



THE 1998 RAMON MAGSAYSAY AWARD FOR INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING

BIOGRAPHY OF CORAZON C. AQUINO

To the world, she is the widow in yellow who toppled a dictatorship in a stirring show of People Power in 1986. To her native Philippines, she is the courageous president who saw off a series of coups d'état and single-mindedly restored the institutions of democracy. But to herself, Corazon C. Aquino is a plain housewife who, in all conscience, could not refuse her country's call to service when her husband, former senator Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino Jr., was assassinated in 1983. She continues to serve after her term of office ended in 1992 through her work with nongovernmental organizations. "What is important is that we believe in the Almighty and that we try to do whatever we can to help ease some of the sufferings of our people," she says. "I always tell my children: 'I don't know how many good years I still have left, but whatever I can do at this time, I really want to be able to continue not only for the cause of democracy, but also to help in bringing about a better Filipino.' For the rest of my life, I will be doing whatever I can to improve things."

Although a member of the Cojuangco, Sumulong, and Aquino political clans, the former president never aspired to political office. She always saw her role as a supportive wife to Ninoy, the political arch foe of Ferdinand Marcos, the dictator Corazon Aquino blamed for her husband's death and whom she replaced as president. Born in Manila on January 25, 1933, she was the sixth of eight children (of whom two died in infancy) of Jose Cojuangco, a former congressman, and Demetria Sumulong Cojuangco, a pharmacist. Both her grandfathers were also legislators. As a girl, Cory, as she is popularly known, remembers handing out cigars and cigarettes to political leaders and their supporters who visited her father at election time. For the most part, however, her life revolved around school, church, and vacations in Antipolo in Rizal Province, the Sumulong bailiwick, and in Tarlac, where the Cojuangcos owned huge tracts of land.

It was Grandfather Sumulong—Cory called him Lolo (Grandpa) Juan—who encouraged the little girl to read. "His eyesight was getting bad," she recalls. "I was seven or eight and I would read the newspaper to him." A nationalist who believed that the elite should not dominate Philippine politics, Lolo Juan died when Cory was about to turn nine. But the senator's influence lived on. "My grandfather insisted that all of us learn Tagalog [the dialect on which the national language is based] first before we learned English," says Cory. "I continued this practice, so all my children were taught or spoken to in Tagalog. I'm proud of the fact that all of us are fluent in Tagalog." She also learned to interact with ordinary folks from the down-to-earth maternal side of the family. "We got a taste of what it was like doing what other people did," she recounts, from eating *halo-halo*, the iced dessert of choice of Antipolo's masses, to trying out the gambling game *beta-beta* with a street-smart cousin.

While the Sumulongns have been in the Philippines for generations, Cory's paternal relatives, the Cojuangcos, trace their roots to Fujian Province. Her great-grandfather, Jose Cojuangco, left China for the Philippines in 1836. Diligent and thrifty, the Chinese immigrant saved his earnings as a junk dealer to buy land for a small rice mill in Paniqui town in Tarlac. Jose became an influential man. His son and Cory's

paternal grandfather, Melecio Cojuangco, was voted to the country's First Congress in 1898, when Filipino revolutionaries declared independence from Spain, only to see the Americans become the new colonial power. Melecio died young, so Cory never knew her paternal grandfather. It was Melecio's spinster sister Ysidra, known to the Cojuangco kids as Lola (Grandma) Ysidra, who filled the void at the family enterprise. By the 1920s, the Cojuangcos had interests in rice, sugar, and banking.

Jose Cojuangco, the patriarch, was so eager to be assimilated into Philippine society that he did not teach Melecio and his sisters to speak Chinese. "That's one thing that all of us regret," Cory says. When she became president years later, Cory made a point of touring her great-grandfather's home village on a state visit to China. For all their wealth, however, the Cojuangcos remained hardworking. Ysidra insisted on an early day for everyone. "Your children will not amount to much if they wake up late," she would admonish Cory's parents. "Late for her was waking up with the sun," recalls Cory. "She would always be sweeping floors in the rice mill, even if she didn't have to do that. She was really a workaholic." Cory's father, named Jose after the patriarch from Fujian, managed the family sugar mill and later headed Philippine Bank of Commerce, the country's first Filipino-owned bank, which the Cojuangcos set up with two other prominent families.

Cory has fond memories of her father. "He was the kindest person that I have ever lived with or met," she says. "He was a very indulgent father, but at the same time he would not contradict my mother in her disciplining of us. But I knew, and all of us knew, that we could always get extras from my father." Demetria was the disciplinarian. She doled out very small cash allowances and recycled outgrown clothes for the younger kids. "I was the third daughter [of four girls], so by the time the blue school uniform got to me, it was almost gray," laughs Cory. "I suppose my mother believed that there was nothing wrong with being frugal and for us to really appreciate the hard work that both she and my father went into to make life

comfortable for us." Like Ysidra, Demetria worked hard despite her affluent background. Before she married, she opened a small drugstore to put her pharmacy degree to use. "While she was supportive of my father, she was also her own person," says Cory. "She was not about to be intimidated or overwhelmed by my father and his family." Demetria had the Filipino pedigree, while Jose had the greater wealth. When the wedding was announced, the people of Antipolo referred to Jose as "some Chinaman." The scale and magnificence of the nuptials showed that Jose knew how to splurge on special occasions, a traditional Filipino trait. The Cojuangcos brought all their cooks from Tarlac for the grand reception. "To top that, they invited people from Manila and Antipolo to go to Tarlac, so my father's family hired a train. My father was wanting to tell them: 'Look, she married somebody . . . not only substantial, but also someone who's been a Filipino for quite some time.'"

