

THE TURNING POINT THAT NEVER WAS (A Military Perspective on the “February Revolution”)

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The so-called February Revolution of 1986 — which led to the flight of President Ferdinand Marcos, after two decades of authoritarian rule, and the installation of Corazon Aquino as the new Chief Executive — was expected to be a turning point for Philippine society, including the Government as well as the military. Thus, in two years, the democratic institutions which had been destroyed by the past dictatorship have been almost completely restored. Valiant efforts are being exerted in business and the economy, in education and culture, in foreign relations and diplomacy, and in other areas of endeavor to put society on the right track towards the desired direction. The military, however, even with a year of official “renewal,” has not really turned the corner at all. Now, after another year as a “renewed” institution, one of the country’s more prominent ambassadors has called the Armed Forces of the Philippines a major “source of instability” for the Aquino Government.

The Pre-Marcosian Military

Between the end of World War II and the Marcos Era, the Armed Forces of the Philippines was largely governed by the National Defense Act of 1936 — or Commonwealth Act No. 1. This law embodied the notion of an ideal — or idealized — military configuration that would make for effectiveness and efficiency. It reinforced existing concepts, norms, and standards of military policy, strategy, operations, and structure, with no place for traditional militarism.

These included the concepts of the Citizen Army, the General Staff, self-reliant defense, and territorial organization. There were also the strong mission-orientation and the strict military discipline expected of every individual officer and soldier — as well as of every military unit at all levels. Moreover, it was postulated that nobody is indispensable in the military, and corollarily, that nobody has a monopoly of military abilities; that the top ranks and position be limited only to the select few who are capable of strategic thinking and have the other qualifications for generalship; and that “the parade must move on” — nobody must be allowed “to delay the Corps” — which means rational military career programming. Thus, the promotion system was governed by the so-called Rule of Three — i.e., two for “seniority” and a third for “ability” through the mechanism of “deep selection.”

The idea of a streamlined, therefore efficacious, Armed Forces structure, was thus deeply inculcated in the minds of the post-war cadets of the Philippine Military Academy during their four years of education in Baguio. This became much clearer to me when I took the Adjutant General Officers' course at the Philippine Army School for Administration early in my military career.

Coming in the way of the "ideal" military organization, however, was the "hump" — the bunching up of officers "of all shapes and sizes" commissioned from all sources during the last war. But it could be shown both actuarially and statistically that by around 1970, we would be "over the hump" — and then the country would have a "beautiful" Armed Forces officered by PMA graduates led by the first post-war Class of 1951. This might, of course, sound elitist, but it was really something to look forward to.

The military system under the National Defense Act was good enough to meet the security needs of the country after the end of World War II. Thus, communist insurgency in Central Luzon led by the Hukbalahaps was crushed in the early Fifties when Ramon Magsaysay was the Secretary of National Defense, and this catapulted him to the Presidency in 1953.

To liquidate armed insurgency in Southern Luzon once and for all, following the Zarraga murders in 1956 in Laguna, President Magsaysay committed the entire PMA graduating class — all fifty-one of them — in the area with the very clear F⁴ mission of *finding, fixing, fighting, and finishing* (not necessarily killing) the enemy. To be sure, the Commander-in-Chief then was not only extremely popular, but he also knew what he was doing, as he had earlier demonstrated in Central Luzon.

"The Guy" — as Magsaysay was fondly called — flushed PMA Class 1956 out of the Philippine Army School Center in Fort Bonifacio (formerly called Fort McKinley), where they were taking the usual pre-service Company Officers' Course, and sent them to the field with the simple admonition that "the best school is the jungle." The School Superintendent then, Col. Cirilo Garcia, gave the class a very inspiring talk. From him, they picked up a word which was adopted by the class as their battlecry when they joined the massive operations against the Huks in Southern Luzon — "*dibdiban*"! (This Tagalog word does not seem to have a precise translation in English — although it could mean "from the heart," "heart-to-heart," or simply "no-nonsense.").

