

Corazon Cojuangco Aquino, 1933-2009

Part two

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5 August 2009

This is the second part of a two-part article. Part one was posted August 4.

The assassination of Ninoy Aquino

Economic crisis struck in 1981. The Philippine economy throughout the 1970s had been buoyed by increasing international prices of raw materials and by ongoing external support from the United States and multilateral lending institutions. Now, the bad debts of the various enterprises run by Marcos' cronies and the effects of US dollar appreciation on the cost of debt servicing produced a significant contraction in the Philippine economy. What residue of middle-class support Marcos still had, vanished.

It was not just the economy which was ailing, however. Marcos had lupus; he was dying. This was known only to a very limited circle of Marcos associates. Marcos' public appearances were infrequent. He spoke in slow, thick speech. Among his intimates, there was a jockeying for power, a struggle to determine who should succeed Marcos.

Enrile, defense minister and architect of martial law, had long felt he would take Marcos' place when the latter stepped down. Marcos had other plans, intending for Imelda to be his successor. Marcos placed his confidence to enforce his interests in his brutal thug henchman, General Ver, an Ilokano soldier who had risen under Marcos from personal bodyguard to head of the Philippine Armed Forces. The treacherous Enrile began plotting other ways of achieving power.

Rumors of Marcos' illness and impending death spread. Ninoy Aquino, now exiled in Boston, heard the rumors and decided to return to the Philippines, determined to be present when the presidency became available. On August 21, 1983, Aquino landed in Manila. He was shot once in the back of the head as he descended the stairs to the airport tarmac.

A scapegoat was blamed; his body lay beside Aquino's on the tarmac, riddled with bullets from security forces. Everyone knew, however, that the murder of Aquino was ordered by the Marcos regime. Imelda and Ver clearly had a hand in the matter. They were determined to retain their hold on power.

Corazon Aquino returned to the Philippines for her husband's funeral. She displayed political acumen, ordering that her husband's remains be untouched, his body displayed bloodied in an open casket. Ninoy's funeral procession became a political rally against Marcos, in which two million people marched.

An organization was formed to attempt to control the protests which were emerging in the wake of the assassination of Ninoy. It represented the interests of the national bourgeoisie, opposed to Marcos' pillaging of

the Philippine economy, but terrified of the power of the working class and the possibility of socialist revolution. Justice for Aquino, Justice for All (JAJA), as the organization was called, sought to mobilize the Philippine working class and peasantry behind the anti-Marcos agenda, but also to prevent them from pursuing their own class interests. JAJA vacillated in orientation on a daily basis.

“People Power”

International and domestic pressure compelled Marcos in late 1985 to call for a snap election, to be held in February, 1986. He was confident that the competing family interests of the opposition would prevent them from mounting a cohesive campaign and that, regardless, he could control the outcome of the election. His calculations would likely have been correct, but for the intrusion of the head of the Philippine Catholic Church, Jaime Cardinal Sin.

Cardinal Sin, from the 1970s until his death in 2005, was the Philippines' eminence rouge—a kingmaker and a skillfully calculating political manipulator. His endorsement could make a political candidate; his disapproval could spell the end of a political career. Cardinal Sin intervened in the squabbles of the opposition, dictating that Cory, the aggrieved widow, would run as president and her leading rival within the opposition, Salvador Laurel, would serve as her vice presidential candidate.

Marcos' open fraud in the February, 1986 election was staggering, even by the standards of excess set by the dictatorship. Ballot boxes were stuffed, others stolen; millions of names disappeared from voting rolls. Despite the massive cheating, it was apparent that Aquino had won.

Marcos declared victory. Aquino's response was a clear example of the impotence of the national bourgeoisie—she called for a boycott of crony companies. Her supporters were no longer to buy products manufactured by Marcos' cronies. In a country where most cronies held a monopoly on a vast range of products, including all electricity and telecommunications, this was not only impotent, but impossible.

Enrile, however, saw this as his opportunity to seize power. Marcos' hold over the military had fragmented. Middle-ranking and junior officers incensed at being passed over for promotions by Marcos' ethno-nepotism formed a bloc of disgruntled opposition to the continuation of the dictatorship.

This right-wing military clique had no interest in democracy or the victory of Corazon Aquino. They desired a disciplined armed forces and saw Marcos' favoritism undermining the power and effectiveness of the military. Enrile and General Fidel Ramos, second cousin to Marcos, organized this opposition. In the chaos that followed the contested elections, they seized two military installations on Epifanio de los Santos

Avenue (Edsa), the main thoroughfare of metropolitan Manila. Enrile intended to oust Marcos and declare himself prime minister.

