

The August 28 Coup: The Possibilities and Limits of the Military Imagination

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Introduction

Col. Gregorio Honasan's adventure last August 28 reveals to us the extent to which power politics has seized the military's imagination. The politicization process within the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) has reached a critical stage where factions within the military have recognized their capacity to intervene in politics and society. This phenomenon has had no precedent in history. That Honasan and his group nearly succeeded in their August *golpe de estado* will have long-term implications on the directions of Philippine politics.

Whether we like it or not post-Marcos politics has come to include a new potent force: a politicized soldiery that is quite aware of its powers and social preponderance. More specifically, there has emerged younger generations of officers that radically differ from their predecessors and current seniors in terms of philosophy, perceptions of themselves and the social mission that they want to accomplish. The old model of the Filipino soldier, loyal and obedient to civilian authority, unquestioning in his performance and capable of sacrifice to implement the orders of authority, has begun to fade away. And in his stead, a Filipino *caudillo* has been born.

Unlike the aging "constitutionalist" generals who still cling to standard Western military "myths" of "respect for civilian rule" and "professionalism", these new corps resemble closely their Spanish and Latin American counterparts (and in Southeast Asia, the Thai Young Turks). Their idealism is not only restricted to the military; they have acquired a strong political commitment to involve the armed forces in practically all spheres of civil society. And unlike the deposed Marcos generals whose sole interest was regime protection and viewing the armed forces as a source of personal booty, these officers identify themselves with certain fundamental military values

that are creatively combined with their own definitions of larger social and political norms.

This political consciousness among middle level officers has been accompanied by a growing appreciation of power politics in the Aquino period. The Filipino *caudillos* have started to learn the art of politics which hitherto was confined to elite politicians, political movements and parties. What is, however, threatening is that their political education carries with it a militarist praxis as seen in the August 28 coup. The seizure of power by these *caudillos* will definitely usher in a more repressive regime, far different from the constitutional pretensions that embellished the Marcos dictatorship.

Martial Law and Birth of the Filipino Caudillo

The politicization of this officers' corps is largely attributed to two phenomena: the 14-years of dictatorship and the February Revolution. When the Marcos regime relied on the AFP as its major prop of support, it expanded its role to include a direct, yet subordinate hand in governance. This altered the political sensitivity of the armed forces and ingrained into its consciousness the value of politics. By the late 70s, the AFP became a new locus of power especially in the provinces where martial law displaced the local elites and removed their bases of influence. And as the regime survived one crisis after another, its dependence on the armed forces became more and more pronounced such that on the eve of its downfall, it was generally perceived that only the military and the United States could ensure the continued survival of the Marcos regime.

Marcos' practice of selective patronage, however, was replicated in the military hierarchy. It became the cause of dissension and conflict between the Marcos generals and the middle-level officers corps who initially felt that the AFP had seriously deviated from its original role as an institution in society and was becoming ineffective as the legally-ascribed instrument of coercion. This dissension took an organizational form when graduates from the elite Philippine Military Academy organized the Reform AFP Movement (RAM) which took the cudgels for initiating changes within the military and restoring the traditions lost by Marcos' preferential treatment of the Ver clique.

Marcos recognized the RAM as an essential threat to his regime's survival but was caught in a dilemma as to how to neutralize it. To move against it would decisively cripple the entire armed forces as RAM consisted of the cream of the AFP officer corps whose locations in the hierarchy - being commanders of field troops - made them indispensable in the face of a growing threat from the revolutionary Left and rejuvenated urban democratic movement. This dilemma allowed the RAM to extend its network and give it space to reach out for public recognition, thereby strengthening its posture in society.

However, the rapid changes in the political climate after

Arnold C. Jumpyay



the Aquino assassination and the growing isolation of the regime forced the RAM to transcend mere demands for military reforms and activate moves to depose Marcos in favor of a transitional junta. From an association for reforms, RAM had been transformed into a movement that sought to establish the military's strong presence in a post-Marcos society. This scenario was to be altered by the February Revolution.

