

# A Season of Coups\* (Reflections on the Military in Politics)

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The new Constitution legalized the politics of people's power, but another form of extra-legal politics is already emerging. The politics of *coup d'etat* is one of the dreadful legacies of the Marcos years. By giving them a taste of power, the erstwhile dictatorship turned the military into a distinct political force. Politicians in uniform are now trying to carve out a wider sphere for autonomous action; some are even trying to play a self-designated role as judges of political propriety.

Marcos became the first victim of his own creation. In February 1986 the politicized soldiery coalesced with the people's democratic movement to drive him out of power. But the February Revolution did not resolve their basic contradictions. It only took a few months for these contradictions to resurface, provoking a series of aborted *coups* against the fledgling Aquino government.

Until thoroughgoing military reforms are instituted and countervailing civilian structures erected, the prospect of a *coup* will always be with us. While the unofficial chains of command and the military fraternities which flourished in Marcos' time have yet to be disbanded, the liberal democratic government can only rely on an alert citizenry, on people who are organized to respond quickly and decisively to any military plot.

The dismissal of Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile and the ratification of the new charter undoubtedly set back the

timetable of neo-fascism, but this evil will not disappear so easily. It is urgent and important for students of political science to understand the nature and dynamics of a *coup* in order to help consolidate our democratic gains in the February Revolution.

This paper reviews and analyzes the events of February, July, November 1986 and January 1987. Since the *coup* is a new phenomenon in our country, its specific features are still unfolding. At this stage, we can only make a preliminary contribution to what should be a continuing intellectual effort.

## What Is a Coup d'Etat?

To uphold their democratic pretensions, the British and American imperialists use foreign words to denote certain undemocratic practices they sponsor in Third World countries. A *coup d'etat* is a French word which is more or less synonymous to *putsch* in German and *golpe de estado* in Spanish America. It refers to the forcible overthrow of a government by a faction in that government. Unlike an insurrection (typically a poor man's project), the *coup* involves persons already occupying positions of power. An *autogolpe* or a self-coup is what Marcos staged on September 21, 1972: the head of a constitutional government himself discards the constitution and dissolves the representative organs so he can rule by decree. In Marxist literature this is termed *Bonapartism*, after Louis Bonaparte, an elected president who crowned himself as Emperor Napoleon III of France.

Besides capturing the presidential palace, the *coup* entails the seizure of vital facilities such as the mass media, telephone system, electric company, banks, etc. The specific tactical targets vary from country to country, depending on

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Loyalist soldiers at the Manila Hotel takeover.

the level of technology and organization in the national capital.

There are three elements essential to a successful *coup*: surprise, speed and precision. Because of their guns, mechanical behavior, and propensity for unquestioning obedience, soldiers are best suited to execute it. A *coup* is typically planned, organized and directed by a faction of the officer corps. It is possible for civilians to take the initiative, but they succeed only if they win over a critical segment of the military. It is not necessary (in fact, it seldom happens) to involve the entire army. More often, only a few strategically positioned units are activated, while the rest stay neutral because they are caught by surprise or they sympathize with the project.

#### Coup d'Etat vs. Insurrection

A *coup* is sometimes mistaken for an insurrection because the two have common features. An insurrection also requires speed and precision. The difference is that an insurrection is the handiwork of outsiders to the establishment, while the *coup* is an inside job. The *coup* relies on the military, the insurrection relies on the masses. Because it must mobilize the masses, the insurrection sacrifices the element of secrecy; a propaganda blitz invariably precedes any attempt to grab power.

Agitators tirelessly summon the workers to insurrection, but their words fall on deaf ears until favorable objective conditions arise. In Russia in 1917, for instance, the ineptitude of Kerensky's provisional government, the collapse of his vaunted "grand offensive," and the aborted *coup* by General Kornilov were among the factors which made an insurrection in October possible. The ensuing political crisis was neither wished into existence nor deliberately created by the Bols-

heviks. Lenin's astuteness was shown in the way he grasped the possibilities of the situation and his decisiveness at the moment for action.

If it succeeds, the insurrection may evolve into a revolution, i.e., the transfer of power from one class to another. This was what happened in Russia. The *coup*, by contrast, is usually motivated by fear of a revolution, by the desire of the elite to hold back the popular forces. There have been left-wing *coups* in Portugal, Libya, Ethiopia and Afghanistan, but these are historical oddities. In all such cases, the left-wing officers concealed their true colors until they were firmly in power. Led by establishment figures and relying on military support, the *coup d'etat* — right-wing or left-wing — assigns a peripheral role to the masses.