Marcos was ill and weary. He failed to respond promptly to the uprising. Twenty-four hours elapsed, more and more troops defected, and Cardinal Sin again intervened. He broadcast an appeal over the Catholic Radio Veritas, calling on supporters of Cory to flood Edsa and create a human cordon around the coup plotters. He effectively declared that the coup was on behalf of Cory Aquino.

Tens of thousands of Filipinos answered the call. When Marcos finally ordered tanks sent against the coup, they found their way blocked by protestors. This event, which provided the international media startling images of unarmed nuns kneeling in front of tanks, became known as “People Power.” Ver wanted to order the tanks to fire, but Marcos, again, hesitated.

Many in the US State Department had long resented Reagan’s intimate ties with Marcos. Marcos was bad for public relations; he was bad for business. Crony-controlled businesses and rampant corruption and bribery were not conducive to neoliberal free market policies which many desired to implement.

The Reagans, however, had been close to the Marcoses since the 1960s, when Ronald and Nancy had visited the Philippines on a state visit as governor of California. Nancy and Imelda spoke to each other on the phone at times on a weekly basis. Vice President Bush famously toasted Marcos’ “adherence to democratic principles” during a visit to the Philippines in the 1980s. After the snap election of February 1986, Reagan declared in a press conference that there had been violence and fraud “occurring on both sides.”

As the events of February unfolded, even Reagan’s closest advisors abandoned Marcos. On Sunday, February 25, in a meeting at the White House, top advisers Shultz, Wolfowitz, Armacost and Poindexter argued that Marcos should relinquish power. CIA director Robert Gates and Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger stuck with Marcos. So did Reagan.

After much discussion, it was decided that Marcos should be offered exile in the United States. The message was conveyed to Marcos and at 9 pm on February 26, four helicopters flew him, Imelda, their children and Ver out of the country. The US put its support behind Aquino, who, thanks to the machinations of Sin, was positioned to be declared president. Enrile accepted the position of minister of defense under Aquino.

The Aquino presidency

The ousting of a dictator has always been depicted as Aquino’s supreme accomplishment. She restored democracy to the Philippines, all of the obituaries claim. She was not a great president, they concede, but what could you expect from “a simple housewife thrust into power?”

This is but the fatuous repetition of myth. Marcos was removed from office by a military coup, the political machinations of a leading cleric, and the belated intervention of the US government.

“People Power” has acquired a magical significance in Philippine politics. The idea seems to be that a strange combination of Marian devotion and the gathering of a mass of people undifferentiated by class on the corner of Edsa and Ortigas Avenue will somehow effect substantive change in Philippine society.

This is not the only myth, however. Aquino was far from a “simple housewife” when she ran for president. This was, to be sure, how she presented herself in her campaign, a “simple housewife” driven by injustice to fight a dictator. It was a powerful image, but far from true.

Corazon Aquino had been treasurer of the Cojuangco empire for 13 years when she ran for president. She was shrewd and calculating, a

woman accustomed to power, able to acquire wealth and able to keep it. She was also devoutly religious.

This formed the subjective basis of her presidency. She had the psychology of a hacendera—she was owner of the vast Hacienda Luisita—and the mindset of a traditional Catholic.

The hispanized Chinese mestizo oligarchy had changed over the previous century. Any trace of Chinese ancestry had long since been deliberately effaced. The Spanish heritage lingered only in the pretence to Castilian mannerisms—the oligarchs still fashioned themselves as Dons and Doñas.

Their intimate ties to landed estates had also faded into the background as the oligarchs bought their way into every possible form of financial and industrial capitalism, both in the Philippines and abroad. They no longer lived on their estates. They lived in mansions in Manila—palaces of opulence but a short walk past heavily guarded barricades from sprawling shantytowns and grinding poverty.

This, the psychology of Cory, scion of the Cojuangco dynasty, shaped how she responded to the objective basis of her presidency. She came to power on the basis of a fragmentary and tense alliance of hostile class forces.

The junior-ranking officers of the coup attempt followed Enrile into support of the Aquino administration. They looked for a reform of the armed forces, rapid promotion for those previously passed over, and a sharp crackdown on the Communist Party, which had grown exponentially during the Marcos regime, and the new organizations of an active and mobilized urban working class.

Aquino had the backing of all of the oligarchic families who had been excluded from power during the Marcos regime. They looked for the restoration of their property and political power.

Aquino had also received support from the members of the urban middle class who had not succeeded in leaving the country during the Marcos era. They, again, desired a technocratic role within an efficient, Western-style democracy, free of graft and corruption.

Aquino enjoyed as well the full backing of Cardinal Sin and the Catholic Church.

Finally, petty-bourgeois intellectuals long disaffected with the CPP-NPA now sought a place within the administration of Aquino, hoping to steer her policies in the direction of certain loosely defined social democratic goals.