Doing well at one's studies was important in the Cojuangco household. The eldest son, Pedro Cojuangco, was held up as a role model because he was always at or near the top of his class. After coasting during the early grades, Cory herself graduated valedictorian of her elementary school. The Cojuangcos also stressed religion and family togetherness. "On Sunday we would go to Lourdes Church," Cory recalls of the period before World War II. "We would ride together in the car and all of us would sit in one long pew. My father and mother both made it a rule that all of us would go to mass on Sundays together." During the Japanese occupation, the brood walked to the chapel at De La Salle school, which was not so far from the family home in Manila's Malate district. They did other things together as well, including going to the movies. "It prepared us for difficult times."

The first of those trying periods came during World War II. Cory was six weeks away from her ninth birthday when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor in Hawaii on December 8, 1941. The family evacuated to Antipolo that afternoon, but returned to Manila when it was declared an open city on December 26. Grandfather Sumulong died on January 9, 1942. He was sixty-six. “That was my first experience with somebody close dying,” says Cory. “He had tuberculosis and according to one of my aunts, my mother’s sister-in-law, he had vomited blood.” Lolo Juan was a big loss for the young girl. “I don’t have any remembrance of him being strict or mean. All I have are good memories of him. I shone in his eyes. I wasn’t one of my grandmother’s favorites because I didn’t like to help setting the dishes on the table or working in the kitchen. With my grandfather, he seemed to appreciate that I could read well.”

But the young are resilient and Cory came to her own during the Japanese occupation. She determined to do better in school. “Suddenly it hit me that, yes, this might be the end of something,” she says. “I decided I’d really put heart and soul into [my studies]. So you might say I react well in a crisis.” Saint Scholastica’s College, the Roman Catholic private school the four Cojuangco girls attended, was bombed in the dying days of the war, so Cory transferred to Assumption College for her first year of high school. The German nuns at Saint Scholastica stressed religion and reading. The more relaxed French nuns at Assumption focused on raising the social consciousness of their charges and teaching them how to think and act like ladies. “St. Scholastica’s was a very strict school,” Cory recounts. “But we, who were studying there, felt that we were really learning more than other girls in other schools.”

Like all schoolchildren at that time, Cory had to learn Japanese. Once she was chosen to recite a Japanese poem in front of Japanese soldiers in a hospital and was rewarded with a big prize—a bag of sugared peanuts. It was a treat for a young girl because food was scarce in Japanese-occupied Philippines, even for the affluent. The Cojuangcos had to ration their rice—one cup for each family member, and perhaps a tiny piece of chicken. Some of the family supplies were smuggled to the Filipino underground resistance and to a Sumulong relative who was one of the thousands of men forced by the Japanese to march to the Capas military camp in Tarlac, north of Manila. Their poorer neighbors in Manila also received free or subsidized food. When the desperate Japanese became more brutal as the fortunes of war turned against them, the family left the capital for a nipa hut with no running water in the tiny town of San Mateo in Rizal Province.

The Cojuangcos were back in Manila when the Americans returned in 1945. They stayed at the Sumulong house in Sampaloc district and were preparing to transfer to their home near De La Salle College when rumors of street fighting circulated. The De La Salle school buildings had thick walls and the Cojuangcos would be joining their paternal uncle Antonio and his family. But the move was aborted because the family’s two horses were stolen. It turned out that De La Salle, which the Japanese had sequestered, was no safe haven. Forced to retreat as the Americans advanced, the Japanese went on a killing rampage and massacred many innocent civilians in the area. “My uncle was killed together with his wife, one son, one daughter, and a daughter-in-law, along with some of the Christian Brothers of De La Salle,” Cory recounts. Gorla, her beloved nanny, also perished along with four other helpers. “Our neighbors said they could hear them shouting and crying; they were apparently tied to the iron grills. Later, we were able to recover their remains and they were buried in our family plot in Tarlac. From that time, my father knew we would never live in that neighborhood again.”

A year after the war ended, the Cojuangco children were sent to the United States to study. The Assumption-run Ravenhill Academy in Philadelphia agreed to accept the three

younger girls. (The two eldest children enrolled in college in New York, while the youngest, Jose Jr., was sent to a military academy in Manhattan.) The private boarding school had one famous alumna at that time—the movie star Grace Kelly, who later became Princess Grace of Monaco. Thirteen-year-old Cory and her sisters were rail thin from the ravages of war. “My mother asked the nuns: ‘Can you please give them extra food?’ That meant drinking five or six glasses of milk in one day.” And lots of potatoes, although there was no rice, which made the three sisters more homesick. The next year, Cory transferred to Notre Dame Convent School in New York City, where she finished high school. She went on to major in French and mathematics at the College of Mount Saint Vincent in the same city.

Her seven years in the United States gave the sheltered teenager a measure of independence. “If I had gone to school [in Manila], I’d always be relying on my parents, on our driver, on our cook, on our maid,” Cory muses. “Having gone to school in the United States, I became more self-reliant.” She learned to decide things on her own, use public transport, stick to a budget, interact with ordinary Americans and people of other nationalities, and regard herself as no different from others. A poised Cory returned to Manila in 1953 to study law. She had wanted to enroll at the University of the Philippines, whose College of Law had educated many of the country’s political leaders. But because her father was chair of the board of trustees of Far Eastern University, which was also owned by her brother-in-law’s family, Cory had no choice but to go there.

