

Subservience's Last Symbol Is Shattered

THE REJECTION BY THE SENATE OF THE proposed "Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation, and Security" effectively renders the continued presence of American military facilities on Philippine soil unconstitutional.

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Whatever efforts are exerted by the beleaguered administration of Corazon Aquino to keep the issue open, the rejection is likely to be final.

In the aftermath of rejection, Aquino explored several means to overturn the Senate's rejection including using the House of Representatives to force a referendum on the matter and applying the new law on "people's initiative" that will need three million signatures merely to reopen the treaty issue for congressional consideration.

Either method shall run into serious constitutional complications and shall surely be met with strong countermeasures by the anti-bases advocates. Aquino's efforts to overturn the Senate's rejection will only serve to deepen the divisions caused by this highly emotional issue.

In the process of considering the proposed treaty, the senators were subjected to intense pressures from business and church leaders. The President of the Republic assembled a pathetic parody of "people power" in a bid to force anti-bases senators to shift. The efforts failed miserably.

By rejecting the proposed treaty that would have extended the lease on Subic Naval Base on US terms, the Philippine Senate has performed a historic act. For the first time in nearly half a millennium, Filipinos shall be driving away foreign troops from their territory.

The anti-bases senators, in explaining their votes, did not allow that significance to pass unnoticed.

There are, however, more significances to the Senate action on the treaty that need to be examined.

The fact that twelve senators did cast their vote for rejection in the face of tremendous pressure from the business elite, the US government, and the Aquino administration itself is worthy of closer examination.

In the past, Washington was capable of determining political outcomes in the Philippines with an air of certainty. They knighted presidents and inhibited legislation that ran counter to their interests in the former colony. They influenced the formation

of policies and held an informal veto over the foreign policy choices of past Philippine governments.

That grip over political outcomes was strongest when Filipino politics was a game played exclusively by factions of the oligarchy. It was a grip that loosened as the Filipino political terrain became more complex and as political participation broadened.

In 1972, Marcos maneuvered Washington into mere acquiescence to his imposition of martial rule. In 1986, Washington failed remarkably in the effort to save their client or chart his graceful exit that would have excluded significant new political forces from the transitional political arrangement. By 1991, Washington failed to get a broad treaty passed through the Philippine Senate even as American diplomats earlier expressed confidence that the necessary number of senators shall easily succumb and pass the document.

The Senate's rejection of the treaty underscores the autonomy enjoyed by nationally-elected representatives and the broader scope of interests that influence policy decisions. Such broader scope of interests at play effectively diminishes the importance of American preference on any issue at hand.

The fact that the shrewdest politicians at the Senate opted to defy Washington is a clear statement about the extent to which US endorsement of candidates has depreciated over the recent past.

The Senate's valiant rejection of the treaty signals a new condition of independence characterizing Filipino politics. It also signals a new ideological turning point.

Because of our long struggle against colonial occupation and post-colonial dictation, Filipino nationalism has been outward-directed and oppositional in character. That variant of nationalism has been sustained beyond its actual utility by the presence of a highly visible symbol: the presence of foreign troops on Philippine soil.

The rejection of the treaty shatters this last symbol of past subservience. It should also transform the articulation of Filipino nationalism from being oppositional to becoming affirmative in character.

This new nationalism shall be more functional given the demands of national performance in a competitive world.

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Senate President Jovito Salonga's speech was the last on the last day of US troops in the country. It had been a long day for the Senate, with the twenty-two other senators explaining their side on the treaty that would have extended US stay for ten more years. Then, the Senate voted, twelve against eleven, to reject the treaty. Outside, under a heavy downpour, thousands of anti-bases activists keeping vigil were delirious in ecstasy as both tears and rain ran down their cheeks. For an issue as bitter as American military presence in the country, the moment of triumph could only come so sweet.

Yet only two hours after the rejection, the Aquino government — which led an all-out campaign for the treaty's ratification — withdrew the notice of termination it itself served the Americans in May 1990. The continued presence of US troops, according to Malacanang, is justified by the 1947 Military Bases Agreement (MBA) as amended by the 1966 Ramos-Rusk Agreement. But with neither a new treaty to extend the September 16, 1991 deadline of the MBA nor a notice of termination to give the Americans a one-year breathing spell under the 1966 agreement, the stay of US troops has, in effect, been extended indefinitely.

The withdrawal of the notice set the stage for the referendum bid to nullify the Senate decision and to extend the bases stay anew, this time for seven years. But since the Constitution allowed a referendum only if the Senate concurred with the treaty, Aquino's referendum was possible only through an amendment of the Constitution first — a messy and dragging maneuver that would need three million signatures of registered voters and implementable not earlier than February 1992 when amendments to the Constitution could begin.

The plan was shelved eventually, as the pro-bases public opinion Aquino was capitalizing on quickly shifted to an anti-referendum mood, involving even the pro-bases senators, Cabinet members, church leaders, and business and lawyers' groups. The emergent sentiment was to bite the bullet: accept the Senate vote as final, begin the conversion plan instead, and redirect the nation's energy in collectively facing the more urgent task of arresting the decline of the economy.

Thus, a compromise has been arrived at by the Aquino government and the anti-bases senators on a three-year withdrawal period through an executive agreement with the US. The anti-bases senators say that they would support it as long as the military components of the bases are out within a year, while Malacanang has kept the terms of withdrawal as general as possible. Further, it has refused to re-issue the notice of termination to Washington, sending instead on October 18, a diplomatic note asking for formal negotiations which remains unanswered by the US.

Two months after the diplomatic note and two months before the national elections campaign, formal negotiations have yet to start, fueling the fear that the terms of withdrawal may be overrun by the elections' outcome, where, in the very words of US Congressman Stephen Solarz, "a two-thirds majority could win seats in the Senate committed to the ratification of the bases agreement."

In his speech, Salonga castigates the pro-bases advocates for being more pro-Americans than the Americans (letting US officials refute them); for lacking a sense of the past (US support of the Marcos dictatorship), present (the end of the Cold War), and future (much more mature RP-US relations); and most especially, for being utterly ignorant of their own people's true strength and resiliency. For indeed, the heart of the debate was not really the US bases, but the extent of a people's belief in themselves to overcome the challenges of the free.