

Securing Cory Aquino's Legacy by Carl W. Baker

Carl Baker (carl@pacforum.org) is director of programs at the Pacific Forum CSIS.

Former Philippine President Corazon Aquino, who died on Aug. 1 after a year-long battle with colon cancer, was laid in a "quasi-official ceremony" Aug. 5 after hundreds of thousands paid final respects to the unassuming former housewife who became an international icon for her role in restoring democracy in the Philippines in 1986. Even in death Aquino remains an inspiration to the people of the Philippines. Two separate resolutions were filed in the House of Representatives to declare her a national hero. Former political opponents offered words of conciliation and admiration. Former coup plotters and organizations from the left claimed her as a strong supporter of their cause, a leader in the fight against tyranny, and a part of their anti-dictatorship struggle. For ordinary Filipinos she remains the symbol of democracy, the most popular president the country has ever had, and the glimmer of hope for creating a more cohesive nation.

Born into one of the country's wealthiest families, the Cojuangcos of Tarlac Province, "Cory" was reluctantly thrust into Philippine politics after her husband, Benigno Aquino Jr., was assassinated in 1983 by officers taking him into custody as he was escorted off the airplane. When snap elections were called in 1985, she emerged as the proxy candidate for various opposition groups even though she was quoted during a campaign speech as saying "What on earth do I know about being president?" In 1986, with her symbolic yellow dress and "L" hand gesture (representing *Laban* or struggle), she was leading street protests against Dictator Ferdinand Marcos' attempt to claim victory in elections marred by massive fraud and violence. Within two weeks she was sworn in as president through the "people power" movement, which became a model for nonviolent democracy movements worldwide.

In office, President Aquino struggled to meet the expectations of supporters as she sought to adapt her populist inclinations to the business of governing. She was seen by many as indecisive and naïve in the face of strong opposition from vested interest groups that ultimately truncated attempts at social and economic reform. Her Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program foundered in the face of strong opposition from the landed elite, including her own family. Ironically, in honor of her death, President Arroyo signed a six-month extension for the program, originally established in 1988 and supposed to be completed within 10 years. Similarly, her efforts to resolve the long-standing communist insurgency were subverted when the military leadership insisted on a "military solution" rather than respond to dissatisfaction in rural areas with political accommodation and economic development programs as Aquino had advocated. After six tumultuous years that included a series of coup attempts, with

many of her closest allies disillusioned and a political system still dominated by elite family clans, Aquino handed the presidency to Fidel Ramos, her duly elected successor.

Still, *Tita* (Aunty) Cory remained loved by the average Filipino. She remained an active promoter of the 1987 Constitution, which she proudly delivered as a lasting contribution to democracy and an antidote to the excesses of the Marcos era. That commitment led her back to the streets in 2001 when she led the second "people power" revolt to remove Joseph Estrada (Ramos' elected successor) over alleged corruption, although she later apologized to him for thinking that President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo would be any better. She returned to her "people power" approach to democracy after the 2004 elections, when she called on Arroyo to resign in the face of accusations of voter fraud and corruption. Even after she was diagnosed with cancer, she was actively involved in campaigns against calls from supporters of the Arroyo administration to change the 1987 Constitution.

Throughout her political career, Aquino had great difficulty translating her ability to win support from the people into effective governance through established institutions. When challenged, her response was to return to the street. To some extent, the failure reflected her inability to effectively manage a complex bureaucracy. The weakness of government institutions, plagued by underfunding and rampant corruption, compounded the problem.

The tension in the Philippines between popular appeal and the ability to govern continues to this day. In her State of the Nation Address (SONA) in late July, Arroyo said she "did not become president to be popular" but was only interested in completing initiatives she began during her presidency. This has been the message since Arroyo "changed her mind" about seeking election in 2004. Later in that speech, after providing a laundry list of accomplishments of her administration, she said "Real government is about looking beyond the vested to the national interest, setting up the necessary conditions to enable the next, more enabled and more empowered generation to achieve a country as prosperous, a people as content, as ours deserve to be." Aquino, on the other hand, remained to the end committed to promoting political goals through appeals to the popular will. This tension is also being played out in other democracies around the world, including the Southeast Asia countries of Thailand and Malaysia, and, to perhaps a lesser extent, in the United States.

This tension is the heart of the Aquino legacy and her commitment to the "spirit of Ninoy," who she defended to her death as a martyr for democracy. Will democracy prevail and become firmly institutionalized? Or, have her repeated appeals to "people power" left the people weary of extra-constitutional politics and Philippine political institutions too weak to overcome challenges by self-serving and elitist politicians?

To the end, Cory Aquino attributed her success to the people. So, it is perhaps fitting that now her legacy is up to the people of the Philippines how they respond in the lead-up to the 2010 elections, and the challenge of adjusting the Constitution. It does not have to be either promoting the will of the people or having the political elite decide what is best for the people. In a real democracy, they are one in the same. Now is the time for Filipinos to demonstrate that they are up to the task that Aquino envisioned for them.