She did well in her studies, but Cory never became a lawyer. In 1954, she agreed to marry Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino Jr., whose family dominated the politics of Tarlac’s south while the Cojuangcos ruled the north. Cory and Ninoy first met when they were nine years old. Their fathers were both congressmen and Jose Cojuangco was the godfather of Ninoy’s younger sister, Lupita. Ninoy’s half brother was married to Cory’s cousin, the Cojuangco young woman who was massacred by Japanese soldiers at the De La Salle school in 1945. Love began to blossom when Cory spent her summer vacation in the Philippines in her junior year. Ninoy was bowled over by the refined lady Cory had become. She admired his guts and knowledge of current events. A journalist since he was sixteen, Ninoy had just returned from Korea, where he covered the exploits of the Philippine expeditionary force in the war there.

Ninoy Aquino’s father, former congressman and later senator Benigno Aquino Sr., had served in the wartime government sponsored by the Japanese occupiers, in the belief that Tokyo would grant the Philippines independence from the Americans. A sovereign Philippines was a long-standing dream in the family. Ninoy’s grandfather, General Servillano Aquino, had fought for independence from Spain. He thought freedom was at hand after the Philippine revolutionary forces joined the Americans to defeat the Spaniards in 1898, but he was bitterly disappointed when the United States annexed the islands instead. General Aquino refused to learn English and proudly displayed a photograph of himself in an American prison. His son was also briefly imprisoned and tried for treason for serving the Japanese-installed government. Benigno Sr. was exonerated, but Ninoy and his siblings encountered nasty comments in the classroom because of their father’s decision to collaborate with the Japanese.

Ninoy was fifteen when his father died, leaving behind four children from a first marriage and five others, including Ninoy, from his second. Ninoy’s mother, Aurora, had to sell her husband’s properties to support the large family. Ninoy persuaded his father’s friend, Joaquin Roces, to give him a job as a copyboy and later as a reporter at the Roces-owned daily, *Manila Times*. At eighteen, he won the Philippine Legion of Honor medal for his coverage of the exploits of Filipino soldiers in Korea. At nineteen, he was named

Southeast Asia correspondent of the *Manila Times* and, later, foreign editor. In 1954, he was awarded a second Legion of Honor medal for negotiating the surrender of rebel peasant leader Luis Taruc. President Ramon Magsaysay also made him a presidential assistant.

Ninoy was a young man in a hurry, intent on continuing his family's legacy and perhaps making up for his father's choice during the war. "Ninoy was so confident," says Cory. "He was somebody I found very interesting and I felt I would never be bored." After they were married, there was so much excitement that she sometimes wished for some boredom. At twenty-two, Ninoy won the election for mayor of his hometown of Concepcion, despite being nearly three weeks short of the minimum age for candidacy. Cory had recently given birth to Maria Elena, the first of their five children, so she was spared from the hustings. She was uncomfortable in her few public appearances. "I was basically a shy person and I really liked my privacy," she recalls. "How can I be smiling and waving at people I don't know?" On the last week of the campaign, the couple rode a carabao cart and then waded knee-deep through a swamp to get to a barrio. They spent the night in a hut that had an empty pineapple can as toilet. "It was really my baptism of fire," says Cory.

The hyperactive new mayor reveled in his job, but his wife traversed a steep learning curve about the realities of being a political partner. It was never like this in her father's house, even during his political heyday. Concepcion folks expected the mayor to solve every problem, including domestic quarrels and elopements. "In the morning, people were in our bedroom," recounts Cory. Why can't they stay in the big living room downstairs? They want to feel like they're part of the family, the politician in her husband explained. Cory was particular about towels—she had them monogrammed so Ninoy would use his and not hers—but some of the guests wandered into the bathroom and used the personal articles there. Why don't they use the amenities downstairs? No, Cory, you can't tell them that, said Ninoy, because you're the wife of the mayor.

Relief for Cory came two years later in 1957, when the Supreme Court upheld a lower judge's ruling that Ninoy's electoral win was illegal because he was underage when he ran. The family returned to Manila and Ninoy became special assistant to President Carlos Garcia, who took over when Magsaysay died in a plane crash that year. The hugely popular Magsaysay, who was seen as a man of the masses, was Ninoy's political mentor and he took his death hard. "I had never seen my husband so sad and dejected," recalls Cory. "He felt that he had lost a second father." Ninoy was supposed to be on the same ill-fated plane to cover the trip for the *Manila Times*, but he asked to stay behind so he could watch a big boxing fight—he was an aficionado of the ring like his father, who suffered a heart attack while watching a title bout.

Cory had a second baby, Aurora Corazon, in 1957 while Ninoy continued his political career. He was elected vice-governor of Tarlac in 1959—he was twenty-seven at this time and truly eligible to be a candidate—and was appointed governor in 1961. Two years later, he won a landslide victory for the governorship in his own right. In 1967, Ninoy was elected senator, the only oppositionist who won in a race dominated by allies of Ferdinand Marcos, who had won the presidency in 1965. The tables were turned when Ninoy led the anti-Marcos forces to victory in 1971, winning six of eight senatorial slots. This made Ninoy the frontrunner for the 1973 presidential polls. Marcos was not eligible to run for a third term. Cory knew she could become First Lady. "I was scared of that," she says. "I was thinking I'll see even less of him and that it's going to be more exacting on him and on everybody else. But if Ninoy really believed [being president] was the best thing he should do, then I'd always support him."