The wisdom, sincerity, and decisiveness — as well as credibility — of President Magsaysay could only be matched by the high sense of mission on the part of every individual officer or soldier. Such mission orientation served also as antidote to human-rights violations for the "moral man in the military." Considering the enemy just as another Filipino — therefore, a brother — fighting for a cause he believed in, one was then expected to take only such actions as were both necessary and sufficient to accomplish

his mission of destroying the enemy's will to fight or seizing a vital installation. If that mission could be achieved without killing, fine — or, if he had to kill at all, it could be done with neither hatred nor cruelty.

When President Magsaysay died in March 1957 in that fateful airplane crash on Mount Manunggal in Cebu, the Hukbalahap campaigns in Southern Luzon and in the rest of the country had gained full momentum. This was in accordance with his famous left-hand/right-hand approach of “all-out friendship/all-out force.”

By the middle of the year armed insurgency all over the country was practically crushed. Philippine Army units that had been deployed in the massive anti-communist operations were pulled out and moved to Fort Magsaysay for retraining in conjunction with a reorganization of the AFP along conventional peacetime functions.

The Marcos Syndrome

President Marcos won the Presidency in 1965, and immediately started his systematic destruction of the military, while fertilizing the ground for the revival and growth of armed communist insurgency in the country. There was Project *Merdeka* in 1967, exploding after the *Jabidah* massacre in 1968, which almost erupted into a war between the Philippines and Malaysia, while ushering in the secessionist movements in Mindanao.

Heavy fighting between the Government and the Moro National Liberation Front of Nur Misuari broke out in 1972 in Mindanao, while the communist New People's Army stepped up its operations in Luzon and the Visayas. With the series of destructive typhoons, killer floods, and other natural calamities, President Marcos found an excuse to declare Martial Law in September, thereby ensuring his stay in power as a virtual dictator.

Thus, instead of pursuing the original concept of the Citizen Army, Marcos expanded the Armed Forces to about four-fold and activated the paramilitary Civilian Home Defense Forces (CHDFs). Without Congress, the President promoted officers in the top ranks according to his whims, and granted temporary promotions left and right, thereby ensuring the canine loyalties of the top generals who would hold key positions in the Armed Forces.

With his curious concept of continuity and stability in the military, Marcos invented the “overstaying general” and destroyed the General Staff concept — a feat which even Adolf Hitler failed to accomplish. Moreover, he changed the laws of retirement by extending the terms of regular officers from the PMA by at least four years — thus, bloating further the “hump.”

With graft and corruption virtually tolerated in the Defense establishment, President Marcos was indeed able to infect the military with the

syndrome calculated to make the organization his tool for political and economic domination, as well as of human oppression. As Marcos's last Chief of Staff, General Ver made the finishing touches by creating the so-called Regional Unified Commands (RUCs). Unfortunately for Marcos, but fortunately for the country, there were RAM and Enrile!

The Aquino Syndrome

When Corazon Aquino became AFP Commander-in-Chief in February 1986, she started imposing her own syndrome on the military — on top of Marcos's. Instead of letting the Minister of National Defense perform his function intact as her *alter ego*, she demoted Enrile to a mere "Monitor of National Defense" and acted as her own Minister. This was announced in her maiden speech on major policies on the military delivered during the PMA graduation in March in Baguio. But even with Secretary Ileta having replaced Enrile, the Defense Department remained just as irrelevant.

Moreover, the President surrounded herself with anti-military advisers — if not amateurs — who are very negative in their treatment of the Armed Forces. To cap it all, she has placed the National Security Council under a Master of Crisis Management — who competes with the Malacañang Press Office in making Presidential pronouncements on security and puts one over the Intelligence Service by divulging matters that should be treated as State secrets — rather than under a Master of Security Policy and Planning.

