

FILE

Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D.C. 20505

DATE 9/9/86 FILE

DOC NO EA M 86-20112

OIR 3

P & PD/

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

20 August 1986

**The Philippines' Corazon Aquino:
Problems and Perspectives of a New Leader**

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Summary

Over six months after she took office, Corazon Aquino remains a popular figure but occupies a precarious political position. Civilian-military tensions, cabinet infighting, limited progress toward social and economic reform, and increasing press criticism plague her government. Aquino--who had never held any elected position prior to her rise to power in February--appears to be maturing as a political leader, but her lack of political instincts continues to color her perceptions of the problems facing her government and the best way to deal with them.

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Mrs. Aquino is, by all evidence, achievement oriented and thus frustrated over her administration's lack of progress. To date, she has not been able to implement programs to meet her campaign pledge to raise the Philippine standard of living. Her insistence on making her visit to Washington an official working one instead of a State visit, we believe,

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This memorandum was prepared by Office of East Asian Analysis and the Office of Leadership Analysis. Information available as of 20 August 1986 was used in its preparation. Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Islands Branch, Southeast Asia Division, OEA, or to the Chief, Political Psychology Division, LDA

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reflects the high priority she places on producing some immediate--and tangible--accomplishment to enhance her public support. [Redacted]

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Aquino's Core Values and Concerns

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In a country where personality politics has always prevailed, Aquino is no exception. She tends to view politics in highly personal terms. [Redacted] during the presidential campaign Aquino became confident that the people who attended her rallies were displaying their personal trust in her and wanted her alone to replace Marcos. [Redacted]

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Aquino probably feels that she must rely on personality politics because she currently cannot operate in government any other way. She has no effective political party to support her, and her decision in March to eliminate the government machinery built by Marcos has forced her to govern without the benefit of political institutions. Ironically, although Aquino campaigned against Marcos's one-man rule, she now finds herself wielding much the same authority as her predecessor. Through the "freedom constitution" that she declared in effect in March of this year, she has broad powers to enact legislation and reorganize the national government. [Redacted]

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Nonetheless, we believe that Aquino--who previously shunned the political spotlight--is not comfortable with her considerable authority and is genuinely committed to the decentralization of power. For example, one of the themes that Aquino has stressed during her presidency has been that of popular participation in government. In numerous public statements, Aquino has encouraged the Philippine people to abandon their traditional reliance on local political bosses, to involve themselves in government at all levels, and become more independent minded and self-reliant. She also has encouraged government employees to be responsive to popular sentiment on various issues. For example, in a recent speech to members of the Philippine Constabulary, Aquino called upon them to "open yourselves to what the people have to say." [Redacted]

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We believe that Aquino views her status as president in terms of this recurrent populist theme. She has said repeatedly that she intends to lead by example, and seems to believe that her involvement in politics--as someone who is not a career politician--represents the level of personal concern regarding the governmental process

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that she would like to inspire in the average citizen. Moreover, [Redacted] she considers her nonprofessional background as an essential element of her popularity. [Redacted]

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Dismantling Marcos's political machine is one of Aquino's foremost objectives, and she is concerned that Marcos still believes he has a role to play in Philippine politics. [Redacted] for example, Aquino receives reports from her [Redacted] advisers that Marcos loyalists are preparing for the former president's imminent return. In addition, [Redacted] Aquino has been warned of loyalist plans to disrupt her visit to the United States. [Redacted]

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US officials report that Aquino is concerned about the level of her popularity. She has confided that the aborted Tolentino coup attempt in July made her realize the fragility of her political position and that "people power" does not provide a stable base of support. Contributing to her concerns may be a recent nationwide public opinion survey conducted for the Bishops-Businessmen's Conference, which found that, although Aquino remains very popular, the majority of Filipinos consider "people power" and not an election mandate as the source of her legitimacy. Accordingly, Aquino seems worried that the press is projecting a poor image of her administration and that this is having an effect on her government's popularity. [Redacted]

