

Imperilled Experiment in Democracy: The Progressive Forces and the Threat of Neo-Fascism

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The most chilling aspect of the August 28 coup attempt was that it came very close to success. This attempt, along with the ones preceding it, reveal the fragility of the democratic experiment we have embarked on in the aftermath of a popular uprising.

The fate of the nation's democratic experiment hung on balance for hours as the combat units of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) decided on which side to take in the factional confrontation. The civilian leadership seemed helpless to take the initiative in quelling an armed rebellion. The resolutions of support for the constitutional authority seemed totally symbolic and politically impotent. The popular organizations appeared completely paralyzed and entirely irrelevant to the outcome of a power struggle decided by swiftness of maneuver and the force of arms.

In the aftermath of the bloodiest coup attempt to date, we find the democratic political arrangement established by the February insurrection severely weakened and under great pressure from right-wing forces. Deep fissures within the governing bloc have been revealed. The relationship between the military establishment and the civilian leadership has become seriously strained. Strong factions have emerged among the various armed forces services threatening yet another breakdown of the line of command and decreasing control by the duly-constituted authority.

On top of all of these, right-wing discontent has found a charismatic symbol in the brash and adventurous Colonel Gregorio Honasan. The failure of the conventional political parties and organized political forces to immediately respond to the coup threat in a unified way can only embolden further military adventures of the sort that distressed the nation on 28 August. So would the cynical opportunism of politicians like Salvador Laurel who exploit moments of crisis to improve their political stocks encourage rather than discourage military adventurers.



The violence of 28 August has left Filipinos confused and disheartened. A peaceful uprising the year before and consistent demonstrations of popular support for the new government have caused a swelling of popular optimism in spite of objective national difficulties. August 28 revealed the seriousness of the threat of neofascism and the weaknesses of the liberal democratic arrangement as it is now constituted. The unexpected amount of support and sympathy enjoyed by the military adventurers indicate a potentially serious undercurrent of right-wing discontent that may again be tapped and reactivated by conservatives enjoying a wider political base than the so-called 'RAMboys'.

Anatomy of the Coup

The conspiracy that materialized in the first hours of August 28 is probably much broader than what meets the eye. The military action itself appears to be less haphazard than it originally seemed and is probably based on more sophisticated political calculation than the plotters are willing to admit.

The timing is definitely opportune. A significant section of the Presidential Guards was sent out the day before as advance parties for the President's tour of several provinces. This by itself suggests a breakdown on the part of national intelligence services theoretically responsible to the Chief Executive.

Two days before, the metropolis was shut down by a transport strike sparked by fuel price increases. Groups identified with the national democratic tendency boasted that they would continue with the strike indefinitely until fuel prices were completely rolled back. They were, not unexpectedly, unable to fulfill their boasts.

Past coup attempts have indicated that right-wing conspirators have a tendency to exaggerate the mobilizing ability of the Left or at least take their claims seriously. The coup attempts of November last year apparently calculated a climate of intense left-wing agitation over the Olalia murder. Such agitation would have provided a crucial smoke-screen for the conspiracy to be carried out. The military adventure of January this year clearly anticipated a condition of massive street protests sparked by the Mendiola massacre.



If reports are accurate that this last coup attempt was in place as early as June, then it must have taken serious account of street agitation by the defeated right-wing politicians and possible left-wing agitation sparked by the Buscayno ambush. It is possible that the adventure was postponed because the "Edsa, Part II" effort led by Juan Ponce Enrile collapsed and the Buscayno assassination attempt missed killing its main target.

It would be completely naive to say -- as some activists have indeed said -- that the coup attempts were stage-managed to overshadow issues raised by the Left or acts of violence committed against left-leaning personalities and groups. What is more likely is that the militarist conspiracies were timed to coincide with left-wing agitation, using the latter as unwitting diversionary factors. It is also possible that the militarist conspirators were themselves behind the violent attacks against the Left in order, precisely, to provoke the kind of left-wing agitation necessary to complement the rightist coup efforts.

The various coup conspiracies have relied, too, on other favorable factors. An attitude survey done by the Social

Weather Station reveals widespread discontent among the officer corps with the perceived indecisiveness of the Aquino government on the matter of crushing the insurgency. Much of this discontent has, of course, been manufactured by intense right-wing propaganda in the military, some of which were carried out with the support of foreign ultra-conservative foundations such as those associated with the Moonies.

Many among the military leadership feel threatened by liberals in the Aquino Cabinet and are anxious that they are being marginalized in the policy-making process. Right-wing politicians have exploited this particular point to force the ouster of progressive or liberal personalities from the Aquino government.

The younger officers of the AFP, it must be noted, entered the service at a time when the military establishment played extensive political roles and when leadership positions in the AFP carried great political influence. The level of discontent is understandably greatest among these junior officers. It must be remembered that the Reform the AFP Movement (RAM) was originally intended to displace the Marcos regime with a political arrangement where the

civilian bureaucracy is actually an extension of military power. It has the perspective to consolidate state power around the military establishment. This political project was, as we now know, intercepted by the popular uprising of February. But the perspective of the aborted military *putsch* against the Marcos regime continues to be nurtured in the minds of officers like Honasan.

