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**THE OCTOBER 1986  
PUBLIC OPINION SURVEY:  
A POLITICAL ANALYSIS**

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The October 1986 Public Opinion Survey: A Political Analysis  
by Felipe B. Miranda\*

The First Public Opinion Report released by the Social Weather Stations and the Ateneo de Manila University last July, 1986 attempted to represent the political and economic sentiments of Filipinos within the first 100 days of the Aquino government. As a people-powered government which overthrew the dictatorial and disastrous rule of Marcos last February, 1986, it naturally became the object of popular affection, the focus of widespread, reasonably optimistic expectations, and immediately enjoyed the credibility and legitimacy which the Marcos government in its last five years could no longer muster.

The First Public Opinion Report did not fail to note the generally euphoric atmosphere of these first 100 days of the Aquino administration. The authors of the report intimated that as the euphoria wore off, there could be expected a levelling-off and probably a diminution of the national popularity and support associated with the new administration. After all, historical examples abound where political honeymoons ended as the prosaic demands of day to day government took over and the dramatic tasks of pulling down a dictatorship became increasingly historical footnotes.

This scenario did not come to pass. Between June and October, 1986, the period between the two public surveys undertaken by the Social Weather Stations and the Ateneo de Manila University, the crisis of Philippine government continued at high pitch. The political stability of the country continued to be much threatened by forces which sought to restore the regime of the fallen dictator, or gain advantages for insurgency movements, or effect too radical changes in an essentially conservative political culture, or simply ensure political capital for politicians minding their immediate future. (The President herself probably would add those forces which, inspired by messianic mentalities, dared design oplans like "God save the Queen". In November, 1986, constitutionalist-minded military leaders must be credited with neutralizing these forces. After largely futile, behind-the-scenes attempts to persuade the oplaners to desist from implementing political designs, they took forceful steps to prevent the final operational aspects of coup-making from being executed.)

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The basic concern with political stability spilled over into the economic sphere. Even as a lot of economic recovery planning and advertising was indicated, neither domestic nor foreign investment picked up sufficiently to fuel the engine for economic recovery. The protracted negotiations of the country's foreign debt were not positively affected by foreign perceptions of how shaky the political foundations of the new administration might be. Thus, the economy continued to be sluggish and optimistic economic projections targeted for a zero to 1.5% GNP growth rate for 1986.

The October 1986 survey for the Second Public Opinion Report ran in the midst of popular discussions regarding the results of the Aquino visit to the United States, the merits and demerits of the constitutional convention and its recent draft constitutional output, the continuing debt negotiations with the IMF, the World Bank and other international agencies, the continuing economic difficulties as indicated by high levels of unemployment and underemployment, the growing militancy of labor and similar stress indicators. But perhaps of greater impact on the popular consciousness would be the various encounters between the military and the communist insurgents, the much publicized ongoing ceasefire talks with both the communists and the MNLF leaders, the in-fighting among Cabinet members, and the prospects for a military take-over or a coup against the Aquino government.

Given all these worrisome developments, the main survey findings indicate sustained popular support for the Aquino government, at levels even significantly higher than those obtaining for last May, 1986, and continuing optimism for the immediate future even as one-third of the Filipinos perceived a deterioration in their material well-being in the past twelve months, compared to one-fourth who perceived an improvement. The euphoria of the heady February days might have already dissipated, but it appears that the core feeling remains as strong as ever, i.e. the sense of how this government needs more time and greater support from the citizenry as both the political and economic crises are confronted and, hopefully, soon mastered.

Still, Filipinos in the current survey also indicate more pragmatic turns of mind, in matters relating to the handling of reconciliation policies with the communist and Muslim insurgencies, the American military bases in the Philippines, and the possibility of eventually being disenchanted with peaceful means of bringing about democratic change. Marcos deposed and Aquino installed notwithstanding, Filipinos are not ruling out the possibility of other modalities of social change. This attitude may bespeak the maturity of the Filipino as he reflects on the necessity for structural change within his crisis-prone society.

In the meantime, most Filipinos continue to rally behind the Aquino government. This popular support is a huge political asset which the present government cannot long squander without dire consequences. In 1972, the Marcos government gained quite a

bit of public support as it provoked martial law through a series of shrewdly-induced crises in the political system. Unfortunately, the political capital gained was systematically dissipated through governmental corruption and ineffectiveness. The fall of the Marcos government in 1986 does not represent the full, or even the major cost of squandering popular confidence. The cost must be reckoned in terms of forgone opportunities for human development and greater social justice in the Philippines; or, alternatively, in terms of the greater impoverishment, brutalization, and subsequent cynicism of most Filipinos who suffered Marcos to be their national leader.