As the first year of her presidency progressed, the coalition of class forces which formed the basis of her presidency broke apart in increasingly hostile confrontations. Aquino attempted to accommodate all groups and wound up displeasing each. The disaffected military officers, under the leadership of Gregorio Honasan, engaged in a series of seven coup attempts, each increasingly bloody. Enrile resigned his position as minister of defense in late 1986, and was directly linked with several of the military coups.

In response to the coups, Aquino shifted her government sharply rightward. She removed the social democratic intellectuals from their positions in her cabinet. She backed the creation of paramilitary anticommunist groups, armed bodies of thugs known as CAFGUs (Civilian Armed Forces Geographical Units). These paramilitary groups of vigilantes engaged in harassment, terrorism, torture and murder, all under the auspices of official anticommunism, and funded by the Philippine military. Aquino notoriously labeled the CAFGUs “an example of people power.”

The urban middle class flooded the press with demands for land reform. They aimed to simultaneously break the power of the oligarchy and of the NPA, whose membership grew in response to landlord abuses.

Here Aquino’s true class allegiances emerged. She engaged in a series of halfhearted attempts, culminating in the misnamed Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP). Large landholders avoided the

redistribution of their land to tenants under this law by either reclassifying their land as commercial or industrial land, or by changing the ownership of the land to joint stock ownership and distributing a small portion of the shares to the tenant farmers.

The Cojuangcos did both with their land. They reclassified a portion of it and placed the rest under joint stock ownership. Cory kept the family hacienda. The urban middle class was thus gradually disillusioned with Aquino as well.

On January 22, 1987, a group of 10,000 peasants marched across Mendiola Bridge to demand genuine land reform from the Aquino administration. Security forces opened fire, killing thirteen and injuring fifty. This became known as the Mendiola massacre. It embodied the increasingly callous attitude of Aquino and her willingness to defend the interests of the oligarchy with violence.

National elections were held in May, 1987. Of the 200 seats in the House of Representatives, 169 went to representatives from dominant families. Of these, 102 were from the pre-1986 anti-Marcos movement, while 67 had been pro-Marcos. It was “a shake in the kaleidoscope of oligarchic power.” (Benedict Anderson, “Cacique Democracy in the Philippines,” in *The Spectre of Comparisons*, London, Verso, 1998, p. 222).

Aquino began her time in office giving the impression that she might possibly oppose the extension of the US bases. By the time the lease came up for renewal in 1991, the Aquino government, in desperate need of funds, was eager to negotiate the renewal.

Mount Pinatubo erupted in June, 1991, destroying Clark Airbase and making renewal a moot point. The Aquino administration negotiated the renewal of Subic naval base with American diplomats, but was unable get the renegotiated lease ratified in the Philippine Senate. The US Navy withdrew from the Philippines in 1992.

Growing poverty and increasing class conflict marked the Aquino administration. Power outages and failures in telecommunications were endemic. Oligarchic politics continued. The election of 1992 saw, among other candidates, Danding Cojuangco, Imelda Marcos and Fidel Ramos run for office. Ramos won the presidency with a small plurality. The same political actors continued the same political machinations. Enrile is now Senate president; Gregorio Honasan, a senator.

The CPP, bourgeois nationalism, and the two-stage theory of revolution

The eulogies in the Philippine media at the passing of Aquino stem from different sources. For some, their admiration of Cory is genuine, the result of historical miseducation. They see Aquino’s ascension to power as a political immaculate conception. In commemorating her, they are celebrating a day when the Philippines occupied the international eye without embarrassment or scandal.

For others, their fond farewell to Cory is an historically jaundiced recollection of past participation in events of importance. This is the empty and historically unfounded nostalgia of the petty bourgeoisie, impotent before the predations of the current president—Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo—a diminutive virago with dictatorial aspirations, a Marcos without talent or charisma.

But for the Communist Party of the Philippines and its ilk, the eulogies offered upon the death of Aquino are but the continuation of the bankrupt policies based on the anti-Marxist two-stage theory of revolution.

During the snap election of 1986, the CPP called upon the masses to passively abstain from participation. It put forward no alternative to Marcos or Aquino. Its call for a boycott placed the masses in the hands of

the national bourgeoisie and Aquino.

The CPP stated that there was no difference between Marcos and Aquino in the days leading up to the election. After Aquino took office, the CPP was eager to negotiate with Aquino, advocating “reconciliation” and a “coalition government” which, Joma Sison argued in a series of lectures in May 1986, would be “mutually advantageous” to “the Aquino government and the revolutionary forces.”

If this coalition government should fail, he continued, “Monopoly of political power by a new clique of big compradors and landlords subservient to US imperialism attended to by a retinue of fresh recruits from the middle class, and the use of the same military that had been used by the fallen fascist dictator to oppress the people, will serve only to hasten the possible return of the fascist dictatorship and the consequent victory of the armed revolutionary movement.” Reimposition of the dictatorship would aid the victory of the revolution.

