

The Moment of Decision

WITH THE RECENT PRONOUNCEMENT made by U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz that the American government would prefer to move the U.S. bases out of the Philippines rather than increase the rental for its continued use, the options available for the Philippine government have become narrower and clearer. The line of pro-bases proponents arguing for the retention of the US facilities in exchange for a higher economic compensation has therefore lost much of its sting.

In this regard, President Aquino's steadfast position on keeping her options open until 1991 is tantamount to ignoring the fact that her options on the bases issue are being narrowed down by the day. In political negotiations, the only way for a political actor to bargain forcefully is for him to come up offhand with a definitive stand on the decision item of concern. Unfortunately, in the ongoing review of the RP-US Military Bases Agreement, only one party — the US government — is armed with a decisive position on the bases issue which is, of course, to exhaust all efforts at ensuring the maintenance of American base facilities in the Philippines. Essentially, the Philippine government is bereft of any position. Hence, Shultz can now afford to make the threat of pulling out the bases from Philippine territory if the Aquino government insists on increasing the rental payment for American use of the bases. American policy-makers could have thought that given the attitude taken so far in Philippine official circles, Filipinos would really prefer American dollar to Philippine sovereignty.

While the executive branch has been quite indecisive in confronting the bases issue, the Philippine legislature, especially the Senate has been busy laying down the guidelines for the future of the bases in the country. With a vote of 19-3, the Senators passed on third reading an Anti Nuclear Weapons Bill which veritably bans the transit and storage of nuclear arms in the Philippines. Before this, however, there were reports that President Aquino had a dialogue with the senators to convince them to tone down the radical provisions of the bill so that she can still keep her options

open on the bases issue. It should be emphasized that the Senate bill simply fleshed out the provisions of the Constitution. Hence, it is incumbent upon the Lower House of Congress, as well as on the Executive, to exert all efforts to facilitate rather than block the passage of an anti-nuclear law if these political institutions are to live up to the mandate of the Constitution from which their powers are based upon.

The characteristic tendency of the Aquino presidency to temporize agonizingly in coming out with clear-cut positions on crucial policy issues, like the agrarian reform problem, has reared its ugly head once more in the current debates on the fate of the bases. As a result of President Aquino's indecision on this matter, unlikely political figures like Sen. Joseph Estrada has stolen the thunder from her in leading the anti-bases crusade in the country. Even Sen. Juan Ponce Enrile, a defender of the bases during the Marcos era, chided Aquino for renegeing on her 1984 commitment to the "fast-track plan" of the then-opposition to do away with the bases if elected into power.

What should be made clear at this point is that the moment of decision in favor of Philippine sovereignty has come of age. It cannot wait for 1991. While the official government line of "keeping our options open until 1991" has often been reiterated, it should be noted that the Constitution circumscribes policy options in such a way that they conform to the requisites of establishing a sovereign Filipino nation and safeguarding a nuclear-free territory.

In this regard, the earlier the decision for the removal of the bases could be arrived at, the better prepared Filipinos would be in 1991. Alternative economic projects could then be planned and set up the soonest time to answer the economic dislocations that would result from the pull-out of the Americans from Clark Air Base and Subic Naval Base. From a nationalist perspective, therefore, the proper options the Philippine government should be dealing right now should be those concerning the smooth and organized withdrawal of U.S. military facilities in the Philippines come 1991.