

A Movement Dies, A Regime is Born

(Notes on the Second Anniversary of the
EDSA Uprising)

Randolf S. David

In 1983, with the assassination of Ninoy Aquino, the struggle against the Marcos regime became truly *national*, in the sense of cutting across social classes.

No other symbol conveyed this development more vividly than that street mural, carried atop a jeep in all subsequent demonstrations, showing Ninoy's face for the first time. In that famous mural, Ninoy found himself flanked on both sides by a tribal Filipino (Macliing Dulag), a student leader (Edgar Jopson), and two medical doctors (Bobby de la Paz and Johnny Escandor), all of whom had been murdered earlier by the Marcos military. Ninoy's death showed that the Marcos regime was capable of brutalizing not just farmers and workers but also the elite.

Same Struggle, Different Reasons

Yet the struggle against Marcos was waged for a variety of reasons. It used to be said that those who fought Marcos were united more in what they opposed than in what they stood for. One could go further and say that there was no unanimity either in the reasons for opposing the Marcos regime.

Some were against the regime because of its subservience to foreign powers. Others were basically against the regime's excessive violation of human rights. Still others fought the Marcos government because like all the previous governments, it stood for oligarchic rule and class oppression.

But the most vocal sector in the anti-Marcos struggle -- the middle classes -- turned against the regime not so much because of its subservience to imperialism, or its authoritarianism, or its bias for landlords and business interests, but because of its corruption, cronyism, wastefulness, and profligate lifestyle. They were the most numerous, and we can say that by the middle of 1984, they had asserted their hegemony over the anti-Marcos movement.

Middle Class Hegemony

In concrete terms, the emergence of the middle classes in the terrain of the anti-Marcos struggle meant that they would also dictate the symbols and class of the movement. Thus, the mass movement's calls came to revolve around cronyism, corruption and economic mismanagement. In short, the charges had become confined to the moral and technical. The more ideological and political themes - such as militarization, imperialism, and popular democracy - were relegated to the background, if not altogether shelved. Signals inconsistent with the temper of an earlier period began to resonate from the banners of the Makati demonstrators. For example, "Marcos Out, Bases In", in obvious reference to the trade-off that the middle classes naively dangled before the Americans.

It is useful to go into the discourse of the post-assassination struggle because the real message of EDSA must be read against this background. By the time the February events began to unfold, democratization and social justice had already become only faint notes on EDSA's agenda. Anti-imperialism completely disappeared almost overnight, together with the campaign against militarization. What took their place were the hegemonic symbols of the flower and the rosary. Perhaps for reconciliation? It is amazing how an event can spring from, and be carried forward by a mixture of powerful revolutionary sentiments, and at once exclude those that it cannot easily assimilate.

The ouster of Marcos proved to be very dramatic, but the recomposition of elite rule which took place almost simultaneously was hardly noticed. The marginalization of people's power occurred at the quiet swearing-in of Mrs. Aquino at Club Filipino in the morning of February 25th, while the people power crowd waited outside the two camps.

An Undefined Mandate

Most revolutions are led by revolutionary parties and organizations which represent a clear ideology in which they set forth their analysis of social problems and proposals for an alternative social order. The EDSA revolution was different; from the beginning it had no coherent ideology. Thus, the ensuing struggle after EDSA became a struggle to define the explicit mandate of that revolution.

The people lost that portion of the struggle. Lacking a stable framework through which to pursue the struggle, people's power found itself prematurely demobilized. It was a period of confusion; people were groping for vision that would guide the period of reconstruction. The politicians, steeped in the ways of conventional governance, capitalized on the public's inclination towards the familiar. They quickly posted themselves in the most influential niches of the new government, there to oversee the quick recuperation of State organs which were just then vomiting the tenacious parasites of the previous regime.

Edsa's Promises

In the final analysis, what did EDSA stand for then? What were its promises? Actually, nothing more than the dismantling of crony monopolies, the return of stolen wealth, the rebuilding of a plundered economy, the repair of political institutions, and the restoration of ethical public service.