#### Prelude to EDSA

Based on these definitions, was the "miracle at EDSA" a *coup* or an insurrection? If it was a *coup*, why did it require people's power? If an insurrection, why did it involve the army? I work on the hypothesis that it was partly a *coup* and partly an insurrection. To comprehend the convergence of the people's democratic movement and the military uprising, let us re-examine that episode to determine precisely the roles of the military and the popular masses.

The EDSA phenomenon cannot be taken apart from the years of struggle against the Marcos dictatorship. The story is, of course, too long and complex to recount in this paper. Suffice it to point out that the campaign for the snap elections of February 7, 1986 united and mobilized the diverse anti-Marcos forces, except a significant bloc who chose to boycott and was subsequently consigned to the periphery in the succeeding events. The rampant frauds and terrorism

committed by Marcos' henchmen aroused them to a higher pitch of agitation. When Mrs. Aquino, refusing to concede defeat, called for "active non-violent civil disobedience" on February 16, an insurrectionary mood was created. Hence, the people at that critical juncture were prepared organizationally and psychologically to defy the dictatorship when a dissident faction in the armed forces led by Defense Minister Enrile and General Fidel Ramos began the mutiny in the evening of February 22. The people responded quickly and decisively because an insurrectionary mood already prevailed not only in Metro Manila but also in the rest of the country.

First to respond were, of course, the cause-oriented groups, veterans of the parliament of the streets. They provided the critical mass around which the hitherto apathetic and still unorganized could gather. One remarkable feature of this phenomenon was the degree of spontaneity. To estimate, at least 80% of the hundreds of thousands who manned the barricades never had participated in any confrontation before. Many had their first organizational experience in Cory's election campaign, others as NAMFREL volunteers.

To recapture the insurrectionary mood, one can recall how the UP community responded to the events of the time. The full impact of those events can be appreciated more fully if one dispels the popular myth that the UP has always been a hotbed of activism. The students may have a rightful claim to that proud tradition, but not the faculty. Professors who refuse to outgrow their youthful ardor constitute a small minority. Normally it requires utmost provocation for most of the faculty to descend from their ivory towers.

The excessive zeal of the local *barangay* captain to create a lead for Marcos angered even the politically indifferent. A professor who was pro-Marcos until polling day said, "I don't mind them cheating, as long as they don't let me see it. When the NAMFREL volunteers caught flying voters with carbonized papers inside the UP precincts and the *barangay* captain started shouting obscenities at a colleague, I felt personally insulted."

Even before the launching of Cory's civil disobedience campaign, the faculty in Diliman and Manila signed a resolution declaring that the academic community was going on strike and would not resume classes until ordered by "President-elect Corazon Aquino". Since Marcos was still entrenched in power, signing that resolution was in itself an act of courage. They knew they were committing sedition against a regime they considered illegitimate, and they were not oblivious of the consequences of their action.

Thus, when Cory called for a nationwide boycott of banks, newspapers and products of companies owned by Marcos and his cronies, there was immediate and whole-hearted support on campus. Neighbors who were not in the habit of talking with one another began holding *pulong bahays* to plan how they can implement the boycott. There were long

queues at the campus branches of the Philippine National Bank, the Republic Planters Bank and the Traders Royal Bank. Students, faculty member and administrative personnel were withdrawing their deposits; or opening deposits in the morning and withdrawing them that same afternoon in the hope of inducing a bank run. They also pressured the UP Food Service and the privately owned canteens not to sell the products of San Miguel Corporation.

This was typical of the mood in the whole country when, on February 22, the defense minister and the vice chief of staff of the armed forces announced their "withdrawal of support" from the Marcos government. It was not surprising, therefore, that people rushed to EDSA to express solidarity and defend the mutineers.

### EDSA: A Triumphant Insurrection and a Frustrated Coup

In announcing his "withdrawal of support" from Marcos, Enrile depicted the mutiny as a defensive response to an order for their arrest. Later, the loquacious colonels in his staff boasted that they in the Reform the Armed Forces Movement (RAM) planned the *coup* as early as September 1985. Their goal was to force Marcos to abdicate in favor of a military-civilian junta, probably with Enrile as strongman. This plan was held in abeyance when Marcos called for snap elections. As Lt. Col. Kapunan explained, "We saw how people pinned their hopes on the elections and we didn't want to grab that hope away from them."

