
Philippines

Malacanang Palace under siege again

by Linda de Hoyos

Although the Aug. 28-29 military coup against the government of Philippines President Corazon Aquino was put down, the government appears to have been weakened by the entire episode, possibly fatally. Although the Aquino government is firmly in control in the capital city of Manila, the coup has exposed and exacerbated a growing political vacuum at the center, which threatens to throw the country into conditions of total ungovernability.

Militarily, the Aquino government is under pressure from three different directions:

- Col. Gregorio "Gringo" Honasan, who led the first coup against former President Ferdinand Marcos in Malacanang Palace in February 1986 and who led the recent coup attempt against Aquino, is still at large and reportedly commanding up to 2,000 troops, most of them likely centered north of Manila in central Luzon. In addition, the island of Cebu, under the command of Gen. Edgardo Abenina, appears to remain under rebel troop control. Honasan's coup bid was by far the most serious of five coup attempts since Aquino came to power, and would likely have succeeded but for an hour-and-a-half delay of rebel reinforcements arriving in Manila. Intelligence sources in Manila report that Honasan and his forces now view the Aug. 28 attempt as a "dress rehearsal" for the real coup—which can soon be expected.

- The Moro National Liberation Front is poised to move in the southern island of Mindanao. The MNLF has declared war on the Aquino government, whose disarray now makes negotiations even more difficult. Mindanao has been left "uncovered" by the transfer of government troops from the island to Manila to put down the soldier revolt.

- The New People's Army on Sept. 4 ambushed a convoy 50 miles east of Manila, killing 21 soldiers. In the last week, the NPA had killed at least 40 soldiers and civilians. An NPA communiqué issued Sept. 1 stated: "Intensification of the revolutionary war and other people's struggles is the correct response to the worsening strife among the reactionaries. Let us take full advantage of political crises in Manila." As in the ambush of Sept. 4, the NPA is now operating in larger groups—up to 200 at a time—with such large-scale ambushes of troops a regular occurrence.

Aquino is also suffering a steady erosion of her political bases of support. On Aug. 27, thousands of trade unionists,

organized by the left-wing May First Movement, hit the streets against a 20% rise in oil and gasoline price. Most protestors were members of the Bayan Party, who in February 1986 surrounded Camps Aguinaldo and Crame on Aquino's behalf. Representing trade unionists and farmers, many left nationalists have been forced into opposition to Aquino because of her subservience to the foreign creditors, and failure to improve the poverty-stricken life of the average Filipino.

For the same reason, Aquino has increasingly earned the wrath of the Makati businessmen, who also played a major role in bringing her to power. The Philippines Chamber of Commerce and Industry Aug. 28 blamed the Aquino government for the attempted coup. "These last few months . . . have witnessed some emerging disenchantment not just within the military but among other sectors as well. The government should look into the sources of this disenchantment and reassess whether it can still maintain its seemingly wavering stance on issues central to peace and order, business confidence and economic growth."

Within the army itself, pressure is mounting—a pressure reflected even in the U.S. press—for the removal of Chief of Staff Fidel Ramos, who led the military operations against the rebel soldiers. Government troops were not aiming to kill rebels, report Manila sources, and instead fired their shots in the air. Honasan was permitted to escape from Camp Aguinaldo in a helicopter without a shot fired. The army, bitter over lack of material and moral support from the government while troops are being gunned down by the NPA, cannot be counted upon to come to Aquino's rescue.

Aquino, it would appear, does not even have the wholehearted support of the Catholic Church under Jaime Cardinal Sin. Although Sin proclaimed at a mass Aug. 30 that it was "a miracle" that the coup failed, signaling a "hand from above" intervened on Aquino's behalf, during the three days of conflict, the Cardinal was unusually silent, issuing no calls for the defense of Aquino.

As her isolation increases, Aquino is left with the sole support of the U.S. State Department. On Aug. 28, President Ronald Reagan proclaimed his full support for the Aquino government, and on Aug. 30 Undersecretary of State Michael Armacost declared that if a coup were successful, all U.S. aid would be cut to the new government "by law." However, there are indications that the U.S. intelligence community is now divided on the issue of Aquino's tenure. Whereas in 1986 the U.S. intelligence community was unanimous in its support for Aquino, the predictions of the *EIR* that Marcos's overthrow would lead to an economic and social devolution have been borne out by the Aquino government's performance over the last 20 months.

The accuracy of the *EIR's* projection then, however, is poor comfort today. Despite Armacost's admonishment, if a successful coup is not launched or if the Aquino government does not radically alter its own military and economic policies, the Philippines faces a protracted multi-sided civil war.