The Aquino government cannot hope to endure by taking for granted the impressive popular support it now enjoys. Unlike in the Philippines of Marcos, the political crises are not contrived but far too real; and the Filipinos are no longer as naive nor as docile as when Marcos first tempted them with a New Society in 1972.

#### Political Implications of the Main Survey Findings

##### Greater public support for the Aquino government.

It is surprising that public support for the present government registers at levels significantly higher than those attained in the first 100 days of the Aquino administration, when presumably the euphoric effects of having ended Marcos rule and installed a new government moved Filipinos towards much support for Aquino and her officials. Also, considering the multiple challenges which have been mounted against the stability of the present government (e.g. the persistent demonstrations and rallies by pro-Marcos elements, the increasingly less collaborative and more demanding stance effected by political groups and personalities associated with the left, the jockeying for political leverage among those who anticipate the need for vantage points as Philippine politics "normalizes", the outbreak of hostilities among some of the most influential cabinet members, and persistent threats of military men plotting "surgical operations" to save Queen and country from the communist menace), it would have been reasonable to expect that the initial core of Aquino's public support must be starting to disintegrate. Yet, the Second Public Opinion Report survey confirms greater public support for the Aquino government.

Several reasons might be considered in an attempt to explain this outcome. The most obvious explanation is that the incremental public support in October 1986 came from those who were largely undecided in May 1986 as regards their sentiments for or against the new President. From 29% who were undecided in May 1986, the undecided in October 1986 dropped to 15%, with all regions significantly reducing indecision and increasing satisfaction ratings for the President.

Another reason may be cited which reflects well on the realist attitudes of Filipinos as they confront their multiple crises. An overwhelming majority (86%) of the respondents affirm that government needs more time to improve the condition of the people due to the enormity of the problems they face. This sentiment precludes harsh evaluations of what might be seen as meager achievements of the present government. It would also be less hasty in criticizing the leadership as temporizing and indecisive. As a matter of fact, this realist attitude would probably sympathize with a government that is perceived to be sufficiently cautious in its approach to any of the critical problems. The only demand would probably be that conditions are not demonstrably worsening too much or too fast, a minimalist rather than a maximalist orientation which makes it easy to find virtue in absolute prices holding constant and inflation rates significantly diminishing, contrary to what appeared to be the irrevocable natural laws of Marcosian economics.

In this light, the quality of life ratings of the October 1986 respondents may be properly appreciated. The proportions reporting their present (October) quality of life relative to the past year as better (23%), same (45%) and worse (32%) have remained much the same as those for the earlier May, 1986 survey (27%, 48% and 25% respectively). The minimal deterioration in present vs. past quality of life comparisons may not have caused much bitterness, and they appear not to have affected optimistic projections for quality of life in the coming year. The October ratings for better (39%), same (44%) and worse (10%) are almost the same as those which obtained in May, 1986 (40%, 40% and 9% respectively).

Yet another reason might be speculated on as inclining more Filipinos to be supportive of Aquino and her government. It is not altogether contradictory to speak of a realist attitude and a romantic streak in character blending with each other. Filipinos who voted for Aquino in the February 1986 snap elections were of course expressing their gross disaffection with Marcos; but they were also manifesting their sentiments for the underdog, the dehado, the grossly abused housewife who had neither enough gold nor guns nor goons to defeat a dictator who was determined that "neither ballots nor bullets" would dislodge him from his throne.

In October 1986, having helped install this housewife as their President and accepting the enormity of the problems which confront her government, it may not altogether be surprising that they rally in greater support of Aquino as her government appears to be threatened by the multiple forces from the right, the left, as well as from within government itself. Respondents reflected this concern, pointing out the communists (68%), the Muslim rebels (66%), Marcos loyalists (58%) and some military men who want political power (56%) as constituting a big or very big threat to the present government. The support for Aquino might have been facilitated by a majority consensus (64%) that the President is keeping promises she made to the people.

