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Introduction

The Philippines has in recent years attracted world-wide media coverage with its sensational political upheavals since the 1980s and through President Corazon C. Aquino’s tenure of office. Five years of the Aquino presidency have been brutalized by six coup attempts, seemingly endless political violence, malfunctioning of the political institutions, chronic socio-economic difficulties and imbalances. No description, perhaps, is more apt in characterizing President Aquino’s term than “transitional”, from the Marcos-era oligarchy to the situation of a newly-restored democracy.

With the start of the year 1991 and the presidential election slated for May 1992, Filipinos appear more confident that there is a decrease in the preceding disturbances of public order and that their President will be able to complete her term in June 1992. The upbeat mood comes amidst tentative signs of political reconciliation i.e. a gradual diminution of the coup rumours; increasing positive interactions between the President and the Opposition, and the start of election campaigning by some presidential aspirants. The most encouraging development is that the Opposition leaders have reaffirmed that they would abide by the 1987 Constitution with regard to the nation’s leadership changes, and denounced those trying to overthrow the government by force. This change in the Opposition’s stance is very significant, and taken as a major turning point in the Philippine politics.
The Philippine economy has been through a dismal period since the December 1989 coup attempt. The intermittent coup rumours have made foreign and local investors jittery, which has resulted in a slow down of investment and a sharp drop in the stock exchange capitalization. Worse, a large number of foreign investors withdrew their capital from the Philippines. The coup fear, however, is not the only factor responsible for the economy's downward trend. Aside from the political uncertainty, the economy has also suffered from acute power shortage which caused severe damage to the country's production capacity during the first semester of 1990, a strong earthquake that hit Central Luzon in July 1990; a series of typhoons which wreaked havoc on various parts of the country (especially the Typhoon Ruping, the strongest typhoon ever to hit the Visayas in November); and lately the Gulf crisis. However, the majority of the people remain hopeful that despite the recurring economic troubles, relative stability of the government will be maintained.

Several observers have pointed out that the Philippine politics is entering a new phase. Hence, the central issue of the Philippines' politics is no longer the survivability of the Aquino administration, but who will likely succeed President Aquino.

The Aquino Factor

President Aquino has on several occasions asserted that she would not seek reelection. Moreover, the president has said that she would announce by May 1991 her support for a person best suited for the presidential post.

As a matter of fact, the Philippines' Constitution clearly stipulates that the president shall not be eligible for reelection and that person who has succeeded as president and has served for more than four years shall not be qualified for election to the same office at any time. The term of the president under the Constitution is six years.

Thus, President Aquino's critics say that her pronouncement is nothing but an acknowledgement of the constitutional provision. However, some Aquino supporters claim that the said provision should not apply to President Aquino who was elected (1986) before the Constitution was promulgated in 1987.
Whatever the case, President Aquino’s pronouncement has been well-calculated and certainly helps assuage the country’s political climate. At least, her action has satisfied presidential hopefuls in both the opposition wing and her own clique, thereby helping neutralise her political threats. With her stand, she could expect that the opposition leaders would be more amenable to her call for unity and cooperation. At the same time even those among her supporters, be they aspirants for the presidency or other congressional positions would try to please her in hopes of winning her endorsement which can be crucial in the 1992 presidential and congressional elections. (Congressional elections are slated concomitant with the presidential election).

President Aquino’s popular support has eroded in the past few years (from more than 80% to less than 50% at the opinion polls), and significantly her military support has become tenuous. She and her administration have been severely criticised by almost all sectors i.e. media, academics, Congress and even the Catholic Church, which had previously been a staunch supporter of the president. The criticisms against the president by Congress are a good indicator that her support is very much weakened. It is known that the president herself had been influential over the legislative branch, the members of which are mostly Aquino people. The House of Representatives is under the control of the Laban Demokratikong Pilipino (LDP), the biggest political party which was set up in 1987 to consolidate congressional support for the president. The youngest brother of the president, Jose Peping Cojuangco is its secretary-general. Likewise, the Senate is under the Liberal Party (LP), which had constituted part of the Aquino-led coalition. Nevertheless, Congress has become the most vocal critic against the president. In recent months, several administration-sponsored bills and Aquino’s call for cooperation in certain matters have been rebuffed by Congress. Some congressional leaders have even called on the president to step down and hold a snap presidential election.

Critics assert that the Aquino government has created a crisis of confidence in the newly-restored democratic institutions. They point out that the government has already outlived the so-called “honeymoon period”, and that people expect that their quality of life should have improved after four to five years of democratic rule. They allege that
the president has not done enough to put the economy on the right track and upon a solid foundation. The perennial infrastructural problems (power shortage, poor maintenances in other public services) have outraged the people.