The presidential election was never held. Marcos declared martial law on September 21, 1972, and his main political opponents were arrested. Ninoy, his chief nemesis, was detained hours before the state of emergency was announced. Weeks earlier, Ninoy had exposed Marcos's plan to impose martial law, which he said was meant to keep Marcos in power indefinitely. Ninoy suggested to Cory that she and the children leave for Australia. "I just kept saying no," says Cory. Maria Elena, the eldest child, was seventeen, while the youngest child, Kristina Bernadette, was only a year old. (Only son Benigno III was born in 1960 and third daughter Victoria Elisa in 1961). "It had nothing to do with patriotism," says Cory with disarming candor. "It was just that I could not see myself managing with five kids in Australia."

In the Philippines, she could count on relatives and a network of friends, even though many of the people who used to buzz around her and Ninoy no longer seemed to know her. Cory fought to remain strong and vowed not to give her husband's opponents the satisfaction of seeing her cry in public, sometimes with the help of tranquilizers. At one point, her visiting privileges were cancelled. She frantically made the rounds of people she thought could help her get permission to see Ninoy again. The Supreme Court was prevailed upon to request the military to allow Cory to see her husband for humanitarian reasons. It turned out that Ninoy had been secretly transferred to Fort Magsaysay in Nueva Ecija Province, about three hours by car from Manila. "When we got there, it was like the movie *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, with the barbed wire and watch towers and *sawali* [bamboo matting] walls."

Cory and the children were shocked when they finally saw Ninoy. The plumpish dynamo—he had a weakness for white chocolate—had lost about twenty pounds since they saw him only two months before, his hair was long, and his glasses were gone. For Cory, the biggest heartache was his despair. She had never seen her husband break down or lose his confidence. "Cory, I have to tell you about all our debts," Ninoy told her. "Better have a meeting with our accountant." She was to try and sell properties, including two airplanes that Ninoy had bought in preparation for the 1973 election. Years later, she would read her husband's diary entry for that day. "I'm so ashamed of myself," Ninoy wrote. "Cory was so strong, did not shed a single tear, and here I was breaking down." Recalls Cory: "I was fortified with tranquilizers, so I was just so very much in control of myself."

Cory drew more strength from prayers and the support of the Catholic Church, especially from His Eminence Jaime Cardinal Sin, who administered the last rites to Ninoy thirty days into his hunger strike in 1975. The senator was protesting an order to force him to attend his trial by a military commission, whose authority he did not recognize. Ninoy stopped his fast after forty days, but not before he had to be rushed to the intensive care unit. Cory was allowed to be with him all this time. She would feed him one or two tablespoons of baby food every two hours. Around this time, the family dogs, whimsically named Ferdie and Meldy (after Ferdinand Marcos and his wife Imelda) bit Kristina, who was then four. The little girl needed more than an hour of surgery—the dogs nearly severed an artery—and could not walk for two months.

Plagued as well by allergies that made her break out in red spots, Cory was in despair. "I had been through many difficulties, but at that time I felt that this was it. I was thinking if something else happens, I'm just going to give up. But I found that when you think you've reached your limits, then the Good Lord gives you maybe just a week of seemingly easy or less difficult days. Then you're reenergized and you say, 'Okay, I am ready again.'" She needed all her strength in 1977, when the military tribunal sentenced Ninoy to face the

firing squad for subversion, illegal possession of firearms, and murder. While awaiting execution, he was allowed to run in the 1978 election for a seat in the Interim National Assembly. Marcos's wife Imelda led the ruling party in a 21–0 sweep in Metro Manila.

Cory had attained a measure of serenity. "In the beginning of martial law, my prayer was, 'Dear Lord, please work it out somehow that Ninoy would be released.' But after two years, I was just asking: 'Dear Lord, help me to accept your will and give me the strength and courage to accept all of these trials. All I was asking for was, if possible, maybe some time together—I wasn't even talking about years.'" The answer came in 1979 when Marcos, perhaps calculating that Ninoy was already a spent political force, granted the prisoner a thirty-six-hour furlough to celebrate his twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Two months later, Ninoy was given a three-week furlough for the Christmas season. And the next year, on May 8, 1980, he was allowed to travel to Dallas, Texas, for heart surgery. Beginning the following September and for the next three years, Ninoy, Cory, and the family lived in Boston, where Ninoy was awarded fellowships at Harvard University, for two years, and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, for one.

Back to her preferred role as wife and mother, Cory glowed with happiness. But the blissful years did not last. The Philippines was never far from Ninoy's thoughts and he decided to return in 1983, despite warnings by the government that it could not guarantee his safety. Marcos was ailing, the economy was in shambles, and the extravagant and vindictive Imelda looked set to take over. Ninoy was assassinated on the airport tarmac while under military guard. In Boston with the children, Cory was devastated but remained strong. Had not God granted her the time together with Ninoy that she prayed for? "There was really very little time for mourning," she says. "I was just taken up by so many necessary activities like giving interviews on television, on radio, by telephone. There were just so many things to attend to."

In Manila, Cory had not expected to see so many mourners. She had seen and been wounded by the people's apathy during her husband's long incarceration. But at his wake and his burial, Filipinos came in the hundreds of thousands—some estimated the funeral cortège at two million people—to honor the man who declared when he was being dissuaded from returning home: "The Filipino is worth dying for." Many also came to protest the repression, grinding poverty, and corruption of the Marcos regime. Cory worried about the outbreak of violence, a concern that would always be foremost in her mind. "I'm a pacifist," she says. "I've never gone for violent acts." At one time, Ninoy thought that force had to be met by force, but he had undergone a spiritual transformation during his years in detention. "He was forever reading Gandhi when he was in prison," says Cory. In the United States, he saw the 1982 movie *Gandhi* three times.

