

# Local elections to expose fatal weakness of Aquino's government

by Linda de Hoyos

On Jan. 18, the Philippines will hold elections across the country for state and local offices, in what the press in the United States is promising will be a "consolidation" of President Corazon Aquino's democratic rule. When she took power in February 1986, Mrs. Aquino summarily dismissed all local elected officials and replaced them with officials handpicked by then Local Governments Minister Augusto Pimentel. The local elections, which are being held after months of delay, are to finalize the transition to "democracy" that Aquino, with the sponsorship of the U.S. embassy and its Project Democracy affiliates, guaranteed to the Republic of the Philippines.

But on-the-scene reports show that instead of marking a great victory for democracy and for Aquino, the local elections are exposing the fatal weakness of the Aquino administration. Instead of marking the consolidation of her presidency, the elections are more likely to mark the final fissuring of the coalition that boosted Aquino to power, and the opening phases of parallel government by the insurgent New People's Army.

On the first danger, within the Filipino ruling elite, Aquino is being openly challenged by the Liberal Party under the leadership of President of the Senate Jovito Salonga. A former executive member of the pro-Soviet World Council of Churches, Salonga was an exile in the United States who was ushered back to the Philippines in 1985 under the official and public protection of the U.S. State Department, just like South Korea's World Council of Churches' politician Kim Dae Jung.

Vice President Salvador Laurel broke away from the Aquino coalition three months ago, but his Unido Party has been reduced to a provincial party in Laurel's own home base. Salonga used the occasion of the local elections to announce that his Liberal Party would file its own slate of local officials, in opposition to Aquino. Salonga, it is believed, is the next potentate in Philippines politics and sources in Manila believe that if he succeeds in stepping into power, he will quickly cut a partnership deal with the Communist Party of the Philippines, its political affiliates, and the NPA.

## NPA local governments

The NPA, which is led by a central committee member of the Philippines Communist Party, has wielded the local

elections to its own advantage.

On Jan. 7, former Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile issued his projection that candidates under the direct influence or organizational authority of the NPA would win 35-40% of the local races. This is no exaggeration, but an assessment shared by knowledgeable intelligence sources in Manila. The NPA reportedly controls 25-30% of the countryside—that is, government troops have ceded these areas to the NPA. Direct influence over local officials will give the NPA new capabilities, including increased taxation in the areas under their control.

In areas under its de facto control, the NPA is forcing local candidates to buy "safe passage" from the NPA, if they want to do any campaigning. Police Constabulary Lt. Gen. Renato de Villa showed a Manila forum examples of the "safe conduct passes" issued by the NPA to candidates in southern Luzon, central Luzon, and Bicol. In Pampanga, he reported, the NPA had collected as much as 18,000 pesos in this way. "We have gotten pieces of information that the rebels have come in very strongly in using the election process to blackmail candidates to pay for their safety . . . in areas where they have some influence."

When blackmail does not suffice, the NPA resorts to murder. Armed Forces Chief-of-Staff Fidel Ramos said Jan 11 that 38 out of 57 reported campaign-related killings had been carried out by the NPA. A total of 31 candidates have been killed in the campaign so far. The murder of candidates—like the Oct. 28 assassination of three American servicemen—"breaks the rules" in Filipino politics; secondary figures may be murdered, but primary figures, such as candidates, are traditionally immune to assassination. According to General de Villa, the NPA has targeted candidates who have been active in fighting the insurgents, or candidates who resist NPA blackmail.

The NPA's flexing of its muscle in those areas under its influence has been accompanied by an escalation in its military operations. On Jan. 11, for example, 300 NPA guerrillas attacked a military detachment in Balbalan, Kalinga Apayao. The heavily armed rebels pounded the detachment for 12 hours, before government reinforcement arrived in helicopter gunships, and even then, the gunbattle lasted another two hours. Before retreating, the NPA guerrillas succeeded in burning down the Balbalan municipal hall.

The Communist Party's official organ, *Ang Bayan*, stated the NPA's overall strategy, assessing 1987 as the "year of reconsolidation," reported the *Manila Chronicle* Jan. 12. In 1987, the CPP said, "The reactionary nature" of the Aquino government grew more distinct. "The past year also saw an increased momentum in building local organs of political power mostly at the barrio level and some at the municipal level," the *Chronicle* reported on the CPP evaluation.

