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 hold 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 contradictory. Newly-released political detainees Ed de la Torre claims the government to a "premature baby" born out of multiple parentage, and the Cabinet seems to be a reflection of that.

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, the way a chief architect of martial law and the father of Andres, now Finance Secretary, was able to win a seat in the "hidden votes" controversy, as well as possible inhuman rights violations during his term, have raised some concern, 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 consistently praised the loyalty to President Aquino and the Filipino people. Nevertheless, Enrile is among those closely watched by groups like the Left, and some sectors in the military.

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 patron Avelino Dela Cruz (Local Government Secretary), Lab Llorente (Reorganization Commission) and Cesar Buendia (Agriculture Minister). While constituting one political tendency, they are obviously not a cohesive group as their constant squabbling has shown. Oligarchs 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 recent issue is the formulation of the country's policy towards ASEAN and the US base there. Laurel will predictably be pro-US.

Making up a relatively strong 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 (presidential NAPFAE 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 Bongzon, Tourism Minister Antonio Gonzalez, Teodoro Locsin of the Information Ministry, and Lourdes Quiambao of Education and Culture. They are also a varied lot in terms of organizational affiliations, business interests and political inclinations. Origin of Benguet Corp., belongs to a post-August 21 group of businessmen, called Manila, and so does Benigno Gonzalez is also a prominent businessman, owner of Monudras Industries, whose building was used as Cory Aquino's electoral campaign headquarters. Locsin comes from a family that owned the defunct Philippine Paper Co. from which Marcos inherited in 1972. He reportedly wrote a number of Cory's campaign speeches. Quiambao, president of the Catholic Educators Association of the Philippines, is known to be close to the new president's circle of Jesuit advisors.

Prominent individuals strongly critical of the Marcos regime have been appointed to sensitive government positions. National lawyer and human rights advocate 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 investigation, in answer to questions about possible military involvement in the case. Maria Sison, exiled in the US at the height of martial law, was assigned to the bureaucracy of foreign and corruption at head of the Commission on Good Government. He is an invaluable toll, considering the amount of work he has to attend to, including the retrieval of Marcos' wealth.

Not a few government watchers have remarked that to qualify for the Cabinet, one has to be a MARBIN lawyer. MARBIN (or the Movement of Attorneys for Brotherhood, Integrity and Nationalism) members occupy strategic positions in government and they include President's Spokesman Rene Saguisag, Executive Secretary Jobert Arroyo, his Deputy Victorio Escobosa, Ombudsman Conrado Ledesma, minister for Social Welfare and Development. In contrast, ARINCA, active 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 exposure of so-called "socialist" policies for the nation.

Important positions have also gone to so-called "street politicians". The Ministry of Social Services and Development is headed by Dr. Mitos Paredes de Torre, with Prof. Kahel de la Torre as deputy. Both are heading members of an organization of professionals, KAAKABAY. To that extent, Guia of BANLDA is a notable individual, while left-lever BAYAN's Alex Buda was a Job at Cagamas Collector.

Apart from a few holdovers from the Marcos administration, the Aquino Cabinet is comprised of men and women who have supported Cory's candidacy. A few have defected from their organizations when these organizations opted to boycott the polls. Indeed they are representatives of the varied lot of Filipinos who helped in the campaign for Cory, such as the periodicals which were published by the late Eulalio Salonga, and the Jakarta newspaper, Al Rayat.

The Cabinet members themselves are watching each other move, 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 an eye on their vigil, this time on the government itself, to see if they do not stay away from the success of rebuilding the country, enhancing the democracy process, and charting a development program for the people.

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