Despite the apparent downturn in her popularity, President Aquino is still regarded as a crucial factor in the forthcoming presidential election. According to one poll, she remains one of the top three favorite politicians. However, her influence is much vested with her ties with major political groupings which are expected to figure importantly in the elections, i.e. the Laban Demokratikong Pilipino (LDP) the newly-constituted (by the president) grassroots movement KABISIG, and her relationship with the newly-elected autonomous government in Mindanao. Such political groupings are the important power bases for the president.

The LDP is the largest political party, with a wide range of connections at the national and local levels. LDP supporters are to be found nationwide in such public offices as municipality mayor, governor and member of Congress. Despite the strained relationship between the LDP and the president, top positions in the LDP are still controlled by the Aquino people, such as the LDP secretary-general who is the youngest brother of the president. Besides Jose Peping Cojuangco who is known as a major power broker, House Majority Floorleader Francisco Sumulong, who is a maternal uncle of the president is another LDP heavyweigh. And there is also House Assistant Majority Floorleader Raul Roco, known as a trusted aide of the president. The recent resignation of House Speaker and the founding chairman of the LDP Ramon Mitra from the LDP chairmanship was seen as proof of the substantial presidential influence in the LDP. Mitra used to be a trusted Aquino supporter during the initial period of the Aquino presidency and served as the first Secretary of Agriculture in the Aquino administration. However, Mitra became very vocal against the Aquino administration (though not directly against her), which soured the relationship between the LDP and Malacanang Palace. President Aquino has hinted that she has lost her regard for Mitra.
Aside from the LDP, President Aquino is able to exercise her influence through another channel, i.e. the Kabisig. Kabisig was embodied as a popular movement in the middle of 1990 when the president’s ties with the LDP were increasingly strained. Many observers were of the view that Kabisig was an organization which would help consolidate support for the president in the same fashion as the LDP previously did. President Aquino has said that Kabisig is not a political party, but an “organization” which is primarily aimed at mobilizing people's participation in the government’s decision-making processes. However, some observers see no difference between the Kabisig and an organized political party. Kabisig is expected to play an important role in the coming election. Whoever is endorsed by the president as her nominated successor can indeed gain a lot from the Kabisig.

President Aquino’s influence over the Moslem-dominated area in Mindanao is another crucial factor. Sakharia Candao, now the governor of the Autonomous Region of Moslem Mindanao is expected to be a major election campaigner for the candidate endorsed by the president. Candao is a trusted aide of the president. He ran for the governorship of the autonomous region under the banner of the LDP.

Presidential Aspirants

The mainstream of the political movement now taking place in the Philippines, it can be said, is in the embryonic phase of the presidential election. Various presidential aspirants are trying to establish themselves. At present, some presidential aspirants have publicly announced their plans, and some are still pondering their future. Those who have already announced their candidacy are House Speaker Ramon Mitra, Senate Minority Floorleader Juan Ponce Enrile, former Secretary of Agrarian Reform Miriam Defensor-Santiago, and well-known Marcos-crony Eduardo Cojuangco. Those reportedly waiting for an appropriate time to announce their intention are Senate President Jovito Salonga, Secretary of National Defense Fidel Ramos and Vice President Salvador Laurel. Those considered to be potential candidates and might decide to run are Senator Joseph Estrada, Executive Secretary Oscar Orbos and Senator Ernesto Maceda.
We shall be now discussing the relative strength of these aspirants, who will be grouped according to their power bases, as follows:

1. **The Aquino Camp**

Among those identified with the Aquino camp are General Fidel Ramos, House Speaker Ramon Mitra, and Executive Secretary Oscar Orbos.

Secretary of Defense General Fidel Ramos, a 63-year old Luzonian, is recognised as the most popular cabinet secretary in the Aquino administration. In an opinion survey of Metro-Manila done by a group of independent academics in June 1990, General Ramos was the fourth most favored candidate after Miriam Defensor-Santiago, Corazon Aquino, Joseph Estrada and Jovito Salonga. The survey also revealed that the general was the favorite of the middle class and the second most favorite of the upper class, but fared poorly among the lower class.

A drawback of General Ramos is that he is a Protestant and lacks direct ties with any political party. However, many believe that if the president endorses him, General Ramos can make use of the president’s apparatus such as the LDP and Kabisig. General Ramos played a decisive role in the 1986 revolution overthrowing the Marcos regime, and has subsequently saved the Aquino administration from several coup attempts. It is conceivable that the president could decide to repay her debts of gratitude to him.

House Speaker Ramon Mitra is another potential competitor hailing from the LDP. Mitra, a native of Palawan, is the founding chairman of the LDP and believed to remain influential in the party, despite his resignation as the party chairman. He became the first presidential aspirant to publicly announce his ambition. His chances are seen as secondary to those of General Ramos.

