
The Philippines

Filipino opposition unifies, in order 'to save the country'

by Linda de Hoyos

A new coalition has emerged in the Philippines dedicated to providing an alternative policy-pole to the administration of Corazon Aquino. On March 17, Enrique Zobel, one of the richest business leaders of the Makati banking district of Manila, was elected chairman of the National Movement for Reconstruction and Survival. The new coalition sees itself, as Zobel told *Asia Week*, "not as a league of confrontation," but "a constitution of consultation and participation."

The Nation Movers, as they call themselves for short, bring together top leaders of the Makati business circles that backed Aquino's coming to power in 1986; some leaders of former President Ferdinand Marcos's New Movement Society; and leaders of the Grand Alliance for Democracy, the coalition of many former Aquino admirers that challenged the government in the May 1987 congressional elections.

Among the The Nation Movers' most prominent members are former Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile, former Defense Minister Rafael Iletto, and current Filipino Vice-President Salvador Laurel.

Other efforts had failed

The Nation Movers thus represent that section of the Filipino elite that has watched, increasingly horrified, as the Aquino administration has floundered in the face of continuing economic crisis, national division, and escalating insurgency. After the May 11, 1987 elections for the first congress under the new Aquino constitution, in which the GAD slate was nearly wiped out by alleged computer vote fraud, there has been no effective opposition to the government presenting policy alternatives to Aquino's ineptitude.

However, the lack of a political opposition has not brought stability, given the crises the nation faces. In July, even Aquino's own hand-picked winners in the Senate and House of Representatives launched a major policy debate against the Aquino government's obeisance to the International Monetary Fund. In coordination with then-presidential secretary Joker Arroyo, bills were put forward in the Senate calling for a "García solution" for the Philippines—prohibiting the government to pay more than 10-15% of its export earnings on debt service. (The Philippines now spends an

untenable 45% of its export earnings to pay the national foreign debt.) However, all such debate was put to rest by the abortive Aug. 28 coup of "Gringo" Honason, which temporarily discredited all "right-wing" opposition to the government.

Since then, Filipino politics has tended to degenerate into apolitical squabbling between dynastic elites, with various attempts by right-center politicians to forge an alliance failing. Hence, in the October 1987 nationwide elections for local posts, the most powerful opposition to Aquino came from President of the Senate Jose "Jovito" Salonga, head of that section of the Liberal Party which backed Aquino in the congressional elections. Salonga, a former exile whom the State Department escorted back to the Philippines in January 1985, was an executive board member of the Soviet-Gnostic World Council of Churches, and if in power, would likely favor a coalition with the insurgent New People's Army.

Salonga is in likely alliance with such as Father Jose Bernas, president of the Benedictine Ateneo University. Bernas, an organizer of Aquino's former "Council of Trent" early advisers, has since publicly attacked the President for human rights violations and for drifting to the right. In the local elections, Salonga fielded his own slate of local candidates in the elections in a campaign against "dynasticism" and "nepotism." The ploy succeeded in knocking out several Aquino candidates, including her own mother's family in Tarlac province.

The creation of the Nation Movers now presents a policy-pole not only to Aquino but also to the Salonga anti-American power base.

Not for confrontation purposes

Beginning March 23, *Asia Week* of March 26 reported, members of the Nation Movers moved to set a policy agenda focusing on six major issues: a federal system of government, agrarian and urban land reform, economic and labor policy, national security, U.S. military bases, and education and cultural development. On the issue of the U.S. bases at Clark Field and Subic Bay, the Movers favor the retention of the bases, but at better terms.

At least from statements of its members, the Nation Movers is not looking to create the political cover for a military coup against Aquino. As Laurel stated in an interview with *Asia Week*: "The Movers is non-political, non-partisan. We are tapping the best brains and the best minds who are willing to help, regardless of party label. We will support Cory when she is right, oppose her when she is wrong."

"We are setting aside personal, partisan interests for the national interest, because the country is in peril. The insurgency problem is getting worse, the foreign debt is getting bigger, and we're fighting each other. So what to do: unite the nation and work together for national survival. That is the overall theme. . . . We are thinking of what should be done under the circumstances to prevent the situation from deteriorating. The objective is not to topple the President. . . . We're not thinking of 1992 [when Aquino's six-year term expires]. We think that if we don't solve the crucial problems today, there won't be presidential elections in 1992."