The Revolution and The Rise of the Neo-Fascists

The outcome of the February Revolution did not subscribe to the original schemes of its participants. The Aquino project of deposing Marcos through a massive civil disobedience movement was interrupted by the RAM revolt while the junta plans of the latter were abruptly put aside when "people's power" became their sole defense against the regime. Instead, the Revolution forced the two forces arraigned against Marcos to establish a *modus vivendi* in the post-Marcos era. This coalition of convenience created a profound impact on the manner in which the Aquino regime governed in the following months.

Many officers within the RAM gave the new regime a chance to solve the problems in the military and in the relationship between the civilian government and the armed forces which led most of them to revolt. Others cautiously supported the government as they were suspicious of the other blocs within the coalition. They gave their pledge of allegiance to Aquino only because the acknowledged leaders of the revolt (Ramos and Enrile) became part of the coalition and thereby would be effective deterrents to what they perceived as the left-wing factions inside it. As long as Enrile and Ramos were in the leadership, the officers felt that the military would be shielded from attacks by their liberal and left-leaning civilian counterparts.

But having tasted power during the Revolution, it was difficult for the armed forces to wean itself away from the desire to exercise it. Once politicized, it could not limit its concern solely on the restoration of lost traditions.

The infighting inside the Aquino cabinet, the earlier policies of the regime towards the Left, and the broad anti-dictatorship movement began to cause ripples inside the military. As Aquino and Enrile slowly parted ways over a number of issues, the colonels of RAM began to take a more critical stance vis-a-vis the regime they helped put to power.

The Manila Hotel seizure by pro-Marcos elements in the armed forces signalled the beginning of a series of coup attempts. These attested to growing military defiance of Aquino and the impunity with which rebellious soldiers were able to prevent government from taking decisive measures against them. Enrile's patronage merely engendered more military resistance. Meanwhile, military animosities were being fueled by what it perceived as the kid glove treatment by government of the National Democratic Front (NDF)

Arnold C. Jumpyay



and the cease-fire talks with the insurgents on December 1986. Problems of military welfare and efforts by some Aquino officials to coddle favorites in the AFP further incensed officers who thought that such problems and practices were supposed to die away with the departure of Marcos.

All these finally emboldened an inner group within RAM to revive once more an aborted plan for a junta. The impending break between Enrile and Aquino convinced the RAMboys to establish links with other factions in the military and with civilian officials and organizations identified with the deposed dictator. To endear themselves to the ordinary soldier, they also proclaimed themselves the champions of the grievances and aspirations of the entire rank and file.

The November coup marked the break between RAM, Enrile and the Aquino government. While government de-emphasized the impact of the "God Save the Queen" plot, the overt participation of some leading RAM personalities signalled a new stage in the growing confrontation between Aquino and this politicized faction of the armed forces. Government swiftly moved to undermine the RAM's influence, assigning RAM leaders like Cols. Honasan, Kapunan, Turingan and Navy Captain Rex Robles to "inconsequential" positions to punish and prevent them from broadening their influence within the AFP. Enrile, RAM's patron inside the cabinet, was replaced while Ramos, who eventually supported Aquino against Enrile remained and in fact, appeared to have expanded his influence inside the government.

The failure of the November coup and the punitive measures taken by government to prevent future attempts from occurring unfortunately did not stop the growing politicization of the military. On the contrary, instead of the new government paving the way for a depoliticization process (which had been the original intentions of RAM), the situation and Aquino's indecisiveness in leading the country out of the morass of the dictatorship merely deepened the process. If in the early days of February 1986, the politicized factions scaled down their political ambitions in favor of recognizing Aquino, the November coup rekindled and strengthened their original plans of taking over the reins of government.

