

Towards Understanding Coups and Civilian-Military Relations

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It is in the nature of transition regimes that civilian-military relations therein tend to be almost always fluid in character. They are particularly so when the polity is in the process of transforming itself from dictatorship to democracy, since the military has had a prominent role as a control mechanism in the former political order. What makes the situation doubly critical is the possession by the military of the monopoly over the legitimate possession and use of arms.

Having played a prominent role in the previous political order, the military would tend to be resistive of an alteration of that role towards the direction of its diminution or contraction. Viewed in this light, there is nothing much so unpredictable or so abnormal in the behavior of certain sectors in the Philippine military since the People Power Revolution of February 1986.

We may recall that before 1972, civilian-military relations were based on the principle of civilian supremacy over the military in theory and in fact. Certain institutional arrangements facilitated the forging of these relations on the basis of this principle. Control powers vested in political institutions ensured the observance of civilian supremacy such as the executive and legislative powers over military promotions and the budget, the legislative's investigative powers, and the executive's powers as Commander-in-Chief of the country's armed forces. Strong socialization into this principle among both civilians and military personnel reinforced the perpetuation of the ethos of civilian dominance over the military. In combination with the absence of a militaristic tradition in the Philippines, and the persistence of the early images of the soldier as a stranger and an agent of colonial repression, the above factors were responsible for the subordination of the military to civilian political authority.

The Philippine experience under the dictatorship altered this pattern of civilian-military relations in this country. While governed by the principle of civilian supremacy over the



military, these relations were maintained by the control, no longer of several institutions as in the past, but of the concentrated powers of the dictator. The destruction of democratic political institutions with control powers over the military that attended the rise of the dictatorship made the observance of civilian supremacy extremely fragile. Depending no longer on institutions, but on a person, the demise of that person from the political scene compromised the observance of the principle.

The maintenance or observance of civilian supremacy beyond the dictatorship was complicated by the participation of the military in the popular uprising against the regime and the ensuing installation of a new government committed to democratic reconstruction. Instead of acknowledging the military's subordinate role in the popular uprising, a role which might or might not have been precipitated by unselfish motives, there appeared a tendency and a belief that it was the military that gave power to rule to the new govern-

ment. As such, it claimed a partnership role in the new dispensation.

As a consequence of this perception, some of its members now claim the right to determine issues of legitimacy, in spite of the existence of a Supreme Court which must determine controversies regarding legitimacy, and in spite of the reality of an enormously popular leader whose charisma seems to hold regardless of her own share of political mistakes and errors of judgment and good sense.

Perceptions compound the problem of restoring civilian-military relations within the constitutionally-mandated framework of civilian supremacy over the military *at all times*. Unfortunately among men (and women, too) perceptions tend to be the basis of human conclusions and actions. By their nature, perceptions may or may not be an accurate reflection of reality. Nevertheless, they are used as the basis of action.

Thus, the perception that the military installed Cory Aquino to power amid the backdrop of the popular uprising,

which incidentally made the military revolt against the dictatorship viable, and the perception by some of its members that the military had been cast aside from the ruling coalition, only serve to exacerbate festering resentment stemming from the military's legitimate grievances. These include miserably low salaries for its rank and file (with the lowest private receiving a measly P1,693.69 gross monthly pay), inadequate supplies, clothing, medicine and housing, outdated equipment, deprofessionalization, contempt for men in uniform among ranking members of the Aquino cabinet, and uneven policies regarding national reconciliation, human rights, and the insurgency.

Distancing between the military and the civilian populace continues. This not only keeps morale at a horribly low level, but it creates resentment among many honest soldiers who smart from the easy tendency among civilians to lump all in the military under the same negative mantle.

The reality of these legitimate grievances among the ordinary soldiers make them easy prey to manipulative and ambitious officers. The tragedy is that these same soldiers were equally victims, in the same way that civilians were victims, of the manipulative rulers of the previous regime. The greater tragedy is that they are the ones who get caught, who die, who are left to face the liability incurred by their officers who should know better than to mislead these men whose training demands obedience to superior orders and subordination to the control of the chain of command.

Another problem which further threatens the fragility of civilian supremacy and the process of democratic restoration is the contending, if not anti-thetical character of decision-making under a hierarchical authoritarian structure such as the one found in the military, and that under a democratic system. The former is efficient, because it does not allow for the play of competing claims and demands, but is, for the most part based on the presumed superiority of knowledge and competence of the superior authority. Democratic decision-making, on the other hand, is cumbersome, slow and painful because it thrives on, and is sustained by the competition of diverse claims and interests, by the art of bargaining and compromise, by the time-consuming, and therefore, "inefficient and cost-ineffective" way of finding a solution or decision acceptable to the majority. Consequently, the slowness with which the democratic wheel grinds is sometimes perceived as indecisiveness, ineffectiveness, or sheer incompetence on the part of the political leadership.

