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How Good Is the Army?

The Philippine army's refusal to fight for Ferdinand Marcos was the key factor in a bloodless transfer of power few believed possible, but it also raises concern among Pentagon experts whether its troops will prove any more intrepid in battling communist insurgents.

Credit for the peaceful transition should not be attributed to Marcos' humanitarian impulses, according to Pentagon sources. They say his orders to elite Ranger units to attack the military rebels at Camp Crame were refused, raising a question: Were the Rangers making a political statement or were they revealing a lack of discipline?

That is one of many questions asked in Washington about Corazon Aquino's new regime. Did Aquino mean it during her campaign when she repeatedly promised to remove "eventually" U.S. bases? In the words of one administration official, could "crony capitalism" be replaced by "crony socialism"?

Even those Reagan officials who were most worried by the tilt against Marcos are overjoyed that he was forced out without civil war and with the army intact. But they also realize this: Though ridding his country of its authoritarian ruler was surely the beginning of solving Philippine problems, a solution requires much more.

There is no certainty Aquino's army will be more effective than Marcos'. Analysts at the Pentagon see perhaps half of the New People's Army guerrillas responding to Vice President-Prime Minister Salvador Laurel's amnesty offer. The remaining half are well-armed, hard-core Marxist-Leninists.

In trying to root them out, the new government must do far better than the Marcos army did. Visitors to the Philippines, including us, have been appalled at the indiscipline and disinclination of many units to fight the insurgents. What is suspected at the Pentagon is that the refusal of the Rangers to obey orders could have been more evidence of military disarray than rebellion against Marcos.

What's more, the problem of private armies in the interior persists. Some in U.S. intelligence believe Evelio Javier, a former governor of Antique province and a strong Aquino backer, was murdered after the election by just such a

gang, not on orders from Manila. During our travels on the island of Mindanao, we found not only the government losing the guerrilla war but also a total breakdown of law and order.

The political acrobatics of Juan Ponce Enrile in keeping the defense portfolio in the Marcos and Aquino cabinets is no good omen for military reform. Until last weekend, Enrile was considered part of the problem: a Marcos crony who became a millionaire during long tenure at the Defense Ministry that saw declining military performance. While Enrile's defection probably prevented civil war, it is no harbinger of change.

More is hoped for from Enrile's co-defector, Gen. Fidel Ramos. A man of rare integrity at senior levels in the Philippines, he failed to accomplish much during a stint as acting chief of staff under Marcos, a failure excused by lack of support from the presidential palace. Over lunch at Philippine Constabulary headquarters in Quezon City, Ramos told us what no other senior officer would: the people were sick and tired of corruption.

Corruption aside, the Philippine army desperately needs arms and equipment—which means more U.S. aid. During the campaign, candidate Aquino told us her country needed less military aid because NPA insurgents would embrace the new amnesty offer. Ramos and other officers will have to explain that reforming the military will be expensive.

Hopes for a tougher military effort depend on Aquino's backing away from some campaign pledges—such as abandonment of U.S. bases when the present agreement ends in 1991. It is notable that her most anti-American supporters are not in her Cabinet.

The new finance minister, industrialist Jaime Ongpin, is viewed by senior American officials as the best hope for economic reform. Although conservative businessmen are suspicious of him, Ongpin is concerned that Aquino is to his left and wants to pull her into a free-market mold. He will have help here from the new trade minister, Jose Concepcion, another rich businessman who headed the citizens group, Namfrel.

The Aquino Cabinet is more conservative than would have seemed likely in a post-Marcos landscape happily free of the physical and emotional debris of civil war. But doubts must remain, especially whether the army can fight as it will have to in the months and years ahead.

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