Ramos and RAM: From Allies to Antagonists

Mention must be made of another alliance of convenience which the February events brought forth: that of RAM and Gen. Fidel Ramos. The events surrounding the coup will show us that these two actors only merged forces in the last minute when the RAM coup plans against Marcos failed and the colonels decided to set up a last ditch stand at Camps Aguinaldo and Crame. Ramos was a last recruit into the revolt. But his stature as the model of a professional soldier placed the RAM at a strong psychological advantage against the forces of General Ver.

The positive outcome of the February events thrust

Arnold C. Jumpang



Ramos to prominence and he was immediately taken in as the new AFP chief. RAM supported Ramos' appointment but only regarded this as a transition. Ramos was, after all, an extender general, but his stature was important in the early pursuit for reforms within the military. Ramos' stature, together with Enrile's political astuteness, would also hopefully protect the interest of the armed forces against members of the Aquino government whom RAM suspected of having leftist inclinations.

The Ramos-RAM honeymoon, however, soured when the chief of staff began to veer towards Aquino even as he was able to prevent civilian inroads into the AFP (through bodies like the Presidential Commission on Human Rights) and thereby preserve the corporate interests of the military. While Enrile was becoming increasingly critical of Aquino's policies, Ramos, in most cases, adopted a neutral posture or tried to mediate between the two leaders. Ramos -- in the eyes of RAM -- was also beginning to show signs of disregarding his transitional role and appearing to be desirous of a longer stay in office. When Ramos took the side of the beleaguered Queen in the November coup, the fragile bond that was established in February 1986 was broken. Ramos -- with Aquino's concurrence -- would immediately move against the RAMboys to contain them and prevent their influence from rapidly spreading. But the manner in which RAM officers led by Honasan forced Ramos to back out from his plan to use force against the GMA-7 renegades in January 1987 showed that this containment policy did not effectively work out.



A final note on conflicting perceptions needs mentioning in this section. Ramos' leadership and his policy of restoring old AFP traditions eroded and destroyed by martial law betrayed an inability of the Aquino generals to realize that old military categories have lost their relevance. Ramos failed to understand the politicization process in the AFP and how it has affected the younger generations of officers. By insisting on the continuing relevance of old concepts like "constitutionalism", "respect for civilian authority" and the "non-partisanship" of the armed forces, the Aquino generals, in effect, posed an ideological and political challenge to the younger generation that has had a different appreciation of politics in the post-Marcos period. The problems encountered by the new regime and the many instances of real or imagined regime indecisiveness became aggravating factors to this conflict of perceptions.

With the January 1987 coup, the proverbial straw broke the RAM-Ramos alliance and set the younger officers on a path of confrontation with the AFP leadership that was to culminate in the events of August 28.

The Non-Military Components of the Coup: The Struggle for Legitimation and Delegitimation

Preparations for the August 28 coup revealed a military imagination that had acquired a new level of sophistication by virtue of a faction's appreciation of power politics.

Working mainly through the alumni network of the PMA, the RAMBoys, now united under Honasan, managed to create a powerful base within the military. Through the network, they were able to reach out to regional and provincial commands and strategic units in the air force and the army, where troops could be mustered in support of any coup attempt. Col. Honasan and his group quietly built the firepower necessary for the success of the adventure. The past coups were, for them a valuable learning process to test the viability of different strategies as well as learn from mistakes. By August it appeared that they were already in a position to depose Aquino.

The oil price hike and the public backlash on this unpopular move by the government signalled a decline in the popularity of Aquino. For Honasan et. al. the appropriate moment to launch their adventure had come.