Nick Beams, writing in 1987 in the *Workers News*, organ of the Socialist Labor League, predecessor of the Australian Socialist Equality Party, responded, “The politics of Sison and the CPP are a double dose of poison. On the one hand they promote illusions in the Aquino regime and then, when the danger of military dictatorship emerges, they disarm the working class with the theory that such a dictatorship will hasten the victory of the revolutionary forces.”

The movement of the masses at Edsa and the ousting of Ferdinand Marcos could have opened the way for a revolutionary movement of the working class to seize political power in the Philippines. What was needed was revolutionary leadership. The Communist Party of the Philippines first told the masses to abstain from participation and then, when the masses ignored the calls of the CPP for a boycott, the CPP attempted to subsume the working class under bourgeois leadership.

The CPP adheres to the Stalinist two-stage theory of revolution. The tasks of the revolution in the Philippines, it claims, are national democratic, not socialist. The Philippines, according to the CPP, is a semi-feudal, semi-colonial country, a backward status which has been imposed upon the Philippines by US imperialism. The national bourgeoisie must thus play a revolutionary role in the throwing off of imperialism and the industrialization and democratic development of the Philippines.

The twentieth century is littered with examples of the tragic results of this policy. In 1925-1927, Stalin ordered the Chinese Communists to subordinate themselves to the national bourgeois Kuomintang. Chiang Kai-shek, the leader of the Kuomintang, slaughtered the working class of Shanghai.

In Indonesia in 1965, the Stalinist PKI collaborated with the national bourgeois administration of Sukarno on the basis of the two-stage theory of revolution. It was disarmed when Suharto seized power and proceeded to slaughter 500,000 to 1,000,000 PKI members. Similar bloody results followed from the same basic Stalinist policy in India, Sudan and Iraq and other countries in the post-World War II period. The two stage theory of revolution disarms the proletariat in the face of its class enemy, the bourgeoisie.

The CPP thus desperately tries to find a bourgeois champion, one who will carry forward the “national democratic” revolution. In its rhetoric, prior to the election Aquino was no different from Marcos; during peace negotiations, she was a possible ally; when peace negotiations broke down, she was, once again, a fascist; now that she has died, what do they make of her?

Joma Sison and other heads of the National Democratic Front, the legal front of the CPP, wrote on August 2, “Corazon Aquino was an outstanding and inspiring figure in the anti-fascist alliance against the Marcos dictatorship.” The Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU), the CPP’s organization of labor unions, wrote: “She died as an ally of the Filipino people... [She] was part of the historical display of the power of the Filipino people’s unity that was Edsa 1. Today we are called upon by

history to create the broadest unity to continue the unfinished task of fighting for genuine democracy and social change.” No word of criticism is written.

Corazon Cojuangco Aquino did not represent “people’s power.” She served the interests of the capitalist-landlord ruling class in the Philippines, and was an instrument of US imperialism. To eulogize her as an “enemy of totalitarianism” or the “mother of democracy” is to lie to the Filipino and international working class.

The national bourgeoisie is organically incapable of playing a consistently revolutionary or even progressive role in backward countries. It is intimately linked with imperialist capital and with the class of landowners. While tensions may emerge between these groups, they are subordinated to their shared hostility and fear of the working class.

In countries with a belated capitalist development, such as the Philippines, the national bourgeoisie cannot achieve the goals of the bourgeois democratic revolution. These goals can be achieved only through a revolution led by the proletariat with the support of the peasantry that establishes a workers’ state and initiates not only democratic, but also socialist measures. They cannot be completed within a national framework, but only as part of a broader international movement of the working class and oppressed.

The perspective guiding such a revolutionary struggle must be based on internationalism. The level of capitalist development in the Philippines is a part of the combined and uneven development of global capitalism. The Philippine working class must consciously conduct its struggle against the Philippine bourgeoisie and big landowners as part of the struggle against world imperialism and for the liberation of the working class and oppressed masses throughout Asia and internationally.

The proletariat is an international class; its tasks are global. Socialism can be achieved only internationally; the proletarian revolution, if it is to succeed, must be an international revolution.

The interests of the proletariat are inimical to those of the bourgeoisie. To subordinate the proletariat to any section of the bourgeoisie—“create the broadest unity”—in the pursuit of a “national democratic revolution” is to prepare colossal defeats for the working class.

Nick Beams concluded his article in 1986 with words that are as pertinent now as they were when they were written:

“The future of the Philippine working class depends on the construction of a revolutionary party to lead it to power. That is why we call on Filipino revolutionists and militants to act now in the interests of their class, to place themselves under the banner of Trotskyism and begin the task of constructing the Philippine section of the International Committee of the Fourth International.”



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