

The December First Coup: Persistent Questions and Tentative Responses

In the wake of the sixth and by far the most threatening coup attempt ever mounted by a group in the Armed Forces of the Philippines against the elected government of President Corazon Aquino, a number of questions have cropped up that are of immense interest not only to analysts but also to political activists, not only to foreign observers but especially to Filipinos, not only to civilians but also to the military itself. The most basic of these are the following:

1. Why did the December coup happen? Why did it fail?

2. Will there be another attempt in the next few months?

3. What lies ahead for the Aquino government?

4. What are the implications of the recent coup for the progressive cause-oriented groups?

Why did the December coup happen?

First, we must distinguish the reasons internal to the military from those that have to do with the larger socio-political environment. The internal reasons are more difficult to assess than the external ones.

There are enough reasons why a segment of the officer corps in the Philippine military would consider it right to intervene in our political affairs. To be effective, these motives need not be uniform. It only takes an influential group, no matter how small, to tap and consolidate these under one hegemonic plan.

The following motives are necessarily embedded in particular ways of seeing, which

the civilian leadership may not easily appreciate:

1. An idealistic officer corps sincerely believes that while the 1986 EDSA uprising has raised the expectations of our people, the Aquino government has only exacerbated our problems because of its incompetence, insensitivity, indecisiveness and inclination to corruption.

2. Many officers believe that the Aquino government partly owes its existence to the military mutiny in February 1986; yet the same government, in a supreme act of betrayal, subsequently launched a campaign to vilify the military establishment.

3. Marcos was ousted because he instituted a patronage system inside the military which divided the officer corps. It is widely believed that Aquino is doing the same thing by coddling members of the "Ramos-De Villa clique", who, in the view of this idealistic officer corps, have long lost the respect of the rank-and-file. This only reinforces disunity and demoralization within the armed force, thereby impeding its effectiveness in fighting the communist insurgency.

4. Many members of the officer corps reserve their highest contempt for corrupt and opportunistic politicians, greedy government officials and top military officers, insensitive bureaucrats, arrogant Cabinet members and Senators, and insatiable big businessmen. These underserving political and economic elites are precisely the cause of the insurgency which they now expect the military to solve by arms. Given their talent, discipline and training in both military and civilian skills, young military officers see themselves as perhaps the only remaining hope of the country. Accordingly, they regard it as their patriotic duty to put the

country in order and thus prevent its self-destruction by a bloody revolution.

5. The "Ramos-De Villa clique" within the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) is perceived to be unparalleled in its vindictiveness against those identified with other factions, namely the Enrile faction and the Ver faction. Even so, it is widely supposed that this dominant clique cannot truly claim to enjoy the loyalty of the majority of the armed forces.

The individual motives can be varied. There may be deep personal grudges against present leaders, fueled by instances of humiliation that must be avenged. At the same time, many commanders may have joined because they were paid by the wealthy civilians who offered to bankroll the entire adventure. Even so, it would be a mistake to think that crass motives are enough to provide the momentum for a coup. We are more inclined to believe that real grievances revolving around questions of principles were the main mobilizing factors used by the plotters in enticing individual members of the officer corps to participate.

It is logical to think that a powerful confluence of motives permitted the coup leaders to temporarily set aside serious differences within their own ranks. How else does one explain the alliance between the dwindling forces of General Zumel and the Ramboys? There was clearly a convergence of interest between the remnants of the Marcos cronies, on one hand, and the RAM soldiers who led the aborted coup against Marcos in 1986, on the other. One wonders how an alliance like this, founded on basic distrust, could run a government, even if we assume they could seize power.

Yet the existence of a motive is not sufficient to explain the actual occurrence of an event. A combination of circumstances must provide the occasion, if not the impetus, for the launching of a coup. Therefore, our analysis must focus on the factors that provided the opportunity for the launching of the coup during the early hours of Friday, 1 December 1989.

We would consider the following as the most important in explaining why a coup was attempted in December.

1. Sufficient time had lapsed since the last attempt. The Aquino government, as well as the AFP command itself, had begun to be complacent about the threat of another coup. The threat had been aired so often in the last two years that nobody paid much attention to talks about impending coups. A week before the coup, the spokesman of the AFP, General Oscar Florendo, remarked on a published interview with Honasan: "Honasan is a spent force." Former National Transportation and Communications Commissioner Linggoy Alcuaz had warned of a coup but was ridiculed by Defense Secretary Ramos as suffering from hallucination. Alcuaz subsequently lost his job partly because he was interfering in security matters that had nothing to do with his office. It is very obvious that the AFP had dropped its guard and was caught flatfooted during the first hours of the coup.