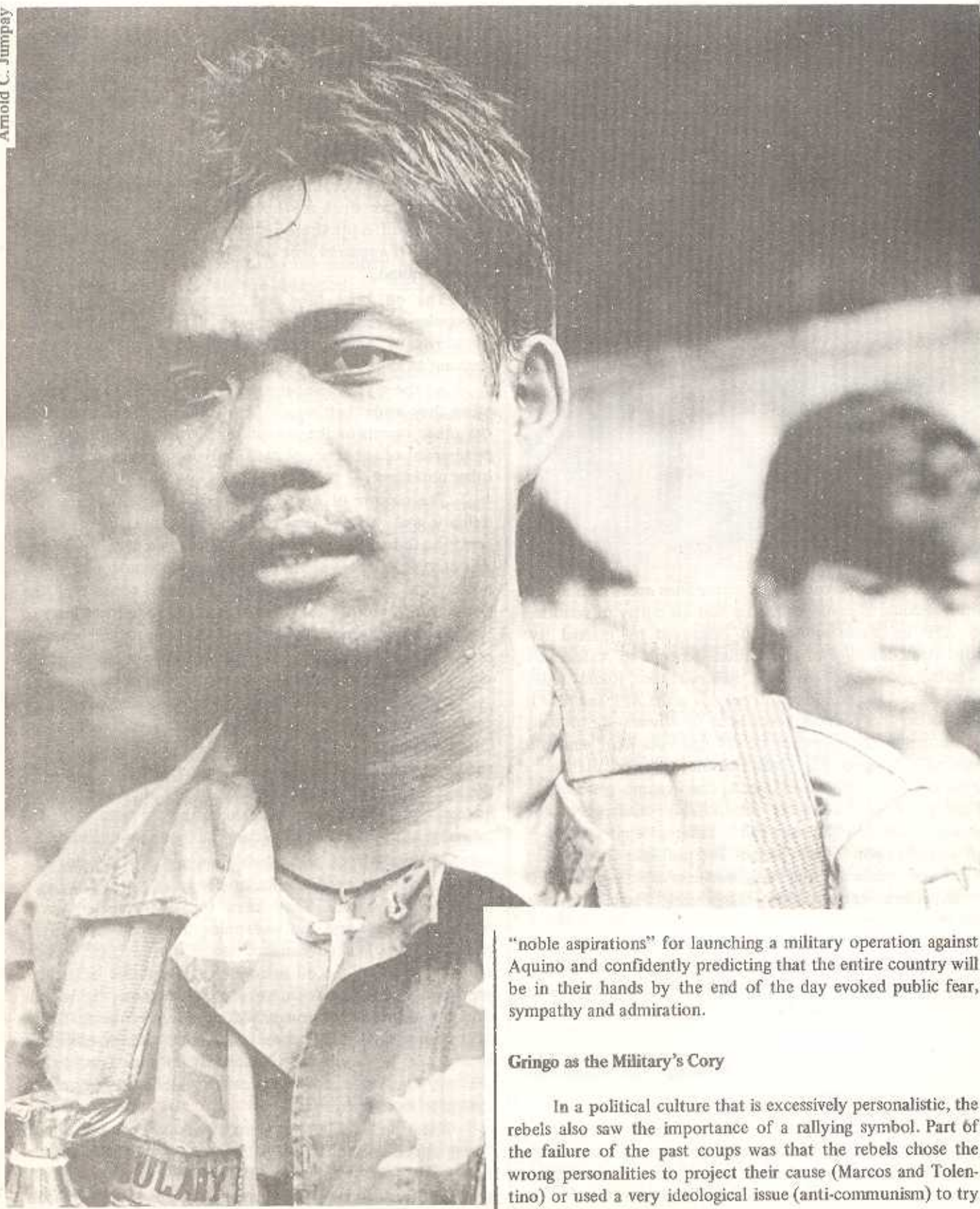
As the saying goes, the plotters covered "all the bases" when they made their attack. This paper shall concentrate on the other aspects of the over-all rebel strategy as the military component of the strategy itself had already been covered by other observers.

The capture of Aquino and Malacañang was not only a military goal, it was intended to be a psychological tactic to convince those who remained neutral to side with the rebels. The seizure of the symbol of State power would also isolate others who may tenaciously maintain their support of the government. Moreover, Villamor air base was not only a landing area for support units from the provinces and a staging area for rebel air attacks. Its seizure was also intended to project the image of Manila as being in a state-of-siege.

