

The Aquino Presidency: Challenges and Prospects

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A TV campaign ad of the presidential candidate shows him leading a flock of people – actually mostly showbiz personalities – all bearing torches as they march up a hill. The scene is reminiscent of the biblical prophet Moses who parted the Red Sea with his cane allowing the Hebrew people to cross away from the pursuing chariot-riding army of the Egyptian Pharaoh. The TV ad exudes a strong biblical affinity to Filipino voters. Unlike Moses, however, the 21st century candidate stops atop a hill to scan the horizon – probably to await a new dawn, a promise land.

Then, what?

That is what Benigno Aquino III just did – he got the votes for the presidency in an automated election marred by systemic failures and inaccuracies. Now, he must do the Moses act – to perform the deliverance that he promised.

For Aquino, time is of the essence. The right hand that he raises in taking his oath as the country's 15th president must now be used to plough the field, so to speak, that now begs for action. The economy is in bad shape, joblessness is at its worst since the past 50 years, corruption has become endemic with billions of pesos lost every year. There has been no effective governance, with the system of accountability and justice system rendered toothless and the dynasties-dominated Congress less equal than – and virtually a rubber stamp of – the president. The human rights situation is at its worst since martial law. The peace process with the armed Left and the Moro secessionist movement is grounded for years leaving the country in a state of siege.



Three issues

Three major issues will hound Aquino from Day 1 of his presidency: Corruption, the economy, and the peace process.

Having run on an anti-corruption and clean government platform, he must now summon presidential power to ensure that outgoing President Gloria M. Arroyo is brought to court to face charges of alleged large-scale corruption as well as election fraud, and culpable violation of the constitution. This move, however, should be done along with initiating the colossal task of weeding out corruption that has become systemic to the state bureaucracy from the national down to the local levels.

Under Arroyo's watch, the economy went into a nosedive aggravated even further by the global recession. There are high expectations for the provision of immediate economic relief especially to the poor, a freeze on new taxes, a wage increase, and measures to arrest high unemployment. The next economic program must now review erroneous institutional policies that look at economic growth from the narrow perspective of promoting the hegemonic interests of foreign and local investors. Economic strategies should be reoriented toward addressing the roots of social inequality, advancing the social and economic rights of the people, and ensuring mechanisms where the interest of those who are less in life is reflected in policy making.

'Peace process'

The government policy of forcing the capitulation of revolutionary movements as the main track of the "peace process" and, hence, the use of military solution no longer holds. Clearly, this track has failed for the past 25 years of peace talks with both the Marxist revolutionary movement and the Moro rebellion. The new government should consider the peace process as a step in the roadmap of addressing the fundamental roots of war through a thoroughgoing social, economic, and political reform. The resumption of peace process can be signaled with a clear and unequivocal commitment by the incoming president to stop the political killings and, with respect to both the armed Left and the MILF, to remove their labeling as "terrorist organizations."

There are high expectations for Aquino to show a "reform agenda" and a presidency different from Arroyo's. Aside from leadership, the push for a "reform agenda" needs to be propelled by a strong, reform-oriented government. On these aspects, Aquino faces what may emerge to be an executive department shared by contending Liberal Party factions, and PDP-Laban headed by Jejomar Binay, the new vice president. Congress may remain under Arroyo's Lakas-Kampi-CMD coalition unless Aquino's LP is able to increase its seats from 44 through a party-switching by members of the coalition and thus become the majority party. A divided Congress will tie the new president's hands to exercising patronage politics through the pork barrel mechanism in order to ensure legislative support. A Congress, whose ability to function is generally dictated by pork barrel and other self-serving interests with the president acting as the key provider can never be an effective forum for reform.

Same economic agenda

As the new administration machinery takes shape, current indications show that Aquino will basically continue the same economic policies pursued by Arroyo. The cabinet faces who will lead the economic management had served under Arroyo and previous presidents whose pro-globalization and pro-business policies proved to be inimical not only to the economy but the people as a whole. Right now, foreign business groups led by the American Chamber of Commerce have offered a blueprint for the country's economic growth. The pro-corporate and pro-foreign capital agenda of both these cabinet officials and Aquino himself will make the electoral promise of giving up Hacienda Luisita to its rightful owners highly remote.

In the middle of the election campaign, Aquino also said he would continue Arroyo's counter-insurgency program ignoring the fact that it is the same coercive campaign marked by extra-judicial killing of at least 1,000 unarmed activists that partly led to the political isolation of the outgoing president. This commitment only means Aquino will be unwilling to support the prosecution of Arroyo in human rights terms because doing so will also implicate the security and military officials whose support he cannot sacrifice as the new commander-in-chief. Backing the Armed Forces of the Philippines' (AFP) counter-insurgency paradigm is always a guarantee to ensuring the loyalty of the military – a power broker by itself – to the president.

Failure of the Aquino administration to make Arroyo accountable for the gross and systematic violations of human rights will only show that a reconciliation is in the works. Reconciliation can only mean choosing the side of repression and a readiness to part ways with some church-based human rights advocates who had backed his candidacy. Does this also mean Aquino will also consider the 2004 Hacienda Luisita massacre as a closed case even if security men were involved, according to witnesses?

Visiting Forces Agreement

Aquino's pro-counter insurgency policy is tied to a pre-determined support to the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) subject, so he had said, to its review insofar as criminal jurisdiction of erring U.S. personnel is concerned. This also means he will continue a strong defense partnership with the U.S. in exchange for continued economic and military assistance which the new

government will badly need. Recent history tells that where a president leads a strong counter-insurgency campaign and support for U.S. defense objectives the peace process has always been undermined.

With a president whose hands will be tied to compromise deals and powerful pressure groups, it would be a long shot whether Aquino will lock horns with the systemic problem of corruption. His inaugural speech will talk of an avowed mission to deal with corruption. But an institutional malady requires not just messianic words of deliverance in the style of Moses but radical institutional

solutions that will have to deal with the structural roots of corruption from the presidency and its extensive bureaucracy, to Congress, the LGUs, and the judiciary.

The presidency is a powerful institution and its vast powers can be used in accordance with law to deal with corruption. However, this requires not just a political will but also constructive confrontation with the occupant's own allies and powerful political dynasties that encourage – actually benefit from – corruption.

The question really is, will he do it?

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