

## How the Politics of Reform Lost and Re-claimed Cory (Corazon C. Aquino, 1933-2009)

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*There may be icons and there may be symbols but real transformation can only take place by giving flesh and blood to people power. Only the masses can truly represent "people power" and it is high time that it is re-claimed by the people themselves.*

Corazon C. Aquino became the country's seventh President on the crest of the first People Power that ousted the Marcos dictatorship in February 1986. She faced at least seven coup attempts but she stayed on until a peaceful transition of the presidency in 1992.

Tita Cory – a term of endearment used by many Filipinos – came from one of the biggest landed elites but those who knew her personally attest that she lived a simple and ordinary life. The people power, that began to be associated with civilian uprisings unseating dictators in the Philippines and other countries, had its roots during the Marcos rule (1966-1986) with the upsurge of the nationalist movement and student radicalism of the late 1960s-1970s through the underground anti-dictatorship struggle until it rose as a giant wave following the assassination of Cory's husband, former Sen. Benigno Aquino, Jr. on August 21, 1983. Since then she became a rallying figure that coalesced disparate forces, from the Left to the moderate forces with the multitude of millions aching for the restoration of democracy as well as social and economic reform.

At the end of Aquino's term, the people power forces who celebrated the EDSA 1 anniversaries dwindled to a few thousand and became less visible in the succeeding years. What went wrong?

### Sequestration of political power

The broad democratic force that toppled the Marcos dictatorship may have installed Mrs. Aquino to the presidency but the reforms that the historic moment needed were swept aside with the sequestration of real political power from the authoritarian regime to its own remnants and a section of the elite. Meanwhile, the U.S. government, which had earlier backed Marcos, admonished the Aquino administration to reconcile with remaining key figures of the Marcos dictatorship so that policies pursued earlier, such as on the U.S. bases, would continue. The reconciliation tack, coupled with pressures arising from coup attempts that brought more power to former Marcos generals, disabled efforts by reform-minded members of the Aquino Cabinet to institute reforms in the political system, security structures as well as in the labor and peasant fronts. One after the other, they were eased out from the Cabinet.



Mrs. Aquino fulfilled her promise to release political prisoners of the Marcos regime but at the same time she issued a proclamation giving immunity from lawsuit to all perpetrators of human rights violations. She tried talking peace with the National Democratic Front (NDF) but military hawks in her government brought the peace process to collapse. With militarists gaining the upperhand, Cory unleashed the sword of war against the revolutionary forces. The brutal counter-insurgency campaign began by Marcos continued under the Aquino government's "total war" policy that was inspired by the U.S.-designed low intensity conflict (LIC) doctrine.

Moreover, she reversed a covenant with progressive leaders during the last years of the dictatorship calling for the dismantling of the U.S. bases by endorsing for Senate ratification a proposed bases

renewal treaty. She signed an agrarian reform act but rendered it unpromising amid legislative acts to emasculate it and by exempting Hacienda Luisita, the largest sugar plantation in Southeast Asia owned by her family, from land reform. The critical collaboration that many progressive sectors offered was further pushed back by the series of massacres of peasants and other military atrocities committed under her watch. Toward the end of her term, Aquino's popularity rating plunged tragically.

## Historical role

Cory Aquino's place in history is her role as a figure that brought hope for the removal of strongman rule and the restoration of civil liberties as well as the trappings of bourgeois democracy. Whether that hope gave birth to effective reform in terms of addressing poverty and bringing about substantial change in the lives of the peasants, workers, and other oppressed classes was a dream shattered – and remains unrealized today or 23 years later. Cory had democratic leanings but failed as a social reformer.

This appraisal can be explained by the fact that hope transforms into real change only if the people are empowered. Democracy works when the political leadership truly represents the patriotic and democratic interests of the people. Elite rule was unscathed even with the exit of Marcos. Today the trappings of restored bourgeois democracy such as Malacanang and Congress remain effectively under oligarchic hegemony.

Divorced, however, from the constraints of traditional politics and aware of her own historic role as an “icon of democracy” private citizen Cory lent her still influential voice in various struggles against plunder,

moral bankruptcy, corruption, and politically-motivated charter change. Hers became a voice in the constant search for good governance asking, for instance, Gloria M. Arroyo to do the “supreme sacrifice” of resigning in the social unrest triggered by the “Garci tapes” scandal and the NBN-ZTE scam. In many ways unlike her, most of the so-called Edsa 1 and 2 leaders and beneficiaries went back to their old ways figuring in plunder, cronyism, patronage, corruption, and human rights violations – the very same evils that trigger people's revolts.

As the lives of many people including military reformists, whistleblowers, victims of forced disappearances, and simple folk were touched by her gestures, it is as a private citizen that Cory can truly be said to have made her true mark. Her presence in protest actions helped keep the flame of people power burning unfazed by Mrs. Arroyo's efforts to douse it off by claiming that people power is dead. Had she lived on, Cory should be a force to reckon with in the most disquieting period of power transition from the present unpopular regime to the next.

## Flesh and blood

There may be icons and there may be symbols but real transformation can only take place by giving flesh and blood to people power. Only the masses can truly represent “people power” and it is high time that it is re-claimed by the people themselves.

A fitting conclusion to this appraisal is this quote from Harriet Beecher Stowe, a 19<sup>th</sup> century American novelist who stood against Black slavery: “The bitterest tears shed over graves are for words left unsaid and deeds left undone.”

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For reference:

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