Rebel sophistication was at its high point when they captured Channels 9 and 13 and the Armed Forces radio inside Camp Aguinaldo and used these as conduits for psychological and propaganda warfare. Honasan and his group had learned the lessons of the February Revolution and the GMA-7 fiasco in terms of understanding the value of media as an agent for "winning hearts and minds" in the military and the public.

An analysis of the rebels' message showed that the plotters creatively used popular criticisms as a means to legitimize their adventure. They knew that these criticisms cut across class lines and can undermine the broad base of the regime. Issues like government incompetence, the "leftist" cabinet members, the oil price increases, cabinet bickerings, etc., were causing strong disenchantment among the middle class supporters of government. Moreover, government failure to address basic social issues like land reform, declining incomes (a potent issue which is not only confined to the military) and the recent oil price hike increased government alienation from the masses.

These public criticisms were ingeniously combined with "motherhood-and-apple-pie" statements ("freedom, justice, equality") to gain public support to their cause. The image of a young officer humbly broadcasting in Channel 13 the rebels'



"noble aspirations" for launching a military operation against Aquino and confidently predicting that the entire country will be in their hands by the end of the day evoked public fear, sympathy and admiration.

Gringo as the Military's Cory

In a political culture that is excessively personalistic, the rebels also saw the importance of a rallying symbol. Part of the failure of the past coups was that the rebels chose the wrong personalities to project their cause (Marcos and Tolentino) or used a very ideological issue (anti-communism) to try



to rally popular support. Marcos and Tolentino were not exactly the figures worth dying for in a political adventure against the popular Aquino. The past plotters were wanting in ideologues and figures that commanded political respect. Charging the regime as having failed in its anti-communist crusade was likewise an explanation that needed time and some intelligent elaboration for the public to understand, much more appreciate.

In Honasan, the rebels found that appropriate personality. "Gringo" Honasan's popularity in the military preceded his involvement in the February Revolution. His distinguished war record as a Mindanao veteran, and the many stories that accompanied it, created the mystique and the charisma of the noble soldier. At a time when the armed forces was in search of well-intentioned leaders, Honasan was the perfect negation of a command marked by indecisiveness. As such he was worthy of emulation by soldiers and officers. His leading role in the revolt against Marcos enhanced his "heroic" image in

the eyes of the armed forces. One can even dare suggest that in Honasan the military had found its Cory Aquino.

The danger of Honasan becoming a counter-symbol was that his charisma also made deep imprints among those outside of the military. With his involvement in the Revolution and the subsequent media exposure of the RAM, a part of the Gringo mystique had spread to the public mind. The attempts of human rights groups to link him with certain abuses committed during the dictatorship did not even dent the perception of Honasan as the epitome of the officer and gentleman. This image was to suffer with the tension and eventual conflict between Enrile and Aquino, but it endured as a result of the indecisiveness of government to publicly censure and move against the leaders and perpetrators of these revolts.

During the August 28 coup, the image of Honasan as counter-symbol would be used to the hilt by the leaders of the coup. And compared to the cigar-smoking and didactic Gen. Ramos, Honasan's public projection was infinitely superior. When interviewed on the captured Armed Forces radio, he called on popular support to their "quests" for justice with a mild voice that was unexpected of a soldier-at-war. TV footage of the coup leader showed him to be extremely serious and committed. Honasan as the rebel with a cause gained for the plotters a certain mileage in their psychological and propaganda war against the government.

Yet, this strategy was not enough to sustain the revolt. By the late hours of August 28, the rebels were completely routed by government troops, and Honasan was forced to withdraw from Camp Aquinaldo.

The Limits of the Military Imagination: Other Explanations of the "Failed" Coup

The failure to capture Malacañang, to hold on to Villamor air base, and to use the captured television stations as an alternative communications center prevented the August 28 coup from becoming a success. Rebel psy-warfare and strategy for legitimation likewise failed them at the crucial moment when they needed to consolidate the positions they had already controlled. For purposes of this paper, let us concentrate on the latter.