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Although Aquino has contrasted herself with Marcos and his pattern of government, she has not revealed what world leaders she respects and would like to emulate. The only prominent figure whom she has said she admires is Mother Theresa of Calcutta; but beyond her late husband Benigno, Aquino may consider her countryman, Ramon Magsaysay, as a suitable role model. Her obvious pride in being Filipino would attract her to Magsaysay, a congressman from a neighboring province in Central Luzon who became president in 1953. Like Aquino, Magsaysay had an honest reputation and styled himself a man of the people. He invited thousands of peasants and laborers to tour Malacanang Palace--much as Aquino did when she became president. He also encouraged farmers to send him telegrams explaining their problems. For her part, Aquino has instituted a biweekly television interview program entitled "Dialogue" on which she appears with ordinary citizens. [Redacted]

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Aquino might also feel that she can draw upon Magsaysay's experience in dealing with the Communist Huk rebellion that he inherited when he took office. Magsaysay--who had previously been Secretary of Defense--reorganized the armed forces, increased the number of combat troops, and tightened military discipline in the field. He also addressed the social and economic causes of the rebellion and established special courts for landlord-tenant disputes, as well as agricultural extension services and credit for farmers. He had begun a program of land reform when he was killed in an airplane accident in 1957. [Redacted]

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Aquino's Evolving Style

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[Redacted] she has tried to limit the political damage resulting from Minister of Local Government Pimentel's efforts to replace local officials by making his appointments subject to the approval of a special committee formed from her coalition, according to Embassy reporting. [Redacted]

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Aquino believes in refraining from direct involvement in the duties of her subordinates. [Redacted] she feels former President Marcos dictated every detail to his cabinet ministers and thus deprived himself of the benefits of their expertise. Consequently, Aquino--who, according to US Embassy reporting, does not feel confident of her understanding of complex issues--is reluctant to resolve a policy issue that she has entrusted to an appointee unless the matter has clearly gotten out of hand. [Redacted]

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Although Aquino's hesitancy to act authoritatively may undercut her efforts to lead the country--given the Philippine tradition of personality politics--she is demonstrating growing political acumen. For example, [Redacted] she is considering replacing Labor Minister Sanchez with someone more acceptable to the Philippine business community despite her public defense of the controversial minister. Her decision to create a national security council, suggested by Enrile, and to name him to such a potentially influential group--thereby giving him greater input into some policy decisions--is also illustrative. [Redacted]

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Aquino is weighing the results of the deliberations of the Constitutional Commission--in which she has publicly promised not to interfere. Despite her public warning to the commission not to make policy by deciding the issue of foreign military bases, for example, [Redacted] Aquino has not given any support to the group of commission members that is trying to keep language out of the new constitution that would eliminate such bases. In such a case, Aquino's tendency to avoid interfering in the duties of those whom she has selected to work for her is probably reinforced by the attitudes of some of her advisers. [Redacted]

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[Redacted] Executive Secretary Arroyo is strongly opposed to government interference in the deliberations of the commission. In contrast, according to the US Embassy, Aquino's brother, Jose Cojuangco, is willing to lobby commission members to ensure that the new constitution does not contain provisions prohibiting foreign military bases or nuclear weapons on Philippine soil. An Embassy contact says that Cojuangco has succeeded in persuading his sister to speak quietly to some commission members.

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Aquino's experience with Enrile--who was Marcos's defense minister when her husband was jailed under martial law--is largely the reason Aquino has limited his authority in her government. Soon after becoming president, she announced that Armed Forces Chief of Staff Ramos and the service chiefs would report directly to her and that Enrile would simply monitor their performance of their duties. In addition, [Redacted]

[Redacted] Aquino is attempting to balance Enrile's influence in the military by securing the loyalty of senior military officers through a careful screening of promotion lists. [Redacted]

