

President Reagan isn't often right - but on this occasion he was closer to the truth than normal. President Marcos's days are numbered. The obvious challenge comes in the elections scheduled for February 7. But whatever happens then it is unlikely that the causes of American alarm will go away.

Throughout the 20th century, the United States has relied on a compliant or friendly local ruling oligarchy for the protection of its vital strategic air and naval bases in the Philippines. For most of this time the oligarchy was a fusion of the traditional landed elite and the *ilustrados*, the educated urban upper middle class.

But when their inefficiency provoked an increasingly violent and anarchic popular response in the mid-1960s, the United States was happy to support the man who displaced them: the populist Ferdinand E Marcos. For though corrupt, and despite exacting higher rental from the US for its bases, Marcos remained essentially friendly towards, and dependent on, Uncle Sam.

But as the Philippines has developed the absence of any fundamental economic transformation has brought the expanded elite into increasing conflict with the impoverished peasantry and appallingly deprived urban poor.

And Marcos's power system, primarily concerned with the need to satisfy its hunger for reward and patronage, is simply incapable of damping down the appetite for change, let alone satisfying it. The acquittal

• PHILIPPINES: THE US DILEMMA

Shortly after his election to the presidency, Ronald Reagan indicated why he supported President Marcos's regime in the Philippines: 'It's Marcos or the Communists' he said.

A New People's Army member in the Philippines.



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and reinstatement, of General Fabian Ver, tried for the murder of Bennito Aquino, will only reaffirm doubts about the ability of the Marcos regime to change.

The beneficiaries in all of this are the Philippines' Communists. Their major arm is the military wing of the Philippine Communist party - the New People's Army. In the late 1960s they adopted a Maoist strategy of building their strength in the rural peasant areas and encircling the cities. The Philippines being a string of dispersed islands, they went for a further refinement - the so-called 'archipelago' revolution, establishing footholds on as many different islands as possible.

The growing social tensions and plight of the peasantry have ensured the success of the strategy. They now have an active presence in the rice-growing northern island of Luzon, in central islands like Cebu and Negros (where the post-1980 collapse of the sugar price has produced mass starvation). Even in the Muslim southern island of Mindanao, the NPA has stepped into the power vacuum created by the collapse of the Muslim separatist rebellion of the 1970s.

Working with the peasantry, exacting 'taxes' from the plantation owners, the NPA has built up a fighting force which was only a few thousand strong in the late 1970s, but which now totals (on CIA estimates) 15,000 full-timers and another 15,000 irregulars. They used to adopt classic guerrilla tactics of avoiding military confrontation with the Philippine army, but now regularly take them on with units of 300 to 400 people. Meanwhile, their 'sparrow' units continue to kill government and security officials and the local rich.

At the same time, the National Democratic Front, a broad semi-underground political coalition dominated by the CPP, has become more prominent. The assassination of Aquino gave them a huge fillip, as disgruntled middle-class radicals realised the futility of the 'democratic' process and joined them in scores. In the anti-Marcos swell, their campaign of industrial and political protest has acquired a major presence in many cities and is now giving the CPP an urban power base. NDF support is thought to be close to a million.

The ideological complexion of the NPA/NDF is curious. It is a homegrown communist movement, strongly influenced by peasant nationalism. It has no external backers, repudiates Deng, and enjoys a distant, uneasy relationship with the Soviet Union. It procures its arms locally, by taking the Philippine army's American weaponry. An amalgam of nationalist, socialist, and communist sentiments, its one consistent strand is anti-Americanism.

So America is alarmed. The administration has rediscovered a 'mission' to bring democracy to the Philippines which was conveniently forgotten during Marcos's martial law. They are frantic to try and persuade him to revive democracy, as a bulwark against further communist advances. They haven't much hope.

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