The current officer corps, according to the same survey, is possibly the best educated of all social sectors. The high educational profile of the officer corps make these soldiers less intimidated by the prospect of running government themselves.

The officer corps of the AFP is almost unanimously anti-communist. Coup conspirators have simply to project a sharp anti-communist posture or exaggerate the threat posed by the armed Left in order to win at least the neutrality if not the active support of the bulk of the military establishment in the

event of a coup attempt. Anti-communism in this case becomes a cynical mobilizing ideology to justify, and build support for a power grab by ambitious military officers. By participating in the anti-communist chorus, the Aquino government reinforces rather than dissipates the ideological bias that allows the military establishment the political means to function as a "corporate interest" distinct from the civilian government. Conspirators simply have to fan anti-communist demagoguery and complement this with manufactured images of government waffling to mobilize armed forces support for a military adventure. The Aquino presidency has done little to diminish the influence of the national security ideology that pervades in the military and has, in fact, allowed itself to be pushed to the defensive by military charges of Left-coddling.

The tragic events of 28 August may be rooted even further in the failure of the Aquino government to, from the onset, build strong countervailing forces to offset the reactionary military establishment. This failure is compounded by what seems to be a policy of appeasement discreetly followed by the government towards right-wing agitation in the military. The Aquino presidency, for instance, dismissed progressives in the Cabinet like Sanchez and Pimentel in order to satisfy right-wing agitators rather than insist on a new political culture of pluralism.

The Aquino presidency also failed to utilize the momentum of the February uprising to comprehensively reorganize and reorient the military establishment. It failed to take more decisive measures against the earlier (and smaller) coup conspiracies and thus virtually assured conspirators that a *coup d'etat* could indeed be a picnic.

February Coalition Splits

The bloody encounter of 28 August and the political fallout resulting from it bring to an end the unlikely coalition that made possible the February uprising. The fracture of this coalition shall underpin to a large extent the dynamics of events in the immediate term.

The leadership of the February uprising was composed, by the force of circumstances, of a putschist faction of the AFP reeling from a Marcos counter-offensive and the liberal democratic electoral coalition headed by Corazon Aquino. The right-wing military putschists, by the force of a triumphant uprising, won control of the military establishment and kept the composition and orientation of that establishment intact. The liberal democratic coalition, on the other hand, consolidated its hold on the civilian bureaucracy and the new elective institutions.

Because of the absenteeism of the mainline Left at the crucial moment of mass rising, the popular forces wielded minor influence in the democratic coalition.

The coup attempt of 28 August brings to the fore the intensifying polarization between the right-wing military estab-

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lishment and the liberal democratic coalition that is consolidating in the civilian bureaucracy. In the absence of strong but sympathetic counter-pressure from the popular organizations, the Aquino presidency tried to postpone the polarization by moving to the right and submitting to demands posed by the militarists.

The bifurcation of the mainstream produced by the February uprising has become irreversible in the aftermath of a failed coup. The stage is now set for a profound, though probably less dramatic, test of strength between those forces intrinsically hostile to the development of a pluralist political order and the expansion of the democratic space, on one hand, and those forces positively inclined towards institutionalizing pluralism. This is the decisive political question at this juncture.

The unsteady nature of this perilous transition away from dictatorship is demonstrated by the increasingly sharp polemics between the military leadership and the spokesmen and supporters of the Aquino presidency.

Faced with this ideological and political polarization, the popular movements are forced to make a choice between supporting the consolidation of a pluralist political order on one hand and the possibility of a neofascist seizure of state power on the other. It is in the character of fluid transitions such as we now have that no single political force controls the agenda of daily political struggles.

In spite of the demonstrations of popular support for the liberal democratic stream represented by the Aquino coalition, the progressive popular movements remain marginal to the immediate arena of political contestation.

Apart from failing to develop and bring into the main structures of state power the popular movements, the Aquino presidency also sought to build its political bases around the traditional networks of elite politicians. The resurgence of elite politics during the brief period from the uprising to the present has contributed to the further demobilization of the masses. This in spite of the rich lessons in political self-activity gained during the period of resistance to dictatorship.

Nevertheless, it is important for progressive activists to distinguish between the diverse ideological and political tendencies characterizing the various components of the governing elite. There is danger in falling into the trap of essentialist analysis, attempting to define the *final* characteristic of an open-ended political condition. Essentialist analysis invites dogmatism which in turn invites faulty strategy and tragic tactics.

Progressives in Disarray

The coup attempts of 28 August did not only reveal deep fissions between the military establishment and the civilian leadership. It also revealed the deep fissions that divide the progressive bloc of political forces.

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The main line of division in the progressive bloc concerns the strategic view of the present political arrangement.