2. The popularity of Mrs. Aquino had dropped to an all-time low as shown by surveys. Criticisms of her government, which had spared her person in the past, were now being launched right at her doorstep. The week before the coup, her own sons-in-law were accused of unduly using their influence in determining appointments to government posts. Her moral armor was tarnished when she quickly pronounced them innocent, in more or less the same fashion as she defended her brother, Congressman Jose Cojuangco Jr., when he was implicated in the gun-smuggling case of Congressman Nicanor de Guzman Jr..

3. Almost the entire civilian political leadership had suffered a crisis of credibility at one point or other in the last two years. The elected officials' penchant for guns, cars, money and sex became the daily fare of media. The amount of public money they gave themselves in the forms of salaries and allowances scandalized the public. Their well-published wealth, which assigned to most of them the status of millionaire, further alienated them from the public that had grown skeptical of their usefulness to society.

4. There is restiveness in the streets by demonstrating school teachers, commuters who could not get a ride on public transport, rice farmers demanding an increase in the palay subsidy, and students demanding a roll-back of tuition. This was compounded by the frequency of unannounced power interruptions which caused dislocation in offices,

factories and households. But the final blow was the sudden announcement of new oil prices just three days before the coup, which triggered off plans for a general strike by KMU and BAYAN.

5. Images of poverty have become more abundant: the increasing number of beggars on the streets, squatter shanties sprouting everywhere, scavengers fighting each other over garbage, and entire families sleeping on the sidewalks, contrasted with the affluence that Pajeros, Benzes and townhouses projected. All these serve as eloquent reminders of government neglect and insensitivity to the needs of the poor, and contribute to general social demoralization.

6. The public sympathy for the dead Marcos, as manifested by a general sentiment in favor of the burial of the ex-President in the Philippines, further demonstrated Mrs. Aquino's growing isolation from the masses.

7. And lastly, the confusion and hostile reaction generated by the Philippine National Police bill among both the police and the Philippine Constabulary might have been interpreted by the coup plotters as sufficient reason to at least neutralize them, if not turn them against the government altogether.

The probable release of Marcos or crony money to bankroll the coup could have strengthened the resolve of the plotters.

The timing of the coup was perfect. Yet it failed. In all probability, it failed:

1. Because the plotters could not operate the TV stations they had taken over, thereby making it difficult, if not impossible, for them to rally support from both the public and the wavering elements of the military. The same is true of the military aircraft they had seized in Mactan, which had been rendered useless by the removal of vital parts and by the absence of pilots.

2. Because they could not deliver the decisive blow on the first day itself. Those military elements they expected to defect to their side took a long time to settle their minds. This, notwithstanding the fact that the troops that initially declared themselves for the rebel side belonged to the elite Rangers and Marines.

3. Because when US air support came, the wavering forces decided it had become too risky to participate in the coup. The rebels were hoping that the US would at least keep quiet and stay neutral. While it is even possible that it had been given the wrong signals by the CIA, when the moment of decision came, the US government declared itself to be on the side of the Aquino government.

Will another attempt be made in the coming months? This is a distinct possibility. While some key leaders of the last coup, like Colonel Tito Legaspi, Colonel Romylino Goho, and Colonel Rafael Galvez are now in custody, many others remain at large.

A great deal depends on how the Aquino government will manage the situation from hereon. A helpless and beleaguered government that continues to project an indecisive and directionless response to the worsening crisis will provide greater justification for another military intervention. Much also depends on the manner in which the Ramos-De Villa group will handle the internal contradictions in the military.

Definitely, the coup masters remain active. More funds will be coming their way. They will be waiting in the wings, ready to pounce at a moment's notice. The next time around, the coup may be swift and relatively bloodless, which is how most military takeovers tend to be anyway.

A formidable barrier to the rebels' success, however, is the absence of a credible civilian component. They do not need this, of course, to seize government power. They would need it, however, to win popular acquiescence. Thus far, the only civilians that have been identified with the cause possess dubious credentials. In the final analysis, the identification of Eduardo Cojuangco and Rafael Recto with the rebel cause will constitute a great liability to the coup plotters.

How has the December coup affected the Aquino government?

