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## PEOPLE'S POWER IN THE PHILIPPINES : QUEST FOR DEMOCRACY

The events that shook the Philippines in February 1986 was a unique demonstration of repressed emotions of the Filipino masses and an inevitable repudiation of long years of Marcos dictatorship. The long Marcos rule created a deep seated popular revulsion against exploitation, patronage and warlordism. The militarist and corporate capitalist ideology of "Constitutional Authoritarianism" soon became anathema to the Filipino masses. The strength and participation of masses proved to be so enormous and so pervasive that the changes that ensued indicate something well beyond a return to the conservative elite democratic system that existed prior to Marcos rule which they inherited from the US. With the gradual but inevitable weakening of the colonial mentality and the spread of mass nationalism, a particular understanding of democracy appears to have been found in the Philippines which emphasised on the "power of the people."

"People's power" as a concept may be viewed to be rooted in and committed to a vision of democracy as a way of life that upholds the intrinsic connection between state and society, while subordinating the statist assumptions of liberalism to the populist/participatory assumptions of democracy.<sup>1</sup> It upholds the primacy of the people,

1. Lester Edwin J. Ruiz, "Philippine Politics as a People's Quest for Authentic Political Subjecthood", *Alternatives*, Vol. XI, No. 4, October 1986, p. 515.

who in the process of participation discover new grounds and new capacity to reshape their life together and jointly nourish what they hold to be good. The 1986 rebellion in Philippines marks the rediscovery of such a democracy. The four day rebellion following the fraudulent election in February replaced the old autocratic regime of Marcos by a democratic government led by Mrs. Corazon Aquino, the widow of the assassinated opposition leader, Benigno Aquino. Mrs. Aquino's ability to combine the image of a suffering widow with that of a determined and courageous political activist succeeded in bringing out on the streets, millions of the unorganised working masses - the great force of struggling lower middle-class clerks, small stall-owners and vendors, small transport operators, unorganised workers and the vast number of residents of the cities, ever expanding shanty towns.<sup>2</sup> Mrs. Aquino's conviction was so total that it even shattered the reserves of the military leaders loyal to Marcos. Most important, however, was the fact that she was backed spontaneously by hundreds of thousands of ordinary committed Filipinos. This unequivocal support from all walks of life exposed the extent of "people's power" in Philippines and clearly demonstrated that the repudiation of the old order was total. She has been able to offer the kind of political leadership which can undoubtedly provide a metaphor for a genuine transformation to democracy.

The problems faced by Philippines today can not, however, be reduced simply to those in political leadership. They are much deeper and far reaching. On deeper reflection, it becomes apparent that widespread popular support and a re-invigorated central government may not be sufficient to overcome the nation's problems. Not only are the problems massive in magnitude, but many of them are deeply embedded in the political and economic structure of Philippine society. Establishment of democracy in the Philippines is thus contingent upon comprehensive re-structuring and transformation of

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2. Walden Bello, "Aquino's Elite Populism : Initial Reflections", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 8, No. 3, July 1986, p-1028.

the society. So the basic question facing the observers of Philippine's scenario is whether and how far the changes in the leadership in Manila presage fundamental transformation of the country towards democratic rule. In an attempt to seek answer to this question the paper examines the historical perspective of the changes and Aquino's triumphant rise, analyses the basic problems facing the new government once it is in power, and highlights the critical tasks ahead for the Philippines in their quest for democracy.

### The 1986 Rebellion : Showcase of People's Power.

The independence of Philippines in 1946 never seemed to have ensured political stability for the country. The experience of colonial and neo-colonial domination left most profound effects on the people and created fundamental contradictions in Philippines society. The Philippines was conquered by the Spanish in 1565 and remained in Spanish hands until ceded to the United States in 1898 after the Spanish-American war. Spanish rule for the first 100 years was exercised in most areas through a type of tax farming known as the *encomienda*.<sup>3</sup> The people who worked for the *encomiendas* received extensive though conditional land grants. They were expected to collect taxes or tribute from about 6,000 families on their conversion and offer them protection from non-Christians. In the course of time these people known as the *encomienderos* virtually became land-owners.<sup>4</sup> The Spanish *encomienda* system established a landed aristocracy which eventually formed the politico-economic infrastructure for a "culture of patronage", a *Padrino* system.<sup>5</sup>

Although the *encomienda* system was formally abolished by end of the 17th century, the legacy of the system remained throughout the

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3. *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* Vol. 14, 15th Edition, London, 1978, p-241.