All too soon, Cory was under pressure to continue Ninoy's mission. In Boston, Guy Pauker of the Rand Corporation, a close friend of her husband's, told her: "Cory, you will have to rethink your political role." Another family friend, Benjamin Brown of Harvard University's Center for International Affairs, was more emphatic. "Cory, I think you should be thinking about the presidency," he said. What do I know about being president? she asked. Brown replied: "Nobody does. There is no school for presidents." A Filipino friend, Juan Collas, urged the same thing. Suppose you say no and Marcos again wins, will your conscience not bother you, knowing that maybe you could have made a difference and you did not even try? he wrote in a letter to her. The sentiment echoed what Ninoy said when asked why he decided to go home: "I will never be able to forgive myself knowing that I could have done something and I did not do anything."

The stage was set for a contest between Ninoy's widow and his political

nemesis. The next presidential polls were not due until 1987, but pressed by the United States and the country's international creditors to prove his mandate, Marcos called a snap presidential election for 1986. After a day of fasting and prayer, Cory declared her candidacy over the objections of many in her family. Dressed in her trademark yellow, she drew huge crowds wherever she went. (Ninoy's welcomers had decorated trees and lampposts with yellow ribbons in 1983, in reference to the song *Tie a Yellow Ribbon 'Round the Old Oak Tree*.) Marcos derided Cory as "just a woman" whose place was in the bedroom. She called him a coward for threatening to take her out with a single bullet and promised him no more than a single ballot in return. Cory cast the election as a morality play in which Filipinos could finally bring Marcos to account for his evil deeds, not least the assassination of her husband.

The election was held on February 7, 1986. As expected, Marcos's henchmen did everything to ensure victory, from bribery to coercion, to stealing ballot boxes, to manipulating the counting. But a third force had entered the equation. In the past, the middle class, the business community, and the Catholic Church had shied from politics, but Ninoy's murder and his widow's candidacy had galvanized them. One of the most compelling images of the 1986 election was that of nuns, students, and professionals forming human chains to guard the ballot. Another was the walkout of computer programmers, many of them women, from the control center of the national canvassing office. The numbers they were inputting into their machines, which showed that Cory was leading, were not being reflected in the tabulation boards, which were giving Marcos the edge.

But the Marcos-controlled legislature proclaimed their patron the winner, with 10,807,197 votes to Cory's 9,291,716 votes. Cory rejected the result and called for a nonviolent protest movement. Then, reformist elements of the armed forces made their move. They had been plotting a coup against Marcos, but the snap presidential election temporarily derailed their plans. The project was resumed after Marcos blatantly stole the 1986 polls, but the government discovered the plot. Threatened with arrest, defense minister Juan Ponce Enrile and armed forces vice chief of staff Fidel Ramos holed up in Camp Crame, along Manila's main thoroughfare, Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (EDSA). Jaime Cardinal Sin appealed for civilian support over Radio Veritas. In a repeat of Ninoy's funeral and Cory's campaign rallies, Filipinos came in the thousands to form a human shield against Marcos's minions.

It was the birth of People Power, a nonviolent way for ordinary citizens to reclaim their freedom and bring about a peaceful transfer of power. Television viewers across the world marveled as hundreds of thousands of praying Filipinos, armed only with rosaries and flowers, repulsed tanks and armored vehicles. Cory took her oath of office as the country's eleventh president at 11:00 a.m. on February 25, 1986, at Club Filipino. One hour later, Marcos held his own oath taking within the forbidding walls of the presidential palace. All the while, however, he was negotiating with his longtime ally, the United States, for sanctuary for himself and his family. Senator Paul Laxalt, US President Ronald Reagan's special emissary, had told him: "I think you should cut and cut cleanly." That night, American helicopters took the Marcos family and their associates to Clark Air Base, north of Manila, where they later took a plane to exile in Hawaii. Marcos died there in 1989.

Meanwhile, the woman who never wanted to become president buckled down to work. Her first priority was the restoration of democracy, but she went about it in a counterintuitive way: she abolished the legislature, declared a revolutionary government, and appointed a fifty-member commission to write a new constitution. Cory

and her advisers felt it would be too difficult to work with a parliament that was beholden to Marcos in the task of restoring democracy. In theory, a revolutionary government could do whatever it wanted, but Cory was careful not to go down that road. "I was governing alone and I could have had all the powers, but I did not [take them]," she points out. "I always abided by the Bill of Rights and I was committed and definitely dedicated to the rule of law."

The issue of who would write a new constitution was a contentious one. If she called elections for a constitutional convention, Cory courted the danger of having Marcos loyalists control the assembly because they were the ones with money. Her vice-president, Salvador Laurel, advised her to name a dozen or so eminent Filipinos, perhaps retired Supreme Court justices. But other voices urged holding polls to show the people she was no dictator. In the end, she decided to form a fifty-member Constitutional Commission drawn from all sectors of society, including the opposition. "We tried to choose from the women's sector, from farmers' groups, from business, from academe," Cory recalls. "We tried to make it as representative as possible." And she says she never interfered in the deliberations, including the election of the body's officers.

