

## NEW WINE, OLD BOTTLES .

'I'm sure no-one ever thought it would happen' said President Corazon Aquino. She certainly wasn't wrong so far as the Left was concerned. The massive popular sentiment in favour of change had been obvious enough, but so too had Marcos's determination if necessary to steal victory in the February 7 elections by terrorism and fraud. Where forecasts foundered was on the assumption that the ailing autocrat would get away with the felony.

Neither of the principal forces on the divided Left, more significantly, played any direct part in the Aquino triumph. The original Partido Komunistang Pilipinas (PKP) described the snap election as a diversionary contest between 'prospective caretakers of American interest' and urged voters to mark their ballot papers with slogans of anti-imperialist protest.

The larger, more widely-publicised Communist party of the Philippines (CPP) decided § after heated internal debates to adopt a similar stance, calling for a complete boycott of a poll it saw as a meaningless 'circus of reactionaries'.

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Photo: Paul Ruffalo/Courtesy News

Taking power: Cory Aquino, the new president of the Philippines, with Salvador Laurel, prime minister designate.

The CPP's initial divisions and subsequent note of ambivalence on the boycott policy mirrored the party's peculiar evolution. Founded in December 1968 as a breakaway from the PKP, the party was dominated initially by university activists inspired by the cultural revolution in China. When the New People's Army (NPA) was launched as the party's military wing, it proudly dedicated itself to waging a guerrilla struggle under the 'supreme command' of Mao Zedong's thought. But as many early cadres were captured or became passive, as the movement burgeoned and as the great helmsman's star waned, positions of leadership in the party, the NPA and above all in the associated mass organisations were frequently taken by radical Catholics inspired by liberation theology.

The seed of truth behind this partisan caricature helps explain the disagreement over the boycott line, for numerous Catholic activists within the CPP-aligned Left felt strongly attracted to the Aquino campaign. In both style and content the campaign indeed resembled nothing so much as an evangelical crusade, the atmosphere at rallies alternating between near-hysteria and reverent, emotion-filled silence.

From the platform Aquino spoke not about political specifics but about her commitment to democracy, justice, morality and faith. She extolled good and condemned evil. Above all, she spoke about 'Ninoy', her assassinated husband. Benigno Aquino had been a politician very much in the traditional elitist and pro-American mould. He admitted publicly that he had worked with the CIA during the terms of three successive Philippine presidents. But with his death he be-

came a martyr, and that potent image was inherited by his widow.

Among a people attuned to religious idiom from the cradle, these appeals struck a responsive chord, and public support for a boycott was manifestly scant. Immediately after the poll, as Marcos loyalists doctored the count, the Left's forecasts nevertheless seemed to be vindicated. A CPP representative confidently predicted at this juncture that the moderate opposition would inevitably contract and the revolutionary movement would advance apace.

Then this whole scenario was abruptly shattered. Onto the swelling Aquino bandwagon there finally jumped two Johnny-come-latelies - the Philippine military and the United States - whose weight very quickly made the critical difference.

This created a fresh dilemma for the CPP-aligned forces. All through the party's 17-year life its propaganda had been primarily directed against what it termed the 'US-Marcos dictatorship'. However popular in the short-term, such an identification of the liberation struggle with the removal of a single individual inevitably creates severe problems if that individual disappears from the scene before victory is won.

The Left's initial reactions to the new government and its peace overtures have revealed division and confusion even deeper than before the election. The released political prisoners have understandably been particularly hesitant to criticise their liberator. Aquino, stated the CPP founding chairperson, was a good woman who was on the right track and deserved broad support. A former NPA second-in-command looked forward to dialogue with the government and

to a peaceful settlement. But such views are not just held by grateful ex-detainees. One of the largest mass organisations, for example, issued a statement celebrating Marcos's ouster as 'a significant victory in the Filipino people's struggle for genuine democracy and national independence.' At the opposite extreme, however, the very same organisation's secretary general advanced the new wine in an old bottle argument: 'Marcos isn't here, but the Marcos dictatorship is still in place.'

Plainly the coalition of the military, the church, elite politicians and millionaire businessmen that backs Aquino constitutes one of the unlikeliest 'revolutionary governments' ever seen. Whether it has the ability or even the will to justify the almost millennial expectations it has aroused must be doubtful in the extreme. When the firework displays and yellow cavalades are through, the Left will need to regroup, unite and assess more dispassionately what has or has not changed.

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