Movers in action

By the end of March, the Nation Movers had proved the point by taking action to avert a possible Muslim separatist war in the southern-most island of Mindanao, whose mineral wealth has made it the richest area of the Philippines.

In the early 1970s, the Philippine Armed Forces fought a bitter war with the Muslims (Moros) in Mindanao, in which at least 100,000 Moros and soldiers were killed. In 1976, Imelda Marcos negotiated the Tripoli Agreement with Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) leader Nur Misauri, currently resident in Saudi Arabia, in which autonomy was granted to 13 Muslim-dominated states in Mindanao, Palawan, and Sulu. But the agreement has been abrogated by the Aquino government, some suspect for reasons of the business interests in Mindanao of Aquino's brother Peping Cojuangco, fueling centuries of hatred by the Moros of Manila "imperialism."

The MNLF, along with two splinter groups, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front and the MNLF Reformist Group, is estimated to have 15,000 trained fighters with 11,500 firearms. However, according to a Moro leader quoted in *Malaya* March 14, the Moros are prepared for war. "Every gun in every Muslim household could be easily centralized" should fighting between the MNLF and government forces erupt.

Despite their antipathy to Manila, the Moros have not linked forces with the New People's Army in Mindanao, and have even been accused of working with the vigilante *Alsa Masa* in Mindanao against the NPA. Nevertheless, it is agreed by both Juan Ponce Enrile and current Defense Minister Fidel Ramos that under no circumstances can the Philippine Armed Forces win in a two-front war with both the NPA and the Moros. It is also believed that the Moros, if they were goaded to fight by Manila intransigence, would prove to be far superior enemies to the NPA. Funded and supplied by the Islamic countries, the Moros would likely employ random

mass terror against civilians similar to that used in Beirut. The NPA limits its actions to targeted assassinations and operations against the armed forces.

Over the past months, the Moros organized a million-signature petition for recognition as a state by the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC), which convened in Amman, Jordan, March 21. According to Moro leaders, upon recognition, the Moro leadership was prepared to establish a provisional government in Mindanao and declare war on Manila.

Agreement on federalization

On March 18, Moro leader Abdul Khavr Alonto, a member of the Grand Alliance for Democracy, announced in a press conference at a Zobel-owned building in Makati, that MNLF leader Misauri was in "full accord" with the federal form of government espoused by the Nation Movers. Misauri, Alonto said, "was optimistic that peace would return to Mindanao under a federal form of government." Misauri's aide, Uztadz Zain Jali, also stated that "federalization is an alternative so that the Philippines will not be dismembered." If federalization is adopted, he said, the MNLF will no longer insist on secession.

Under the current constitution, the country is highly centralized, with national authority presiding over education and local government. Over 70% of local taxes are passed on to Manila, where, it is widely suspected, it is siphoned off into the coffers of the families in power. This total centralization has made it very difficult for local authorities to deal effectively with the NPA insurgency. As seven provincial governors complained recently, they are not receiving enough funds from Manila to provide new jobs, the best antidote to NPA agitation.

Alonto himself is on the Nation Movers subcommittee to study which federal system would be most appropriate for the Filipino culture, reported the *Manila Chronicle* March 18. Vicente Puyat, who led the Grand Alliance for Democracy and who is also a member of the subcommittee, added in the press conference that he would push for the creation of Mindanao as the first federal state, to serve as a model for the other seven or eight such states that might be created. He also agreed on the use of the Tripoli Agreement as the basis for negotiations, since "that is already a past commitment and government is running late in implementing it."

The danger of war has been averted by these developments, crafted by the Nation Movers, and by the March 21 decision by the OIC not to seat the MNLF as a nation among Islamic states.

If the Nation Movers fully succeed in their endeavors in Mindanao, it will have earned full credibility as a reliable source of policy alternatives for the Aquino government. This will be required if the government is to save the country from its near-disintegration into warlord territories and unite to fight the NPA.