These three reasons could all be working together in providing Aquino her broad-based popular support. Not even Magsaysay probably had as widespread public support transcending demographic (age, sex, educational attainment, urbanization), economic (economic class status) as well as geographic (Metro Manila, Rest of Luzon, Visayas, Mindanao) labels. Indeed, in October 1986, the singular political asset of Aquino and her government comes across: public credibility. If it were totally up to the survey respondents, she would be President together with her current Vice-President up to 1992, without needing another electoral mandate before that time.

Popular support for Aquino and her government cannot but have positive effects towards the stabilization of Philippine politics. In addition to giving her a sense of confidence which expands the range of her political options in dealing with both national and international issues, as well as with crucial political groups and personalities, the fact of popular support could help tame the ambitions of those who might be tempted to illegally or extralegally challenge her government. Perhaps of equal importance is how perceived popular support facilitates the constitutionalist response of crucial military figures, those who at certain critical times might be the only factor determining whether a government continues with a functional civilian authority, or whether a nation is sundered by civil war. (The events of last November, 1986 make it irresponsible for any Filipino analyst to treat these outcomes as academic scenarios; they are as real alternatives as any in our current political situation.)

As for those in the left, a perception of genuinely widespread support for Aquino's government would weaken the hands of adventuristic elements and strengthen those who argue for political negotiations as well as sustained strategic organizational work. The Aquino government then would have a most critical asset to work with, time with which to demonstrate not only its good intentions for the people (and, in particular, those with the left), but its ability to effectively translate intentions into actions and, furthermore, undeniably positive results.

Finally, one cannot overestimate the value of having incontrovertible public support as Filipinos continue to acknowledge the vital role played by international actors in Philippine affairs. Negotiations relating to the country's foreign debts could be facilitated as the Aquino government is able to consolidate positions which are reflective of Filipino public opinion. As of October 1986, foreign debt survey responses already indicate significant popular resentment (41%) in repaying loans used to enrich corrupt government officials in Marcos' time. A similarly large number of responses (40%) aver that foreign creditors extended these loans even as they knew that the loans would be so used or abused. For both test items, large enough groups of "undecided", 24% and 32% respectively, remain. Should the international agencies continue with their harsh demands in foreign debt negotiations, Aquino's broad-based

support could enable her to activate even greater public resentment for unconditional foreign debt repayment. Unlike Marcos, Aquino with her popular mandate cannot be arrogantly treated by international finance agencies without considerable risks to their interests. (A Philippine default could well conclusively demonstrate the real costs of default, at this point arguably survivable even for a country as disadvantaged as the Philippines. What cannot be risked by the international finance agencies is a demonstration of the full costs of default, for then the Philippine case may not long remain an isolated one.)

However important it might be, the issue of foreign debt is not the most crucial for the Philippines in its international relations. Philippine-American relations is. On the surface, this is accounted for by the historical, colonial relationship between the United States and the Philippines, reflected much by cultural, economic and political linkages. The contemporary dynamics of Philippine-American relations, however, appears to focus on the American postwar global policy of communist containment, a policy which has made it mandatory to maintain a strategic network of American military capabilities abroad, including vital air force and naval facilities in the Philippines. The continuing presence of these American military facilities seems to be a given in the calculus of mostly every Philippine President. (No Filipino President to date has campaigned with a promise to remove these facilities. And those who have tinkered with the Military Bases Agreement's provisions, like Marcos, have done so with an eye towards removing "irritants" in the wording of the agreement, with much hope for better base compensation packages, but with hardly any serious attempt to inquire into the fundamental security ends of Filipinos served by the MBA.)

The great popularity of President Aquino endows her with a capability to scrutinize all the givens of Philippine politics in this time of crisis, including those that relate to Philippine-American relations. It is doubtful, however, that on the question of American military facilities she would be able to undertake radical changes. Filipinos are still largely convinced (55%) that most of what the US government wants to happen in the Philippines is good for them and thus the plurality sentiment (48%) is that American bases should stay, regardless of rental or aid, since they are valuable for the defense of the Philippines. An even greater number (60%) is willing to keep or tolerate these American bases in the Philippines. Perceptions of American government intentions being good remained at the same level from May to October, 1986, but those who would keep or tolerate American military bases increased from 50% to 60% in the same period. It is possible that this increased support came from people who were still "undecided" in the May survey but who made up their minds to be supportive of the bases by October, 1986. Such people could have been alarmed by the high profile in the media assumed by National Democratic Front, CPP/NPA and other leftist personalities and might have become vulnerable to military and rightist propaganda which grossly projected the communist threat to the Philippines. Another possibility is that the Philippine

media covering the Aquino visit to the United States created a lot of goodwill among Filipinos as their President was shown being warmly received and toasted by the highest American government officials in September, 1986.