The new constitution, perhaps the world's most lengthy and detailed, was completed in record time and approved overwhelmingly by the people in 1987. Elections for the newly restored Congress followed. Voters gave Cory and her allies another handsome victory, handing them twenty-two of the twenty-four available Senate seats and a big majority in the House of Representatives. Cory was still clearly beloved, but she faced extraordinary challenges. She had retained the rightist Enrile as defense chief and named the pro-American Ramos as head of the armed forces. At the same time, Cory appointed left-leaning human rights activists who were Ninoy's allies to other key cabinet posts. Even an experienced leader would have been hard-pressed to reconcile the personal and ideological tensions between the contending camps.

And Cory, for all her personal incorruptibility and sincere desire to rule well, was a woman in the traditionally macho business of politics and government. At least in the beginning, the men she worked with saw her as a figurehead president who could be influenced to further their own agenda. With Enrile, says Cory, "I felt that he was always thinking it should be me sitting there and not you." Laurel may have felt the same. Says Cory: "When he agreed to run as my vice-president, maybe some people told him, 'You will, in fact, be the president because Cory Aquino doesn't know anything about running a government. You will be calling the shots.' In fairness to him, I did promise he would be prime minister. But I did not know that there would be a People Power Revolution and that I would be given the opportunity to abolish Parliament and to call for a Constitutional Commission."

Both men harbored political ambitions. Marcos had seen Enrile as a threat to his wife Imelda's own presidential bid and so sidelined him in the latter part of his rule. The defense minister had staged his own car ambush in 1972 to give Marcos an excuse to declare martial law. He was the patron of the military officers who formed RAM (Reform the Armed Forces Movement), the planner of the 1986 coup attempt that precipitated the People Power revolt. As for Laurel, he had long been positioning himself as the opposition standard-bearer. His father, Jose P. Laurel, was president during the Japanese occupation, a member of the same regime that Ninoy's father served as House Speaker. Ninoy and Doy, as Salvador Laurel was popularly known, were childhood friends, but Doy was persuaded to join Marcos's Kilusan ng Bagong Lipunan (KBL) party in 1978, although he later broke away.

If Enrile and Laurel thought they could manipulate Cory, they soon discovered their mistake. Cory may have been indecisive on some issues, but she was no putty in anyone's hands. "I felt that in the end I would be the one to blame, so I might as well act according to my beliefs rather

than take somebody's advice when I'm not completely convinced that that's how to do it," she says. Despite rumblings from Enrile and RAM, she freed top communist rebels to prove the government's sincerity in a peaceful settlement of the insurgency. The leftists demanded the immediate closure of US military bases on

Philippine soil and the abrogation of most foreign debts, but the president said all sovereign obligations must be honored. The media talked darkly about the return of dictatorship, but Cory stood pat on her decision to replace elected local officials with appointed officers-in-charge. "Can you imagine having all these mayors in Metro Manila beholden to Marcos and having control of the police?" she says. "It would have been the end of our efforts at restoring democracy."

In November 1986, nine months after she became president, Cory did what even Marcos could not do: she let Enrile go. "You could call it my defining moment," she says. "I decided enough is enough and I fired Johnny Ponce Enrile, which was unheard of. Even during Marcos's time, he was often said to be thinking of firing Johnny, but was never able to do so." To appease the Right, she also accepted the courtesy resignations of four other men, including labor minister Augusto Sanchez, whose leftist sympathies the business community blamed for the sharp rise in strikes. "I was very sorry to have to ask for [interior and local government minister] Nene Pimentel's resignation, but he understood and he said he didn't hold it against me," recalls Cory. Pimentel implemented her policy of axing elected local officials. "The more important thing was to keep the country together."

Enrile did not go gracefully into the night. He called his own version of People Power, but his supporters never reached the numbers at EDSA in 1986 and dwindled sadly away. He campaigned against the ratification of the new constitution and was rebuffed by the electorate. Still, he squeaked into the Senate in the 1987 elections made possible by the charter he opposed, one of only two oppositionists elected (the other was action star Joseph Estrada, who became president in 1998). Cory felt Enrile was not ready to give her respect and friendship. She remembers announcing to her cabinet her decision to advance her state visit to the United States. Have you been promised anything? Enrile asked pointedly, adding that Marcos never went on a visit unless he knew exactly what he would get. "He was really so haughty," says Cory. She went ahead with the trip and got a standing ovation from a joint session of the US Congress, plus a US\$200-million grant for the Philippines.

The RAM boys, too, would not be placated. Gregorio "Gringo" Honasan, a young charismatic colonel who emerged as one of the heroes of EDSA in 1986, led some twelve hundred soldiers in a failed attempt to take over the government in November 1986, in a plot they called "God Save the Queen." In August 1987, he and his followers stormed the headquarters of the armed forces and the presidential palace, but were repulsed by troops whom Ramos, now defense secretary, rallied around the presidency and the constitution. Pro-Marcos forces previously tried to wrest power, but the attempt by a section of Cory's own military was the most serious try. Honasan fled when the coup collapsed but was captured four months later. Held in a prison ship, he managed to escape with some of his guards in 1988—to resurface in 1989 for another takeover try. That seventh and last attempt was put down with some help from the United States. Enrile was implicated in the RAM coup d'état plots, but was never indicted.

Laurel chose to break away from Cory after the "God Save the Queen" attempt. After visiting military camps to ascertain sentiment toward government policies, he expressed support for the rebellious soldiers and resigned his post as foreign minister. Ever the politician, he may have been positioning himself as Cory's successor if the military were to force

her to resign. But the queen had no intention of stepping down, even as the self-appointed knights of the republic insisted on “saving” her. With everything that she had gone through, Cory had become fearless. She refused to leave the center of power at the height of the coups, even when her only son Benigno III was shot and wounded in the August 1987 coup attempt. Cory had pledged to restore democracy, and that meant a peaceful transfer of power to a duly elected successor when her single six-year term ended.

