

The Coup Crisis and the Future

Kilusan ng mga Nagmamahal ng Bayan

Despite the surrender of the last holdouts of rebels from the Makati Commercial Center, the nation continues to face a military threat and a serious political one. Either could lead to further loss of confidence in the government or even its downfall and the beginning of a new fight to restore democracy.

This paper analyzes the present crisis and proposes a framework for its resolution: damage control and necessary reforms. It has been prepared by concerned citizens who wrote and distributed four papers, then called "Kilusan papers", during the fight to restore democracy in the country from 1983 to 1985. Although some of the original authors have joined the present government, those remaining have decided, in the light of present developments, to resume publication of Kilusan Paper No. 5.

The Crisis

No crisis develops overnight. It usually undergoes the following stages:

1. A symptomatic stage
2. An acute stage
3. A chronic stage
4. A crisis resolution stage

The idea is to move decisively from the symptomatic stage to the resolution stage and avoid going through the acute and chronic stages.

The present situation, however, shows a tapering off of the acute stage and a shift to a long chronic one. Resolution is not yet in sight and it will depend on:

1. The strengths and weaknesses of government;
2. The people's resolve to uphold democracy; and,
3. The strength and weaknesses of the rebel forces and their political allies.

Dimensions of the Crisis

■ The strategy of the rebels

The forces that seek to topple the government use all means, including violence, to attain their objective. They also appear to have a political arm.

Short of victory, the rebels' strategic aim is to prolong the military crisis and trigger a larger political one. In fact, from the behavior of those who surrendered, remorse for their actions is absent.

It is obvious, therefore, that the latest coup attempt is not a measure to reform the Aquino government, as the rebel's psychological warfare aims to implant in the people's mind. It is a naked grab for power being conducted by those who tried the same in February 1986, and whose attempt was overtaken by people power. The actors are essentially those who were involved in the 1986 EDSA event although their roles may have changed.

Furthermore, the start of the coup was well-timed.

If the recent coup happened much earlier, say a few months after EDSA (as similar events did in a smaller scale), the people's response and feeling for the leadership may be quite different from what they feel now. Also, the succession of coup attempts and the long interval since the 1986 EDSA event

cloud the reality that the two, EDSA and the latest coup attempt, are integral parts of the same process of a country undergoing social change.

This gave the rebels the opportunity to claim that the inadequacies of the Aquino government are the primary causes of the coup.

■ The people's perception of government

The people's existing disappointment with the performance and responsiveness of the Aquino government was the fertile ground for the rebels' message.

The most disturbing feedback from independent surveys has not been the decline in the ratings of personalities but the declining confidence in the effectiveness of the national administration.

Specifically, surveys show high public dissatisfaction in many areas of government performance, of which the most serious are unabated graft and corruption, handling of the foreign debt, deteriorating public safety (especially criminality), prices and availability of prime commodities, and, in Metro Manila, inadequate transportation facilities and energy supply.

In addition, dissatisfaction appears to be directed at:

- broken promises and unfulfilled expectations;
- instances of lost opportunities because of incompetence, red tape, or inability to control narrow political interest particularly in social reform programs;
- a decision-making process characterized by lack of anticipation, initiative and foresight, plus frequent rationalization or stonewalling of erroneous decisions;
- hasty exoneration or uneven application of due process when it comes to complaints against presidential relatives and favored government officials;
- lip service to the principle of consultation with the people due to organizational barriers (cordon sanitaire of people in the Office of the President who have no links with the movements that produced the February 1986

EDSA event) or psychological barriers (aversion to "unsolicited advice");

- the return of traditional politicians with narrow selfish interests;

- the appointment in the inner circles of government of people who were fence-sitters or identified with the former regime;

- the government's apparent incapacity to correct the weaknesses brought to its attention. This flaw can be fatal.

With the damage brought by the last coup attempt, the people may find that the cost of preserving democracy is too high and may yield to alternative forms of government. There are already signs from surveys that people may be losing faith in the efficacy of peaceful means to achieve reforms.

■ Inadequate government response

The intensity, duration, and destruction caused by the last coup attempt suggest the following:

1. That, once again, the government can be faulted for not responding decisively during various stages of the crisis. This lack of an adequate structure for crisis management was highlighted by shortcomings at the height of the coup, that is:

- the principal source of public information were radio stations rather than regular government bulletins;
- crucial statements of support from various sectors and other vital pieces of information were not being collated and used;
- no regular and systematic briefings of the foreign community occurred;
- no procedure for formulating key government messages in response to the crisis was evident.