This exploration of the possible character and the implications of a continuing, broadly-based public support for President Aquino and her government has attempted to indicate the expanded range of political options which a popular leader necessarily enjoys. At the same time, it also has pointed out how even a popular leader like Aquino could be constrained by current public perceptions and sentiments relating to possibly some of the most vital issues of the day. The October 1986 survey also reflects public opinion that even President Aquino needs to have institutional checks on her extensive powers. More than half (53%) of the respondents agree that a Philippine President should not be given the power to declare martial law without the permission of the National Assembly. After Marcos, this sentiment is not surprising. What is surprising is that barely a majority openly reflected the feeling. Perhaps if the incumbent President had been any other person than Aquino herself, this attempt at an institutionalized check would have gained immensely greater support.

The popular support which President Aquino enjoys might well be unprecedented, as the political and economic crises of the Filipinos must be considered unprecedented (barring those years of the Second World War when Japan occupied the Philippines). In these extremely trying times, Filipinos appear to acknowledge in their President one of their last hopes in the attempt to improve their desperate condition. Should there be another betrayal of public trust, or perhaps even simply a failure of political will by their leadership, Filipinos could turn to more radical alternatives in effecting social change.

It should be recalled (from the First Public Opinion Report) that, in May 1986, 31% of the voters felt it is possible for Filipinos to lose faith in peaceful means of promoting democracy, compared to only 22% who felt it is not possible. Although there has been some improvement from the time of the Marcos dictatorship, it is a very dangerous situation when the plurality view expresses possible disillusionment with peaceful alternatives. Even the February Revolution itself was a public testimony to the commitment to peaceful change. It is as if Filipinos want to send a clear message to their current political leaders, a message of kapit sa patalim, hawak ay patalim. If this is so, then Aquino's phenomenal public support also has a grim aspect to it.



The Cabinet: Still largely unknown, with much room for improvement in perceived level of performance; public acclaim for a man in uniform. .

As of October 1986, most of the members of President Aquino's Cabinet remain unknown to the public. Only 11 out of 28 are known by at least half of the survey respondents, an insignificant improvement over the condition in May, 1986 when half of the survey respondents were able to correctly identify only 9 of the 27 cabinet members. The median satisfaction ratings for the Cabinet members was 58% in October, 1986. When net satisfaction ratings are taken into account (i.e. when one subtracts the proportion of dissatisfied respondents from those who are satisfied with the identified cabinet member), the median value becomes 47% in October, 1986, and only 11 out of 28 have net ratings of 50% or more.

The respondents' choice in Aquino's official family is a military man, General Fidel Ramos, Chief-of-Staff of the New Armed Forces of the Philippines. More than 10 percentage points separate him from the civilian officials (Minister of Foreign Affairs and concurrent Vice-President Salvador Laurel, Minister of Education Lourdes Quisumbing and Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile) who are ranked immediately after him in net performance ratings. The public satisfaction with General Ramos carries special significance precisely because the military failed to enhance its public image as reflected in the October survey. More than half (56%) of the respondents acknowledge military men who aspire for power as a big threat to the present government; and the local military merited a net satisfaction rating (42%) which was considerably lower than local civilian officials (51% for barangay captains and 49% for city or province officers-in-charge). Furthermore, military men had been implicated in anti-government demonstrations and rallies (with the Manila Hotel attempted coup being the most publicized) and media helped inclined the public towards suspecting military men of unwarranted political ambitions.

In reserving the highest level of public satisfaction for General Ramos, the respondents might well be indicating their awareness of the continuing delicate dependence of the civilian authorities on constitutionalist-minded military men. In addition, public satisfaction could be interpreted as a signal to the more publicity-minded military men that they must assume, like General Ramos, a generally low-profile approach to their career as public servants, ever mindful of their supportive function in relation to the civilian authority.

Reconciliation with the rebels: try it and hope for the best.

There is majority (54%) support for continuing ceasefire programs with communist and Muslim rebels. Bigger majorities (62%) view current reconciliation policies with the rebels as just right and a plurality of nearly half (47%) are hopeful that

peacetalks with the communists could lead to their laying down their arms and living peaceably. All of these sentiments are indicative of the national temper towards giving everyone a chance to live in peace, or at least avoid bloody confrontations among Filipinos.