Anticipating massive cheating, they went ahead laying the groundwork for a *coup*. RAM initiated "Project Kamalayan 86", a series of prayer meetings ostensibly to inform the soldiers of their duty to protect the sanctity of the ballot. In fact, it was the operational cover for organizing a nationwide network of conspirators. As a RAM leader admitted, "No one really believed that an honest election can be had by merely praying for it."

When the plot was reactivated soon after the elections, it encountered serious problems. Kapunan's wife led a walkout of computer operators at the Commission on Elections tabulation center, and the RAM junior officers, disgusted at their senior colleagues' apparent indifference to rampant frauds, issued a statement of their own endorsing civil disobedience. These uncoordinated initiatives by persons identified with RAM alerted General Fabian Ver, the AFP chief of staff and Marcos' chief hatchetman. Enrile and his boys panicked on February 21, when they heard of the arrest of the strike force tasked with capturing Marcos and his family. That could only mean that their plot had been exposed.

The day after, on February 22, Enrile and his boys hurriedly replaced their *coup* plan with a plan for mutiny. As one would gather from the preceding discussion, a *coup* is an offensive strategy; its goal is to seize power. A mutiny, by contrast, is defensive; its goal is either to protest or express



desperation. On the fateful day of February 22, Enrile and his cohorts embarked on a suicidal stake-out in Camps Crame and Aguinaldo. But even with Gen. Ramos as a last minute recruit, they could not pack sufficient strength to cancel out the overwhelming superiority of loyalist forces in Metro Manila. Their only chance of survival and victory depended on reinforcements from combat zones where the troops were mostly commanded by PMA graduates who either belonged to RAM or sympathized with it.

Only a few and relatively small units arrived from nearby provinces. Since they had little time to solve the transport problem, only one unit arrived from Mindanao where most combat-effective units were assigned: 105 men from Cotabato who hijacked a commercial plane and got themselves arrested upon landing at the Manila airport.

In their original plan, people were to play a merely supportive role, lending a semblance of breadth for a narrow military operation. People's power became a crucial factor only when Ramos and Enrile realized their weakness, given the balance of forces in Metro Manila. They pleaded for and obtained people's support by identifying their cause with Cory's.

As the whole world knows, the people flocked to EDSA by tens of thousands, armed with nothing more lethal than towels drenched in *kalamansi* juice. Following instructions from Gen. Ramos, they sealed all entrances to Crame. This established what the military calls "defense in depth" which simply means keeping the enemy at a safe distance. Normally, defense in depth is achieved by artillery barrage, but because the mutineers sorely lacked artillery, an ocean of unarmed but determined people served the purpose.

While awaiting reinforcement, defense in depth is an appropriate tactic for a beleaguered military unit. In the case of the Crame mutineers, however, hopes for reinforcement faded after the first day. But the unexpected occurred: a "miracle of transubstantiation." From a defensive weapon, people's power became an offensive weapon. Not only did they block the tanks, people also broke the morale of Marcos' men. Starting the morning of February 24, massive defections quickly and decisively shifted the balance of forces. The rebels gained control of the skies when the 15th Strike Wing and the 5th Fighter Wing of the Philippine Air Force repudiated the dictatorship. The Philippine Navy also defected, moving three battleships from Sangley Point to place the presidential palace within the range of their powerful guns. Thus the "oath-taking" of Marcos on February 25 had an air of tragi-comedy because by then he had lost the armed forces, the last remaining prop of his unpopular regime.

Analyzed closely, nothing was miraculous. What happened was explicable in secular terms, although it may take a bit of romance from the episode. When soldiers march to battle, when there is both the impulse and the space to think about the prospect of death, morale becomes extremely important. The soldiers must be absolutely convinced of the righteousness of the side they are on and absolutely convinced that the other side is evil. At EDSA, Ver's troops were uncertain if Marcos was worth dying for; and the enemy they were ordered to crush included their PMA classmates as well as Gen. Fidel Ramos, the most esteemed officer in the armed forces.

Another psychological constraint was the fact that the people facing their tanks were not the usual "red crowd" who sometimes prick their egos with insolent slogans, or stir their adrenalin with rocks and pill boxes. In bold contrast, the "yellow crowd" offered smiles and flowers. Yet, friendly as they were, they also displayed an iron will. They refused to cede an inch of ground. When they put themselves in a trance with the rosary, even the hideous sound of tanks could not scare them. Given that situation, there were only two ways of dispersing them: provoke a panic with tear-gas canisters dropped from above, or fire at them. But, to the Filipino Rambos, it is one thing to shoot unknown peasants in Escalante, and another to fire at nuns and beauty queens while the electronic mediamen recorded everything for television sets all over the world.