In short, the government's inability to collect, evaluate and act on information was extremely weak. Furthermore, it was hesitant to employ the full spectrum of political warfare methods and tactics as its opponents were doing; and even its narrower efforts were undermined by the political maneuvering of some of its own allies.

2. Second and more serious, the government can be faulted for not responding to the conditions that allowed the attempt to be made, despite the several coup attempts in the past three years. This can be fatal. Any navigator knows that no ship is on course all the time. The most important skill that a navigator can have is to know when his ship is off course and to correct the deviations when they occur. The worst thing that can happen is when the navigator is faced with warning signs that he is off course and he clings to the illusion that he is on the correct course.

The primary conditions that spawned the last coup as well as the other attempts since 1986 were generated during the Marcos period. These were:

- corruption within the state's instruments of violence, e.g., the AFP and the police force;

- politicization of the AFP and police force (i.e., involvement in the political affairs of the state, interference by politicians in military affairs);

- factionalism within government and deep divisions between the civil authority and significant segments of the AFP;

- social conditions in the country.

Under the Aquino government, the same conditions are perceived to continue, although, with respect to the country's social condition and the politicization of the armed forces, in a lesser degree. There are, however, additional conditions – the perceived weakness of political leadership and the frequent grandstanding of politicians pursuing selfish ambitions.

Despite the fact that essentially the same grievances claimed by the rebels to be the reasons for the coup attempt existed before 1986, no serious coup attempts were made during that time because of the ruthless use of force and the corruption of the military and police forces.

The present leadership has not resorted to the use of force and other forms of intimidation to exact obedience. Neither has it been able to exercise full control over the military and police forces through the exercise of powers legally vested in it.

Scenarios -- What Do We Want to Happen?

The recent event itself has several immediate consequences:

1. A serious drop in the people's confidence in the government's capability to protect itself and to govern.

2. Loss of life, limb and property.

3. Serious damage to the economy.

4. Encouragement to the other enemies of the State.

5. Loss of national esteem in the international community due to the government's apparent difficulty in containing the coup and the US' visible involvement.

6. Potential problems caused by the deaths and injuries, including the psychological wounds created among the ranks of the civil authority and the military that have remained loyal to the Constitution.

■ What can happen?

1. An acute political crisis may force the present leadership to step down from office. A caretaker government may lead to new elections where a better or worse leadership may emerge. This may mean that NAMFREL and other people's organizations may have to go back to square one as the elections may be characterized by the use of force, money and other illegal measures that subvert the democratic processes.

2. Another military crisis may, for better or worse, lead to a new leadership. This would mean an erosion of democratic ideals.

3. The present leadership may be removed by assassination, in which case another leadership, for better or worse, may emerge according to Constitutional provisions or by illegal means.

4. The present leadership may be able to hang on to power as it had in the past three and a half years.

5. The present leadership may emerge stronger by instituting the necessary reforms.

We want the present leadership to emerge stronger by instituting the necessary reforms.

What Must Be Done

The process towards crisis resolution requires government action on two levels: damage control and internal structural reforms.

While many of the suggested actions appear to be directed to the Executive, it is obvious that the task requires coordination and support not only from other departments of government, but from non-governmental institutions and the general public. Congress, in particular, must do something to improve its performance since it is held in lower esteem than the Executive and the military.

■ Damage control

A. The first step is to resolve the present military crisis as quickly as possible.

1. Contain the wider conspiracy involving the political arm of the rebels by the immediate arrest of suspects regardless of their stature or position.

2. Make a clear distinction in terms of reward and punishment between loyal and rebel soldiers. Treat those who participated in or declared support for the rebellion as criminals accountable for the crimes of murder, pillage, damage to property, i.e., no special treatment such as house arrest, special detention, or allowing them to keep their guns, etc..

3. Communicate to the public that the armed force has undergone the most painful experience of killing fellow soldiers while defending the Constitution. Armchair generals have no business criticizing the way the military operations were conducted.

4. Correct earlier suggestions that the Philippine pilots "hesitated" to shoot the rebels. In fact, they exercised wise judgment in not destroying the rebel planes over populated areas. The pilots, particularly the late Major Atienza, deserve the highest commendation for their loyalty and bravery.