4. D.R. Sardesai, *Southeast Asia : Past and Present*, The University Press Limited, Dhaka, 1981, p-97.

5. Lester Edwin J. Ruiz, *op. cit.*, p. 506.

subsequent periods which witnessed at the best a modified version of the *Padrino* structure. The changes, if anything, were to serve basically the interests of colonial masters through the patronage network involving hand-picked groups of local land-owning and trading oligarchy. Thus, the change in colonial hands from Spanish to Americans fielded the "American experiment in democracy". This proclaimed, on the one hand, a vision of liberal Lockean democracy while modifying, on the other hand, the landed aristocracy into a client-elite within the United States neocolonial system.<sup>6</sup>

When the Philippines emerged as an independent state in 1946, it took over a constitution that closely followed the US model. Although people had been proud of their political system and had seen it as making the Philippines a "showcase of democracy" in South-east Asia, it had never worked very well in practice.<sup>7</sup> The profound effects of colonialism were clearly visible as the political parties were dominated by a small oligarchy, largely from the land-holding class, controlling appointments and distributing the spoils of office among their relatives and friends and exploiting the unlimited opportunities for corruption and self-gratification through control of licenses, leases and foreign exchange regulation.<sup>8</sup> Although elections were held regularly, they were designed more to create legitimacy with the aura of democracy than to respect the sentiments of the people. Thus, the roots of democracy were neither allowed to go deep nor the democratic institutions allowed to develop. Apart from weak democratic structures that were built, the economic models so far pursued turned out to be unsuitable to the Philippines' circumstances, thus leading to lopsided development. The structural limitations for a successful economic programme were obvious both during the initial import-substitution and the later

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6. *Ibid.*, p. 506

7. Alexander Turpin, "The Philippines : Problems of the Ageing New Society", *Conflict Studies*, No. 165, p. 12

8. D.R. Sardesai, *op. cit.*, p. 322

export-led economic development strategy.<sup>9</sup> This uneven growth led the country to social tensions and subsequent political instability, which, in turn, became a pretext for military intervention and the development of bureaucratic-authoritarian political structures. This apart, the external developments at the international level, especially, the US-Soviet ideological rivalry, contributed to the destruction of democratic norms and institutions and encouraged the authoritarian repressive regimes.

With the imposition of Martial Law in the country and suspension of the constitution by Ferdinand Marcos in 1972, the scenario in Philippines was changed, decidedly for the worse. Politically, martial law resulted in the degradation of whatever vestiges of democratic bodies that were existing, non-participation of people in the political process, suppression of freedom, corruption at all levels, military abuse of power, inefficiency, soaring crime rate, etc. The economic situation was catastrophic. In 1965, when Marcos assumed power, 66 percent of the country's population was living below poverty line, by 1983 the figure had increased to 71 percent. while the external debts accumulated to over 26.3 billion.<sup>10</sup> While the economy was deteriorating, the armed forces grew abnormally rapidly and the defence expenditure constituted the major share of government spending.

Although Philippines had a two party system of Liberals and Nationalists, neither of them could function with a consistent and comprehensive set of political objectives. There were of course sincere and patriotic individuals in both parties, but the majority were opportunist. The brave few who wanted to speak out against the regime found it almost impossible to do so, with parliament suspended, the media muzzled and public meetings banned. But

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9. G.V.C. Naidu, "The Philippines : From Marcos to Mrs. Aquino", *Strategic Analysis*, Vol, XI, No. 11, February 1987, p-1278.

10. *Ibid*, p. 1280

the man who stood out as Marcos' uncompromising opponent was the leader of the Liberal party Benigno Aquino.

Combining a populist charisma and the purposely vague rhetoric of "anti-corruption", "reform" and "social justice", Benigno Aquino rose rapidly from being a regional politician to the Secretary General of the opposition Liberal Party by 1969. From this position he began his quest for presidency, which he hoped to gain by 1973, when Marcos' second term would have come to an end.<sup>11</sup> However, Benigno Aquino was arrested on the eve of martial law. The first chance for the opposition came in 1978 with elections for an interim National Assembly. Benigno Aquino, from his detention hut managed to mould the opposition into a semblance of unity under the slogan LABAN (people's power) and on the eve of the elections organised a spectacular demonstration of peaceful protest by getting

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the citizens of Manila at an agreed hour to blow car horns and bang dustbins.<sup>12</sup> The next opportunity for the opposition came during the February 1980 elections for governors, mayors and councilors. By now Benigno Aquino had developed a serious heart condition and the mantle of leadership passed to Salvador Laurel and Gerardo Roxas who produced a manifesto designed to unite all opponents within UNIDO (United Democratic Opposition). The outcome of the elections however was a disaster for UNIDO. As preparations

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11. Walden Bello, "Benigno Aquino: Between Dictatorship and Revolution in the Philippines", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 2, April 1984, P-284.

