

FOCUS



People Power In The Philippines

The groups comprising the Philippine 'legal' Left have a real problem now. They must build an anti-fascist front with a government they no longer believe in and whose policies they don't consider worth defending.

But if they don't, and if the rebel officers led by Colonel 'Gringo' Honasan succeed in another coup attempt, the crackdown will almost certainly close what is left of the 'democratic space' remaining under Aquino's brand of conservative democracy.

This will mean not only death-squad bullets for the leaders of the legal Left who haven't gone underground, but also the end of the vital political work of re-educating a public culturally and politically suppressed during the 20 years of Marcos' martial law.

The legal Left has almost written off Aquino for her failure to tackle the growing problems of poverty and exploitation among the majority of Filipinos, and her lack of an agenda and vision to do so.

Her land reform programme, initiated only after the massacre of peasants demonstrating last January for justice and an end to feudal exploitation, has been described by the militant KMP peasants' union as a 'feudal folderol'.

The modest land reform measures, a key to undoing the feudal land relations and rural poverty that plague the Philippines, have already been watered down by landlords in congress. Some landlords have said they will defend their land with their blood.



Infant democracy?

Aquino has followed nearly all the economic policies laid down by foreign capital, the Left argues, which are anti-people and pro-imperialist. She has accepted responsibility for the massive debts corruptly run up by Marcos and his cronies.

The democratic possibilities of 'people power' have not been realised. The majority of working people and peasants are nowhere represented in her government.

Aquino has 'unleashed the sword' against the insurgency following the breakdown of the peace talks with the communist-led National Democratic Front (NDF) last February. She has also given her blessing to the anti-communist vigilantes and landlords' goons terrorising peasant leaders in the provinces.

So it was perhaps inevitable that Aquino and her government were seen by the legal

Left as the main problem. They had begun calling her administration the 'Aquino-US' regime.

Honasan's near-successful coup on August 28, and the continuing threats of further coup attempts, have changed all that. The loyalty of the army is suspect. Only 30% of the officers are opposed to the military intervening in politics.

So now the NDF has offered a ceasefire with any anti-imperialist group to form a popular front against a further coup attempt. The NDF has come under increasing pressure from the legal Left to regain the high moral ground and be more flexible and sensitive to Aquino's precarious position.

Honasan has got all he demanded from Aquino. He is popular with a military that has been given large pay rises, indemnity from past human rights violations, and

a free hand in the conduct of the anti-insurgency campaign.

Aquino's cabinet has now been purged of all remaining liberals, nationalists, civil libertarians and human rights lawyers, whom the Right describes as pro-communist.

This is low intensity conflict played out at the highest political level. Washington is alarmed at Aquino's inability to handle the insurgency and growing nationalist demands for the removal of the country's giant US bases (whose lease runs out in 1991).

The latest coup attempt and the ones before it are, so most of the centre and Left believe, Washington's way of shunting Aquino towards the Right.

The US has been described as the imperial manager, whose strategy has been to manage and mediate conflict between the Aquino clan and the other factions on the Right, and to drive a wedge between Aquino and the mass organisations who want radical changes in Philippine society.

It is no surprise that Honasan, a military satrap, should go on US tv to air his demands to Aquino from his military hideout. Like Marcos before him Honasan needs his Washington patrons as much as they need him.

So what will the Left do now? Moves are being made by the legal Left to unite to defend the shrinking democratic space, linking as broad a range of opinion as possible on this single issue. And to broaden the struggle into civil society.

The illegal (listed) Left, despite its support for a united front against renewed fascism, believe that authoritarian rule is certain to be imposed again. President Aquino may call again for the 'people's power' that ousted Marcos to counter the continuing threat of fascist restoration. But, it is asked, 'people power' for whom? For the people? Or for the multinationals, warmed-over militarists and recycled Marcosists? •

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