#### Junta to Matriarchy

The imminence of death brings out the sublime in everyone's character, but the prospect of victory brings back the worst. Let us recall that Enrile and his boys planned a *coup* months before the snap elections, and their goal was to establish a civilian-military *junta*. People's power not only shielded the beleaguered mutineers, it also prevented the mutiny from developing into a *coup*. When he joined the EDSA crowd in rejoicing over a false report that Marcos had fled, Enrile spoke

like a conquering hero; the liberator who delivered the country from dictatorship. Not once did he mention Cory Aquino. And he took upon himself the presidential prerogative of appointing a new chief of staff of the armed forces. Suspicious, the activists of cause-oriented organizations detected between the vowels of his speech a dangerous craving for power.

Alarmed, they held an impromptu meeting at the sidewalk of EDSA to plan a course of action should Enrile install himself as the new dictator. Had he made such intention explicit while the siege was on, the people might have abandoned him to the tender mercies of Gen. Ver since they were too Christian to lynch him themselves. At that level of mobilization, he had no chance against people's power. The people were there not for love of him. They were there to enforce Cory's victory. Perhaps he could not even count on the troops who were awed by the courage and solidarity of the people.

The abortion of the *coup* forced Enrile to lower his objective. He himself admitted later that his first option was indeed the establishment of a junta; second was a coalition government with himself and Cory as co-equal partners. The proclamation of Cory as president was only his third option. Because events unfolded in such a way that people's power emerged as the decisive factor, Enrile settled for the third option.

### The Enrile Challenge

From the moment of her inauguration Cory Aquino ruled like a proper president. She appointed ministers without consulting Enrile and ignored his recommendees for cabinet appointment. She released political detainees against her defense minister's advice and excluded him from the peace

talks with the communist guerrillas. For sometime, Enrile nursed his wounds in silence while allowing his law partner, Rene Cayetano, to say in public what he was evidently thinking in private.

When the issue of whether to declare a "revolutionary government" or to govern under the 1973 Constitution divided Cory's advisers, Enrile joined the advocates for retention of the 1973 Constitution. Tailor-made for Marcos, that constitution contained Amendment No. 6 which empowered the president to legislate. But during her election campaign Cory pledged never to exercise Amendment No. 6. Since the Batasang Pambansa (National Parliament) was packed with KBL members, she would have been a hostage to a cluster of *balimbings* around Enrile.

Cory eventually decided to discard the 1973 Constitution, dissolve the Batasang Pambansa and promulgate the so-called "Freedom Constitution." Frustrated once again, Enrile started alluding to a secret agreement in February under which Cory pledged to rule through a coalition in which Enrile holds co-equal status. In other words, the President would have to consult her coalition partners in constituting the cabinet and deciding on national policies. But nobody, not even Ramos who was supposed to be part of the coalition, would attest that there was indeed such an agreement, treacherously arranged behind the backs of the people who installed Cory as president and protected Enrile. His one witness was former MP Homobono Adaza who, unfortunately, suffers from serious credibility problems.

### The Manila Hotel Farce

The attitude of his cabinet colleagues after the Marcos loyalist *coup* at the Manila Hotel on July 6 must have confirmed in Enrile's mind that he was being marginalized. Instead

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of thanking and congratulating him for defusing the *coup*, he was grilled at the next cabinet meeting on the probable complicity of his boys.

For unexplained reasons, the Aquino government has suppressed the report of a special committee headed by Health Minister Alfredo Bengzon to investigate the Manila Hotel incident. Instead of exonerating Enrile, secrecy kept alive the suspicion that, if not Enrile himself, his boys were indirectly involved. Sources close to Arturo Tolentino have admitted that the "acting president" agreed to take his "oath of office" when assured that the wily defense minister was about to do to Cory what he did to Marcos in February.

Some 300 soldiers provided a military prop to the political farce. On their way from Camp Olivas in Pampanga, they were waving loyalist banners and flashing loyalist hand signals. It is indeed amazing how they eluded those responsible for the security of the national capital. Is the defense establishment that inept? Or did the mischievous colonels in Enrile's staff patronize the show?

There were thousands of angry Cory supporters who wanted to encircle the Manila Hotel, cut off its electric and water supplies, and prevent the entry of food. But they were dispersed on orders of Enrile. Even those who brought food for the government troops were asked to deposit their contributions at points very far from the Manila Hotel. All this led cynics to suspect that Enrile was deliberately preventing a display of people's power in order to convey a message to the Aquino government that it survives only on the sufferance of the armed forces.