12. Alexander Turpin, *op. cit* p. 13

began for the 1984 general election, Benigno Aquino, who had stayed on in the United States after heart surgery, decided to return home. But on his return on August 21, 1983, he was brutally assassinated on the tarmac of Manila International Airport. His assassination was a turning point in Philippines' politics.

It re-awakened a renewed determination by the different opposition forces to dislodge Marcos from power and to establish a regime more in tune with the sentiments of the Filipino people. In the weeks and months that followed, street vendors and socialites, businessmen and radicals all awoke from years of resignation to cry out their rage. Yet the official opposition to Marcos remained fatally factious, divided into more than a dozen self-seeking groups. It soon became obvious that the only person far enough above the political differences to unite the opposition was the martyr's widow. Corazon Aquino, though virtually unknown heretofore to politics, took the steering of opposition movement not merely to provide the cementing force but also to emerge soon at the helm of the mounting political force capable of ousting the Marcos regime.

The systematically plundered and oppressed population of the Philippines looked to Corazon Aquino during the early months of 1986, for the immediate salvation of a prostrate republic. After the February 7 Presidential elections fought between Marcos and Aquino which was the most fraudulent and violent election in Philippines' history, the failure of the Marcos government was clearly manifest. The Filipino people could not take any more of the despotic rule and they revolted outrightly. The banner was carried by Aquino, who refused vehemently to accept the results of the fraudulent election and to compromise with Marcos despite US pressure.

Her strategy during the rebellion days was to continue civil protest by mobilizing the people, first by "prayer rallies" and later perhaps by strikes; starting in one or a few places and expanding the locales, attempting by degrees to bring the corrupt government

and the economy to a halt.<sup>13</sup> Although she did not have the official levers to carry out her strategy, she had the loyalties of the vast number of Filipinos who voted for her. The rebellion she led with the backing of peoples power finally succeeded in overthrowing Marcos and Mrs. Aquino became the new President. Mrs. Aquino had a strong commitment to non-violence and spoke for a broad democratic movement. She brought with her a sincerity and a moral force that most Filipinos found refreshing after twenty years of Marcos' authoritarian rule.

### **Aquino's Populist Government**

Aquino's triumphant rise to power created pleasant chapters in the history of Philippines. Although she came to power through extra-parliamentary means, on the back of a military and by populist movement, the ratification of the new constitution in February 1987 plebiscite provided the Aquino government a democratic seal. The new constitution promises the establishment of a full constitutional democracy. It also assures Aquino, a six year term in office. This also bestows on her the task of leading her country in its journey towards democracy. Before examining the prospects of success in that, it is essential to focus on the features of her government and the problems it faces.

The most striking feature of her government that dilutes its ruling class character is its dependence on massive popular mobilization or "people's power". Elite interest groups surround Aquino, but she herself is situated not by a political machine but by the direct charismatic relationship to the masses.<sup>14</sup> She came to power only because the people supported her. It is again the "people's power" upon which she will have to rely to maintain a balance between the disparate political forces and build a new Philippines free

13. *The Guardian*, 23 February 1986, p-1

14. Walden Bello, "Aquino's Elite Populism : Initial Reflections", *op. cit.*, p. 1020

from despotism. Emerging after two decades of harsh repression, her government exhibits a spirit of revolutionary puritanism. The moral crusades that have been launched against the old corrupt ways is indicative of democratic values.

Another critical feature of the Aquino administration is its ambivalence towards the US. Whether Aquino government will accept and effectively play the role Washington wants it to assume an open to question. While the US continues to exercise significant influence over key elements within the new government that influence an not as dominant as it was under Marcos.<sup>15</sup> Although these features appear to have brought significant qualitative changes in the charac-

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ter of Aquino's populist government, it has not totally extricated itself from certain disturbing cleavages leading thereby to an overall aura of uncertainty around her power base. Firstly, the appointment to key government positions of some individuals who had served faithfully under the Marcos dictatorship raises the danger of the continuation of the militarist and corporate-capitalist philosophy of the previous government. A founding member of the Communist Party of the Philippines put it "You may see some different faces in the government, but the same repressive system remains in place."<sup>16</sup>

Secondly her government is in reality an instable coalition of sharply competing elite factions. The coalition includes the various factions in the army, and the right and left. Dominant among these are the elite reformists. While favouring the restoration of

