
Philippines

Aquino shows the IMF fist

by Linda de Hoyos

In the second week after the May 11 congressional elections in the Philippines, the Aquino government's heavy-handed tactics against its legitimate opponents has sent a political chill throughout the country.

As of May 29, the Aquino government continues to claim that only one member of the opposition Grand Alliance for Democracy slate won a seat in the 24-person Senate, thereby turning that newly created institution into a rubber-stamp body for the policies of President Corazon Aquino and the families and interests around her. On May 27, more than two full weeks after the elections, Comelec, the government election commission, had counted only 75% of the vote, and had stopped counting due to the high number of irregularities in the vote tallies. For example, in the Ziga district, 150,000 votes were counted, although the district has only 110,000 voters. The pattern is repeated throughout the country. Aquino presidential press secretary, former Communist Party member Teodoro Benigno, had announced the "landslide victory" only two hours after the vote had closed, when no votes had yet been tallied! His "report" has stuck.

By the week following the elections, the dangerous implications of the gross fraud committed by the Aquino government—with the full backing of the United States—began to emerge. On May 26, the Grand Alliance for Democracy, along with protestors from Ferdinand Marcos's KBL, held a 15,000-person rally outside Camp Aguinaldo and Camp Crame, the military encampments on the perimeter of Manila which were the site of the "people's power" protests that brought down Marcos in 1986.

Although the protestors were non-violent, riot police from Quezon City were dispatched to the scene, and began shooting into the crowd. Although the news was blacked out of the international press, our special correspondent in Manila reports that at least two people were killed, with unconfirmed reports that up to 11 people were killed, including a two-month-old baby. When some of the protestors ran to the gates of Camp Aguinaldo, they received protection from the military, who told the police that if they persisted firing, they would be drowned in blood themselves.

This is the second time that Aquino's riot police have shot into the crowds—actions unheard of during the Marcos "dictatorship." The violence at the demonstration brought

the political temperature in Manila and within the military to a boiling point, but a coup has been, for the moment, precluded by the full U.S. backing for the Aquino government, support that goes as far as the early May transferral of 20,000 Marines from Okinawa to Subic Bay.

Vendetta tactics

On May 27, the Aquino government launched its campaign of political vendetta against the Grand Alliance leaders. The Manila Bank, the third largest bank in the Philippines with over 1 million depositors and 72 branches nationwide, was summarily shut down in a Chapter 7 involuntary bankruptcy proceeding brought by the Central Bank and its chief Jose "Jobo" Fernandez. The bank is owned by the Puyat family of Grand Alliance chairman Vicente "Teng" Puyat. At 8 a.m. in the morning, Philippine marshals sealed off the bank's main branch and informed Puyat by phone that the bank would no longer be open for business.

The bank seizure, said Puyat, "is a classic act of political vendetta by the Aquino government." The action was taken, he said, to punish Puyat for his harsh criticism throughout the campaign of the economic policies of the government and its surrender to the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, and his naming of Finance Minister Jaime Ongpin and Central Bank chief Fernandez as the top IMF henchmen.

Ongpin himself is credited with directing the Manila Bank shutdown. The "word" in Manila is that he gave Aquino the lying report that Puyat was funding the anti-Aquino rallies through the bank, and that on this basis, Aquino gave her consent to the bank's seizure.

The bank's assets, which outweigh its liabilities anyway, according to bank president Consuelo Puyat Reyes, are now in the hands of the Central Bank. There are now reports in Manila that First Bank of Boston, which was last year caught laundering more than a billion dollars in drug money, is keenly interested in buying up the Manila Bank. Puyat's bank is slated to become one of the first victims of the Ongpin policy of debt-for-equity sellout that he denounced throughout the campaign.

By the last few weeks before the election, Puyat's campaign against Ongpin et al. had succeeded in galvanizing the nation's major columnists to oppose Ongpin's sellout. Now all attacks on Ongpin have ceased. Before the elections, it is estimated, presidential secretary Joker Arroyo, a factional rival of Ongpin within the cabinet, had permitted the anti-Ongpin campaign. Now, all articles and television tapes must be submitted to a board of censors.

The mood in Manila is angry and tense, reports our special correspondent. But this anger is muted by fear. The "people's power" democracy, Filipinos now know, has been a giant hoax. Behind the image of "Saint Cory," the IMF and the World Bank, which May 28 announced it will not fund a land reform program in the Philippines, are more firmly in the saddle in Manila than ever before.