

## Aquino On The Edge

On November 23, the day after her chief of staff's preemptive strike against ultra-rightist army dissidents, President Aquino broadcast to the nation in an uncharacteristic mood of anger and impatience. 'My circumspection has been viewed as weakness and my sincere attempts at reconciliation as indecision', she said. 'This cannot continue.'

To mollify the disaffected colonels, however, she immediately served notice that her vexation should also be heeded by the Communist Party (CPP) and the New People's Army (NPA). Unless a ceasefire agreement was reached within a week, she threatened, bipartisan talks would be terminated and the military would launch a major new counter-insurgency campaign. Two days after Aquino's broadcast a truce was agreed, to begin on December 10 and to last for 60 days.

The ceasefire talks thus ended as they had begun, with the Communists on the defensive. Having failed to contribute to Marcos' downfall, the CPP had inevitably faced difficulties in maintaining the momentum of armed struggle against an overwhelmingly more popular regime which even party leaders acknowledged as having a 'liberal democratic' tendency. Mindful of 'the people's clamour for peace', CPP negotiators persevered with the talks despite persistent rebuffs.

Twice they threatened to withdraw, firstly to secure the release of a senior party leader arrested whilst acting as one of their consultants, and secondly to await justice for the brutal slaying of the president of the militant KMU trade union federation. Neither objective was attained. Then there was a series of retreats on the actual terms of a ceasefire.

Government inflexibility during the ceasefire talks,



Uneasy truce: communist guerrillas of the New People's Army

however, failed to appease the ultra-rightists, who had been dismayed by Aquino's kid-glove reconciliation policies ever since she came to power. They were outraged when CPP cadres were released from prison, including the party's principal founder and the NPA's erstwhile top commander.

Aquino's cabinet had been 'stuffed with pinks'. Suspect individuals had been appointed in droves to the government bureaucracy. A Human Rights Commission, headed by a notorious pink, had begun probing abuses committed by the military during the Marcos years whilst ignoring the misdemeanours of the Left. And finally, in the rightist view, there was the naivete and folly of the ceasefire talks themselves, to which the military had not even been invited.

What has become alarmingly obvious in recent months is that the cold war-style anti-communism which prompted this near-pathological response to Aquino's initiatives, far from being confined to a Rambo fringe in the military, is in fact the institutional norm.

The Left in the Philippines

has little reason, given the current climate, to regard the 'fresh start' now promised by Aquino with much optimism. Increasingly the government appears as a fragile, fractious coalition held together by little more than the popularity of the president herself.

Aquino's survival up to and beyond the first anniversary of her dramatic accession to power has become problematic. In the short term, it seems, her prospects depend on the outcome of the plebiscite due to be held in February to ratify a constitution which will enable her to remain in office without standing for re-election.

If the truce with the NPA is honoured, meanwhile, negotiations with CPP representatives on substantive political issues are scheduled which both sides recognise will prove much more difficult than the original ceasefire talks.

The greatest danger, though, is that the plebiscite and the negotiations will both be rendered academic by an authoritarian military that decides the complexities and restraints of civilian rule are not to its taste. •

Jim Richardson