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The aborted coup attempt in July has prompted Aquino to try to ease the growing tension between her civilian advisers and her defense minister. According to the US Embassy, in a cabinet meeting following Tolentino's coup attempt, Aquino defended Enrile against harsh criticism from some senior government officials who believe that Enrile was involved in the abortive coup. [Redacted] although Aquino believes Enrile knew about Tolentino's plans, she does not think that he was involved in the planning and does not intend to take any action against him. She has even begun to heed his advice--over the objection of other cabinet ministers--on some security issues, [Redacted] and has named him to a newly formed national security council. [Redacted]

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Aquino may well believe that Enrile is biding his time in the expectation that she will misstep and provide him an opportunity to oust her. [Redacted] these fears may be well founded. Enrile, for example, appears to us to be positioning himself to take advantage of unfolding events. In addition to publicly claiming that Communists have infiltrated the Aquino government, a US Embassy contact says that Enrile is meeting informally with a wide range of military officers to win their confidence and loyalty. Also, [Redacted] Enrile is using his contacts in the former ruling party to rebuild the Nationalista Party and field candidates in the national and local elections expected early next year. [Redacted]

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Traditional Politicians. Aquino seems to regard Vice President Laurel as an [Redacted] politician who is typical of the traditional Philippine political leader [Redacted] [Redacted] She allowed his UNIDO Party only three Cabinet positions and has limited his input into policy decisions. [Redacted]

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[Redacted] the Embassy says she recently admonished Laurel--along with other ministers--for publicly criticizing her cabinet. In addition, she was reportedly enraged by his proposal to improve diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China through the use of Philippine Government radio to broadcast anti-Koumintang messages to Taiwan, according to the US Embassy. [Redacted]

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Nonetheless, Aquino has tried not to alienate her vice president, who boosted her campaign by providing the organized political machine that she lacked. [Redacted]

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[Redacted] Aquino has ordered that any action by a government agency affecting Laurel's home province must be cleared with him. In addition, Aquino has tried to ease tension between Laurel and Minister of Local Government Pimentel arising from the latter's replacement of local officials with members of his PDP-Laban Party instead of Laurel's party. [Redacted]

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Aquino probably is aware that Laurel is positioning himself for a break with her, most likely during the national and local elections expected early next year. [Redacted]

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[Redacted] Laurel is meeting privately with Enrile to discuss plans for opposing PDP-Laban in the local elections. Laurel has even told US Embassy officials that he would not hesitate to campaign against government candidates because his attempts to forge a unified slate were rebuffed by PDP-Laban leader Pimentel. Laurel may actually have little choice in the matter because UNIDO members are unhappy over their treatment in the coalition. The US Embassy says that party leaders are frustrated with Laurel's inability to provide most of them with senior government positions. [Redacted]

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The Catholic Church. Because of the Catholic Church's prominent role in poll watching during the presidential campaign and Cardinal Sin's public support for her presidency, Aquino is aware that good relations with the Catholic Church are important, according to the US Embassy. She continues to consult Cardinal Sin and other church leaders for advice on some issues because "the Church has contacts with the people's grassroots". Aquino has publicly stressed, however, that they do not dictate government policy. [Redacted]

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Recognizing the value of the Church's nationwide organization and its influence with the local populace, Aquino has sought the Church's help in negotiating with the Communist insurgents. [Redacted] she is encouraging contacts between clergy and insurgents in different areas of the country to determine the rebels' terms for a ceasefire and surrender. On the government's behalf, the archbishop of Cebu, Cardinal Vidal, has negotiated with insurgents in his province who were interested in surrendering. Aquino probably believes that church involvement in negotiations in the field will convince the military to treat those who may surrender fairly. [Redacted]

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Aquino's relationship with the Church may have seen its best days. In spite of their general willingness to assist the Aquino administration with counterinsurgency issues, for example, church leaders seem increasingly hesitant to be closely identified with her government. Cardinal Sin has emphasized in his public statements that the Church intervened to help oust Marcos only because it was an emergency situation in which peoples' lives were in danger. He has said that the Church will now concentrate on providing educational and social services and aid for the poor. According to the US Embassy, leading clerics have privately told Aquino that they intend to follow a policy of "constructive critical collaboration" with the government. [Redacted]

