

Democratic Space, Rightward Drift

Much has been said about the "rightward drift" of the Aquino government, but little about the democratic space offered by the new liberal democratic arrangement.

In the generally civil but nonetheless bitter power struggles at the Palace, the conservative factions have tended to predominate over the nationalists and liberal reformists. Although the Aquino government's populist claims remain distinct, they have also become increasingly hollow.

The finance, trade and economic development policies of the new government hew closely to the model of dependent growth prescribed by the international financing syndicates. A structure of government conducive to the revival of elite democracy has been installed. The development of grassroots political institutions for projecting people's power has suffered from government disinterest.

The Aquino government's commitment to the peace process appears to have slackened. The militarists seem to have acquired a more influential voice after the peace negotiations collapsed. It looks imminent that the civil war will now be prosecuted full scale.

Most indicative of the conservative disposition of the Aquino government at the present phase is the manner in which the Cabinet has been reconstituted. The bloc of human rights lawyers that once occupied strategic roles at the top echelon of the executive branch has been decimated by purging. In their stead, a new technocratic corps drawn from corporate row has been installed.

The consolidation efforts of the Aquino government, as it begins its second year of governance, concentrates on two sectors: the military and the technocracy. The long-term implications of this type of consolidation is disturbing to say the least. The countervailing institutions of popular democracy are not being developed apace.

The conservative reconstitution of the Aquino government reflects the balance of class forces in Philippine society. While the February Uprising did overthrow the authoritarian political arrangement, it left the configuration of social forces largely intact. The powerful big business lobby exercises principal influence in the formation of national policies. It puts primacy on continuity, stability and the cultivation of investor confidence in the market. Within that set of considerations, little room is left for policy innovation and alternative visions of development.

The present dominance of the conservative tendency over the political arrangement invites the extremist perception that there is no substantial differentiation between the present arrangement and the one preceding it.

The extremist position glosses over the liberal democratic characteristic of the present arrangement, the historical possibilities it offers and the peculiar political dynamic it entails.

While the preceding authoritarian arrangement waged an unbridled war of extermination against the popular movements, the present liberal democratic arrangement cannot do the same without running against the grain of its legitimacy and its claim to political superiority over dictatorship.

The present arrangement is constrained to affirm the principle of political pluralism. The new liberal democratic ethos open up a substantial democratic space wherein mechanisms for popular empowerment may be developed. Within this democratic space new progressive forces may crystallize and new modes of popular engagement advanced.

The present political situation encourages experimentation with new forms of people's power. It also allows for a diversity of forms of struggle, each adapted to the peculiarities of the various class, sectoral and political forces.

It is important to analytically differentiate between the factional characteristics of the government apparatus and the alignment of forces in the larger political field. These are related but distinct arenas of struggle.

The extremist position absolutizes the dominance of the conservative tendency in the sphere of formal governance and imputes it as a character of the entire political arrangement. By not cultivating the novel political potentials offered by the democratic space, the extremist position shall result in the abandonment of crucial mediating arenas of political engagement. The extremist view shall assume the dynamic of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The open-ended dynamic of the present political situation ought not to be theoretically foreclosed by the reification of old formulations. The new political condition demands great theoretical and practical flexibility.

New historical developments have a way of transcending old strategies. Unless actual political forces maintain a critical distance from strategic formulations reflective of an earlier period — rather than be fixated to them — there is danger that they, too, may be transcended by new circumstances. **K**