For all the disappointment in the collapse of the peace process, the watering down of the land reform program, and the economic problems brought on by the coup attempts, Cory can justifiably say that she completed what she had promised to do. After local elections in 1988 and village-level polls the next year, the first free presidential election in decades was held as scheduled in 1992. Seven major candidates ran, including Laurel, Imelda Marcos, and Cory’s estranged cousin Eduardo Cojuangco, a wealthy business executive and staunch ally of Ferdinand Marcos. Cory backed Ramos, the EDSA hero and armed forces chief she promoted to secretary of defense in 1988. She chose to support him over House Speaker Ramon Mitra, a difficult decision because Mitra was an associate of Ninoy and the husband of one of Cory’s closest friends. “In the end, it could not be just friendship,” says Cory. “I felt that Ramos could be a better president than Monching Mitra.”

In the final act of her presidency, Cory wanted to make sure that the country’s restored democracy would not be hidebound and traditional. She was wary of career politicians and their dependence on the patronage system to win elections. Like herself, Ramos had never run for office and therefore had not accumulated too many political debts. Cory’s political instincts told her that the country was weary of traditional politicians. She was proved right when Ramos won the 1992 elections with 23.6 percent of the vote, and another nonpolitician, former judge Miriam Defensor Santiago, garnering the second largest number of votes, with 19.7 percent. Cojuangco, the pro-Marcos tycoon, was third. On June 30, 1992, Cory had the pleasure of passing on power to Fidel Ramos. “This was what my husband died for; he had returned precisely to forestall an illegal political succession,” she says. “This moment is democracy’s glory; the peaceful transfer of power without bloodshed, in strict accordance with law.”

Historians are beginning to assess the Aquino presidency. A key thesis is that the military coup attempts forced Cory to move to the right from her left-of-center position in 1986. “I will admit that I gave more time to the military because they were the biggest threat not only to me but to our democracy,” she says, although she denies she got soft on cracking down on human rights abuses. Still, Cory continued peace negotiations with communist insurgents and Muslim rebels in the south, convinced that force should be the last resort. Jose Ma. Sison, the chair of the Communist Party she ordered released, had fled to the Netherlands and continued to direct the armed struggle from there. “My line insofar as the Communists and Muslim rebels were concerned was that we should follow the Constitution, that we cannot give more privileges or perks simply because you were against the dictator,” says Cory.

She does not regret reaching out to the insurgents. By the time she left office in 1992, the number of followers of the communist New People’s Army (NPA) had dwindled significantly. “That was a revelation to me,” says Cory. After she called a ceasefire in 1986, reports trickled in about communist foot soldiers returning to their families for Christmas and getting to see the conditions of the country for themselves. Holed up in the remote mountains, they had to rely on propaganda from their leaders. “It also made it difficult for the NPAs to extract money from the people in the countryside,” says Cory. “Because they were saying: ‘Why do we have to give you money when Cory says she’s willing to let you come back and live lives like we do?’ While the ceasefire ended and we didn’t really come to a final settlement, it did reduce the number [of

Communists] and at least put a halt to their getting more supporters to their party.”

Land reform was another controversial issue. Although she belonged to a landed family, Cory seemed ready to break up huge haciendas and distribute plots to the landless with a pro-poor Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP). But she chose to let Congress determine CARP’s final outline instead of legislating the plan in the brief time she headed a revolutionary government. Some in her cabinet objected on the grounds that landlords would almost surely dominate Congress. The body did water down many of CARP’s tougher provisions, allowing the distribution of stocks instead of land, for example. But Cory argues that it was still a superior program. “My predecessors had not included [land planted to] sugar and coconut, but under my administration they were included. We went about the business of giving not only land to the farmer beneficiaries but, more importantly, my directions were for the government financial institutions to give the necessary credit support.”

Her critics charged that she opted to pass the legislation on to the pro-landlord Congress to protect the Cojuangco family’s Hacienda Luisita. “We did something different in Luisita,” Cory counters. “Whereas farmer-beneficiaries have to pay for the land or the stocks they got, the Luisita workers were getting stocks for free. They were also going to be given a percentage of the gross sales. More than 90 percent voted for the stock-option plan, where they become owners. They all realized that to run a sugar plantation, unlike rice farming, requires a lot of capital.” You cannot please everybody, she says philosophically. “Given our limited resources, it could not have been all accomplished in my time. What I hope for is that with each administration, more and more will be done and that each succeeding administration will be more successful than the previous ones.”

As Cory tells it, the key reason for her decision not to legislate land reform was the inadequate time for broad-based consultations on the merits and implications of such a far-reaching program. She had a self-imposed deadline of just one year as head of a revolutionary government and was not willing to extend it. The irony was that some of the people who fought for the restoration of democracy now wanted her to use her dictatorial powers to impose her own vision of agrarian reform. “People were saying I was going so slowly,” she says. “The problem was that Filipinos had gotten so used to dictatorship [that allowed] the president to do anything and everything. And then here I come and I’m talking about due process. But this is what democracy is all about.” Cory aimed to govern from the bottom up. “I wanted people to have a real sense of what it is like to govern themselves, to live out, not just live under, the democracy they had put in place.”

