

Congress Must Move Fast

Francisco A. Magno

The massive voters' turnout in the recent Congressional elections could hardly be explained as a sign of the growing political maturity of the Filipino people considering the still highly observable predominance of patronage and personalities in the Philippine political culture. Rather, such a phenomenon could be more meaningfully interpreted as a manifestation of the people's enthusiasm to participate in the political process, no matter how limited it may be after having been deprived of it through the long years of martial law. Underneath this enthusiasm is the people's hope for change.

Apparently, the people's romance with Cory Aquino has not ended. Many people voted for Lakas ng Bayan (LABAN) not because these candidates raised meaningful issues but because their hands were raised as a symbol of endorsement by the President. Aside from the so-called "Cory magic", others view the predominance of pro-Administration LABAN candidates emerging victorious in both chambers of Congress to signify the preference of most Filipinos for centrist politics.

At best, the centrist politics of LABAN is transitory in character. After all, LABAN was meant to be a coalition of political parties and organizations ranging from the Right of Center to the Left of Center whose main objective is the acquisition by pro-Administration candidates of Congressional majorities in both Houses. This was all part of the Administration's goal of achieving political stability in the face of countless coup threats from neo-fascist forces unleashed after the fall of the dictatorship. Centrist politics characterized by compromise and accommodation thus dictated the tempo and mode of governance in the country in the aftermath of the February Revolution. With the establishment of a new Congress, the elusive political stability sought by the Aquino government is guaranteed, at least in the medium term.

Given such a state of affairs, the ideological differences within the LABAN coalition would be allowed to freely come to the fore. A realignment of forces within the coalition in accordance with divergent positions with respect to issues like the U.S. bases, the mode of foreign debt repayment and the interpretation of just compensation and retention limits in the land reform program would most likely occur. It would be interesting, for instance, to see how party affiliation would affect the nature of debates in the Senate especially as regards the bases issue. PDP-Laban, it is to be noted, is explicitly anti-bases, at least in its declaration of principles. The political practice, of course, is something else particularly among tradi-

tional politicians. Ostensibly, the deliberations on the bases issue would be closely watched by the U.S. government since 9 anti-bases Senators would be enough to obstruct the automatic retention of the bases beyond 1992.

Given the composition of Congress, what types of legislations are we to expect from its august halls? First of all, it is important to assess the character of the recently held political exercise. If the shrill denunciations of whole-scale vote-buying, especially at the district level, were to be an indication, it would appear that the House of Representatives would be essentially elitist and conservative in character. Moreover, a cursory look at the names of winning candidates would reveal the recurrence of certain political family names. The old political warlords, if not their spouses, sons or daughters, and other relatives appear to be back in Congress. In this regard, the constitutional mandate prohibiting political dynasties would meet stiff opposition in Congress.

Given the entrenchment of vested elite interests in Congress, it is expected that the land reform program would meet stubborn resistance from the landowning legislators. In terms of the program for economic recovery, the Congressmen would most likely vote for the entry of more foreign investments into the country. However, with respect to the foreign debt problem, we could expect the legislature to deliberate over other options aside from the adamant Ongpin posture of repaying all foreign loans contracted under the Marcos regime regardless of the onerous terms and usage of many of them.

If there is any bright side to the new Congress, it might as well be the probable emphasis on anti-dictatorship legislations. These may take various forms - from substantial human rights and military reform legislations to the ceremonial renaming of streets and public parks so as to wipe off the remaining traces of the Marcos dictatorship. Such legislations shall have smooth sailing in the Senate while encountering some rough time in the Lower House where former Marcos henchmen have reinserted themselves.

Amidst the gnawing poverty and underdevelopment which afflicts the majority of Filipinos, the new Congress is tasked with the heavy responsibility to make itself relevant to the greater masses of people especially as regards social welfare and social justice legislations. It has to move fast before history overtakes itself.