

THE AQUINO CABINET: An Interesting Mix of Traditional Minds, New Blood and Progressive Spirits

The composition of the Aquino Cabinet has made government-watching an increasingly interesting area of political inquiry. The men and women who now head the various ministries and presidential commissions come from different political persuasions, and the approaches they will take towards national reconstruction will be varied and may even be controversial. Newly-released political detainee Ed de la Torre likens the government to a "premature baby" born out of multiple parentage, and the Cabinet seems to be a reflection of this.

Aquino's early appointment of Juan Ponce-Enrile as Minister of National Defense came as no surprise to many as he was definitely one of the "heroes of the hour". While many concede Enrile's decisive role in the February events, his appointment to a very powerful position has made some sectors wary. Questions about his political past (he was the chief administrator of martial law until Fabian Ver edged him out of power in the '80s), his alleged involvement in the "hidden wealth" controversy, as well as possibly in human rights violations have recently surfaced, and some groups have asked for his resignation pending the resolution of these cases.

For his part, Enrile has made known his willingness to be investigated on the issues raised against him. He has also repeatedly emphasized that the military is subordinate to civilian rule and has constantly professed his loyalty to President Aquino and the Filipino people. Nevertheless, Enrile is among those closely watched by groups like the Left, and some elements in the military itself.

Meanwhile, the appointment of General Fidel Ramos as Chief of Staff seems to have been better received, although his ties with the US have not escaped the eyes of the more vigilant observers. Ramos is known to be an honest and professional soldier, and in the best position to institute reforms in the military.

The traditional politicians also make up a part of the Cabinet. Led by Vice-president Salvador Laurel, who is also Foreign Affairs Minister, this group includes former assemblymen like Aquilino Pimentel (Local Governments Minister), Luis Villafrute (Reorganization Commissioner) and Ramon Mitra (Agriculture Minister). While constituting one political tendency, they are obviously not a cohesive group as their constant bickerings have shown. Conflicts based on party differences (UNIDO versus PDP-Laban) are evident, indicating that party interests still govern their respective moves.

Laurel is tightly watched by nationalist groups for his sympathies towards US interests in the Philippines. A crucial issue is the formulation of the country's policy towards ASEAN and the US bases here. Laurel will predictably be pro-US.

Making up a relatively sizeable bloc in the Cabinet are new faces from the business sector led by Finance Minister Jaime Ongpin and Minister of Trade and Industry Jose Concepcion (erstwhile NAMFREL Chairman). This group, which made itself particularly prominent during Cory Aquino's campaign, is a strong advocate of IMF-World Bank measures to resolve the economic crisis. The others are Health Minister Alfredo Bengzon, Tourism Minister Antonio Gonzales, Teodoro Locsin of the Information Ministry, and Lourdes Quisumbing of Education and Culture. They are also a varied lot in terms of organizational affiliations, business interests and political inclinations. Ongpin, of

Benguet Corp., belongs to a post-August 21 group of businessmen, called Manindigan, and so does Bengzon. Gonzales is also a prominent businessman, owner of Mondragon Industries, whose building was used as Cory Aquino's electoral campaign headquarters. Locsin comes from a family that owned the defunct Philippine Free Press which Marcos closed down in 1972. He reportedly wrote several of Cory's campaign speeches. Quisumbing, president of the Catholic Educators Association of the Philippines, is known to be close to the new president's circle of Jesuit adviser.

Prominent individuals strongly critical of the Marcos regime have been appointed to sensitive government positions. Nationalist lawyer and human rights activist Jose Diokno, thrown into jail in 1972, has been appointed to head a commission that will investigate human rights violations committed under the Marcos government. Diokno has made it known that no one will be spared from the investigations, in answer to questions about probable military involvement in the cases Jovito Salonga, exiled to the US at the height of martial law, was assigned to rid the bureaucracy of graft and corruption as head of the Commission on Good Government. His is an unenviable job, considering the amount of work he has to attend to, including the retrieval of Marcos' hidden wealth.

Not a few government watchers have remarked that to qualify for the Cabinet, one has to be a MABINI lawyer. MABINI (or the Movement of Attorneys for Brotherhood, Integrity and Nationalism) members occupy strategic positions in government and they include Presidential Spokesman Rene Saguisag, Executive Secretary Joker Arroyo, his Deputy Fulgencio Factoran, Customs Commissioner Wigberto Tanada and Labor Minister Augusto Sanchez. Active and visible during Cory Aquino's campaign, they are known to be champions of human rights and nationalism. A few are even identified as having "leftist" ideas. Already, MOLE's Sanchez has caught attention for his exposal of so-called "socialist" policies for the ministry.

Important positions have also gone to so-called street parliamentarians. The Ministry of Social Services and Development is headed by Dr. Mita Pardo de Tavera, with Prof. Karina David as her deputy. Both are leading members of an organization of professionals, KAAKBAY. Teopisto Guingona of BANDILA is Audit Commissioner, while left-leaning BAYAN's Alex Padilla landed a job as Customs Collector.

Apart from a few hold-overs from the Marcos government, the Aquino Cabinet is composed of men and women who have supported Cory's candidacy. A few had resigned from their organizations when these organizations opted to boycott the polls. Indeed they are representative of the varied lot of Filipinos who helped in the campaign for Cory, guarded their ballots, participated in the Luneta rallies, and kept vigil at EDSA.

The Cabinet members themselves are watching each other's moves, which, if influenced by their backgrounds and beliefs, can pull the Cabinet into varied directions. It would therefore serve the purpose of people power if the people kept on their vigil, this time on the government itself, to see to it that they do not stray from the goals of rebuilding the economy, enhancing the democratization process and charting a development program for the people.

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