"This year," stated the *Bayan* article, "we expect to make further progress until large areas shall have been virtually liberated in the future. While going all out to strengthen and lead forward the basic forces of the revolution, we have been exerting ourselves to win over the middle forces (the organized and unorganized forces that stand between the revolutionary and the reactionary camps) and to completely isolate the U.S.-Aquino regime and other diehard reactionary forces."

However, NPA strategy, political initiatives, and terror tactics do not fully explain how 35-40% of local government seats could fall within its orbit. In the areas of NPA strength—the countryside—poverty is increasing, according to latest national statistics. In the last year, the agricultural growth rate was 0.7%, against the 3.7% agriculture posted in 1986, a drastic drop, in part resulting from drought and typhoon damage.

Even so, Aria Agnes Quisumbing, an economist at the University of the Philippines, reported in the *Manila Standard* Jan. 3 that the lack of land reform is aggravating rural poverty. The bottom 30% income-bracket families are growing in number annually at about 2.8% faster than the 1.3% annual increase of their non-agricultural counterparts. In non-rice-producing families that are dependent upon corn, coconut, and other crops like sugar, the percentage of owner-operated land is declining sharply. This is creating an economic and social condition that feeds the NPA, or at the very least, makes the Filipino farmer tolerant of the NPA's presence.

### **Cory's halo slipping**

Meanwhile, back in Manila, while Cory Aquino may still bask in good press in the United States, the Filipino press corps has turned against her en masse. There is now a full Filipino press boycott of Malacanang Palace, in protest over Aquino's refusal to be interviewed by Filipino reporters. She obligingly doles out her time to foreign correspondents. Aquino press secretary Teodoro Benigno justified this exclusion by saying that Mrs. Aquino "does not relish the moments she spends with [Filipino] media, because they have printed and aired, here and abroad, mostly criticisms of the government."

"What Malacanang wants," said one Manila columnist, "is a press that is sympathetic to it; a press that it can manipulate to advantage; a press that will sing only hosannas to Cory the Saint."

But underneath the press wars against Aquino is a grow-

ing disaffection with her administration. According to a poll taken by the Ateneo University, Aquino's popularity rating has dropped by 20 points over the last two months, to 55%, and below 50% in Manila itself.

In the local election campaign, Aquino has come under attack for building up a new dynastic political structure around her immediate family. This nexus centers around her brother-in-law, Paul "Butz" Aquino, previously a link to the radical left, and her brother, Jose "Peping" Cojuangco. In areas around the country, particularly under "Peping," the Aquino slate is linking up with local political warlords and the still-powerful remnants of the Marcos political machinery.

Nor has the press hesitated to paint Aquino with the brush of graft and corruption, with brother "Peping" the big target of opportunity. According to numerous sources in Manila and published accounts, the Cojuangco family has lined its pockets with money taken from the national gambling concerns, among other perquisites.

The taint growing around Aquino is being used to good effect by Jovito Salonga, who wants to see himself in Malacanang as soon as possible. Hitting her coalition with various Marcos forces, Salonga lashed out: "We did not suffer 14 years of the Marcos dictatorship only to see the return of the same practices of Marcos." Complaints coming from the press of "human rights violations" by the Aquino administration also bear the Salonga stamp.

Salonga has emerged as the most powerful figure challenging Aquino within the elite. On Jan. 11, Salonga announced that President Pro-Tempore Teofisto Guingona and Marianito Canonigo, head of the Presidential Commission on Urban Poor, has joined his Liberal Party. Along with Senate Majority Floor Leader Orlando Mercado, Salonga now controls the top-three most powerful posts in the Senate, which itself has wide policymaking powers.

While some might herald the free-for-all politics in the capital as a sign that "democracy" is "working," the net result is a failure of national will in the face of an increasingly bold and self-confident insurgency feeding on continued economic collapse. This is the work of the U.S. Project Democracy. A letter to the leftist Malaya paper accurately summed up the condition as many Filipinos see it:

"When Cory Aquino was campaigning for the presidency, she said that if I voted for Marcos, many dire things would happen. . . .

" 'The New People's Army would grow in strength'; 'graft and corruption would rage unabated'; 'there would be a breakdown of law and order'; 'the rich would get richer and the poor would get poorer'; 'political dynasties would increase their grip on power'; 'private armies would continue to proliferate'; 'political killings would be part of the country's daily routine'; and 'human rights violations would go on unabated.' "

"Well, I didn't believe her. But it turned out she was right. I did vote for Marcos, and all these things came true!"