15. *Ibid*, p. 1022

16. *New York Times*, 28 February 1986

formal democracy, they retain a strong interest in maintaining the country's landlord-dominated semifeudal agrarian structure and keeping the economy structurally tied to the US. Then, there is the extremely influential Cardinal Jaime Sin and his coterie of Jesuit Priests. They are strongly anti-communist and are actively searching for ways to outmanoeuvre the left in gaining popular backing for conservative social reform. Next, in terms of influence within the government coalition is the militarist faction. Being solidly pro-US, the militarists serve as the key conduit of US influence in the governing coalition. Perhaps the weakest grouping within the administration is that formed by elite or middle class nationalists-classified as liberal democrats by the left. They are not only strongly anti-fascists, but they also espouse nationalist policies aimed at sharply reducing US political and military influence. There are other appointees who are considered even more radical.<sup>17</sup> This current coalition government represents a very messy method by which the government functions and this disparate grouping may become instrumental in bringing about destabilising conflicts, especially as the overwhelming tasks of political and economic reconstruction gets underway.

Mrs. Aquino has moved into an organisational vacuum. Her regime has vast public support, but it does not have a unified executive leadership or effective institutions, such as a reliable military, a national political party or competent civil administration.<sup>18</sup> It is crucial for her to fill the organisational vacuum to effectively pursue her goals.

### Basic Problems

The legacy of colonial exploitation and the corruption and maladministration of the Marcos regime has left insurmountable problems for the new government. Not only are the problems massive in

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17. Walden Bello, "Aquino's Elite Populism: Initial Reflections" *op. cit.*, p. 1023

18. William H. Overholt, "The Rise and Fall of Ferdinand Marcos," *Asian Survey*, Vol. XXVI, No. 11, November 1986 p. 1163.

dimension, but many of them are deeply embedded in the structure of Philippine society and its political culture. Her government cannot ignore the basic problems of Philippine society: the inequity of its social system and the maldevelopment of its economy, which together have bred poverty, injustice and massive discontent of the dispossessed. There is no solution to these basic problems unless the government can transform the society and change the structure of the economy.<sup>19</sup>

Aquino's problems remain daunting. They include (a) a faltering economy (b) the communist insurgency (c) disharmony within administration and (d) divided military.

(a) For years since gaining political independence, the Philippines remained an economic colony of the United States. Agriculture, the mainstay of the economy, functioned mainly on a subsistence basis, with a few cash crops (sugar, coconut, abaca) accounting for the bulk of exports. The staple food, rice, was cultivated by traditional methods depending on the weather and had often to be imported. The industry sector remained backward. The United States dominated external trade, taking 80 percent of all Philippines' exports and supplying most of its manufactured imports.<sup>20</sup> This dominance persisted until the late 1950s when Japan's economic expansion got under way. The Japanese steadily built up their position as a supplier of consumer durables and in return bought raw materials. But the basic pattern of trade with both partners was still neo-colonial, and the rate of growth of the Philippine economy at an annual average of 5.5 percent, did little more than keep pace with a population that was growing at over 3 percent.<sup>21</sup> Investment from internal sources was quite inadequate, and domestic industries, operating behind a high

19. Jose W. Diokno, "The Present Crisis", in R.J. May and Francisco Nemenzo ed. *The Philippines After Marcos*, Croom Helm, London, 1985, p. 6.

20. Alexander Turpin, *op. cit.*, p. 17

21. *Ibid.*, p. 17

tariff wall were in general inefficient and offered no prospect of developing export-led growth. Successive presidents who wanted to take remedial action were blocked by a Congress, which put sectional interests before the national good.

By proclaiming martial law in 1972, Ferdinand Marcos, had a free hand to carry forward economic reforms. But by 1981 and 1982, it began to emerge that his way of doing things were wrong. Among other things, governmental intervention in basic sectors of the economy such as grains, coconut, sugar and oil was proving arbitrary and inefficient if not downright corrupt. Highly adverse international economic environment contributed to problems in Manila. The terms of trade with the outside world remained obstinately adverse. By 1983 it was clear that exports and invisible earnings could not meet the cost of imports plus interest repayments.<sup>22</sup> But the event that caused a major flight of confidence in Marcos' way of managing the state was assassination of Benigno Aquino. Credit from overseas dried up: tourism fell away; the black market rate for the dollar soared. Suddenly the economy was in a deep crisis which the new government inherited.

Negative growth rates are haunting the economy since 1984-1985, when it was -5.5 percent. Although the situation slightly improved to reach -1 percent in the first quarter of 1986 the problem persists unabated.<sup>23</sup> Inflation, lack of credit and a shrinking domestic market have forced many companies to close or pull out of the Philippines. These closures have meant that more than 100,000 people have lost their jobs during the 1984-85 recession.<sup>24</sup> Unemployment is estimated at about 20 percent along with huge underemployment reported to be around 45 percent of total work force. Industry is operating at a low capacity of 40 percent.