Nevertheless, there appears to be a growing sentiment that firmness must attend government reconciliation policies. Respondents who see these policies as too lenient have increased between May and October 1986; from 17% to 26% in the case of policies addressed to the communists, and from 14% to 23% regarding policies targeted for Muslim rebels. Furthermore, in October, 1986 even as there is clear resistance (32%) to the idea of taking up the "sword of war," the plurality view (42%) is to use armed force on the rebels should ceasefire programs break down.

These sentiments may reflect both a sincere desire for ending civil strife as well as a growing impatience, perhaps even outright exasperation, with those who would use peace initiatives primarily for propaganda purposes. Neither the Aquino government nor the NDF and the MNLF stand to gain by sabotaging the currently still fragile framework temporarily governing ceasefire agreements. Even as military men regularly assure the population of their capability to deal insurgency mortal blows in short order, the historical experiences of many countries suggest that such claims are best treated with extreme caution. Indochina, Latin America and Africa provide examples of insurgencies which appear to have been strengthened precisely by simplistic military responses. The military and civilian resources required by a largely military counterinsurgency effort will probably make the Philippines even more vulnerable to external influences which cannot be presumed to have the best interests of the Filipinos in mind.

Modern counterinsurgency doctrine, fashioned after the sobering experiences of Vietnam as well as Afghanistan, has incorporated a lesson well understood by Machiavelli and earlier military and political strategists: for insurgency to wither away, the authorities must cultivate their people and make them productive and contented citizens. Such strategy is not served well by tactical operations which zone people into hamlets and make no distinction between the pacification and extinction of those who have been hamletted. The Philippine Government as well as its military, before, during and after Marcos' rule has publicly acknowledged the need for an integrated politico-military approach to insurgency. Marcos' oplan Katatagan as well as the current oplan Mamamayan manifest a theoretical grasp and appreciation of the more basic political and economic character of insurgent movements. The problem has not been with the theory, but the will to have one's practice guided by sound theory.

The best governmental response to the rebels, given an avowed policy of national reconciliation, is probably one indicated by the majority of the current survey's respondents: try the policy conscientiously and sincerely hope it works; should it fail even then, other more forceful policies might be indicated. President Aquino appears to be convinced by the wisdom of this approach and thus enjoys a very close rapport with most of this survey's respondents.

The proposed Constitution: strong views, limited opportunities for active discussion.

Although more than a majority (57%) of respondents expressed their interest in the draft Constitution by following the process of its creation, only a small number (10%) managed to attend any meeting to discuss the proposed Constitution. Majority views nevertheless registered on issues such as preferred legislative systems (bicameral, 58%), presidential power to declare martial law (not to be exercised without permission by the national assembly, 53%), and preferred arrangement for presidential and vice-presidential tenure given a new Constitution (let Aquino and Laurel serve their 6-year term before calling for new elections, 81%). Foreign participation in the utilization of natural resources elicited split opinions, with 38% opting to maintain the current 40% foreign share, 9% to increase it beyond 40%, 19% to decrease it below 40% and a sizeable 27% for excluding all foreigners and reserving natural resources exclusively for Filipinos.

The strong interest in the draft Constitution is consonant with the idea that with the fall of Marcos, a new Constitution is necessary to define the framework within which government authorities may legitimately exercise powers entrusted them by the people. The democratic bias of respondents is reflected in the May, 1986 Public Opinion Report survey where a great majority (81%) implicitly criticized Aquino's appointment of the Constitutional Commissioners by explicitly preferring election of those who would draft the document. In the present October survey, as earlier noted, the distrust for an all-powerful executive is reflected in the requirement that the power to declare martial law must not lodge in the President alone but must be shared with the National Assembly or legislative.

Given their great interest in the draft Constitution, many respondents could have felt frustrated as hardly any venue for its discussion appeared to have been available as late as October, 1986. Hopefully, the constitutional forums which were designed by the Commissioners to help inform the people succeeded in their educational mission. The Aquino decision committing her administration to the draft Constitution's approval may also have contributed towards the greater dissemination of information pertinent to the draft provisions and their more active discussion. The recent, apparently successful campaign to register Filipinos for the forthcoming constitutional plebiscite is a good omen. The campaign at least impressed on more people their right

to know more about this basic document as well as their duty to intelligently assess it as a putative Constitution. After suffering Marcos and after successfully chasing him out of the country, most Filipinos will claim the right and perform their duty.