Instead of calling into question the whole foundation of Philippine social structure, the new government regarded the Marcos regime as an aberrant episode in the otherwise normal life of these structures. They thus equated democratization with simply retracing one's steps back to the *status quo ante*.

The Aquino leadership studiously avoided any discussion of political and economic problems which it could not simply blame on the Marcoses. Thus, long after they had fled the country, the Marcoses were made to play the role of omnibus evil personified, the ones responsible for the misfortunes of all Filipinos, rich or poor.

In this manner, the infirmities of a fundamentally flawed social system were effectively concealed, the persistent realities of exploitation and oppression explained away, and the anger of social classes deftly assuaged through periodic reports of public humiliation suffered by the once high and mighty Marcoses. We may therefore say the Marcoses, in exile, and as the institutional scapegoats for the thousand and one sins of an entire system, have continued to faithfully serve the interests of the ruling classes.

The point is that the aspirations of national liberation and the authentic democratization of our political and economic life require a steady constituency. The EDSA crowd was not that constituency. For its perspective was basically

a moralistic and spiritual one; its consciousness was essentially allergic to structural analysis, which it conveniently equated with the communist way of thinking.

It is not to EDSA's promises that the Cory government has turned its back, for EDSA really did not promise much, but rather to the hopes that nurtured the struggle against Marcos and against American neo-colonialism, a struggle that clearly antedated the politicization of the middle classes.

It is not important to ask whether these hopes were also, at any time, Cory's hopes. It is enough to say that for the millions of peasants and workers who were too poor to come to EDSA, Cory did personify the promise of a better and more meaningful life. And for them, this meant, above all, land they can till and call their own and livelihood that fulfills and dignifies them rather than degrades them.

A Tragic Failure

In both of these, the Cory government has been a tragic failure. The quest for land via a comprehensive agrarian reform program is still a dream, and it is slowly being shattered by an unrepentant landlord class. The growth of the economy, on the other hand, which would have satisfied the quest for livelihood, is hampered by a heavy debt service burden which the Aquino government has assumed in the name of the Filipino people. As a result, hundreds of thousands of Filipinos are forced to continue to find work abroad, mostly as unskilled construction workers, as domestics, and as prostitutes.

Workers' rights continue to be restricted by unrepealed Marcos decrees, which, then as now, are used to advertise the country's suitability for foreign investments.

Unchanged Economic Policies

It no longer comes as a surprise that the ouster of a dictator has not led to any relief from mass poverty. With the exception of strict prohibitions against cronyism, economic policies have not changed much. In fact, the enforcement of oppressive IMF and WB economic conditions in exchange for debt rescheduling has been more thorough under Aquino than under Marcos. Through import liberalization, generous incentives to foreign investors, and schemes like the debt-to-equity swap, our economy is much more vulnerable now to crises in the global economy than it ever was under Marcos.

The handling of the private armies and the debt issue gives us an idea of the Aquino government's political and economic directions today. Politically, the early Cory was committed to liberal democracy, some measure of political pluralism, and the return to the rule of law. Economically, she wanted desperately to produce an economic miracle that would generate jobs overnight. But it is quite obvious that she has no great passion for land reform, or even if she believes in

it, it is not likely that she ever appreciated its urgency.

The first demonstration of her commitment to liberal democracy was her decision to release political prisoners detained by Marcos, over the objections of the military. The second was her decision to begin peace negotiations with the NDF. In both these instances, she was under great pressure from the military. Even so, her decisions on the political prisoners and the peace talks, which were widely applauded, prevailed.

But when her Presidential Committee on Human Rights (PCHR), then headed by the late Senator Diokno, demanded the dismantling of private armies and para-military groups like the CHDF, the military refused to budge. Not only was the task monumental, but they also thought that the higher priority was the communist insurgency, and in this, they needed the private armies and CHDFs as complements if not as buffer. On this occasion, Cory Aquino chose to be prudently quiet. As things turned out later, that silence was but one step away from the public endorsement of the *Aksa Masa* which she found herself announcing one day in Davao City in 1987.