Under the leadership of Cory Aquino, the AFP organizational "hump" has remained just as bloated as ever. This is brought about by the mistaken belief that she must promote her own generals to neutralize those who are not hers and must have troops personally loyal to her — to the point of creating a separate "Yellow Army" as "an army within the Army." The Lady Commander-in-Chief just cannot seem to get used to the fact that the military organization belongs to the Republic — not to the President, as in the case of Marcos.

The Aquino leadership regards the Armed Forces in terms of the "military mind" stereotype — unthinking, unfeeling, and misbehaving children. Thus, President Aquino simplistically reacted to Minister Enrile as a "mere child at play" once and Colonel Honasan as "making gimmicks to get the attention of media" — rather than trying sincerely to discern the messages the two gentlemen were trying to convey. The soldiers, likewise, see Cory Aquino's frequent — sometimes surprise — appearances in the camps as one frantic mother's attempts to appease her troublesome children with lollipops.

This simplism of the Aquino leadership extends also to its interpretation of the principle of "civilian supremacy over the military." To AFP members, the principle simply says that the Commander-in-Chief is the

President, who is a civilian, and exercises command through the Secretary of National Defense, who is also a civilian. Moreover, the civilian Congress has effective control over the military through its sole prerogative to declare war, its budgetary function, and its right to pass over top promotions and appointments in the Armed Forces.

Otherwise, civilian functions over the military are limited to policy — including review — matters only. The strategic and tactical functions of military planning and management are technical in nature, and are better left to the military as they are not within the competence of civilian authorities. Thus, a prudent civilian President will not interfere with the actual conduct of military operations — let alone, allow his or her civilian “advisers” to direct military commanders. Moreover, the principle of “civilian supremacy over the military” does not mean that any lousy provincial governor can push around the military commander — not even a duty sergeant — in his area, since military personnel receive orders from and report to their immediate superiors in the chain of command only.

The simplism of the Aquino leadership has bred its indecision, as well as its incompetence, in military operations — and this has a telling effect on the anti-insurgency and anti-secessionist campaigns, which have been escalating in both qualitative and quantitative terms. The wishy-washy leadership has simply confused the troops on the frontlines — which are now everywhere — who are no longer sure whether they are to shoot, to pray, to sing, or to run — and end up being shot at, killed, and buried.

The soldier or officer under the present dispensation who is still afflicted with the Marcos and Aquino syndromes is simply confused. This is certainly to be expected when the military leadership is one big picture of fuzziness. General Ramos, Secretary Iletto, and President Aquino were, in fact, telling the plain truth when they said that the military organization was “misguided, misled”.

Many a soldier or officer now could not even be able to tell who the “enemy” is — therefore, unable to internalize the basic F⁴ mission orientation. For instance, the current official notion of an “unarmed Citizen Army under the AFP” is a bastardization of the original Citizen Army concept — if not a contradiction in terms — and does not conform with the Constitutional provision on the “Citizen Armed Forces.”

The Ramos Factor

In fairness to the civilian President Cory Aquino, the military problem, as distinguished from the national problem, should be placed squarely on the shoulders — atop those four-star boards — of Gen. Fidel Ramos who used to be the AFP Chief of Staff.

One problem with General Ramos is that the public's knowledge — more accurately, their perception — of him has largely been the product of mass media. Unfortunately, this image does not square up with the real person — let alone, with the military man in him. Ramos may be very popular among all ill-informed civilians, but he is very unpopular among well-informed military personnel. In fact, he does not enjoy at all the respect of a large segment of the officer corps — from retired generals to young lieutenants — not even of PMA cadets. Those who know the real record of the former Chief of Staff and current Defense Secretary believe that he should not have risen to the star ranks.

In the military service, the ultimate test of an officer is his performance while commanding a company, which is the smallest tactical and administrative unit, especially in combat, because this is considered to be the most difficult assignment in the field. It is very much easier for one to command a battalion — more so a larger unit — since he has a troop staff and other assistants. But a Company Commander is his own Intelligence Officer, Operations Officer, Communications Officer, Logistics Officer, Mess Officer, Training Officer, etc. He is directly responsible for the behavior, discipline, morale, welfare, etc., of his men — as well as the accomplishment of the unit's mission.

