

The scramble for power is on

WHAT NEXT FOR THE PHILIPPINES?

by Lino Tagle

The government of the Philippines finds itself in the midst of a major political crisis, brought on by long-standing popular discontent and increasing economic difficulties. The rising tide of disaffection with the Marcos regime over suspicions of its complicity in the assassination of opposition leader Benigno Aquino has not yet reached its crest. The present situation is fraught with danger and opportunity.

After eighteen years in power, the Marcos regime has failed to live up to its promise of internal peace, prosperity, and order. Some progress has been made in reducing the threat from private armies and containing the Muslim secessionist movement in the southern province of Mindanao. But these modest accomplishments have been achieved by means of a martial law program that has resulted in more than two thousand documented abuses of human rights by the military. Freedom of the press has been curtailed and normal democratic processes, including the guarantee of habeas corpus, have been suspended. The Philippine foreign debt stands at \$22.5 billion. Graft and corruption by those close to the first family are rife, and the problems of the poor—some 85 per cent of the population—have largely been ignored. Marcos's program of centralization foundered, not unexpectedly, on the clannish and regionalistic outlook of the citizens of a nation composed of 7,400 islands in three major groupings. The regime's attempted imposition of its own Ilocano culture, along with the favoritism shown the Ilocanos, further alienated the government from the people.

Mass demonstrations in Manila and the provinces, in which more than two million have participated, have strengthened the morale and courage of those who are longing for a new order. The handwriting is on the wall; most analysts expect the downfall of Marcos within six months to a year, provided opposition leaders keep up their pressure. Given an electoral process free of coercion or the manipulation of ballots, an alternative leadership could

easily win a national election. However, any such optimism must be tempered by the realities of Philippine life and politics.

THE ACTORS

President Marcos's resolve to maintain himself and his followers in office is well known. Within his own circle there are at least two groups with plans to carry on the regime's policies after Marcos's departure. The prospective leaders of these groups are prominent members of the government today, but exactly who among them will inherit the mantle of the departed leader, whether peacefully or by force, remains to be seen. There is little doubt that in a relatively free election no one in the discredited Marcos camp would win more than 25 per cent of the vote.

As the clamor against the current regime grows, the role of the military becomes more crucial and more problematic. Given the realities of martial law, the opposition has no chance of winning so long as the Army supports Marcos. Marcos has bribed and cajoled the senior officers and raised military salaries over 500 per cent. But among the Army colonels and majors, there is widespread unhappiness about the blatantly political way in which promotions are made. In the festering discontent of these middle-rank officers lies the possibility of change.

It is generally conceded that the Philippine Army has maintained a strong sense of professionalism, indicated by its determination to obey whoever is in power. Strongly anti-Communist and generally friendly to the United States, many of its top officers were trained either at West Point or at some other U.S. facility. Perhaps as many as 150 key officers study military science, tactics, and weaponry in the U.S. each year.

There is always the chance that the military might actively support the emergence of a civilian leader friendly to their interests or stage a coup in which one of their own would take over the government. It is also not inconceivable that disaffected lower officers might pull a coup of their own, overthrowing the generals who have received all the benefits from Marcos and left them out in the cold.

Most of the Filipino political leaders, young and old, who oppose Marcos live in exile, primarily in the United States. Filipinos in the U.S. are as yet disunited: The

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greater number of the leaders have occupied themselves with consolidating their own groups, leaving little time to exchange ideas or work out a common platform. Others have yet to make their voices heard, and from this group may emerge "dark horse" leaders of the future.

The National Democratic Front, on the other hand, an extreme leftist exile group with direct links to the New People's Army—the military arm of the Philippine Communist party—is unified, dedicated, and hardworking. Because of its coherence, the NDF has won widespread acceptance of its radical ideas among many young people in the Philippines and the United States. For example, at a recent conference on the Philippines sponsored by the National Council of Churches in Stony Point, New York, attendees adopted positions similar to those of the rebels in the Philippines and El Salvador.

In the Philippines itself, the New People's Army is the strongest of the three distinct groups that have emerged within the armed rebel camp. When martial law was declared in 1972, a reliable estimate gave the NPA 2,500 active members, most of whom were hiding in the hills; within recent months their number appears to have swelled to about 10,000 and, if present trends continue, may well double by the end of 1983. By virtue of temporary alliances forged with Socialist Democrats ("sodems"), most in the South, and with other radical groups, the NPA may already be capable of eliminating some of the top leadership of the government, either through assassination or armed insurrection.

The "sodems," a label that covers diverse groupings that draw inspiration from Socialist ideals and Christian teachings, is temporarily aligned with the NPA, although several of its subgroups in the South are strongly anti-Communist and have frequently fought the NPA in the past. A series of meetings between representatives of the NPA and the "sodems" have removed some of the irritants that have divided the groups ideologically. And it is in

ideology that the "sodems" appear the strongest, led by radical priests and nuns who have taken to the hills. Lay leaders (mostly graduates of Ateneo University, De La Salle College, and various national universities), some of whom are in exile in the United States, play an influential role in the group as well. The Socialist Democrats number about 3,000.

