of night at prominent business and government buildings throughout Manila. Marcos had orchestrated the bombings; he blamed the communists. Enrile, principal architect of martial law, staged an ambush on his own entourage, with gunmen opening fire on his vehicle. He rode with his security detail in a separate car. Marcos again blamed the communists, signed Proclamation 1081 declaring martial law, and dispatched soldiers to arrest all of his political rivals. The first arrested was Ninoy Aquino.

Aquino was a charismatic politician, similar to Marcos in many regards. His political career set a series of records: he was the youngest mayor, youngest vice-governor, and, at 35, the youngest senator in Philippine history. He came from a prominent political family.

His father had been speaker of the assembly under the Japanese occupation. Elite collaborators were quickly pardoned by the returning American forces and by the first administration of the newly independent Philippines. The peasant army which fought against the Japanese during the American absence, the Hukbalahap, fared far worse—they were summarily disarmed, many were arrested.

In addition to charisma and political prominence, Ninoy had the funding of the Cojuangco family. He was the man who would have been president in 1973, but 1973 found him in a cell in Camp Aguinaldo.

The writ of habeas corpus was suspended. Marcos arrested thousands of opponents. He seized control of the assets of rival families, turned them over to the control of his cohort of cronies, and plundered them. Certain sections of the oligarchy flourished under Marcos; others were pillaged.

Mass opposition met with brutal repression. Kidnapping, torture, and summary execution were routinely carried out by the military; the practice became known as 'salvaging.' As the 1970s progressed, Marcos lost his class base of support. The urban middle class, erstwhile aspiring technocrats, were slowly disillusioned. Those that could migrated from the country; those that could not kept their head down and silently and impotently watched for an end to the Marcos regime. Marcos' power was now based on his firm control over a military which had tripled in size since his entrance to power.

Two groups benefitted from martial law: the military and the new Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its armed wing, the New People's Army (NPA).

The Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and martial law

By the mid-1950s, the Stalinist Communist Party of the Philippines, known by its Tagalog name Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP), had entered a period of stagnation and dissolution. The rebellion of the PKP's guerrilla army, Hukbo Mapagpalaya ng Bayan (HMB) —the peasant Hukbalahap reshaped after the Second World War—had been successfully suppressed by the Magsaysay administration through the combined use of psychological warfare and a limited program of land reform for surrendering “Huks.”

This program and the presidential candidacy of Magsaysay had been thoroughly orchestrated by CIA operative Edward Lansdale. In 1957, having already shifted tactics from guerrilla warfare to legal struggle, the leadership of the PKP announced its “single-file” policy. All cadres were to have contact with only one other party member and directives were to be disseminated orally in a “single file.” The networks and organizing groups of the PKP, in essence, self-dissolved. A few guerrilla units were preserved as bodyguards and security for those engaged in the legal struggle. Among the preserved units was Kumander Dante's central Luzon command, which would be the founding unit of the New People's Army (NPA).

The Philippine Communist Party was thus a nearly defunct organization when the simultaneous waves of bourgeois nationalist politics and student rebellion broke across Philippine society in the late 1950s. It continued in this moribund state throughout the 1960s. While Imelda Marcos hysterically denounced communist agitation in private conversations with LBJ and Nixon and gained millions of dollars in military funding, the Philippine Communist Party had, for all intents and purposes, ceased to exist.

Jose Maria Sison, known as Joma, founded a new communist party in the Philippines in 1969, this time under the acronym CPP. Joma was the child of a landholding mestizo family from Ilocos. He grew up on the rhetoric of politicians in the 1950s, and was profoundly inspired by their nationalism.

In the early 1960s, he briefly moved to Indonesia, where he encountered the Maoism of the PKI under Aidit. He returned to the Philippines, joined the PKP and established an active youth section. His activism and sharp criticism of the existing leadership earned him the ire of the central committee and he was expelled from the party in the late 1960s.

At the beginning of January 1969, in a remote barrio of Mangataram, Pangasinan, Joma Sison met with 11 associates to found the Communist Party of the Philippines. The conference began on January 3, but by joint agreement the date of the congress was recorded as December 26, 1968, to honor Mao Zedong's birthday. At the Congress, Sison submitted a previously written report, which he titled “Rectify Errors and Rebuild the Party.” Philippine society, he claimed, had a semi-feudal, semi-colonial mode of production, and the only viable solution was a “protracted people's war” which was based on the idea that the “universal truth of the theory of using the countryside to encircle the city has been proven invincible.”

In need of a people's army to carry out this “people's war,” Joma Sison contacted one of the last remaining HMB guerrillas still in the field, Bernabe Buscayno, known as Kumander Dante. Under the leadership of Kumander Dante, the armed wing of the CPP was established on March 29, 1969 as the New People's Army (NPA).

The CPP-NPA remained a small, insignificant organization. It recruited few and accomplished little. However, with the declaration of martial law and the crackdown on legal forms of organization, many felt that they no alternative but to join the NPA and the armed struggle of the guerillas in the mountains. Petty-bourgeois intellectuals, disgruntled peasants, and leaders of the working class—all were sent off to “surround the city from

the countryside.” The tighter the imposition of the Marcos dictatorship, the more the NPA flourished. Martial law was the best thing that ever happened to the ideologically bankrupt CPP. The NPA grew in the 1970s from 60 members to 12,000.

To be continued



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