



**PRESIDENTIAL POPULARITY
AND THE AUGUST 28, 1987 COUP**

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Presidential Popularity and the August 28, 1987 Coup

by Felipe B. Miranda*

Much speculation has centered on how the most recent coup might have affected the level of public support for the Aquino government and its authorities. A Social Weather Stations survey of 500 Metro Manila respondents, run September 12 to 21, 1987, suggests that the coup probably improved the Aquino government's political capital in terms of consolidating greater public support for the authorities and, in particular, President Aquino. The survey also indicates that the level of public support before the coup might already have started decreasing relative to what it had been from May 1986 to March 1987 as reflected in comparable Social Weather Stations and Ateneo University surveys. In a manner of speaking, the coup leaders might have served the Aquino government in much the same way the devil in Goethe's Faust laments his role: " I am he who while ever conspiring to do evil somehow manage to do good."

Precisely because the popularity of public officials is often equated with public satisfaction, approval, and support for the officials concerned, much interest focuses on popularity ratings particularly for the President and her cabinet members. Critical events, such as the August 28, 1987 coup attempt, predictably sharpen this interest and both public officials and the general public eagerly await information on how these events have affected the popularity of key government personalities.

For understandable reasons, no popularity ratings have been as exciting as President Aquino's. Dramatic circumstances attend her rise to political preeminence and continue to characterize her first nineteen months of political administration. The latest attempt at forcibly unseating her, by far the most serious challenge to her constitutional leadership, provokes serious questions regarding the extent of continuing public support for her and her administration.

The Social Weather Stations, an independent research group, has sustained its probes into public support for lead personalities and institutions in Philippine politics in the last two years. This effort has been conducted basically through periodic nation-wide surveys done in collaboration with Ateneo University

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through a project known as Public Opinion Report. In addition, the SWS has started running a parallel survey (ran September 12 to 21, 1987 in Metro Manila specifically on citizen perceptions of the last coup and related matters) as part of its own Social Weather Report project.

The SWS test instrument employed in probing for the popularity of public officials is a question asking the survey respondents to rate the overall performance of specific officials up to the time of interview. The actual question in Pilipino, which is the controlling text, is: "Gusto po sana naming malaman kung paano ninyo gagraduhan ang mga sumusunod sa pagganap ng kanilang tungkulin. Pakisabi lang po kung kayo ay LUBOS NA NASISIYAHAN, NASISIYAHAN, MAAARING NASISIYAHAN MAARING HINDI, HINDI NASISIYAHAN, O LUBOS NA HINDI NASISIYAHAN." A list of names follows from which the interviewer randomly draws one name at a time for the respondent to evaluate.

Presidential popularity as indicated through this test statement had been on the upswing from May of 1986 (with 60% of the nation-wide survey respondents indicating satisfaction with President Aquino) through October 1986 (78%) and March (76%). Alternatively, one could chart the margin between those satisfied and those dissatisfied with her performance and the results for the same time frames would be: +53 percentage points (May 1986); +72 percentage points (October 1986); and +69 percentage points. Both measures indicate a high proportion of satisfied (and, by inference, supportive) respondents for the President at the beginning of her administration; a rapid build-up of this popular base in the next six months; and its successful maintenance as late as a full year from the time of Aquino's political ascendancy.

Various reasons are alluded to in explaining this unprecedented level of public support for President Aquino. From survey data generated by the SWS and Ateneo University Public Opinion Report project, the more convincing ones appear to combine an extensive public realization of the enormity of the problems confronting the nation, an accompanying pragmatism regarding the pace at which material improvements could be effected, and a widespread perception that far too many threats imperil the Aquino government's stability and ability to govern, requiring that the public give unstinted support if Aquino's government were to survive and effectively perform.

Since March 1987, there are indications that presidential popularity could have started declining. Although no definitive national survey data exist to anchor speculative analysis, a combination of event and Metro Manila survey data points to this possibility. Presidential popularity could have been eroded by the continuing deterioration in conditions of public safety, with violent political encounters, assassination and index crimes going up, attended by the apparent inability of the authorities to stop criminal activity from being perpetrated or to apprehend and punish its perpetrators. So could the presidential action

on the issue of agrarian reform, effectively shunting the responsibility for a comprehensive reform program to Congress, and incurring the ire of both the influential landlords as well as the expectant landless. Another event data could be the government's unpopular decision to increase oil prices, which was attended by widespread demonstrations in August, 1987.

