

Cory Aquino: A legacy of unfinished tasks

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No President could have wished for a more rewarding funeral than the one that the Filipino people gave President Cory Aquino last Wednesday. The sendoff Cory got was neither a state nor a family event, but a national funeral befitting someone widely regarded as the mother of the nation. It was the long funeral procession, rather than the Mass at the Manila Cathedral or the interment at the Manila Memorial Park, that became the occasion for a grieving and grateful nation to stage its full presence. In the long march to the cemetery, Church and State took the backseat, allowing the people to claim their place in the nation's history. It is time to reflect on what has just happened here.

Cory left a legacy of achievements as well as of unfinished causes. Of the first, most people, especially the young, will remember only her role as an icon of democracy, a courageous widow who refused to be paralyzed by grief, serenely accepting the task of leading the nation's quest for liberation from the tyranny of a home-grown dictatorship. They will likely not remember the less romantic struggle she waged to restore institutions badly damaged by autocratic rule and the prolonged presidency of Ferdinand Marcos.

Cory knew how the country's institutions remained brittle when her term ended in 1992. To her, Philippine democracy would have to be a continuing project. It needed to be deepened, broadened, strengthened, and, most of all, defended. She thought of herself mainly as the president who paved the way to a stable democracy. But, even when she was no longer president, she did not hesitate to come out publicly to denounce recurrent attempts to undermine the institutions she fought hard to restore. That commitment inevitably pitted her against politicians who tried to tinker with the Constitution in order to extend their grip on power.

Filipinos expected miracles to happen during her presidency. The poor expected instant relief from the ravages of poverty. The middle classes expected a renewed and functioning government to be put in place overnight. After 21 years of oppression, Filipinos wanted freedom without the attendant responsibilities of citizenship. People power became a license and a weapon to defy established authority whenever any vested interests were threatened.

Amid all these, Cory had to defend the supremacy of civilian authority against those who believed that state power had to be shared with the military because of the role they played in bringing down Marcos. Seven coup attempts against her administration failed to weaken Cory's will, but it led her to prioritize political consolidation over social reform. This allowed the conservative forces in society to assert undue influence in her government. The handling of crucial issues like agrarian reform, the foreign debt, the US bases, crony properties, and human rights violations in the previous regime reflected this conservative influence in no uncertain terms. Each one of these became a cause of Cory's isolation from the popular movements that had accompanied her rise to the presidency.

Important as they were, these issues tended to overshadow the quiet work that the embattled president was resolutely undertaking to stabilize and restore the autonomy of the institutions of government. The Supreme Court had lost credibility under Marcos; Cory restored its prestige and

independence. The law once more could assume its function as a stable moral code in our nation's life. The civil service had been severely politicized and placed under the disposal of the Marcos regime; Cory revitalized its professional ethos by appointing highly qualified individuals to head the government agencies. She brought in honest and competent individuals to head the financial institutions of the country—the Bureau of Internal Revenue, Customs, the Central Bank, and other regulatory bodies.

Under Marcos, elections had become nothing but expensive rituals that had little to do with the people's will. Cory brought back the centrality of honest and credible elections to the survival of democracy. The 1992 national elections will long be remembered as one of the most orderly and credible of all our elections. Most importantly, Cory made it very clear that she would not stay a day longer in public office after she handed over the reins of government to her duly-elected successor.

She set a model of presidential demeanor that was marked by a lack of showiness and a disavowal of privilege and the trappings of power. Her inner strength came out as luminous grace, and not once did it manifest itself as bravado or bitchiness. Her exterior was always marked by kindness, humility and simplicity. Some mistook this for weakness and lack of self-confidence. They grossly underestimated her will power.

In death, Cory will continue to be underestimated. Those who feel threatened by the legacy of causes she left behind will try to minimize the meaning of her role in our nation's history. They will reduce this to acts of personal goodness and piety, and will ignore her active struggle for integrity and honesty in public leadership.

Cory did not just ask Filipinos to love their country in a sentimental way. She urged them not to abandon it, and to look after it, to defend it against those who would misuse their power and betray their oaths of office. Like a true mother of democracy, she lent her residual magic—the way she lent her personal rosary to the wounded and the sick—to those who would stand up to abusive power in the fight for what is good and just.

P.S.

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