The aftermath further deepened the mystery. The soldiers at the Manila Hotel surrendered without waiting for the deadline set by Enrile, revealing a remarkable lack of will to fight. When interviewed by media, some were baffled, protesting that they were only obeying orders from the Ministry of National Defense. Some also claimed they belonged to "The Guardians", a military fraternity whose president is none other than Col. Honasan, chief security officer of Enrile. Lt. Col. Kapunan, chief of Enrile's special intelligence service, made the indiscreet remark that when he saw the infamous Col. Rolando Abadilla at the Manila Hotel (who was supposed to be under house arrest), he did not see a wicked human rights violator but a fellow officer who shared his aversion to communism. And Enrile, in a show of generosity, recommended 30 push-ups as penalty for trying to overthrow a government whose security was supposed to be his primary concern.

Enrile thereafter organized the right-wing pole in the Aquino government. He minced no words in criticizing the government of which he was defense minister. He charged some cabinet members of being communists or communist sympathizers. He condemned Cory's policy of national reconciliation as a communist-inspired plot to tie down the hands of the armed forces while permitting the New People's Army to expand and consolidate.

### Early Symptoms of Neofascism

As early as August 2, 1986 the Bukluran sa Ikaunlad ng Sosyalistang Isip at Gawa (BISIG) warned of a "neo-fascist coup". The immediate and most serious threat to our democratic space, a BISIG statement suggested, no longer comes from the Marcos loyalists, but "from within the Aquino government itself, led either by one who is untainted by complicity in the crimes of Marcos or one who is supposed to have atoned for his sins by a timely political somersault."

BISIG perceived a sinister effort by Enrile to finish his unfinished *coup*. He was already beginning to rally all forces opposed to Cory, including the Marcos loyalists. But, the BISIG statement asserted,

Nothing can hold these heterogenous elements together but a shared paranoia towards communism. They see communists everywhere. ... They imagine that the communists are trying to grab every available bureaucratic post. To create a false sense of urgency, the NPA (which has always maintained defensive units in Metro Manila since its founding in 1969) is reported as if it is entering the urban centers for the first time, as if it is already 'surrounding the cities from the countryside'.

If Enrile was indeed the backstage director of the Manila Hotel farce or his boys acted on their own, it is inconceivable that their aim was to restore Marcos in power. More likely the purpose was not even to depose Cory but just pressure her to grant them a share of power commensurate to the role they played in the February Revolution. This was definitely the objective of succeeding "*coups d' talks*" in which the military politicians were openly involved.

Foreign and local journalists who flocked to the Ministry of National Defense were fed with "confidential information" on how the gallant soldiers of the "New" AFP would reduce the lady President into a figurehead, and how, if she remained obstinate, they would push her off the throne to pave the way for the Ibanag Cromwell.

The garrulous conspirators grossly misjudged the lady president's nerves. They thought that their psywar tactics would suffice to make her yield to their impositions, central to which was a return to the 1973 Constitution. Had she given in to this, however, Cory would have become a decorative piece, as powerless as the Queen of England.

### "God Save the Queen"

Having opened their mouths too widely, the Enrile boys were hard pressed to make good their threat. But before they could strike the first blow, one of them committed a fatal blunder. This particular aide of Enrile tried to recruit Lt. Col.



Victor Corpus, the former PMA instructor who shocked the nation in 1971 by defecting to the New People's Army. He urged Corpus to issue a public statement exposing Mrs. Aquino and her martyred husband as secret supporters of the communist guerrillas. He also asked Corpus to help create panic by warning Metro Manila residents of the presence of NPA assassination squads. In his effort to motivate Corpus, he laid out details of an elaborate *coup* plan code-named "God Save the Queen". But rabidly loyal to the President (who not only freed him from a decade of detention but also reinstated him in the armed forces), Corpus informed Ramos that a *coup* was in the offing, this time by the Enrile faction of RAM.

The assassination of labor leader Rolando Olalia and the bombing of North EDSA Shoemart fit the pattern in Corpus' revelations. Then in the afternoon of November 22, rumors circulated that troops loyal to Enrile were moved to Metro Manila from Cagayan, Isabela and Tarlac. With his oversized security group under Col. Honasan and the anti-terrorist unit of Lt. Col. Kapunan, they would have sufficed to oust the Aquino government, if the other military units in Metro Manila had remained neutral. But they would be no match against the Special Action Forces (SAF) of the Philippine Constabulary and the Philippine Army, both loyal to Ramos. The AFP chief of staff thus became the critical factor: the "man in the middle", as one newspaper described him.

