

Two Widows, One Dead Future

WHEN IMELDA MARCOS ARRIVED AT THE NINYOY Aquino International Airport last November 4, none of the half a million who barricaded EDSA only five years ago was there to block her way, none of the thousands who stormed Malacanang but failed to lynch her came to finish the job, none of the fifty thousand arbitrarily detained during the dictatorship appeared to handcuff the real criminal, none of the thousands tortured showed up to tell her that the nightmares would not stop, none of the children whose parents were summarily executed came to point a finger at her, and none of the mothers of the thousands disappeared was there to ask the self-proclaimed mother of the nation where a long lost son or daughter is. Instead, thousands of Marcos loyalists, mobilized to feign popular support to Imelda, were on hand to give their returning benefactor a rousing welcome.

What should have been an occasion for national outrage and indignation, short of a Khieu Sampan reception, against the wife of the dictator, who together emptied the nation's coffer while filling the streets with the blood of their own people was turned into a circus by Imelda's cosmic speeches and comic theatrics. What should have been a refresher course on the Marcoses' repression and plunder was lost as media's sensationalized coverage focused not on the return of a criminal but the arrival of a celebrity.

That Imelda would stage her comeback like a circus that rolled to town was expected, coming from a character who has always belonged more to an amusement center than to a community of civilized human beings. What is serious, however, is the unbelievable detachment of the Filipino people who in a past too glorious to be erased and too recent to be forgotten drove away the dictatorship with surplus passion and intensity.

No, Filipinos are not suffering from amnesia, theirs is a severe bout of depression. Their detachment is the symptom of a profound disillusion to the state of things, a retreat of consciousness against a present no different from the past and a returning past that never really left, both as if conspiring to deny them a future.

It is the quiet resignation of an exhausted people who traversed the dirt road of dictatorship and democracy in search of development only to reach a dead end, the despair of a people badly battered by the unending succession of natural calamities interspersed with man-made ones, the sense of helplessness of a people whose own leaders just weeks ago undermined their faith to stand on their own without foreign troops, and the extent of hopelessness of a people whose growing sense of personal salvation is to make it as drivers, domestic helpers, and prostitutes abroad.

To be caught in the crossfire of the so-called war of the widows is the last thing they would want to be in. As such, two widows each central to the eras they represent — Imelda's, that which the nation has rejected and Cory's, that which the nation is itching to leave behind — are caught in a futile effort to rally the people on their side.

Thus, the enthusiasm of Imelda's homecoming has largely been confined to a narrow circle of fund-hungry elite oppositionists who are now sticking to her like flies to a shit. Their call to the people to translate their resentment of Aquino to a support of Imelda simply did not materialize.

On the other hand, government pronouncement that Philippine courts would now have a chance to convict Imelda on fraud, graft, and embezzlement charges, resulting both to her imprisonment and to the release to the government of US\$356 million frozen by Swiss authorities, was met with the same detachment as the arrival of the charged.

They could not believe how this government, which has nothing substantial to show in its five-year pursuit of the Marcoses' loot but a trail of

excuses, could nail Imelda now that it is at the virtual end of its term. Its Presidential Commission on Good Government (PCGG), tasked to recover the assets stolen by the Marcoses and their cronies, is taken more as the boy who cried wolf agency, with its countless diggings everywhere for buried Marcos treasures that all unearthed not a speck of gold but chests of ridicules. Against this bleak background is the image of a triumphant Imelda emerging from the New York court that acquitted her.

The homecourt advantage enjoyed by the Philippine government this time against Imelda fails to draw the home crowd. Cronies of the Marcoses who have returned before her were not only not jailed but have in fact recovered part of their sequestered wealth either through legal victories or through compromise settlements with the government.

But rather than the government's incompetence, the more important reason for the general disorientation is that kleptocracy in government did not leave with the Marcoses, it only got worse with Aquino. The estimated amount lost last year in government to graft-related activities is P40 billion, twice the P20 billion figure during the last years of the dictatorship. This translates to 37 centavos wasted for every peso paid in taxes and is P6 billion more than the combined 1991 budget for agriculture, agrarian reform, health, natural resources, and power and energy.

Where big time corruption was largely limited to the Marcos family and their cronies, today, multi-million pillaging has spread like a wild epidemic in the different levels and branches of government. Before there were the cronies, now, the *Kamag-anak* (relatives) Inc., composed of Aquino's relatives and close family friends who have cornered economic and political power via association with her.

Though Aquino herself has not been involved in any corruption scandal, she has however compromised her integrity with her double standard. While her government tries to prosecute the scums of the past era she has protected many of her aides who figured in their own rackets. Either way, the result is the same: except for a former airport general manager in a P55 million anomaly, not one big fish from both sides has been convicted.

Even the PCGG has been rocked by embarrassing scandals, from its men assigned to sequestered corporations helping themselves to the juicy resources of the companies to its lawyers asking for commissions from cronies out to get a settlement with government. With government's hands dirtied, who will take seriously its accusing finger?

Thus, the possibility of winning back the Marcoses' stolen wealth provokes no popular excitement. In its place is popular fear that with all the pickpockets in government, the money will never reach the people. Further, the entry of new money in the past has been hailed by Aquino's economic handlers as the panacea to the country's woes, yet still, the old poverty remained. In this administration, fresh money only turns into withered promises.

Analysts say that government's neglect to press human rights charges against the Marcoses undermined the anger of a people who were not only robbed but mugged as well. Yet pursuing blood debts would have provoked the military — the very iron hand of the dictatorship that implemented its unparalleled terror — which has not only remained unreformed but has managed to burrow into the very heart of the new regime.

From Aquino's promising start of releasing all political prisoners in her first month, creation of the Presidential Committee on Human Rights in its second month, and holding of peace negotiations with the left nine months after, the eventual rightist ascendancy over the liberal elements within the Aquino government unmasked itself in the shift from a political solution on the insurgency question to a military one. Thus, from an initial decline in human rights violations in 1986, the reversal to the Marcosian policy led to the dramatic resurgence of salvagings, disappearances, arbitrary arrests, tortures, hamlettings, and massacres.

If human rights violations seem not as pervasive now, it is only because the line of fire, which during the height of the dictatorship included even the elite opposition, has been concentrated back to the military's favorite target: the left, whether armed or unarmed.

And just like the thieves in government, human rights violators continue to escape justice. Worse, a number of the more notorious abusers have been promoted in the military hierarchy while some even assumed civilian or elected posts.

In a sense, Imelda returns to the country as the country returns to where Imelda left. For after nearly six years of a difficult and trying journey, we are back where we started — in a recession.

The twilight year of Marcos saw the economy shrink by 4 percent, with 4.9 million unemployed and an inflation rate of 23.1 percent. After five years of mediocre gains, Aquino ends her last year in the same blind alley: a negative growth rate of 1 percent, 4.5 million are out of jobs, and an inflation rate of 19 percent. What brought this losing endgame is the same for both players: a scandalous debt management strategy that stifled economic activity in order to release scarce funds for debt servicing.

One difference however is that Philippine society, after more than a decade, now exists without a center of meaning to animate it. This center of meaning which provided a sense of nationhood and direction to the Filipino people was expressed in the negative under the dictatorship as the anti-Marcos struggle and culminated as support to then overwhelmingly popular Aquino. But the succeeding de-popularization of Aquino has left a leadership vacuum as none of the political forces, either conservative or progressive, could resuscitate the popular imagination. This effectively leaves the terrain of the people's consciousness open to all but accessible to none.