On one hand, social democrats, popular democrats, socialists and independent marxist groups see the Aquino bloc as expressive of the democratic space promised by the Uprising. The main threat to popular empowerment, at the present juncture, emanates from the neofascist groups, ultra-conservative landed elites with their private armies and remnant forces loyal to the deposed dictatorship. The immediate task at hand, for those who share this general analysis of political juncture, is to consolidate the democratic gains of the Uprising and develop the mechanisms for popular empowerment allowed by existing democratic space.

On the other hand, the mainline national democrats have reached the conclusion that the "US-Aquino regime" is *essentially* reactionary in character and that it is the main and principal opponent of the progressive movement. This line of analysis minimizes the threat of the neofascist forces and glosses over the diversity characterizing the various components of the governing bloc. It recycles the strategic format of revolutionary struggle adopted during the anti-dictatorship phase and chooses to direct the main blow of political activity by the mass organizations against the liberal democratic segment of the governing bloc.

This is not the occasion to delve into the polemics between the contending interpretations held by the progressive forces. The main concern here is the diffusion of political action among the progressive forces in the face of the political contingencies characterizing the present situation.

The disagreement in analysis is fundamental insofar as it prevents the development of a progressive united front bringing together the various ideological, organizational and political tendencies sympathetic to meaningful social change.

The former category of political groups have directed their efforts at blunting the threat from the neofascists and pushing the development of mechanisms for popular intervention in the state process. They have put their energies at developing the conditions for political pluralism and expanding the democratic space.

The national democrats, on the other hand, have pushed for a revitalization of the strategy of revolutionary armed struggle against what it terms the "US-Aquino regime." This, in the language of national democratic analysis, is understood as an undifferentiated category. There is a tendency within this general strategic line that prefers a showdown with the new governing bloc at the soonest to prevent it from consolidating.

National democratic analysis, in its standard form, invited the unpopular tactic of calling for a rejection of the new Constitution. It also inhibits the national democratic mass organizations from lending at least critical support to the Aquino government at a moment when it is besieged by fascist forces.

Events, however, have had their way of skirting around the standard national democratic formulations. In the aftermath of a bloody coup attempt, many national democrats were constrained by their strategic perspective to publicly label the bloody affair as a "moro-moro" stage-managed by the "US-Aquino regime."

The difference in analysis has also prevented the establishment of a reliable mechanism for a unified response by the progressive forces at a time when the threat of a military dictatorship is most severe.

The continued division among the progressive forces on the matter of strategy and tactics in the present situation can only encourage military adventurers who pin their hopes on the absence of a strong response to a coup effort by the politically organized sections of the population.

Tasks of Democrats

The basic question progressive activists must confront in the present situation should be: Is the democratic space, won by a truly popular uprising, worth defending?

For all its limitations, is this political arrangement more preferable to the dictatorship our people deposed or to the dictatorship segments of the military establishment want to impose?

A number of activists have replied with the following line of argument: The present liberal democratic arrangement is a deceptive facade that conceals the same oppressive and violent social order maintained earlier by the Marcos dictatorship. It is, therefore, *ultimately* no different from the preceding dictatorship and must be antagonistically confronted with the same strategy and tactics devised against the Marcos regime.

This line of argument is handy but flawed. It engages in reductionism and fails to make the fine and crucial distinctions between authoritarianism and pluralism. It grossly simplifies an intricate transitory political condition. It traps the progressive forces into a narrow field of maneuver. Worse, it has proven conducive to tactics that diminish rather than expand popular support for the radical political movements.

In a perilous situation such as the one now prevailing, it is important to distinguish between acute analysis and wishful thinking. The forces of reaction and conservatism are not about to obliterate each other and cause state power to freely flow into the hands of progressives. What is more likely, if progressive groups and movements fail to mobilize the widest possible popular support to their side, is that the conservatives and militarists unite to make the political terrain more inhospitable to popular empowerment.

Let this be clear; the ultimate objective of the coup attempt of 28 August is not simply to displace the liberal democratic arrangement but to do so in order to brutally crush the political formations of the progressive groups and movements as well as immobilize the politicized masses through comprehensive political repression. Given the thoroughly defensive political position of the revolutionary Left and the low level of popular organization, there are little means to withstand the onslaught of neofascism once it has broken through the outer perimeter of a popular liberal democratic leadership. The spectre of Indonesia in 1965, Chile in 1973 and Thailand in the mid-seventies haunts the present. It must be remembered that in the case of Chile, the neofascists displaced a government put in place by a progressive united front that was strong enough to actually get a president of their choice elected.

The most viable option open to the progressive forces in the present crisis is to quickly mobilize in order to defend the democratic space validly won by our people through mass struggle. In concrete terms, this means setting up countervailing mechanisms to check the right-wing forces as well as lending *conditional* and *critical* support to the Aquino-led liberal democratic bloc to prevent it from succumbing completely to the immense pressure now being exerted by an unholy coalition of big businessmen, right-wing demagogues and militarists.

The neofascists and not the liberal democratic bloc are the immediate enemy of the progressive movement. The progressive forces must be very clear on this. Otherwise they may end up unintentionally abetting the rise of a Filipino Pinochet. K