

DEPENDENT NATIONALISM

Alexander R. Magno

Once in a while, the Marcos regime is seized by fits of nationalist rhetoric, not too inconspicuously inspired by reasons other than unblemished patriotism.

When the treaty governing the use by the US of military facilities in the Philippines was being renegotiated several years back, the air was thick with officially sanctioned anti-Americanism. As diplomats from both nations haggled across the table, obeisant Filipino bureaucrats kept a minor but constant barrage against the iniquities of Filipino-American "special relations". Academics did the rounds of the conference circuit, discoursing on the peculiar "love-hate" relationship between the Philippines and the United States. The President's own daughter led a half-hearted demonstration in front of the US embassy, denouncing the games the superpower played.

When the US conceded to a "compensation package" in exchange for the use of "Philippine" bases, the officially-induced carnival of nationalist rhetoric abated. When more serious nationalists demanded the withdrawal of American military facilities on Philippine soil, a new treaty was announced, rudely ending a public debate that had just gotten lively.

This year's government tantrums were provoked by a proposal in the US Congress to alter the mix of the "compensation package". The proposal would have drastically cut the amount of military aid while boosting the economic assistance component going to the Philippines this year. The move was aggravated by two additional proposals: one, to channel a substantial portion of the economic assistance through the Philippine Catholic Church; the other, requiring the American President to periodically report to Congress on the progress of political and economic reform in the Philippines.

To the US Congressional proposals, the Philippine government responded with a threat to abrogate the bases treaty; grounds: national pride and American intervention into Philippine domestic affairs.

The hysterical response of the Philippine government becomes understandable when seen in the context of the authoritarian regime's great dependence on foreign development and military aid.

Since its institutionalization via the imposition of martial law in 1972, the authoritarian state in the Philippines has expanded at a rate beyond what domestically-generated State revenue could afford. The expansion of the military establishment has been most phenomenal, and here the role played by foreign assistance—principally American—is most marked.

With the serious ongoing Philippine economic crisis, the dependent character of the authoritarian regime became most stark, the reliance of the entire state apparatus for extra funding from external sources became most overt.

The deterioration of the Philippine economy bore

tellingly on the factional nature of the Marcos regime. Increasing IMF influence over the debt-ridden economy reflects in the stronger role of the technocrats in the policy-making process. This, plus the rising economic dissatisfaction and general insecurity over the political continuity of the regime, has diminished the basis of support enjoyed by the Marcos faction. Thus, the Marcos faction is forced to rely more and more on its control of the military apparatus to maintain its political supremacy.

The assassination of Benigno Aquino, along with frequent reports of military atrocities has led to an irretrievable erosion of credibility. There is mounting pressure to shift increasingly scarce government resources to welfare services and education and away from the military. Teachers' strikes called attention to the massive military budget in the face of gross deterioration of the educational system. The first half of the year saw signs of disillusionment *with* the military and disenchantment *within* the military. A movement by retired generals as well as officers and men in active duty to reform the Armed Forces of the Philippines came out into the open.

In July, the scandal of huge property holdings abroad secretly owned by persons close to the ruling circle erupted in the news, embarrassing the Marcos faction and damaging its popularity even more. A campaign by the political opposition to impeach the President was seemingly answered by rumors of an impending reimposition of martial rule, underscoring the government's greater reliance on the apparatuses of armed repression.

The move by the American Congress to cut military aid this year threatened the very structure of the Marcos government's political existence. The proposal to channel part of the economic assistance package through a non-government institution lends validity to charges of large-scale corruption by the regime and signals a drop in international confidence in it. The proposal that the American President report to Congress on the progress of reforms in the Philippines unmasks the regime's subservience to the United States and has encouraged opponents of the Marcos regime to take bolder political steps at a time when it is most vulnerable.

The compromise package subsequently worked out by a joint committee of the House of Representatives and the Senate more or less restored the military aid component to its original posture. Both proposals to pass part of the economic aid through Church agencies and to require periodic reports on the progress of Philippine reforms were dropped.

Through bluff and bluster, the Marcos regime, concededly, won this round.

But whatever gains were made here would not cure the regime's strategic vulnerabilities. The last exchange merely revealed them.