

Corazon Aquino: U.S. puppet on a string

Linda de Hoyos reports on the circumstances, and devastating results, of Bush's "decisive" rescue of the faltering Manila regime.

Although forces loyal to Philippines President Corazon Aquino appear to have quelled the most recent and serious coup attempt against her four-year-old regime, the political and military conflict is far from over. As Mrs. Aquino may discover, the price for her victory over the coup bid, which was launched in the early morning hours of Dec. 1, may well be the ability of her regime to survive.

As for the United States, which entered into the fray on the side of Mrs. Aquino in a display of Bush "decisiveness," the price may well be the final sinking of any negotiations for a new treaty that would extend the presence of U.S. strategic bases on the Philippine islands beyond the current treaty's 1991 expiration date.

In weathering the current challenge to her government from major factions within the military, Aquino was forced to call upon U.S. military assistance, deployed from the U.S. strategic air base at Clark Field. Although certain U.S. reports indicate that Washington had signaled the availability of U.S. forces to aid her besieged government, the official story is that at 11 a.m. on Dec. 1 (Manila time), Aquino informed U.S. Ambassador Nicholas Platt that she might require U.S. air cover, since rebel forces had seized several airfields and were strafing the presidential Malacanang Palace. An hour and a half later, Aquino officially requested such assistance. By 1:30 p.m., U.S. F-4 Phantom bombers were providing air cover for Aquino, and placing an "aggressive cap" over the two Philippine air bases that had been taken by the rebels. The U.S. declined Philippine requests to shoot at rebel forces, preferring to take defensive action only as required. Even so, there is little doubt—especially in the minds of her countrymen—that Aquino survived the coup bid only through the U.S. show of force.

Contrast to Marcos treatment

The U.S. response to Aquino's request might usefully be contrasted to Washington's reactions to former President Ferdinand Marcos in February 1986. When Marcos was confronted with a military rebellion led by U.S. embassy favorite and current Defense Minister Gen. Fidel Ramos, he was told that not only would the United States not support him, but any effort on his part to suppress the rebellion would result in the immediate suspension of all U.S. military aid. This

was stated publicly in order to advance the military coup against Marcos.

This U.S.-planned and -orchestrated military coup—not the "People's Power revolution"—was the decisive factor in bringing Corazon Aquino to power. Even so, Aquino was able to portray herself as the alternative to the "U.S. puppet President" Ferdinand Marcos. No more. Aquino has demonstrated that her political existence hangs on the thread of U.S. support; her mandate is now in Washington.

The U.S. air cover has also made a mockery of Aquino's refusal to commit herself to a new treaty for the U.S. bases. In early November, amid coup rumors, Aquino visited the United States for a seven-city tour to promote investment in the Philippines. The trip was not a success. During her state visit in Washington, tensions came to the fore over the bases issue. The Bush administration insisted on a pledge to the U.S. bases: "A new security agreement will preserve bipartisan support for . . . continued economic and military aid," Bush publicly menaced. For her part, Aquino withheld her commitment and insisted on more funds to aid the islands' shattered economy.

Aquino's reliance Dec. 1 upon U.S. military support against a serious coup bid has substantially reduced Aquino's bargaining position, a fact near-sighted U.S. officials have been chortling over. The increasing likelihood, however, is that either Aquino will not survive long enough to negotiate the bases; or that in order to maintain any popular credibility at all, she will have to refuse a new agreement. Bush's display of "decisiveness" carried a big backfire potential.

Across the entire political spectrum, Aquino is being attacked for her subservience to the United States. This has been a longstanding battlecry of the left-wing "People's Power" component of her once-popular mandate. "The cost [of U.S. air support for Aquino] to the Philippines in terms of national honor cannot be redeemed," railed the leftist *Malaya* newspaper on Dec. 3. Negotiations on the bases "will be practically toothless when George Bush calls in this big IOU."

Now the attack is also coming from the Nacionalista Party, led by Aquino's own official Vice President Salvador Laurel and by Sen. Juan Ponce Enrile, the former defense minister under Marcos, who bolted to the Aquino side in

February 1986. A Nacionalista Party statement declared that the "brazen" U.S. military intervention "puts into question the constitutional legitimacy of the Aquino government for renouncing the country's sovereignty to a foreign government as the price for its continuance in power."

Enrile, who has also organized a new anti-bases coalition over the last month, told the press that the quelling of the coup was a "victory for America, not Aquino."