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22. *Ibid.*, p. 20

23. G.V.C. Naidu, *op. cit.*, p. 1287

24. Gary Humes, "United States Support for the Marcos Administration and the Pressures that made for Change", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 8, No. 1, June 1986, p. 27.

Between 1980-83, the country's external current deficit had risen from about 5 per cent to 8 percent, and debt service ratio from 21 percent to 36 percent, with short term debt accounting for almost 50 percent of the total external debt.<sup>25</sup> The new government inherited a \$ 26 billion foreign debt from the Marcos regime.<sup>26</sup>

The fiscal statistics show only a part of the Philippines' economic plight; the human picture is much more telling. About 70 per cent of Filipinos live below the official poverty line of \$116 per capita annual income. The control of the economy on the other hand remains on a tiny, wealthy elite - about 10 per cent of the population - who collect more than 40 percent of the country's total income and hold more than 90 per cent of the arable land.<sup>27</sup>

The crisis of Philippine economy is a structural one associated with the economy's colonial legacy. The problems have been compounded by the continuation of the export-oriented strategy of development at a time of global recession. Reduced demand for its traditional agricultural exports and rising protectionism in the West

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against its non-traditional labour-intensive manufactured exports such as garments have further deteriorated the situation. The lack of a dynamic industrial sector based on an expanding internal market has meant the absence of a countervailing mechanism against the depression of the export sector.<sup>28</sup> Thus it is unlikely that the economy will stop contracting in the next few years.

25. G.V.C. Naidu, *op. cit.*, p. 1287

26. *Newsweek*, February 16, 1987, p. 10

27. *Ibid.*, p. 10

28. Walden Bello, "Aquinos' Elite Populism : Initial Reflections", *op. cit.*, p. 1026.

b) The communist insurgency has become one of the most serious problems in the Philippines' political scenario. It has its roots in agrarian unrest in central Luzon. The peasant rebellion under the Hukbalahaps (Huks) raged between the 1940s and the early 1950s. In 1968 came a powerful infusion of ideological confrontation with the creation of a new Philippine Communist Party (CPP) which looked towards Peking and was inspired by Maoist revolutionary doctrines. At the same time a military arm of the CPP was set up and given the name of New People's Army (NPA)

The Communist Party of Philippines (CPP) has been waging an armed struggle since its inception. Its armed wing-the New People's Army (NPA) managed to recruit about 22,000 full-time and about 15,000 part-time fighters. The NPA virtually controls more than 20% of the country's 55 million population.<sup>29</sup> Their operations are spread across the country in almost all the provinces. It currently operates on at least 30 fronts in 43 out of the 72 provinces (seven in northern Luzon, eight in the Visayas especially Samar Islands, and eight in the northern and eastern sections of Mindanos). The NPA includes about 5,000 armed insurgents with hard core guerrilla cadres of some 3,000 to 3,500.<sup>30</sup> Led by disaffected urban intellectuals, the NPA has expanded its influence to the point of infiltrating or controlling 20 percent of the villages by the skillful exploitation of the grievances of the poorer rural population.

Mrs Aquino from the very beginning initiated a policy of "reconciliation" with the left, aimed at integrating it into the "democratic mainstream." The release of all political prisoners, including the top leaders of the left and the naming of nationalists and some progressives close to the mass movement to cabinet positions are gestures in this direction. However, the communists have not responded positively to her gestures for national reconciliation. The Marxist framework

29. G.V.C. Naidu, *op. cit.*, p. 1286

30. H.M.L. Beri, "The Crisis in the Philippines," *Strategic Analysis*, Vol. IX, No. 10 January 1986, p. 947.

of the left leadership leads to scepticism about the capacity of the government to bring about the kinds of revolutionary changes to which the insurgency is committed.<sup>31</sup>

A 60-day cease-fire between the government and the Communist New Peoples Army (NPA) broke down in January 1987 and since then the armed clashes that have taken place indicate that the insurgency is intensifying. The communists feel that Mrs. Aquino only wants to have their arms laid down without looking into the causes of genuine grievances. The military, on the other hand feels that the government still have no formal counter-insurgency programme.

Objectively looking, the communists cannot defeat the Philippine armed forces in the near future. The NPA admits that only 10,000 to 12,000 of its guerrillas are combat ready.<sup>32</sup> In addition, the troops have no proven outside sources of supply. In contrast, the Philippine army consists of some 60,000 soldiers, of whom about 50,000 could be considered effective ground troops. Still the ratio of government troops to guerrillas is only about 5 to 1, half the 10 to 1 ratio, military experts consider necessary to defeat an insurgency.<sup>33</sup>

As in most guerrilla wars, the NPA can choose the time and place of its attacks. And unlike the smaller NPA forces, the government units cannot live off the countryside, building effective social, political and economic relationships at the village level. Thus the long-term danger posed by the insurgency is more political than military. The insurgency has reached its present stage due to Marcos' misrule, armed forces abuses in the countryside and the fast deteriorating economic conditions. It is most unlikely that communists would give up their fight and forego their hard earned gains.