Former Transportation Secretary Oscar Orbos is rapidly emerging as a strong candidate for the presidential post. He was recently moved by the President to the position of Executive Secretary, the equivalent of the U.S. White House chief of staff. Orbos, now forty years old, had been an energetic LDP congressman representing the province of Pangasinan, the home province of General Ramos. The strengths
of Orbos are his close relationship with the president (considered as the closest among the close aides), and his ties with both the LDP and Kabisig. (He was one of the founders of Kabisig). He is well regarded as a man of action, a quality seen sorely lacking in most of the members of the present Aquino cabinet. It is for his dynamism that Orbos has been publicly cited by influential Manila Archbishop Jaime Cardinal Sin as possessing the right presidential quality.

2. The Liberal Party

Within in the Liberal Party, it seems clear that Senate President Jovito Salonga will remain its standard bearer.

Salonga, 71 and from the Rizal province in Luzon, is a veteran politician who enjoys high respects among his colleagues in the 23-member Senate. He is among the top four favorite politicians, who has a long record of fighting against the Marcos dictatorship. His strengths are, aside from his popularity, the solid support from the Liberal Party, where he has played an outstanding role for years. He is more rational than most other politicians in his thinking, while possessing a shrewd personality. Moreover, he has maintained a reasonable alliance with President Aquino since her assumption of office. Senator Salonga may not receive the president’s endorsement since he belongs to another political grouping, but the Aquino-endorsed candidate will have a hard time competing with him. A problem with Salonga is that he will have to find a suitable running mate, which is apparently hard to do without the risk of breaking up the Liberal Party. Presently, there are at least two other presidential aspirants with the party, namely Senators Joseph Estrada and Ernesto Maceda.

Joseph Estrada, a former popular movie star, is a popular figure in Metro-Manila. He is regarded by underprivileged constituents as their politician. He is reportedly ready to give way to his party chief, and just hopes to be picked up as Salonga’s running mate.

Senator Ernesto Maceda is very knowledgable senator with great experience from his long political career. He used to serve as executive secretary under former President Ferdinand Marcos before he broke off his relationship with Marcos. Maceda is not as popular as some of the foregoing candidates, and his ties with President Aquino seem to be worsening due to his increasingly vocal criticisms against the president.
3. The Opposition Wing

Presidential hopefuls from the opposition camp can be grouped into two groups, i.e. those connected with the Nacionalista Party (Vice-President Salvador Laurel and Sen. Juan Ponce Enrile) and the Marcos-associated clique led by Eduardo Cojuangco, the estranged cousin of President Aquino.

Vice President Salvador Laurel has emerged as a presidential candidate well ahead of the other politicians. In 1985-86 he led the biggest opposition coalition called the UNIDO. (President Aquino ran for presidency under the banner of UNIDO.) However, Salvador Laurel suffered a major political setback after he broke ties with the president in early 1987. Vice President Laurel later tried to build up his power base by joining with the other oppositionists, including Sen. Juan Ponce Enrile in restoring the long dormant Nacionalista Party.

Another potential candidate is Juan Ponce Enrile. Enrile is one of the best known politicians in both negative and positive senses. He has maintained his position of being critical of the president, even on some very personal matters. Enrile clearly projects himself as an alternate of President Aquino. With his position in the Nacionalista as the party’s secretary general, Enrile seems to be the first challenger of Laurel in their bids for presidency. Enrile recently announced that he would not accept anything less than presidential nominee. Otherwise, he would run for the second term as senator.

Eduardo Cojuangco is another potential candidate from the opposition wing. He is best known as a super crony of the late President Ferdinand Marcos. He fled to the U.S. after the 1986 people’s revolution and just returned to the country a few days before the December 1989 coup attempt. He is the most favorite politician in the opposition camp, and perhaps the most influential.

4. Outsiders

The Philippines’s politics is highly volatile. One should not rule out the possibility that someone outside the establishment may enter the scene.
Former Commissioner of Immigration and Deportation Miriam D. Santiago seems to fall under the category of "outsider". She is, perhaps, the most controversial figure in the Philippines' political circle. Most of the opinion surveys by different institutions so far have revealed that Santiago is the top runner among the presidential candidates. She is known as an outspoken technocrat with a good career record. Santiago became known on the political scene since she was Commissioner of Immigration and Deportation, a post which won her the Magsaysay Award as an exemplary bureaucrat. She was later appointed Secretary of Agrarian Reform. She has emerged an alternative for the middle-class people who are fed up with the rampant graft and corruption in the country.

Weakness & Strength in Comparison

Victory in a presidential election in the Philippines is largely determined by the following factors, i.e. popularity, a powerful political machine, a strong political alliance, financial base and a rational platform. Some of these factors are highly changeable, which makes prediction difficult.