But there are limits to government by consultation, especially one that has yet to find its feet after decades of authoritarian rule. In the wake of the God Save the Queen plot, Cory started to take unilateral decisions, turning her presidency into a Committee of One to combat perceptions of drift in governance. “It was a step forward in political stability, but a step back in political maturity,” she admits. On occasion, Cory also felt the freewheeling media needed restraining. She put her foot down on government-run television airing an interview with the fugitive Honasan, but did not intervene when a private station aired the scoop. “I was saying, ‘Look, I’m not a masochist and I’m not about to allow a government-run television station to air the side of the enemy.’” Pardoned by President Ramos, Honasan won a seat in the Senate in 1995. “We always have a tendency to forgive or, at the very least, to forget,” sighs Cory.

She considers free secondary schooling as one of her greatest accomplishments. “It made a difference in the lives of the people because so many really just had to drop out of elementary school and had no chance to go on for secondary education,” she says. Her government also raised the salaries of teachers, although not as

much as she wanted because of limited resources. “My problem was with the foreign debt,” says Cory. “My critics were saying, ‘If only she would repudiate [it] and use the money for education and social welfare.’ Yes, of course it would have helped a lot in the short term, but I was telling them, ‘Look, after my husband’s assassination, the Marcos dictatorship called for a moratorium on payments and the interest rate was as high as 50 percent. Everything just stopped. Factories were limited either to one shift or even closed down and everything had to be bought with cash. There was no credit.’ It was so important for the Philippines to regain its place in the international financial community.”

That was Cory the financial manager talking. Her critics thought she was listening too much to her financial advisers, but in fact the president knew what she was about. “In time, every president understands that you don’t deal with a problem by itself,” she says. “A problem cannot be dealt with in isolation of other requirements of government.” A president must also learn how to bow to the inevitable, as Cory had to do with the negotiations on the renewal of the US lease on its military bases in the Philippines. After keeping her options open, she signaled her support for ratification of a 1991 treaty allowing the Americans continued access to the installations for ten years, with the option to renew for another ten. The Senate voted 12–11 against the agreement and the Americans were out of the country by 1992.

For Cory, perhaps the hardest lesson was that personal ties must sometimes be sacrificed for the greater good. After the God Save the Queen coup attempt, the calls for the resignation of her left-leaning executive secretary, Ninoy lawyer Joker Arroyo, became more insistent. Cory considered finance minister Jaime Ongpin a personal friend, but the Left regarded the businessman’s appointment to the cabinet as too eager to appease Washington and the country’s international creditors. In both cases, Cory complied.

Then there were the natural disasters that were particularly vicious during her term. A massive earthquake in 1990 and super typhoon Thelma in 1991 brought untold misery. The eruption of Mount Pinatubo, also in 1991, destroyed three major regions and caused temperatures around the world to drop by one degree. “People who said that the peaceful People Power revolution that restored democracy was a gift of God began to wonder about Him and his habits of giving,” Cory observes. She never wavered in her faith. Her critics said she prayed too much, but the widow who found greater strength in God through the difficult years of her husband’s imprisonment says no one can pray too much. “I believe that God does not send us problems that we cannot handle,” she once told a reporter. “Each of us must do what God expects of us. I try my best to adjust to whatever my circumstances are and I will not shrink from whatever is before me.”

These days, her luminous faith is as strong as ever. “I accept almost all invitations to talk about or to share experiences in the matter of prayer and suffering,” says Cory. “I feel that I owe it especially to the Lord to be able to share in spreading the Good Word.” Her other mission is to help democracy continue to take root and flower in the Philippines. In 1993, Cory organized the Institute for People Power and Development (IPPD) through the Benigno S. Aquino Jr.

Foundation. The institute aims to act as a catalyst in the consolidation and integration of cooperatives, so they can play a significant role in poverty alleviation. It also promotes the cause of peace and human rights across the country through such programs as sensitizing police officers to these ideas. “Having been president, more doors are naturally open to me,” explains Cory. “I could call people in government to bring their attention to whatever problems some cooperatives

would have.”

She is not shy as well about using her international profile in aid of the cause of freedom outside the Philippines. Cory has championed the campaign of Aung San Suu Kyi against the military junta in Burma and took the time to meet with supporters of detained former Malaysian deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim to talk about ways to wield People Power. “As the years go by, I think people not only have a better understanding but also a better appreciation of what we were able to do,” says Cory. “The Filipino people are being looked up to as the role models insofar as restoration of democracy is concerned.” Indeed, since 1989, the

Philippine experience has served as inspiration for freedom movements in South Korea, Burma, Czechoslovakia, South Africa, Poland, Chile, Thailand, and Indonesia. “People Power,” writes political scientist Mark Thompson, “has come to symbolize a peaceful, spontaneous, popular revolt that topples a dictatorship.”

Cory is back to her natural role as nurturer and earth mother, not least to her many grandchildren. “I think I have finally attained inner peace,” she says.

“Whatever problems I have are really minor and solvable ones, in contrast to what they were before.” But the greater concerns of her community remain a constant in her life.

“When I look back now on all those years—waiting outside the prison to see my husband, waiting in the house in Boston for the confirmation of his death, waiting for the dictator to blink in our face-off (because I certainly wouldn’t), facing down the military rebels—I realize how really hard it is to come by freedom and democracy,” she declared in a speech in 1996. “And that it is mainly by

perseverance that one is won and the other is kept.” The widow who led her country to freedom will make sure her people will not lose it again.

Cesar R. Bacani Jr.

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