Now, what is General Ramos's record as a Company Commander? As a captain, he was once Commanding Officer of a company of the 16th Battalion Combat Team, Philippine Army, operating against the Hukbalahaps in 1956-57 in Laguna. But his command turned out to be a disaster when the unit encountered the group of the Huk Supremo, Jesus Lava. The Platoon Leader who led the fight on behalf of the beleaguered company is now a retired General and a Congressman from the South, while the Battalion Commander who "kicked" the bewildered Company Commander "upstairs" to the position of S-3 (Operations and Training Officer) is still very active in business as a retired Colonel.

Fidel's cousin, Ferdinand Marcos, was elected President in 1965. A "triumvirate" was immediately formed to call the shots in the military, consisting of Generals Ernesto Mata (later named Secretary of National Defense) and Ismael Lapus (later named Chief of the National Intelligence Coordinating Agency), as well as Major Fidel Ramos (later named Presidential Assistant on Military Affairs in Malacañang). That was how the last Chief of Staff's star started to rise. However, when the critical moment came in 1981 — some 16 years later, which was presumably ample time for assessing the capabilities of the "President's Men" — Marcos chose his other relative, General Ver, as AFP Chief of Staff.

Now, what is the difference between the two Marcos relatives — Generals Ver and Ramos? Unlike their predecessor, the professional General Romeo Espino, who could work with whatever officers he would find in

their posts, Ver and Ramos must bring along their "own boys" personally loyal to them.

If General Ver had to create the so-called Regional Unified Commands (RUCs) in order to have a direct hand in the affairs at the lower levels, General Ramos had not only retained those control structures, but had also superimposed the so-called Area Unified Commands (AUCs) in order to have more handles on the Armed Forces. Like President Marcos and General Ver, the last Chief of Staff had the propensity to centralize military operational decision making, without delegating functions and authority substantively. This was the reason for outgoing Secretary Iletto's lament that operations were very centrally controlled at Camp Aguinaldo. Thus, Army and lower headquarters are practically useless — and he ought to know being a former PA Commander himself.

What was uniquely Ramos, however, was the practice of usurping the functions of his subordinates. To cite a few examples: It was the AFP Chief of Staff presiding over the Graduation Week last March in Baguio — rather than the PMA Superintendent. In Bicol, it was also the Chief of Staff supervising the Constabulary Regional Commander — rather than the PC Chief. Even simple administrative and tactical matters that are better left to company commanders had to be taken up by the AFP Chief through the mass media, as well as the multi-layered chain of command.

All these functional and organizational quirks of General Ramos — as well as those passed on undiminished by General Ver — have caused a lot of confusion and demoralization among military personnel. These have resulted in the loss of effectiveness and efficiency in AFP operations, thereby endangering the security of the country.

Turning the Corner

The relationship between the former AFP Chief of Staff — now the Secretary of National Defense — and the members of the Reform-AFP Movement is a very important element in the "Ramos factor." The outset of the so-called February (1986) Revolution, when that relationship was closest, is usually described by some RAM leaders as follows: ". . . the General would not even dare lift a finger on his own. But after Enrile had taken the initiative, Ramos had no more choice than fill up the niche carved out for him in history by others."

The "Revolution" could have been a real turning point not only for Philippine society, including the Government, including the AFP, but also for General Ramos. Then, Fidel's sins of omission and commission could have all been forgiven and forgotten had he really turned the corner through a real change of heart and mind.

Even before the flight of Ferdinand Marcos as his erstwhile Commander-in-Chief and the installation of Corazon Aquino as the new

President, the new Chief of Staff had already christened the Armed Forces as “New” — the NAFP. Thus, General Ramos was already on the way to becoming the “Father of the New Armed Forces of the Philippines” — if his earlier bid for “Father of the Special Forces” had turned *kaput*, unlike General Ileta who had already established himself as “Father of the Scout Rangers.”