SWS survey data for Metro Manila, from early 1986 to March 1987, provide the necessary contrast to the probable, recent decline in Presidential popularity. Up to early 1987, these data reflected the same generally positive pattern as the national data presented earlier. Metro Manila gross satisfaction ratings for President Aquino were a high 64% in May 1986, a much-improved 72% in October 1986 and a holding 73% in March 1987. Margins of satisfaction (gross satisfaction ratings minus gross dissatisfaction ratings) for the same periods were +54, +62 and +67 percentage points respectively.

Presidential ratings in the September 1987 Metro Manila survey indicate a decline in popular satisfaction/support relative to the period May 1986 to March 1987. President Aquino's current gross satisfaction rating is 55%, which with a 24% dissatisfaction rate means a margin of satisfaction of +31 percentage points, clearly below her previous ratings. (It may be noted that no public official included in any SWS/Ateneo survey from May 1986 to March 1987 escaped a depreciation in public satisfaction rating in September 1987.)

This is not the most important finding, however, if one wanted to analyze public support for the President as a function of the August 28, 1987 coup. The remarkable thing is that the attempted coup actually appears to have improved the extent of public support and thus presidential popularity.

The crucial test question for probing into presidential popularity and coup operations, asked only in the last Metro Manila Social Weather Report survey, was "Batay ho sa mga sinabi o ikinilos nila nuong kasalukuyang isinasagawa at pagkatapos ng nakaraang coup nitong Agosto 28, 1987, ang inyo ho bang paggrado sa kanila bilang mga opisyal ay BUMUTI, HINDI NAGBAGO o SUMAMA?" This question was in addition to the standard question on performance by public officials cited earlier.

About 40% of the Metro Manila respondents said that their performance rating of the President improved on account of her statements and actions during and after the recent coup. Another 41% said that their performance rating for the President remained the same and 18% avowed that their presidential performance rating worsened.

Yet, despite the 40% improved and the 41% same ratings, the gross satisfaction rating of the President in the same survey managed to reach only 55% and her margin of satisfaction only up to +31 percentage points, clearly inferior to her earlier survey gains. The only possible interpretation of this truly remarkable

phenomenon is that Presidential popularity as indicated by public satisfaction/support ratings previous to the coup must have been at lower levels before the coup and improved during or after the coup.

The Metro Manilan's protective instinct towards the government of President Aquino and probably towards her in some personal sense might have been activated by the fact of the coup itself as well as the manner it was conducted. As has been noted, the popularity and staying power of the Aquino government draws strength from a public perception and appreciation of the threatening environment within which it has had to function. The perceived dangers range from the rebellious radicals of the left, the secessionists of the south, the politicized military and fascist reactionaries of the right, as well as the political opportunists of the center. A besieged government, installed through people power, still manages to reactivate what might already be a diminishing public sense of people power. If this line of analysis is correct, the logical course of action for those who would destabilize the government of President Aquino is to leave it largely alone, or else to prepare a truly blitzkrieg operation emasculating any conceivable public resistance with its lightning success. Filipinos, civilians or military, do not seem to take easily to surgical operations on the body politic, either as patients or as surgeons. Neither the temperament nor the will appears easy to come by, even where Filipinos rather melodramatically keep on diagnosing the most metastasized of social cancers.

Thus, the method chosen by the coup leaders appears to have also consolidated much sympathy for the President and her government. The armed, confrontational strategy effected by Col. Honasan and his followers alienated far too many civilians. The rebel alternative was graphically communicated to Metro Manilans in televised images of so many civilian victims killed or maimed by rebel military action and an angry mother, the President no less, sternly calling for punishment to be meted to those who had tried to kill her only son after her own husband had been assassinated.

Presidential actions during the coup largely stripped away any patina of indecisiveness which might have afflicted her public image between March 1987 and the date of the coup. While the question of her effective control over the military remained, there could be no question that the Commander-in-Chief had indeed made the decisions which her subordinate commanders may immediately execute, tarry obeying, or even choose to subvert completely. Decisiveness as well as constitutionalism became focal considerations by the public, but the President was no longer being taken to task; the demand for decisive, constitutionalist action was shifted to her civilian as well as military subordinates. Public sympathy and support welled up for her.