According to a survey done in Manila by a group of independent academics; i.e. the Center for Advanced Philippine Studies, in June 1990, it was found that the most favorite candidate was Miriam D. Santiago, followed by President Corazon Aquino should she run, Joseph Estrada, Jovito Salonga, Fidel Ramos, Eduardo Cojuangco, Juan Ponce Enrile and Ramon Mitra. Another survey done in Manila by a respectable newspaper in November 1990 also formed a similar conclusion. Santiago ranked first followed by Joseph Estrada, Jovito Salonga, Fidel Ramos, Corazon Aquino, Juan Ponce Enrile, Ramon Mitra, Eduardo Cojuangco and Salvador Laurel.

Among the top runners, Jovito Salonga of the Liberal Party is the only one who has solid control of a political party. The fate of the other candidates with regard to their control of political caucuses remains unclear. General Ramos may win the president's endorsement, which by its virtue will enable the general to make use of her political machi-
neries. For Sen. Juan Ponce Enrile and Vice President Salvador Laurel, despite their positions in the Nacionalista Party, the two are not expected to reach any compromise on the presidential candidacy, thereby risking a breakup of the party. Miriam Santiago and Eduardo Cojuangco are in the same fate, as the two have no established caucus. It was recently reported that a certain Miriam Santiago for President Movement had been founded. However, analysts remain doubtful if she could tackle the handicap.

With regard to the matter of policy on some major problems of the country, General Ramos apparently tows a moderate line. It is said that Ramos would follow most of the directions set by President Aquino, particularly in the country's external debt, a gradual phaseout of the U.S. bases, a compromise population development program, and the country's opening up for foreign investment.

Salonga is expected to carry out a more nationalistic line such as a tougher stance on the foreign debt, an immediate withdrawal of the U.S. bases, a pro-labor policy, tax increases and more economic (trade and investment) protectionism.

Miriam D. Santiago will be giving top priority to the suppression of graft and corruption, restructuring of the bureaucracy and a more disciplined labor.

The policy aspect of presidential candidate in the coming election is expected to be a crucial part in the election, as trends are showing that the coming election would likely emerge in a more mature and sober fashion. The voters are not confined to choose someone simply because they do not want the other one to get elected, as appeared in the 1986 election which most people sided with Corazon Aquino because they wanted to force then President Ferdinand Marcos to step down. The victory is determined in a large part by how convincing presidential candidate’s policies are on some controversial issues such as the country’s economic difficulties, graft and corruption and peace and security.

CONCLUSION

As the Philippines’ President Corazon Aquino is running through the last year of her presidency, the Filipino people are apparently more
confident that any major disruptive incident will not appear on the political scene. They are now keeping their eyes to movements that are leading to the forthcoming presidential election, which is set to be in May 1992. At present, the picture of the 1992 election is gradually becoming clearer, as more and more presidential hopefuls are trying to establish their names for the coming race. The Philippines is therefore coming to another crucial phase, which will be significant for years ahead.

For Filipinos, the 1992 presidential election offers optimism and high expectation. Having experienced an economic downturn under the newly-restored democratic regime, Filipinos seem to have realized that democracy in government and honesty in their leadership are not enough. They need something more, e.g. decisiveness, far-sightedness and action to tide over harsh political and economic difficulties. For them, the forthcoming election may provide the answer.

In fact, there is ground for their optimism. With the election, Filipinos may be able to erase the question of political legitimacy, which has put the Aquino administration in a very difficult position ever since. President Aquino has been challenged that her mandate as reflected in the 1986 election was questionable. Moreover, the diminished popularity of the president in recent times is seen as a main source of the political instability in this country.

Whether the optimism of Filipinos will be borne out in the 1992 election or not is certainly not guaranteed. The current political and economic problems in the Philippines have taken roots for years which are hard to erase in a short time.

The accumulated public debt of more than US $28 billion has become a major obstacle for the Aquino administration. Throughout the term of President Aquino, the Philippine government has dealt with the problem of budget deficit by drawing more loans from domestic sources through sales of short-term treasury bills and medium-term government bonds. Any initiative to raise tax revenue is strongly opposed by a large member of politicians in both the opposition and the government camps.
Another problem is the vulnerability of the country’s balance of payment. Throughout the 1980s this problem was critical due to a slow down of foreign investment, poor performance in the export sector and a decline in the inflow of foreign loans. This has resulted in intermittent shortage of foreign exchange in the country in mid-1980s and 1990.

On the political front, the new president would also have a hard time in dealing with the decades-long problem of the communist insurgency even when most of the communist states are withering. This problem is in a large degree linked with the critical problems of poverty and the inequitable distribution of wealth. The question of peace and security, thus, has to be addressed simultaneously with the macro problems of society which are basically economic.

Such tasks await the new president.