1. It has exposed the Aquino government's essential vulnerability: the lack of preparedness of its loyal forces, and the indifference of the public to its probable collapse.

2. It has made the Aquino government a virtual captive of US patronage. Henceforth, its survival will basically depend on continuing support from the US. This reduces its leverage in dealing with the Americans especially on the future of the US military facilities in the Philippines, and serves to further isolate the Aquino government from the progressive forces which had supported it in 1986.

3. It has compelled the government to adopt authoritarian powers, which, in the long term, will create more occasions for human rights violations.

4. It has exacerbated latent conflicts within the ruling coalition, thus further eroding the base of Aquino's political support within government. If the crisis intensifies, it should not come as a surprise if the very members of the ruling coalition now supporting her start raising the clamor for a snap election.

5. The coup once more places economic recovery on hold. Tourism will be the biggest casualty. New investments will hesitate to come before the 1992 elections. This will compound the problem of unemployment.

6. If the Marcos loyalist remnants and the coup plotters decide to launch terrorist attacks on selected targets, the resulting chaos could compel Mrs. Aquino to declare Martial Law and suspend civil liberties. The adoption of authoritarian measures could further alienate influential sections of media who, even now, are recoiling from arrogant military pronouncements on the responsibility of media in times of crisis.

Will the Aquino government survive till 1992?

Provided she is not assassinated, there is a great chance that her administration will last its term. It will probably take a while before the remaining rebel forces can regroup. But under present circumstances, the only way Aquino could manage the rest of her term would be to assume authoritarian powers, short of declaring Martial Law. When this happens, as it is now happening, the military will have become the dominant partner in the exercise of political power. Ramos' stock as a presidential candidate for 1992 would have risen also. He would be presented by his supporters as a necessary bridge between the military and the civilian community.

A desperate scenario would be a Cory Aquino calling for snap elections, with herself as candidate. Such elections would be fraught with irregularities and massive cheating. The resulting chaos could provoke another coup, and the installation of her military-civilian junta. This would be a last resort for her.

How has the December coup affected the progressive cause-oriented groups as well as the Left as a whole?

1. In an effort to unify the factions within the military as well as to highlight the bases of unity between the civilian and the military establishments, a process of scapegoating will follow. The likely scapegoats will once more be the Left, in addition to the Marcos cronies. In the guise of fighting the "real enemy", the hunt for "communists" at all levels, underground and aboveground, will be intensified.

2. The moderate Left finds itself having to decide whether to condemn the coup and support the Constitution, or to assume an indifferent posture and declare the coup as an intra-elite conflict. To condemn the coup and express support for the Constitution would be to risk being aligned also with the unpopular policies of the Aquino government. On the other hand, to take an indifferent posture would be to risk being seen as quiet supporters of the coup plotters. This is a very delicate question which becomes increasingly difficult to address as the Aquino government takes a more defensive authoritarian stance.

3. Various positions have, in fact, been expressed by the different political forces on the evolving political crisis. These positions differ from each other on several points, namely:

- a. Basis for denouncing the coup.
- b. Attention paid to the failings of the Aquino government.
- c. Attitude towards US intervention.

4. All progressive groups have denounced the coup without exception. All cite the coup as a violation of constitutional democracy, except one group, which makes no mention of the Constitution and prefers to denounce what it refers to as the war between two fac-

tions in the military, preferring to make no distinction between them.

5. All progressive forces have devoted attention to the failings of the present government, although there are slight differences in the way these failings are linked to the coup.

6. All these forces have made reference to US intervention in the last coup. Some groups like Kasapi have tried to find an excuse for inviting US intervention, even as they lament it as unfortunate. Most of the moderate groups have condemned US intervention, though there has been no uniform denunciation of the government that sought it in the first place.

Whether another coup succeeds or not, there will be a significant tightening of the democratic space. Right-wing terrorist groups

may be unleashed once more, and their targets could include figures from the Left. In a polarized political situation, the gainers will be the underground on both sides of the political fence.

It will be necessary to prepare modes of effective political action under conditions of diminished democratic space. This space will be pronounced totally closed the moment terrorist action begins to target American nationals.

As a general strategy, it will be important to establish firm links with other legal social movements and groups like KILOS. Such movements will serve not only as mobilizing channels for popular resistance in the event of a coup, but also as guardians of the democratic space against a beleaguered government that allows itself unwisely to be drawn into the murky waters of authoritarian politics.