Vigilantes

The private armies which are synonymous to the CHDFs in many areas constitute the coercive apparatus of the big landowners and landgrabbers and the traditional political clans. The failure of the new government to dismantle them gave the landlords the breathing space they needed to consolidate their ranks and to enter into timely political settlements. The government had every opportunity to lay the groundwork for the erosion of oligarchic rule in the economic and political life in the countryside, which would have paved the way for agrarian reform and the dispersal of political power. But when the military began to make noises, the Cory government felt beleaguered and decided to retreat.

The military line, then as now, was that the enemy was the insurgency, and that no effort should be wasted in battling other armed groups that could be enlisted as allies in the counter-insurgency program. This attitude was congenial to the formation of anti-communist vigilante groups. In a desperate bid to compensate for the disabilities of an internally divided army, the military leadership chose to close its eyes to the existence of illegal armed groups for as long as they were virulently anti-communist.

The military waged a sustained campaign to make anti-communism the centerpiece in the new government's agenda. In this way, they attempted to divert public attention away from the human rights abuses that military personnel committed under the previous regime. At the same time, they sought to mend the rifts within the military establishment. While many issues divided the many factions in the military, a simple-minded anti-communism served as a powerful basis of unity.

Interesting too was the manner in which the military systematically went about propagating and reviving anti-communism, a mind-set that everybody thought had become obsolete through constant use in the Marcos years. Under Marcos, the NPA guerrillas were hailed as heroes. After EDSA, it became necessary for the military to de-glamorize or delegitimize the insurgents. Thus, from being called rebels, they came to be known as CTs or "communist terrorists". As such they were painted as ruthless persons who murdered their own comrades at the slightest suspicion that they were DPAs (deep penetration agents), who cold-bloodedly and without hesitation killed defenseless traffic policemen, and who extorted money both from rich businessmen as well as from poor students and sari-sari store owners in the guise of collecting revolutionary taxes. The object of this name-calling exercise was to set them up, and all those who showed any sympathy for their cause, as fair targets for all "defenders of democracy".

Moreover, it should be noted that this military tactic worked not so much because it was so well launched, but because the NPA itself embraced the role assigned to them by stepping up Sparrow unit assassination of civilians and policemen, and bombing bridges.

Foreign Debt

The figure is approximately \$29 billion. Debt-service payments, i.e. principal plus interest, for the six years between 1987-1992 amount to \$21 billion. During that period, we can expect to borrow only up to \$3 billion, thus making our country a net exporter of capital amounting to \$18 billion. NEDA officials project that even under the best circumstances, we cannot possibly raise this much from our export earnings. They predict therefore a deficit of \$7.7 billion.

Through forward exchange agreements and government assumption of private loans, the Philippine government has become the solitary sovereign debtor for nearly all of this \$29 billion obligation. Thus, in 1988, 39% of the national budget is devoted to debt service alone.

The net effect of this suicidal arrangement is that the government must collect as much taxes as it possibly can, while cutting back on public subsidies and welfare services. All to please the foreign banks and the IMF before whom President Aquino had sworn to honor all external obligations of the Marcos regime. Perhaps, her attitude was nourished by the naive hope that if we behaved according to the rules, we would be treated generously and with great understanding and sympathy.

The mistake of the Aquino government is in approaching the debt issue from the banker's point of view. It is in fact a moral and political issue. It is a moral issue in the sense that most of the lending banks knew they were dealing with a corrupt regime which was already being massively challenged by the people. A number of transactions may be shown to be

fraudulent; an outstanding example is the \$2.1 billion that went into the Bataan Nuclear Power Plant, for which the Filipino people pay at least \$350,000 per day in interest alone. Some loans were either diverted or were given for projects that had no clear proof of viability.