The problem with his innovation, however, was that, to the good General, it seemed as if the creation of a new AFP would only be a matter of inserted the word “New” — just as in the late, unlamented “New Society.” With the Marcoses, at least, there were lots of conceptualization — the writing of books — and all those other pretensions about ideological and political formations, fostering of developmental values, reorientation of the civilian bureaucracy.

But did the last Chief-of-Staff have any substantive plan for renewing the Armed Forces — aside from the repainting of buildings and vehicles, printing of new letterheads, etc.? The reading of the Bible or the Koran — as usually mentioned — is the preoccupation of a lifetime. What about something more down-to-earth? The more efficacious organizations in business and government — let alone, the military — need something more operational than the Ten Commandments.

Then, last February 1987 — around one year after the “Revolution” and the baptism of NAFP — General Ramos announced that the word “new” should be dropped because the Armed Forces was already “renewed”; he did not say “old.” That was to be followed by a massive repainting of signboards, reprinting of letterheads, etc. — all over again.

There is really a pressing need to renew and revitalize the Armed Forces organization — even this late. But who is going to take the lead? Not even General Ramos, who could indeed be the wrong man for the right job. Indeed, one from the Constabulary, which is the “bastard” in the military, is considered least qualified to lead the Armed Forces. Creating a new AFP means breaking away from certain old values and habits — those which almost sent the military completely to the dogs — and fostering new ones. Is General Ramos, as the former Chief of Staff and the present Secretary of National Defense, capable of such an reorientation?

For one thing, General Ramos could not simply shed off his “upper-classroom mentality” decades after he graduated from West Point. It is shown in his habit of calling everybody he does not like as “Mister” — Mr. Marcos, Mr. Abadilla, Mr. Honasan, etc.; this is how plebes in the Academy are addressed. It is also shown in his propensity to “ask for pushups”; this is the standard punishment for plebes. General Ramos is also hamstrung by his “colonial and colonized mentality” — but this needs no elaboration — as it is also evident in President Aquino and former Secretary Ileta.

Moreover, even in his age, the former Chief of Staff was just too pre-occupied with jumping (from airplanes) and jogging — which he pursued with almost hypochondriac zeal — to lead the other generals in the intellectual activities which are necessary for creating a new AFP. But what could really be a stumbling block to General Ramos's capability to lead in the renewal and revitalization of the AFP was his apparent inability to shed off his old ideas — especially those Marcosian concepts fostered by two decades under the dictator — to pave the way for the inculcation of new ones.

Take the “superstar mentality” — the hallmark of the Marcos Era. Because of this mentality, ex-President Marcos, as Commander-in-Chief, destroyed the General Staff concept in the military and foisted the myth that stability and continuity in the military is a function of the commander. This served as the justification for the institution of the “overstaying general.”

Like Marcos, many a commander created the self-serving myth that he was “indispensable” — in violation of the dictum that everybody is expendable in the Armed Forces, regardless of rank, even the Commander-in-Chief. To sustain that “indispensability,” the Marcosian general did not prepare any successor. He did this very easily by “exiling” every brilliant officer, who could be a threat to his position, and surrounding himself only with the mediocre. Like Marcos, he monopolized power, refused to delegate authority along with tasks, and pretended to run the organization through directives issued from the top.

Now, what about General Ramos, the ex-future “Father of the New AFP” that never was? Is he ready to give up his old Marcosian ideas and habits and replace them with new ones compatible with the needs of the times? Has he seen himself as not indispensable, and must, therefore, prepare young leaders to take his place — beforehand, not at the eleventh hour? Has he revitalized and strengthened the General Staff as the institution that provides stability and continuity in the military? Is he ready to share authority — not just responsibility — with subordinate commanders down the line? Is he ready to step down — and out — to give way to young blood? In other words, is Ramos ready to give up the Marcos syndrome? Whether we can have a New AFP — not just in name under General Ramos — depends on the answers to the foregoing questions.