Presidential actions after the coup focused on distinguishing between the substantive issues publicly projected to have inspired the coup and the method used by the military rebels in pursuing the resolution of those issues. Acknowledging the need for improving the material conditions of soldiers and their families, more clearly enunciating the need to pursue a more resolute policy against insurgency with a better armed military, moving to re-constitute her cabinet by letting go of some members who have strained official civilian-military relations close to a crisis point, and showering praises on perceived constitutionalist military officers, President Aquino has clearly admitted to the legitimacy of many issues raised by most military authorities, but more dramatically by those who launched the August coup.

Still, the only legitimate method of redress remains those defined by law and particularly the Constitution. President Aquino has continued to adopt a hard line where the leaders of the military rebels are concerned. No amnesties are being announced, no presidential invitations for the rebel leaders to conditionally surrender are being extended. From the presidential view, the law must take its course. Until this position is significantly modified, it is unlikely that the coup leaders might be prevailed on to surrender; it is also going to be probably more difficult for the military establishment to locate and capture any of their renegade officers.

Combined with the relatively lenient treatment afforded by the government to those who surrendered during or soon after the coup, President Aquino appears determined to consolidate the burden of guilt on the small circle of military men who led the last coup. The presidential image being projected is one of a leader sympathetic to legitimate grievances by the military, who moves to have the grievances redressed within the bounds of law within a reasonably short period of time, and who may even humanely forgo strict punishment for the misled military rebels even as she refuses to be less than severe with those who misled the rest into waging a coup.

The presidential line probably has already earned her a higher level of popularity among military men. The more serious question may well be that of continuing civilian support. It is conceivable that Aquino and her government may once more backslide towards diminishing popularity. Another coup attempt may not be enough to help prop up sagging public sympathies for a government perceived to be ineffective in coping with multiple crises.

Peace and order conditions remain woeful all over the country, but particularly in areas where insurgency has assumed bolder initiatives. Economic conditions which were beginning to look promising in the first half of the year appear to be vulnerable to a relapse due to uncertainties highlighted by coup activities, insurgency operations, strikes and similar labor practices in both the private sector and government institutions, growing restiveness among the farmers, vigilante operations and

other similarly destabilizing phenomena. In the South, the secessionist movement continues even as, in the North, the creation of the Cordillera Autonomous Region remains a rather volatile issue.

The gains of civilian government, largely in the formal area (adoption of a Constitution, holding an election, and reconstituting Congress and other constitutional bodies), needs to be fortified with clearer material gains in terms of more jobs, more gainful employment, increasingly accessible housing, education and other welfare opportunities together with a more secure physical environment. Most Filipinos do not expect their enormous problems to be eradicated within President Aquino's term. Still, it would be irresponsibly optimistic to believe that they will not demand clearly productive efforts in addressing their national concerns.

Failing in this reasonable expectation, one must not put it beyond the Filipinos to also lose faith in more peaceful means of effecting democratic change. As of March 1987, 42% of Filipinos already believe this loss of faith possible. About a year earlier, in May 1986, this proportion was only 31%. Two years ago, less than a year before Marcos' political demise, 42% shared the same dark conviction. As of September 1987, in Metro Manila, 49% confirmed the same fear.

After supporting President Aquino against the military rebels in this last August 1987 coup, any perceived continuing debility on the part of her administration may be overly costly. Still it is clear that the civilian government has first to defeat itself, to lose its political will, before any military coup can succeed.

Popular support for President Aquino and her government is no longer at the same heady levels of a year or half a year ago. What probably has been lost between President Aquino and most Filipinos is political romance, what could be earned, should the President and her team work assiduously on it, is political respect. This would not be such a bad deal. Romance flows from dreams and, often, illusions; respect is nurtured by realities and, inevitably, veritable achievements. Political leaders learn to be manipulative and build on illusions only when they cannot or will not achieve enough for their people. "Cory magic" must be sustained on firmer grounds than Marcos' necromancy. Otherwise it will be transmogrified into the same monstrous thing "people power" had to be marshalled against.