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[Redacted] many of the Catholic hierarchy are concerned about the stability of the Aquino government and its inability to make progress toward reform. To express their concerns in the least obtrusive way, several bishops were appointed by the Catholic Bishops Conference to talk privately with Aquino. [Redacted]

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[Redacted] Aquino has been sent a letter by the religious superior of the Carmelite convent in Cebu--where Aquino took refuge when the military rebellion against Marcos began in February--protesting the disruptive increase in labor militancy in Cebu City since Aquino took office. [Redacted]

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Aquino's Views of the United States

In our judgment, Mrs. Aquino is philosophically and personally well disposed toward the United States. She attended US Catholic schools from junior high through college and was steeped in the democratic philosophy of the American "founding fathers." Her gratitude for Benigno Aquino's successful triple bypass surgery in Dallas and the outpouring of sympathy she received from the American people after her husband's assassination further strengthened her positive association with the United States. [Redacted]

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[Redacted] President Aquino considers the United States an important historic and strategic element in Philippine politics and desires close Philippine-US relations. Nevertheless, she has pledged to do "whatever is in the interest of the Philippine people" and will be reluctant to foster too dependent a relationship with any one country. This should be particularly true in light of the growing nationalistic and anti-US sentiment in the Philippines. We expect her position in future bilateral relationships to reflect a stronger pro-Philippine--although not necessarily anti-American--perspective than has previously existed in US-Philippine relations. [Redacted]

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As for the US bases, prior to the elections, Aquino--like her husband--said she wanted Clark Air Base and Subic Bay Naval Base removed. Last February she also stated, "No sovereign nation should consent that a portion of its territory be a perpetual possession of a foreign power." On the other hand, she has--since her election--indicated she will keep her options open until 1991. In our view, Mrs. Aquino wants as much national independence as possible. But her recognition of the need for US fiscal support--the annual payment for the bases is nearly 10 percent of the total Philippine Government's domestic tax collection and the bases directly support nearly 40,000 Filipinos--will strengthen her resolve to fight against immediate or midterm removal of the bases. [Redacted]

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Aquino stated she wanted to assume a direct role in the bases talks. Although we do not expect her to be firmly wedded to specific details prior to the negotiations, we expect her to bargain hard for beneficial terms for the Philippines. According to the press, members of her administration are seeking information about the experiences of other countries--Greece and Spain--in renegotiating their base agreements with the United States. We also expect Mrs. Aquino will consult with other ASEAN members before formalizing her plans. [Redacted]

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After the Visit

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Although Aquino's chances for implementing her program of social and economic reforms will depend heavily on the support of local and national officials, she does not appear to be making an effort to ensure that her people will be in place once elections--tentatively scheduled for early next year--are held. The situation is particularly urgent from her point of view because, among other reasons, the government's program to replace local officials who held office under Marcos has been unpopular in many parts of the country and [Redacted] opposition politicians--who possess considerable financial resources--are actively preparing for the upcoming elections. [Redacted]

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Embassy reporting indicates that Aquino is aware of the possibility that members of Marcos's former party could defeat government candidates if her coalition cannot close ranks before elections. She has created a committee of close advisers to study the feasibility of establishing her own political party that would draw elements from PDP-Laban and UNIDO. In the meantime, she has also encouraged her brother, Secretary-General of PDP-Laban, to meet with representatives from UNIDO and the Liberal Party to try to plan a joint election strategy. [Redacted]

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As for the longer term, Aquino has demonstrated a capacity to learn from experience and should continue to evolve into a more competent leader. It remains to be seen whether she will make significant changes in people and approach that are needed to encourage longer term policies about how to address serious economic, political, and security problems, rather than rely on quick fixes based largely on her popularity and charisma. [Redacted]

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