This observation should not be taken as a defense of the present political leadership, because it is not. I would like to think that the military has a valid reason for its apparent discontent with certain officials in the Aquino Government who hold the military in contempt and who treat them with arrogance. There is no room for such views and behavior in a government that is struggling to preserve its democratic gains as it grapples with the gargantuan and multi-dimensional problems that are the collective heritage of our nation's

unhappy and lamentable past. There is no room for contempt and arrogance in a government that is fighting for its survival. Furthermore, there is simply no room for contempt and arrogance among men in public service. If people are born that way, then they should have the grace and patriotism to leave government service so that the nation can proceed with the task of sorting out its problems, so that it can proceed with the business of national survival.

The latest challenge to the Aquino government posed by the group of Col. Gregorio Honasan is part of this pattern of challenges normally facing transition regimes. What made it dramatic is its leadership by officers who were acclaimed as "heroes" of EDSA; what made it credible to some quarters is

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the leadership's identification with the Reform the AFP Movement (RAM) which is widely perceived as a genuine movement to restore professionalism in the military; what made it dangerous is that it vied for the support from apparently widely-spaced commands in the archipelago, as well as the future officer corps of our military currently undergoing their initiation and training into officership at the Philippine Military Academy (PMA); what made it tradition-breaking is the breach it inflicted on the time-honored practice of obedience to legitimate authority and the preservation of military fraternal unity where brother does not fight against brother.

The EDSA rebellion is not the same as the Honasan coup attempt. At EDSA, there was the breakdown of legitimacy which had been in crisis for quite a while. The opposition challenging the incumbent was popularly and overwhelmingly supported by a wide spectrum of the population. The people were into the process of non-violent civil disobedience. They were determined to unseat the dictator.

The Honasan coup attempt took place at a time when legitimacy of the government was widely accepted and validated by two electoral exercises participated in by what is conceded as a record high electorate turn-out in the democratic episodes of our country's history. While disenchantment and erosion of popular support may have taken place in some sectors of Cory Aquino's popular base, she continues to enjoy the support of a significant majority. For many, the bottom line is that the alternatives to Cory Aquino could be far worse. The attempt also takes place at a time when the constitutional mechanism for redress of grievances have already been set up. Even admitting for the sake of argument that all their grievances are legitimate, the method which was used by the rebels in seeking their redress is clearly unconstitutional. The officers reneged on their pledge to be officers and gentlemen; and possibly, even misled their men into an unconstitutional path.

On the issue of the alleged indecisiveness of the military leadership, it must be stated that the Chief of Staff is in an unenviable position, having inherited a deeply fractured armed forces and a twin insurgency that refuses to go away. Trying to hold the bottom line of maintaining military unity even at high costs by keeping brother from fighting against brother, he had been perceived as indecisive. When the crunch came, he set a new bottomline for the military and that is: keeping the Constitution inviolate. Those who threaten it must be thwarted whether brother, friend, or foe. For this he must at least be understood, if not be commended by the political leadership. General Fidel V. Ramos remained a constitutionalist amid a crisis that threatens to sunder not only the military, but also the entire government.

Why did Honasan and company embark on this plot? My own hunch and feel about this is because they wanted to have a hold on political power, in order, on the surface, to institute the reforms they aspire for. In the collective

experiences of nations where military intervention had taken place, unfortunately, no coup makers admit they do it to obtain power. Always, an idealistic messianic mission is forwarded as the goal, the intervention being only a means to achieve it. The festering grievances among the rank and file, present even during the dictatorship which could have rewarded the military much more evenly and which could have more efficiently dealt with these grievances, seemed as the fertile ground from which recruitment among the rank and file was facilitated and served as the legitimating, rationalizing excuse for the plot.

It might be pointed out in this instance, that the coup leaders were members of PMA class 1971, that class which rose within the officer corps' hierarchy during the period of the dictatorship. It was at this time when the cumulative effects of the alteration of the pattern of civilian-military relations in this country took root. Their socialization into the officer corps took place against the environment of an altered role for the military, focussed on its mission as a partner in national development. They had no personal experience in the previous system where multi-institutional checks against military institutional power prevailed. It would be difficult for them to cast themselves in a subordinate role, especially after their participation in the People Power revolution and their perception of government's having dealt with them unjustly. When our current flag officers fade into the horizon, these colonels are the officers that will constitute the military leadership. Unless something is done right now to neutralize the factors and forces inherent in a world view anti-thetical to subordination to civilian supremacy at all times, coups and threats of coups are likely to be with us for a while. Government must be willing, successful and effective in responding to the soldiers' legitimate grievances as it keeps the Constitutional mandate on civilian-military relations inviolate.

Some say that getting involved in a coup d'etat is like rupturing one's hymen. Those who are involved in a coup can not be made to recapture their virginity. That may be so, but given the significant advances in science might it not be possible to rebuild it surgically?

Responses to the legitimate grievances of soldiers must be undertaken by government to the extent possible. I say this because like a poor family with many children, our country has limited resources to be applied to competing and equally legitimate needs. Many of our people are poor and underpaid. In this they share the lot of our brothers in the armed forces. We may consider being a little more willing to get only a fraction of these limited resources while we keep the family together, as we struggle to improve its fortunes.

Beyond this, there is a critical need to re-examine existing civilian-military relations, respond decisively and positively to legitimate military grievances, institute reforms to provide constraints against future military intervention in politics, and rebuild the military in accordance with the mandate of the 1986 Constitution. **K**