31. F.A. Mediansky, "The New People's Army : A Nationwide Insurgency in the Philippines", *Contemporary Southeast Asia*, Vol. 8, No. 1, June 1986, p. 14.

32. *Time*, March 9, 1987, p. 26

33. *Ibid*, p. 26

(c) Another fundamental problem which Aquino faces is the disharmony within the government coalition. The conflicts within and among the factions making up the coalition are likely to be destabilising. The tensions between the elite reformists and liberal democrats, on the one hand, and the militarists on the other will intensify. Intractable divisions have surfaced between the government and armed forces particularly over Aquino's stand on the Communist insurgents. The problem is, neither Mrs. Aquino can trust the army nor the army can trust her. The armed forces dissatisfaction was clear by their voting pattern in the plebiscite. It is reported that a majority of the Air Force voted "no", as did most of the cadets at the Philippine Military Academy. At other Armed Forces installations, the Constitution passed by an average 60 per cent margin.<sup>34</sup> Repairing the schism will take a leap of faith neither side seems willing to make. But it must be noted that Aquino cannot afford this gulf with the military if she plans to chalk out a successful counter-insurgency programme.

Ever since the February Revolution of 1986, the right and left have coexisted uneasily in the coalition cabinet of President Aquino. Now, with the congressional elections of May 1987, the simmering feuds among the disparate groups have burst into open, leaving an impression of disarray in Aquino's government. The cabinet power struggle appeared to be rooted less in personalities than in ideology. Squaring off were conservative technocrats led by Finance Secretary Jaime Ongpin and left-of-centre advisers headed by Executive Secretary Joker Arroyo. The two blocs appear to have turned Aquino's office into an ideological battleground. Roughly it pits nationalists against more pro-American cabinet men, technocrats versus populists.<sup>35</sup>

This infighting within Aquino's administration is a golden opportunity to the opposition Grand Alliance for Democracy (GAD) led

34. *Newsweek*, February 16, 1986, p. 11

35. *Asiaweek*, March 29, 1987, p. 23.

by Juan Ponce Enrile—currently fighting Aquino's candidates in the Congressional elections. The Party which gains the upper hand in the Congress will dictate the direction of government over the next five years. It will also have the power to shape major initiatives on land reform, counter-insurgency, economic-recovery, alleviation of poverty, retention or removal of US military bases and laws implementing more than the 100 provisions of the new constitution,<sup>36</sup> Aquino's control of Congress or lack of it may well determine the success or failure of her presidency—more importantly the future of Philippines. For this control she needs to act more decisively and get her own coalition in line. For there is no doubt that the deepening "ideological chasm and power play" among Aquino associates, can ultimately lead to a more dangerous stalemate.

(d) There are significant rifts within the 250,000 strong Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). In fact, four distinct factions have emerged within the armed forces. These are the pro-Aquino forces, which include the president's privately trained paramilitary security force commonly known as the "Yellow Army". There are also Ramos supporters, Marcos loyalists and the activist officers of Reform the Armed Forces Movement (RAM). Overlapping are various internal organisations. These include the RAM, estimated to comprise at best, 1,000 officers who are graduates of the elite Philippine Military Academy, the 20,000 strong Guardians Composed mostly of noncommissioned personnel (sergeants and below) and IROG (Integrees and Reserve Officers Group) involving reservists.<sup>37</sup>

The issue of factionalism and divisiveness within the army is a serious problem for the administration. This is reflected in the frequent coup talks and attempts rampant in Philippines. General Fidel Ramos said, "We cannot afford to have an armed forces within the armed forces. Otherwise we will have anarchy."<sup>38</sup> The

36. *Asiaweek*, March 15, 1987, p. 14

37. *Asiaweek*, March 8, 1987, p. 17

38. *Ibid*, p. 17

issue of disunity within the military has to be addressed by a chain of command as soon as possible.