To summarize, there are two main objections to the military (mis)-leadership of General Ramos — viz., his style and his politics. On the first, his management approach is largely *reactive* — if not *inactive* — where it should be *interactive*. He is, thus, perceived as the Juan in the caricature waiting for the guava to fall into his mouth. As ex-President Marcos described General Ramos in an interview for *Playboy* months ago, “he needs somebody to kick him in the butt to move” — and the cousin ought to know.

Continuing Revolution

Two years have passed since the so-called February Revolution of 1986. President Corazon Aquino has replaced the dictatorial Ferdinand Marcos. A new Constitution is in place. Congress has been installed, composed of duly-elected members of the Senate and of the House of Representatives. Provincial governors, city or municipal mayors, and other local officials have been popularly elected and are now performing their functions. In other words, the democratic institutions that were destroyed during the Marcos Era have been practically restored.

But aside from the restoration of these political structures — as well as the replacement of people, not necessarily for the better — what else have changed? Cronyism, dynastism, nepotism, and other insidious practices that had almost sent the country down the drain under Marcos are still very much around under Aquino — although with different participants. Graft and corruption continue to plague society. Gross ineptitude of the bureaucracy can only be compounded by the attempted deceptions in government decision making.

As a result, the hoped-for economic recovery has not taken place. The fate of the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program in Congress is still unknown. The despoilation of our natural resources has continued unabated. Agricultural productivity has grown so low that the country is even importing sugar and rice, which it once exported. The low levels and the unequal distribution of income have worsened, while some sixty percent of Filipino families are living below the poverty line. The peace and order conditions have grown so bad as to affect the investment climate adversely, while mass government layoffs have worsened the unemployment and under-employment problems.

Meanwhile, armed communist insurgency operations have escalated throughout the country. The threat of armed Muslim secessionist struggles in the South has not at all abated, despite the signs of a slowdown in military operations down south (which, after all, could be the proverbial lull before the storm).

These developments have brought to the fore the issue of the capability of the Armed Forces of the Philippines. Is the military now in a better position to meet those demands?

There have been replacements among the people on top of the Defense and Armed Forces organizations, but this does not mean a real change in leadership. The functional and structural anomalies which should have been corrected by reorganizing the PC/INP out of the AFP is still far from implementation.

The Americans — notably Richard Armitage, U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Affairs — have again assured President Aquino

of increased military assistance in the form of hardware for fighting insurgency. The AFP is, likewise, beefing up its strength with the recruitment of some 6,000 fresh troops.

But have the lessons of Vietnam been lost on our leaders? Winning a war is not a matter of firepower — both hardware and men — but of superior intelligence, leadership, and motivations. If the Philippine communist insurgents — as well as the Muslim separatists — have been increasing their influence, according to the Secretary of National Defense and the AFP Chief of Staff, it is because of poor intelligence, bad civil-military relations, and continuing misleadership in the government — resulting in low fighting effectiveness and efficiency. In other words, the qualitative factors are more important than the quantitative.

The Marcos syndrome has remained in the military. No de-Marcosification has taken place at the level of values, strategies, processes, and structures. This is still compounded by the Aquino syndrome. The President might have allowed General Ramos to shed his military uniform, but she cannot simply give up the Marcosian habit of extending the tours of duty of retireable officers — as in the case of General de Villa — even in violation of the Constitution.

The AFP has, therefore, remained fragmented. The Defense-military hierarchy is doing its utmost to eliminate the leaders of the Reform-AFP Movement by charging them for various crimes and assassinating them in the media. It succeeded in getting the RAM people out of the picture in the Second Anniversary celebration of the “February Revolution.”

But the ideas and ideals that triggered the original “February Revolution” and deposed ex-President Marcos cannot simply be sequestered. They have stayed alive in the hearts and minds of concerned Filipinos — not just the “disgruntled” military — no matter how insignificant their number may be. They are embodied in two messages: a “national message,” whose bottom line is *good government*, and a “military message” — a *revitalized military*. To these concerned people, the “Revolution” is far from over.

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