But the plotters misjudged Ramos as well. Despite his refusal to be part of the conspiracy when invited, they still expected him to join them when it comes to a crunch rather than risk a split in the armed forces. They never reckoned with him as an active adversary. Indeed, without Ramos on her side, Cory would have fallen as quickly as Marcos. Blunted by nine months of disuse, people's power was not ready to avert a *coup*. Few military units were loyal to her. Aside from the Presidential Security Group of Col. Voltaire Gazmin, there was only the Capital Regional Command (CAPCOM) of Gen. Montañó, but the latter — as demonstrated in the Mendiola affair — included many undependable elements.

It was Ramos who "saved the Queen". In late afternoon or early evening of November 22, Honasan, in behalf of Enrile, issued an alert order to troops throughout the country. They were just awaiting further instructions when Ramos countermanded Honasan's order. When the troops began to obey Ramos, Enrile and his boys knew that the game was over. Enrile meekly submitted his resignation to President Aquino at noon the following day and the mischievous colonels pledged allegiance to the new defense minister.

The heroes of February became the villains of November. They were the same "reformists" who, exactly nine months before, captured the public imagination for starting the mutiny which caused the downfall of Marcos. Unfortunately, their loyalty to Enrile and their fanatical anti-communism turned them against the liberal democratic government they helped install.

It is inaccurate and unfair, however, to condemn the entire RAM for complicity in "God Save the Queen". The RAM personalities who got involved in the conspiracy formed only a part of the organization. The majority — young and idealistic junior officers — were also instrumental in thwarting the *coup* attempt. They, too, were outraged by their comrades whose behavior they perceived as unbecoming of a professional soldier. The Enrile boys, however, were better known because, in Marcos' time, they often appeared on television and gave press conferences under the defense minister's protective mantle.

The dismissal of Enrile was a popular decision, but the rejoicing was subdued. Although the *coup* was defeated, it made people more painfully aware of the fragility of the democratic space. A sense of relief mingled with the fear that the Aquino government, dependent on Ramos for keeping the armed forces in check, is now more susceptible to pressures from the military and the Americans. Some even expressed the apprehension that Ramos attained by fidelity what Enrile failed to get by coercion.

There was also the suspicion that members of the military establishment were covering up the faults of each other. After being dismissed for his involvement in the *coup*, Enrile received a medal for valor. None of the mischievous colonels in his staff were brought before the court martial; they were simply reassigned and placed on "floating status." Brig.-Gen. Tan-Gatue (speaking in behalf of Gen. Ramos) even denied at a television talk show that there was a *coup* attempt. If indeed there was none, why was Enrile removed? Why were Cols. Honasan, Kapunan, Turingan and Robles relegated to "floating status"?

Tan-Gatue based his denial on the fact that there was little movement of troops. But *coups* are not always accompanied by troop movements. In the "bloodless *coups*" of Thailand, the contending parties just call each other by phone, comparing the number, size and firepower of their troops: the

weaker side capitulates without putting up a fight. This was apparently what happened last November. When he knew that Ramos had rallied a superior force for the government, Enrile meekly submitted his resignation.

### Marcos and His Last Hurrah

Marcos is different. Until now he refuses to concede defeat. He claims that under the 1973 Constitution, only the

A keen observer of Philippine politics could readily discern the legalistic mind of Marcos in the aborted *coup* of January 27, 1987. Two of the leading characters in the Manila Hotel farce - Col. Rolando Abadilla and Lt. Col. Reynaldo Cabauatan - also figured in this incident. The participating soldiers were all wearing the official colors of the Marcos-Tolentino movement. They flashed KBL hand signs. Moreover, the loyalist radio stations and the loyalist superstars were ecstatic over the uprising.



*"The threat of a coup may have already become a permanent feature of our national life."*

Batasang Pambansa (parliament) can proclaim the winners of the presidential and vice-presidential elections. Since he was the one proclaimed and he took an "oath of office" before he fled, he maintains that he is still the president.

Cory Aquino, on the theory that she was proclaimed by the people in the February Revolution, discarded the 1973 Constitution and governed under a "Freedom Constitution." With his legalistic mind, Marcos easily disputed the "Freedom Constitution" because, in truth, it was a presidential decree, not a constitution in the proper sense of the word. Realizing that ratification of the Cory-sponsored draft in a credible plebiscite would strip him of the "legal basis" for his pretension to the presidency, he urged his devout followers in the Philippines to campaign for its rejection.