### **Democracy : The Goal**

A democratic government that comes to power on the shoulders of a popular uprising not only inherits heavy political and economic burden but also encounters troubles in making the next moves. The successor government's strong commitment to democratic principles may pose problems as it settles down to adopt apparently unpopular measures for the greater benefit of the nation. Such problems were and still are being faced by Mrs. Aquino, whose rise to power was followed by a phenomenal uplift of expectations. The masses who supported her had high expectations of things. They expect her government in short order to eradicate corruption, restore efficiency in government, achieve economic growth and realize social justice. They have raised their expectations too high, without apprehending that the basic political and socio-economic problems of Philippines are deep-rooted. There is every possibility that the failure to live up to these expectations may lead to disillusionment among the masses. More so, because Mrs. Aquino's government does not have a clear programme of action like a revolutionary regime. There is no doubt that restoration of democracy and a return to peace and relief from crushing poverty—are the avowed goals of Mrs. Aquino. But there is barely an outline of how she intends to accomplish those. Although the new constitution was approved by the people in plebiscite recently, it does little to untangle the thicket of problems she faces.

If Mrs. Aquino aspires to fulfil her avowed goals and early promises, she must deal concretely with her country's long list of woes. This calls for (a) consolidation of power, (b) revitalization of the plundered economy, (c) reaching an accommodation with the left and (d) reorganising the military.

(a) *Consolidation of Power:*

Mrs. Aquino, even after one year of coming to power, still heads a coalition without any specific platform that would help focus her popularity. She is basically an apolitical person, but one cannot overlook the fact that in matters of realpolitik, staying apolitical means loosing ground. Even her closest supporters lament her reluctance to consolidate power by forging a single political party. She can no longer shy away from organising and leading a political party, whether she fashions it out of existing groups or forms an entirely new entity. Although, in the congressional elections she will be campaigning through the *Lakas ng Bansa* (People Power) coalition party of the administration, she needs to take a firm grip of it and develop it into an effective political institution.

Elections will be held for a new bicameral legislature consisting of 24 member senate and 250-seat House of Representatives in May and August respectively. Mrs. Aquino must get her men in line quickly or risk a permanent stalemate. While the upper, chamber will be elected in national poll, and is likely to be dominated by Aquino's men, the House fight will take place in farflung districts dominated by special interest and local kingpins—many of them Marcos cronies bent on revenge. The exiled President's political Dobermans are masters at the rough and tumble of Philippine electioneering. The opposition knows that if it wins the majority of the House seats, the President's administration will be in jeopardy. It could turn out that the most effective way to thwart Aquino is through the democratic machinery of the new legislature.<sup>39</sup>

Although Mrs. Aquino retains the right to issue laws up to the time the new legislature convenes, she announced that "as much as possible I would like to defer (it) to the congress." She has all along tried to stand above the fray, but there are serious questions about whether that is still a viable solution. It is high time, that she grasps the

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39. *Newsweek*, February 16, 1987, p. 10

power she has been offered before the debilitating stalemate ensues within the administration.

(b) *Revitalization of Economy:*

Mrs. Aquino will have to face up to Philippines, economic difficulties—a foreign debt of \$26 billion and 13 percent unemployment.<sup>40</sup> She has failed to convince either domestic or foreign businesses that the Philippines is a sound investment. Their skepticism will continue at least until they get a chance to test the mood and strength of Congress.

Up to now the centerpiece of Aquino's economic vision for the country's neediest has been an employment programme providing funds for roads, bridges and school construction, all aimed at boosting rural economies. But bureaucratic bottlenecks delayed implementation of the plan last year. As a whole, the economy produced 360,000 new jobs in 1986, barely half the number required.<sup>41</sup> However after the plebiscite, the government has begun a campaign to

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*The masses who supported her had high expectations of things. They expect her government in short order to eradicate corruption, restore efficiency in government, achieve economic growth and realize social justice.*

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create jobs, increase production, improve social services and institute land reform. With the ratification they predicted "strong economic recovery in 1987". Manufacturing sales, they said, would increase 15 percent over 1986 levels.<sup>42</sup> The government has also launched a five-year, four-part programme to fragment ownership over many of the nation's 10 million cultivated hectares. "Nationalists" and left leaning critics, say the plan still hazy in many details fails to solve deepening

40. *Time*, February 16, 1987, p. 5.

41. *Newsweek*, February 16, 1987, p. 10

42. *Asiaweek*, February 15, 1987, p. 37.

crisis of rural landlessness. Others fear that redistributing land will simply siphon off limited resources and exacerbate sagging productivity.<sup>43</sup> In spite of differing views it appears imperative for Aquino that she carries on land reform even if it offends powerful landed interests.