The neutrality of military units and services does work well for a coup plot. But if the plotters are unable to show significant signs of strength in the process, and allow government to survive their early attacks, neutrality can also prove the rebel's bane. This was precisely what happened to Honasan and his rebels. Their inability to capture Malacañang and hold on to Villamor and the media facilities forfeited their chance to take advantage of the neutrality taken by most units guarding the Metro Manila area. By noontime, with reinforcements from Mindanao, government was already besieging rebel positions. Moreover, the longer the coup would take, the more the tendency among the rebel troops -- most of whom are uninformed of the plans -- to revert back to a neutral stance. Honasan's firepower began to dwindle by the later hours of the day when his troops, discovering that they were not transported to Manila to come to the rescue of the government, began to surrender.

The image of a noble rebel also waned when civilians began to get killed in the crossfire or were summarily gunned down by rebel soldiers. The government's propaganda counter-offensive focused on these atrocities and thereby undermined public sympathy to their cause. Rebel technical ignorance and incompetence did not allow them to fully utilize the media facilities under their control. They sat content with merely repeating their original announcement which, as time passed, became less effective as compared to the developing sophistication of government propaganda. Of course, the presence of Marcos loyalists in the television stations further eroded the rebel's image to the popular mind.

The mid-day impasse finally worked against the propaganda initiative of the rebels. The rebels were well aware that in its early part, public acceptance of a coup depends on the degree of support rebel propaganda can draw. In a stand-still, however, the coup plotters have to reveal more of their agenda and go beyond the typical "motherhood-and-apple-pie" imagery since people will begin to inquire more about what they initially heard or saw. Honasan's vacillation to publicly admit his junta plans -- a move which he knew he could not make unless he alienates himself from the people -- proved costly in the end. It allowed the government to undercut his plot by warning of a Marcosian restoration with a Gringo face.

Notwithstanding their well-laid plans, Honasan and his plotters were unable to transcend the compartmentalized thinking that was characteristic of the military mind. The coup was a repetition of the February revolt, perhaps with some degree of elaboration. This only betrayed Honasan's limited imagination and his failure to fully learn from the past. For instance, Honasan was unable to appreciate the fact that even the 1986 revolt was a failure. Moreover, Honasan could not also understand the radically changed conditions after the ouster of Marcos.

Finally, the absence of support from non-military sectors gave the rebels very limited options to move after the surgical strike. No assistance came from politicians, groups and organizations of national stature that could have taken care of the struggle for legitimation. And other than a crowd of onlookers, no spontaneous mass support converged at Aguinaldo and Villamor. While in theory and in other experiences, coups do not need popular initiatives for legitimation purposes, in the case of the Philippines where a moral revolution placed to power one of the most popular leaders of the country, any attempt to overthrow the Aquino government needs a certain moral hegemony that can effectively gravitate certain sectors towards the rebels. Honasan, in his application of the techniques of a coup d'etat, literally applied what he learned from books and failed to take into account this Philippine specificity. Thus, despite well-prepared firepower, the plotters in the end were unable to push through with their adventure.

Impasse and Continuing Threat

It is wishful thinking on the part of government to declare that the rebel's defeat and hasty retreat was their "last hurrah". While over 700 of them were captured and scores were killed, a significant number, including the leaders of the coup, have escaped the government's counter-attack and melted into the areas outside Metro Manila. The rebels have also managed to keep intact their provincial units who either withdrew to safe areas or acquiesced to a return to the formal chain of command without necessarily disbanding themselves.

In short, the coup plotters lost a battle but they did not necessarily lose the war. We are sure that at this very moment, Honasan et. al., are busy consolidating their forces, assessing where they failed. Lessons are painfully being learned from the August 28 failure, to be used in preparation for the next battles that lie ahead.

Should government continue with its old ways, and unless more effective initiatives are launched by people's organizations to revive "people's power", it will only be a matter of time before another coup attempt shall be made by this ultra-right faction. This time, the attempt at seizing power may just prove to be successful. **K**