In Hawaii, Marcos already rented a jumbo jet from a company that specializes in flying *contras* to Nicaragua, while his capricious wife Imelda went on a shopping spree for combat boots and jungle fatigue uniforms. In his province of Ilocos Norte, the stage was set for a triumphant homecoming. His sick nonagenarian mother was smuggled from a government hospital in Manila and brought to Ilocos Norte.

All this left no doubt that the January 1987 *coup* was a Marcos-inspired plot to forestall the February 2 plebiscite. But the question inevitably arises: Were Enrile and his boys also involved? There is neither direct nor circumstantial evidence of their complicity, although it is possible that they knew. Despite their hostility to Mrs. Aquino, one cannot take the pro-Enrile and pro-Marcos factions in the armed forces as a



single bloc. The loyalists cannot easily forget that Enrile betrayed Marcos in February and duped Tolentino in July.

Although Enrile likewise opposed the draft Constitution, the matter was not as crucial to him as it was to Marcos. While campaigning for rejection, his political henchmen were more concerned with rebuilding the *Nacionalista Party* in readiness for the forthcoming elections under the new Constitution. Enrile is unlikely to risk whatever influence he has left in the army for a venture that serves somebody else's purpose. Furthermore, Enrile is well aware of Marcos' vindictiveness.

Like the Manila Hotel fiasco, the January 1987 *coup* was badly planned and clumsily executed. A small contingent tried to capture Villamor Air Base (headquarters of the air force where C-130 transport planes are stationed), and another raided Sangley Point (headquarters of the navy and the 15th Strike Wing of the air force). In both cases, they were easily routed.

More dramatic but also more inept was the take-over of Channel 7. Under the command of Col. Oscar Canlas, loyalist troops entered the premises in the early hours of the morning, while there was no broadcasting. All technical employees of the studio were out, but neither did Canlas bring his own television technicians. The oversight defeated the very purpose of capturing the station.

Speaking before television that afternoon of January 27, an angry President Aquino used tough words. Unlike in Manila Hotel there would be no forgiveness this time. There is a moment for reconciliation and a moment for retribution. All soldiers who took part in the latest *coup* face the court martial; the on-going problem in Channel 7 would be subjected to military solution.

Deviating from the line set by the President, Ramos reverted to the velvet-glove approach. He pleaded for hours with the stubborn and self-righteous Col. Canlas and even tried to cajole the rebel officer by commending him for his "idealism". Ramos sounded like the negotiator of a besieged army. When Canlas spurned his pleas and treated his cajolery with the contempt it deserves, only then did Ramos allow the tear-gas bombing of Channel 7. At this point, however, some 80 politicized officers (all PMA graduates) led by none other than Col. Honasan staged a mini-demonstration outside Ramos' office and warned him not to employ force against the "misguided elements". Ramos relented. He suspended the tear-gas bombing and resumed negotiations with Canlas.

The threat of a renewed tear-gas attack persuaded Col. Canlas and his men in Channel 7 to surrender. Yet they were able to extract from Ramos the face-saving concession that they be allowed to march to detention with their guns, minus their magazines. Since then Minister Iletto has created four special courts martial to try the "misguided elements," but so far no decision has been rendered. This contributes to a growing cynicism towards investigating bodies which produce no visible results.

## In Lieu of a Conclusion

The histories of Third World nations where *coups d'etat* are a perennial problem prove that once a military is politicized, it cannot be depoliticized. Having had an exhilarating experience of meddling in politics, some elements in the Philippine armed forces will always be tempted to intervene whenever the country undergoes a crisis. This cannot be wished away or cancelled by symbolic gestures. The threat of a *coup* may have already become a permanent feature of our national life.

Had the electorate rejected the new Constitution, a *coup* would have been irresistible. That would have given an unmistakable signal to the politicized soldiery that the liberal democratic government no longer enjoys popular support. *Coups* thrive where legitimacy remains an open question.

The overwhelming vote for the new Constitution shelved the legitimacy issue, but it does not guarantee stability. There are many and complex causes for the instability of our present situation. Should these plunge our country to another crisis, the season of *coups* will surely recur.

A public opinion survey taken by the Asian Research Organization, Inc. (local version of the Gallup Poll) three weeks before the plebiscite showed that only 40% had decided to vote "Yes," while 55% were undecided. Since President Aquino had been campaigning for the draft Constitution months before the survey was taken, the results indicated that her popularity alone was inadequate to ensure a convincing victory. The "true Coryistas" (the "Yes na Yes crowd") were already among the 40%.