5. Apply the full force of the law on those who gave aid and comfort to the rebels.

B. Counter rebel propaganda with the following messages:

1. That the coup is nothing more than a naked attempt to seize the powers of government by the same people whose aspirations in February 1986 were thwarted by people's power.

2. That the rebels are common criminals (not reformists) who did not hesitate to kill and inflict considerable damage on the people by setting back economic recovery.

3. That there are effective mechanisms in a democratic system for resolving grievances without resorting to violence.

4. That US armed support was not needed, as borne out by facts, to gain military air advantage over the rebels. The request for fly-overs was meant to demoralize the rebels by countering the claims of their leaders that the US was supporting their coup, pointing to the presence of US military attaches in the rebel camp during the August 1987 coup as an assurance.

5. That the opposition reacted adversely to the US fly-overs because it hurt the rebel cause and not because they were concerned about sovereignty.

C. Immediately establish presidential resolve to eliminate the potential for influence-peddling of those close to power.

The president must declare that under no circumstances should any member of her immediate family make recommendations to any government office or corporation or contact them for any purpose. She should also ask officials to make public the names of all recommendees as well as requests from such members, if any.

D. Establish an appropriate structure and system for crisis management and communication manned by skilled professionals. (There is a difference between image-building public relations and "communications".)

■ Internal reforms

A. Institute military and police reforms the process of which should consider the inputs of all those affected.

1. Identify the most competent and professional military leaders and place them in key positions.

2. Without exception, dismiss from the military and punish all those who have shown disloyalty to the State.

3. Allocate adequate resources to the AFP and police forces to enable them to better serve and protect the people, as mandated by the Constitution. This is vital but difficult as it implies strengthening the very instruments that can overthrow the government. Hence, the need for a comprehensive re-orientation program.

4. Address the criticism directed at the proposed law on the creation of the national police.

B. Institute reforms in national administration particularly in such areas where symptomatic public dissatisfaction is high.

On the issue of competence, poor performance can generally be attributed to inadequacies in either shared vision, skilled individuals, or authentic teamwork. Reforms must, therefore, address the following areas:

1. On the lack of shared vision – people are confused by internally inconsistent goals and the gap between rhetoric and action, e.g., "growth before debt", non-inflationary wage policy, "an even playing field", priority of farmers and the rural poor, etc..

2. On the skills of individuals -- many senior government officials are perceived to be second-rate, re-treads, misplaced, or selected on the basis of their ability to be pleasant and pleasing to the leadership.

3. On the lack of effective teamwork – the problem is not on the existence of policy debates to inform the people of issues nor the presence of strong-minded individuals. It is the apparent inability to harmonize the different views and make timely and consistent decisions in the national interest. Instead, the kind of teamwork that is encouraged is "agreeableness".

In the context of these perceptions, the following steps are suggested:

1. Communicate the government's vision, particularly in the areas of social reform and income distribution.

2. Replace, without exception, high government officials who have not performed, after a review of their effectiveness – the review should be based on objective and transparent criteria, i.e., accomplishments vis-a-vis targets as well as public dissatisfaction. Replacements should be identified through a systematic search and not through ad hoc referrals.

3. Use all means to improve the performance of local government officials as they are the ones involved in delivering basic services that are lacking such as those that lead to peace and order, water, health and sanitation, delivery of such services as traffic control, garbage collection, etc., in the light of recent events, controlling abnormal movements in the prices of basic commodities.

4. Concentrate the anti-corruption campaign immediately in one area, especially in that area where the public has so much stake, e.g., public safety.

The Challenge

The challenge to the government is to reunite the country. The "gut" issues to the greater majority must become the "gut" issues to the decision-makers, which does not seem to be the case today.

The events, however, are not yet irreversible nor is it impossible for the government to come out even stronger than before. There is still a large reservoir of political capital in the person of the President, although it has declined and is moving outward from the Metro Manila and urban areas to the rural areas of Visayas and Mindanao. Support for the administration must also be re-harnessed from people's organizations and the movement behind the EDSA event who feel left out of the decision-making process, to the advantage of big business.

There is a challenge to the people as well. Since action must be preceded by awareness and commitment, the people must again be willing to engage in the process of education, "ugnayans", workshops, group discussions, consensus building, networking, etc., as in the pre-EDSA days. The centrist coalition that fragmented after EDSA must be rebuilt.