

The Burden of a Second Mandate

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The overwhelming affirmative vote given to the 1986 Constitution in the February plebiscite may be seen as a testimony to Cory Aquino's unfading popularity. Viewed against the background of the recent military-led attempts to overthrow her government, the vote signifies an unequivocal rejection of Marcos-loyalist elements and other coup plotters within the military.

While not necessarily identified with these loyalist elements, Mr. Juan Ponce Enrile was also eloquently repudiated in this event. He had campaigned strenuously against the Charter from North to South, taking potshots in the process at Mrs. Aquino's government. Yet the people overcame their accustomed indifference and trooped to the polls without being enticed by free rides or coerced by threats of imprisonment. And they voted overwhelmingly for the Charter. Even in Region 2, the Cagayan Valley, which is reputed to be Enrile country, the "No" votes led the "Yes" votes only by a very small margin. Everywhere else, Mr. Enrile's bombastic attacks against the draft Charter and Mrs. Aquino fell on deaf ears.

A Mandate To Do What?

The results of the February plebiscite have exceeded the expectations of many people, even President Aquino. The voter turn-out has been massive, the conduct of the plebiscite incredibly peaceful and orderly, and the endorsement of the new Charter has not only been decisive but truly spectacular. Any remaining doubt concerning the legitimacy of the Aquino government must now reside exclusively in the demented imagination of Marcos and in the bizarre reasoning of his loyal followers.

Yet, in the middle of this second euphoria, the question that we must raise is: **How will this new mandate be employed?** There is great apprehension among critical elements in Cory's

camp because the record of her government in the recent past has not been particularly inspiring.

In rhetoric, the Aquino government of the last eleven months has been revolutionary. Consistently, it vigorously asserted its right to govern by virtue of the mandate of the February 7th election and the Feb. 22-25 Revolution. Yet, in practice, Cory's government suffered from a type of political apoplexy which manifested itself in an almost suicidal refusal to exercise the enormous power of a revolutionary government. Consequently, it found itself publicly professing its revolutionary character while privately confessing its need for a broader democratic mandate.

It permitted itself to be heckled into timidity both by those who resorted to simple-minded legalism in order to cast doubt on its legitimacy, and by those who made a show of her government's lack of control of the entire military. Thus, on vital issues, it temporized pathetically, even when simple political expediency would have required it to broaden its constituency as a way of fortifying its defenses against logical counter-revolutionary bids for power by the extreme Right, and as a way of removing the wind from the sails of the Left.

For instance, it felt no particular urgency to launch its own program for the landless peasantry, preferring to continue the Marcos program until a new Congress could promulgate a new land reform program. On the occasion of Labor Day, May 1st 1986, when the revolutionary euphoria was still very much in the air, it found itself making public pronouncements about the restoration of the rights of workers which were systematically suppressed during the time of Marcos. Yet the executive order that would have enforced the Labor Day pronouncements remained unpromulgated nine months after. This much-awaited executive order (EO 111) was released only after the plebiscite.



Many repressive decrees left behind by Marcos, which made life miserable for countless dissenters, have remained unrepealed. Yet human rights advocacy was the centerpiece of Cory's platform of government when she was still a presidential candidate. The irony becomes even more disturbing when one remembers that in the presidential office, she is surrounded by human rights lawyers who were all active human rights campaigners during the time of Marcos.

The point is that the President and her advisers have actually squandered a rare opportunity to dismantle the remaining ramparts of an authoritarian and corrupt political system. Such a system was assembled by a government deploying dictatorial powers; it can only be dismantled by a leader resolutely employing the same powers. It is absolutely necessary for the President to be decisive about this because an entire culture has grown around, and now buttresses, this terrible system. And the inertia of the existing structures is beginning to overwhelm those who had assumed control of these structures, those who originally intended either to transform or abolish them.

When President Aquino decided to declare the revolutionary character of her government and promulgate her own Freedom Constitution in lieu of the Marcos-led Batasan which she had abolished, and the 1973 Constitution which she had repudiated, many celebrated this as the beginning of genuine change. But after taking this revolutionary path, the same government appeared to have succumbed to a paralyzing timidity, as if in atonement for its initial revolutionary temerity of abolishing the Batasan and nullifying the 1973 Constitution.

It is in this light that one may view the significance of the recent plebiscite. That exercise was singularly important for a presidency that perhaps secretly doubted its own legitimacy. The existence of a duly-ratified Constitution, which clearly and legally confirms the incumbent president's term of office,

should henceforth give the Aquino government a sound basis for a more activist assertion of its right and duty to run the country. And indeed, a more self-assured presidency might also merit greater respect from a hitherto recalcitrant military.

Few governments are given an almost blank cheque to re-order a society. Cory's government is unique in the sense that it is the recipient of this gift not only once but twice. Will she now wield her near-absolute powers more confidently, at least in the next few months before legislation becomes the sole prerogative of Congress? Will she use these now to correct the basic structural injustices that have accumulated in the course of our evolution into nationhood? Will she, in particular, address the urgent problem of peasant landlessness now, or will she defer to Congress?

Will she employ the legislative prerogatives of her revolutionary and constitutional government in order to overhaul the political system and bureaucracy which were elaborately designed by her fascist predecessor? When will the promised streamlining of the bureaucracy actually begin? How soon can we expect the much-delayed reorganization and cleansing of the military?

Will she use her enormous popularity to rally her depoliticized people behind the ideals of national sovereignty, social justice and popular democracy? Will she make use of the global adulation and support that she enjoys to articulate the yearning of all Third World peoples for autonomy and freedom from the deadweight that the entrenched interests of Mother America represent? Will she, for instance, stand up to the corporate arrogance of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the transnational banks, and the multinational corporations?

In theoretical terms, Cory is probably a hundred times more popular than Alan Garcia of Peru who recently shocked the financial world by his staunch refusal to sacrifice the interests of the majority of his people just to pay Peru's foreign debts. Would she use her popularity to compel the banks to recognize the Filipinos' moral right to repudiate some of the debts incurred in their name by a corrupt dictator who had lost the legitimacy to speak or to borrow in the name of the Filipino nation long before he was finally overthrown?

The Filipino people are waiting for the answers to these questions. With the landslide vote for the 1986 Constitution, they have reaffirmed the mandate they originally gave to Cory Aquino at EDSA. Nothing should stop the President now from doing what she perceives our people expect her to do as president. After nearly a year, the Aquino charisma is undoubtedly still there. But charisma is a matter of perception. It can wane if it is not affirmed in practice.

The worst thing that President Aquino can do now is to defer action on many vital questions on the ground that these can await proper Congressional attention. Our farmers and workers have said time and again that an elected Congress would not be able to give them the justice they demand. This fear is not without basis. Clearly, therefore, the opportunity to correct an injustice that has been built historically into our social order is very much in the President's hands. **[X]**