But the second poll conducted three days before the plebiscite showed a decisive swing from "Undecided" to "Yes". Asian Research predicted 71% for ratification, which fell just a little short of the final 76% — in a plebiscite with an extraordinarily heavy turnout of registered voters. Let it be stressed that this second survey was taken after the aborted loyalist *coup* of January 27. One can conclude from this that the overwhelming majority for ratification was only partially a vote of confidence for President Aquino. To a large extent, it was also a vote against Marcos, a vote against *coups d'etat*, a mandate for cleansing the service of politicians in uniform.

Not only the civilians but also the RAM officers who stood by the Aquino government agree that the velvet-glove approach is not the way to restore discipline in the armed forces. We have already seen how 30 push-ups and the oath of allegiance to the Freedom Constitution failed to deter Cols. Abadilla and Cabauatan from repeating in January the sedition they committed in July. If the stringent rules of military discipline are to be enforced, the *coup* plotters must be taken to task. Push-ups embolden them and encourage others to follow their bad example.

So much hope is pinned by the pious Cory Aquino government on the so-called "value formation program" of

Ramos and Iletto. This is an exercise in futility. No amount of seminars will teach old rascals good manners and right conduct. The doctrine of civilian supremacy can be written on every page of the constitution and preached in every military parade. Every soldier can be required to swear fidelity to democracy. But all this will come to naught when a chance to grab power arises.

Now that our soldiers have been politicized, we might as well politicize them properly. They should be made aware of the disastrous consequences of military rule in other countries, and how military intervention, far from solving any problem, compounds and makes it worse. In a language they understand, they must be made to grasp the rationale for civilian supremacy. And above all, they must be helped out of the simplistic Cold War ideology which perceives politics in black and white. Theirs is the task of quelling insurgency of whatever persuasion, but it is not for them to judge the legitimacy of contending ideas. Anti-communism as a means of motivating the soldiers can be detrimental to democracy; it is the ideological root of contemporary fascism.

Politicization in the positive sense is too cumbersome to be undertaken for the entire armed forces. Our efforts should focus on the PMA because, after all, the PMA cadets are destined to be the regular officers of the armed forces. Bluntly put, they are the potential *coup* plotters. But it takes years for the fruits of an educational program to ripen. Meanwhile, the present liberal democratic government is faced by an immediate threat.

Its urgent task is to build countervailing civilian structures. Cory cannot hope to stay in power on the basis of a spontaneous movement. By its very nature, the spontaneous is ephemeral, it cannot be sustained. People's power has to be organized, institutionalized, structured; otherwise, it cannot respond to a *coup* quickly and decisively. When people's power is dormant, democracy must rely on the military: the force with the greatest potential for destroying democracy itself.

At her victory mass on March 2, 1986, President Aquino put forward a brilliant idea. She suggested the formation of *people's councils*, presumably a substitute for the corrupt

*barangays* of Marcos. Whereas the *barangay* was an extension of the bureaucracy and an instrument for social engineering of the authoritarian regime, the people's councils could have been the embodiment of people's power.

Unfortunately, the people's organizations did not pick it up and the President herself did not follow it up. She alone could have spearheaded its formation by requiring the ministries and local governments to deal with and course resources and services through the people's councils, instead of the *barangays*. The *barangay* is essentially the system of ward leaders, an intermediary between the grassroots community and the government. In Marcos' time, it served as a channel for discriminatory allocation of political patronage.

Had the government institutionalized the *pulong-bahay*, a socio-political unit which proliferated after Ninoy's assassination; had it encouraged people to meet regularly to discuss their community problems and, through the people's councils, transmit to the appropriate government agencies their demands and grievances, people's power could have become a living reality, not just a memory to be recollected once a year. This would have kept people alert and ready to mobilize against an impending *coup*. Besides defending the democratic space won in the February Revolution, the people's councils could be a structure for self-activity and initiative from below, and a counter foil to bureaucratic corruption and insensitivity.

Cory's government has, unwisely, kept the bureaucracy intact. KBL practices are again visible. Even in mobilizing support for Cory, the activists of cause-oriented groups who have turned bureaucrats employ the familiar *hakot* system. The new bureaucrats seem to have forgotten too that this is good only for parades and public rallies, not for confronting the armed enemies of democracy.

Plagued by worsening problems she inherited from Marcos, President Cory Aquino has to run a race against time. A year has already been wasted with lackluster performance. If her government proceeds in this fashion for another year, her charisma will dissipate and popular enthusiasm will turn into destructive cynicism. Should such a grim scenario materialize, another despot will come forward, professing to save the republic and reform society. ❏

Nonoy Marcelo / Manila Chronicle