Speaking from Hong Kong Dec. 3, Salvador Laurel called upon Aquino to consider resigning if that were "the only way to avert bloodshed and civil war."

But Aquino has also come under fire from presumably the most stalwart of her political supporters. Even before this latest coup attempt, she drew harsh words from Sen. Leticia Ramos Shahani, chairman of the Senate Foreign Affairs Committee, and sister of Aquino's right-hand general and likely successor Fidel Ramos. "If we become too pro-American," remarked Shahani, "we become subservient." Shahani, an outspoken critic of the International Monetary Fund, then compared Aquino unfavorably to Marcos! "To a certain point, Marcos was more nationalistic. He really tried hard to make us more independent, politically and also economically."

Military under fire

The latest coup is believed to have been led by Col. Gregorio "Gringo" Honason, who led the August 1987 attempt against Aquino and who warned of a second, bloodier attempt in the last week of November. Honason was a leader of the Reform the Armed Forces Movement (RAM), and a close associate of Marcos Defense Minister Enrile, who played a key role in the military rebellion against Marcos.

The immediate trigger for the coup—which apparently only involved military forces—may well have been a bill placed before the Philippines Senate to reorganize the military. Specifically, the bill calls for the dissolution of the Philippines Constabulary (PC), a force with dual military and police functions comprised of 50,000 men (out of a total of 165,000 in the Armed Forces). The PC has played a front-line role in combatting the New People's Army (NPA).

The not-so-hidden objective of the legislation is to "clip the wings of the military," reported one wire service. The reaction within the Armed Forces was immediate. Protests were held in camps in various locales. On Oct. 28, Armed Forces Chief of Staff Gen. Renato de Villa banned all protest actions, after 1,000 officers and men in the central city of Cebu burned effigies and marched with black armbands in a mass demonstration at the military camp there. Legaspi, a Honason stronghold south of Manila, was also the scene of near-violent protests.

Warnings by Defense Minister Fidel Ramos of court martials had no effect on the demonstrators.

The bill is a further blow to a military which has borne the brunt of fighting the NPA under conditions in which

proper equipment, supplies, and even uniforms have been non-existent. In addition, the military became a political target of certain senators who claimed in November that the Armed Forces have been involved in drug-trafficking.

To the military, the combination of attacks appeared as an assault on the military as an institution—a challenge that has not gone unanswered.

Taking a major role in the attempted coup were Scout Rangers, the AFP's elite force. Aquino also named two generals and 10 other senior military officers as involved. Also noteworthy is that 18 soldiers on trial for the 1983 assassination of Aquino's husband, opposition leader Benigno Aquino, escaped from an Air Force stockade at the height of the coup bid.

The coup attempt and reactions—including Aquino's "surrender or die" refusal to negotiate—leave none of these explosive issues resolved, despite the physical putting down of the insurrection.

Economic issues behind revolt

Aquino had equally harsh words for her civilian opposition: "We shall also root out those who have given aid and comfort to the traitors. . . . I speak of leaders of the opposition . . . who have . . . encouraged, financed, and in any other manner given aid and comfort to the enemy." Presumably this is directed at the Nacionalista Party, which has the support of many Marcos loyalists and many of the country's business elite who are disgusted with Aquino's own "cronyism" and subjugation of the national economy to the austerity and liberalization demands of the International Monetary Fund.

Although the Nacionalistas deny any involvement in the coup bid, they are a prime suspect for its funding. Suspicion is also raised by the timely reappearance in the Philippines of Eduardo "Danding" Cojuangco, a Marcos "crony" and first cousin to Aquino herself. Aquino thought she had successfully banished Cojuangco forever to the United States, but he managed to acquire a U.S. passport. Cojuangco, Asian sources say, has the money and power to possibly emerge as a rallying point for the opposition against Aquino.

Most importantly, the coup bid and the political machinations surrounding it take place in a context in which Aquino's use of her post to bring the Philippines under an International Monetary Fund-bankers dictatorship, has collapsed the physical economy—while a slim percentage of Aquino associates, starting with Central Bank chief José Fernandez—gets richer and richer.

Only two days before the latest coup bid, her government sharply hiked prices on gasoline, diesel, and cooking oil. Filipino trade unions—from moderate to NPA front organizations—are preparing a general strike.

In short, Aquino's mandate of support—with the exception of the U.S. embassy—is far below that of Ferdinand Marcos in 1986.