It is also a political issue because the new government had come to power in a revolutionary way, as a result precisely of the overthrow of the same corrupt regime which had borrowed the money. There was nothing about the EDSA events that empowered Mrs. Aquino to commit the Filipino people to pay the debts left behind by a deposed dictator. On a sensitive issue like this, in which the public itself is made to shoulder the burden of repayment, the least that the government could do is consult the people. Nothing of the sort has been done by the Aquino government.

The logic of such a self-lacerating stance probably lies in the belief that development can only come at this time with the cooperation of the international financial community. We should not antagonize this community, it is argued. If we do, the punishment could mean the final destruction of the Philippine economy, and the resulting economic dislocation could only imperil this new government.

Consequently, the approach chosen was accommodation and appeasement, rather than confrontation on questions of principle. A tough principled stand would have allowed Mrs. Aquino not only to determine the actual size of her constituency and keep it in a state of mobilization, but also to break new paths, something which the limited legitimacy of conventional leaders typically cannot permit. Unfortunately for the Filipino people, Mrs. Aquino, in the end, chose to be a conventional president. This mode may have her presidency more stable, but only at the cost of accommodating all those forces which historically have kept the Filipino masses in bondage.

Disenchantment and Continuing Politicization

Our disenchantment with the Aquino government grows each day we watch it drift a little more to the right, and violate our notions of what she should have done with the Revolution she had inherited and symbolized.

We wanted her to terminate the military bases agreement with the US, and to de-Americanize and diversify our foreign relations.

We expected her to confiscate the lands of the big landlords and to distribute these free to landless farmers.

We wanted her to challenge the basic morality of the foreign debt, as the Latin American bishops had done. For she was above all a moral leader, not a politician or a businessman.

We waited for her to undertake a thoroughgoing professionalization of the military, one that would ferret out all the corrupt elements and the habitual violators of human rights. We wanted her to hit the private armies hard, and to scuttle the last defenses that provincial warlords use to bully ordinary

citizens.

We wanted her to follow-up that dramatic act of releasing political prisoners with a genuine offer for the Left to play a meaningful role in rebuilding our society.

Would she have been able to call on popular support if she had chosen to act according to all these wishes? This is a question that cannot readily be answered in the affirmative. For, no matter how eloquently we project these progressive dreams as the wishes of our own people, the truth is that many of these have not yet become part of the masses' own political consciousness. A revolution needs a steady constituency. Behind every single revolutionary act, there must be a movement, ready to defend and to push when necessary.

The constituency for *radical* changes had not yet fully congealed in February 1986, notwithstanding the long years of struggle against Marcos and American imperialism. Ironically, it is fast taking shape in many parts of the country -- from the debris of Mrs. Aquino's failure to institute even moderate reforms.

Nearly everybody who had participated in this long struggle even before the assassination of Ninoy Aquino understood the urgency of such reforms. The land problem and the oppressiveness of private armies had been and continue to be the two most important causes of the armed insurgency. Yet the Aquino government refused to recognize the centrality of these issues, especially to those who actively supported her.

In trying to account for the rightward drift of the Aquino leadership, many would probably say -- "we told you so, you can expect nothing from a landlord's daughter." Such remarks only reflect the sad metaphysics of those who get frustrated when life does not behave according to their expectations. In their frustration, they prefer to criticize life than to face its every unfolding challenge.

Yet, neither does it help to just excuse everything with a philosophical "give her more time: Marcos took 20 years to plunder the country; she's had only 2 years to put things in order". Time is not exactly on our side. Mrs. Aquino has been led into thinking that reform on behalf of the poor can wait, and that the important thing is to consolidate and stabilize the government first, even if this means accommodating the demands of the extreme Right.

This is a dangerous attitude. By the time she thinks she has neutralized the threat from the extreme Right by her policy of appeasement, she will have completely lost whatever remains of that amorphous people's power which gave her the presidency. Indeed today, it is difficult to imagine how she can call upon that reserve force the next time the extreme Right attempts to grab power.

Whether she can or cannot is no longer as important today as the need to use the remaining time to politicize our people and to speed up the formation of popular organizations. It is now clear that only an organized and articulate public can safeguard the progress made by any revolution.

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