Finally, there is the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), a secessionist movement in the Muslim South seeking greater political independence from the central government and backed by Libya and several Middle Eastern countries. According to some reports, its 15,000 to 25,000-man force is among the best-armed in the Philippines, even possessing short-range missiles. That force has been somewhat depleted recently with the migration of a substantial number to Sabah to join some 250,000 political refugees and others now resident on that Malaysian island. Small groups of urban guerrillas are active in Manila and other cities. Although their influence is negligible at present, it could grow in time.

If a peaceful solution to the problems of the country is not found, an armed uprising may well be in the Philippines's future, one in which the three rebel groups can seize simultaneous control of about nine provinces, holding them for a week or two. Although the rebels lack a sufficient supply of ammunition and medium-range weaponry to prevail against the Army, they are capable of defeating platoon-sized units. At present these groups are rent by divisions based on personalities and ideologies, but any political party hoping to win power in the Philippines will have to make peace with all three, or at least the strongest among them.

ALTERNATIVES

The alternatives are clear: Either Marcos and members of his camp will yield to honest elections or there will be a violent transition to power. Dissension within the Marcos

group itself, which is likely to hold on to the bitter end, may lead to assassination and counterassassination. All contending parties will attempt to strengthen their positions by forging internal and external alliances. Countries such as the United States, Russia, and China will be approached for help; others, including Japan, Great Britain, France, and the Benelux countries—all of which have economic interests in the Philippines—may be drawn into the struggle.

The costs of armed rebellion in terms of human lives, enduring animosities, destruction of property, and economic chaos would be enormous. In monetary terms alone, losses for the Philippines have been projected at \$2 to \$3 billion, or 24 to 36 billion pesos. All productive activities would be suspended and plants and machinery would likely be destroyed—to the detriment as well of foreign lenders and investors; the loss will be at least \$5 billion. A termination of the U.S. military bases would represent a setback of \$20 billion in financial terms alone.

Hope for a peaceful solution to the Filipino future lies in the support sympathetic outside groups give to the efforts of such religious leaders as Jaime Cardinal Sin, archbishop of Manila, who has proposed to President Marcos that he resign and organize a transition government, made up of a council of leaders, that would take over the reins of power until the next election. Free elections would then be held, martial law would be lifted, and democratic processes once again would be allowed to operate.

For a popularly elected government to come to power and maintain a stable government, the present democratic opposition leaders both in and outside the country must subordinate their personal ambitions to the needs of the people and the exigencies of the present, forming a middle-of-the-road coalition that is acceptable both to Left and to Right. Whichever group, or alliance, secures the following is likely to head the government after the fall of Marcos:

1. Support of the military
2. Backing of the armed rebels
3. Credibility among the people, especially the young
4. A clear ideological position superior to that of the old government—most likely center-Left, but acceptable to the moderate Right
5. A practical program, with sufficient financial re-

sources (an estimated \$30-\$50 million) to carry out its goals

6. Party organization, with strong leaders and well-disciplined members

7. A leader or coalition of leaders exhibiting qualities exactly opposite those of Marcos, including charisma and public visibility

8. Strong outside support and effective alliances.

All parties have something to give up—but all have much to gain. Certainly none can benefit from the loss of human life and the destruction of property that are sure to attend a hotly contested transition to a new regime. Neither is there room in a future Philippines for any leader who sees his own solution, religious persuasion, or cultural identity as the only norm of conduct, for that would be to fall into the trap that the Marcos regime set for itself. And it is the very prospect of a unified and peaceful Philippines that will provide the poor with the hope of a better life, a hope denied them for most of the years since the country achieved independence.

All groups opposing Marcos have drawn inspiration from the courage and death of Benigno Aquino. His example could prove a rallying point for the divided opposition to come together in the pursuit of common goals. Working in their favor is the fact that the people of the Philippines are convinced that the government had a direct hand in Aquino's assassination.

The United States, the Soviet Union, and other major powers have heavy stakes in the outcome of the present turmoil. So too do the world's multinational corporations, which, though long-time supporters of Marcos, have in fact suffered from the graft and corruption of the Marcos regime. Always eager to back a winner, they will be closely watching for the emergence of a viable candidate.

Now is the time for the opposition parties to find a way to sit down together and, perhaps through the good offices of a third party, arbitrate their differences in a peaceful manner. The chances of Marcos acting quickly to prepare for a genuine dialogue with his democratic opponents and begin to form a transitional coalition government are hard to predict. But if reason prevails, a solution might well be forthcoming—one that would resolve the problems of the Philippines in a climate of peace and reconciliation.

COMING

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