### (c) Communist Insurgency :

The government's failure to produce a full rehabilitation plan for the surrendering rebels threatened to undermine its advantage over the NPA. Aquino reportedly intended to declare an amnesty and aid programme for the communists. Mrs. Aquino pins her greatest hopes on an economic recovery, that will eliminate the well of despair from which the communists have drawn so much strength. The government's inability to forge a comprehensive counter-insurgency scheme has alienated the military which argues that the NPA benefited most from the two month ceasefire. The guerillas used the time to resupply, regroup and retain, attend to their medical problems and, most important, get splashy play in the mass media.<sup>44</sup> The government's approach now rests on efforts to divide the rebellion by concluding region by region ceasefires with the NPA. While Aquino has given the armed forces a go-ahead to fight the guerrillas, she would also like to continue negotiating with them and to pursue regional ceasefires wherever possible.

Mrs. Aquino must deal concretely with the communist insurgents, whether by assuaging, rehabilitating or combating them. She cannot please the communists and the military at the same time, so the most vexing dilemma now facing her government is: how to intensify the counterinsurgency campaign against the communists while preventing the military from lapsing into repression against the civilians who sympathizes with the rebels. The government has to

43. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, March 5, 1987, p. 32.

44. *Newsweek*, February 16, 1987, p-12

act quickly to create a "check and balance" system to prevent military atrocities because fighting has already reached pre-ceasefire levels.

*(d) Reorganising the Military :*

The armed forces remain the administration's weak and delicate link. Although on an average 60 percent of the military voted for the constitution, there were a large number of negative votes in the five Metro-Manila military headquarters. As it stands, Aquino has yet to show that she can control the country's factious military. Since she ousted Marcos a year ago, she has survived several abortive attempts at a coup. Clearly, many rightist officers still refuse to accept her leadership.

With a communist challenge of uncertain strength still to be faced, Aquino clearly needs a disciplined military behind her. For this she needs to start building bridges between her government and the 250,000 member Armed Forces. At the same time she has to work out resolute actions against those in the Armed forces who seek to overthrow her constitutionally established government. More important would be to adopt measures designed to prevent such possibilities.

By carrying out all these reforms, the President might lose some popularity and more than a few friends, but in the long run she might just save the country and, in the process gain unimpeachable respect of her people. The reality is that, an effective leader, one who really tackles deep rooted social and economic problems, cannot be loved or even liked, by most of the people. Mrs. Aquino is now face to face with this reality.

**Concluding Observations**

During the final years of his "constitutional authoritarianism" Marcos had effectively moved his country backward—from democracy to autocracy, from prosperity to poverty, from general peace to overall instability. In this distressing scenario, Mrs. Corazon Aquino came to power with the help of massive popular support. Although

"peoples power" brought about a new order under the leadership of Aquino, the Philippines is still suffering from instability and an uncertain future. Aquino has before her daunting problems to cope with—as she caps the innings holding the promise of democracy for the country.

After the ratification of the constitution Mrs. Aquino has been formally accorded the task of restoring democracy in Philippines. However, in her acquiring the ability to govern effectively the new constitution may not be sufficient. The constitution gives extensive powers to a national legislature and local governments at the expense of presidential prerogatives and these bodies are likely to be dominated by entrenched individuals who have more to lose than gain by reforms.<sup>45</sup> Put simply, the radical socio-economic changes the country needs will not come easily.

The new constitution is also not likely to dramatically inhibit the violence that is endemic to Philippine political process. The longer the violence continues the greater the role the Armed Forces will feel obliged to play in civil affairs, and greater will be the probability that the military and Aquino's camp will clash over the fundamental issue of how best to ensure law and order.

Unless Aquino can quickly bend the Philippines to her will, the confidence of the people on her is very likely to run out. Some quarters feel that her record does not inspire confidence. Her attempt

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*What appears needed most at this moment is the capacity to transform the unity against a common enemy to unity towards common goals.*

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to negotiate peace with the Marxist NPA got nowhere. The strains between Aquino's civilian government and the military have only grown since the day an army revolt helped sweep her to power.

45. *Newsweek*, February 16, 1987, p. 13.

And her inability or unwillingness to heal political wounds has left Philippine society dangerously polarized.<sup>46</sup>

It must be realised that given the deep-rooted and firmly embedded socio-economic and political problems of Philippines—one cannot anticipate an instantenous solution to all the problems and a flourishing of democracy in its pure form. The problems will require, as indicated above, structural cures and democracy in its pure form to be established will need a transitional period. The Filipino people must bear in mind that Mrs. Aquino's government offers a liberal democratic alternative to radical change for which the country is hardly prepared. It is difficult to imagine even a modicum of democracy in Philippines today without the presence of Mrs. Aquino. In a sense her government new rests on a solid democratic footing and the machinery for its full functioning is starting to fall into place. But in another way she is only in the process of facing the real test of the challenges in changing her nation. What appears needed most at this moment is the capacity to transform the unity against a common enemy to unity towards common goals.

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46. *Ibid*, p. 12