

Cory's losing control

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Last week Manila suffered through the fifth attempted military coup since Cory Aquino came to power 18 months ago. As bullets whizzed around the capital's streets, it was painfully clear that many Filipinos just don't regard Aquino as the lovable saint that she is made out to be by the doting western media.

Cory Aquino is a kind and refined lady who is doing her best to pilot the Philippines through the stormy waters of insurgencies, massive social problems and economic malaise. Thanks to the western media, however, Aquino has been blown up into a superstar and female cult figure—living proof, it is held, that a housewife can run a country better than those oafish, venal men.

The baroque Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos, not so long ago themselves the darlings of the chic liberal media, provided dramatic villainous counterpoint to the beatific widow Aquino. Corymania was definitely in.

The last time our media establishment so fulsomely sanctified a foreign leader was during the reign of Egypt's Anwar Sadat. His peace treaty with Israel and red carpet treatment for Barbara Walters and Walter Cronkite made Sadat into a "good Arab." In short order, the media turned Sadat into a celebrity—to westerners, that is. At home, more and more Egyptians came to see Sadat as a corrupt, megalomaniac buffoon.

An assassinated Sadat was mourned only by his sticky-fingered entourage, his patrons in Washington and the New York media. So much for pyramid chic.

Such double vision also exists in our view of the Philippines. The Cory Aquino seen by many Filipinos is no saint but a dithering, confused lady who can't seem to take any decisive action in the face of the nation's fast-growing problems.

While the western media have portrayed the Aquino regime as bringing democracy to the Philippines, in fact Aquino ruled for the past 18 months as an indecisive dictator. The new legislature to which some power has been devolved is so

packed with Aquino supporters that it is no more than a rubber stamp for the president.

Without the firm backing of army chief of staff Fidel Ramos, Aquino would most likely have been kicked out of office long ago. The army faction headed by Ramos is really the power behind the throne and one wonders just how much of a figurehead Aquino has become.

It's hard to tell who is running the government, Ramos or the coterie of leftist advisers and family members who surround Aquino.

While an inept president fights off equally inept rebelling soldiers, the Philippine's problems get worse. The deadly communist insurgency is spreading fast. Before too long, large-scale urban warfare could erupt in the cities. Unless the government can be stabilized, and officers gotten out of politics and into the field, the outlook is stormy. Today's topsy-turvy politics and farcical coups in Manila have a scary resemblance to Saigon in the 1960s.

In the south, a powerful Moslem insurgency confronts Manila. After centuries of persecution and exploitation, Moslem Filipinos are demanding autonomy and a bigger slice of the national pie. At the same time, the agriculture-based economy is going from bad to worse. Aquino has done nothing to stem the nation's economic downturn nor its chronic social problems. Plans for badly-needed land reform have foundered.

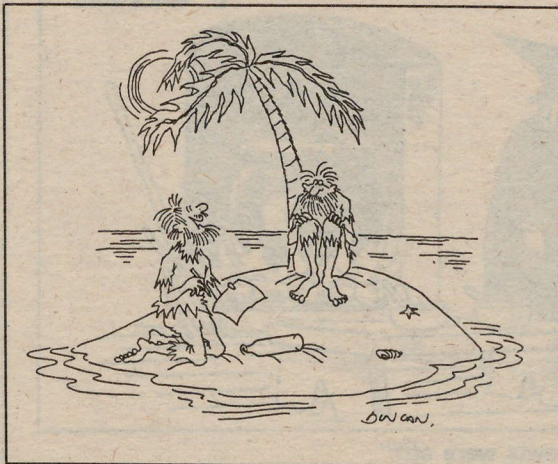
If leaders of the latest coup make good their threats to take to the bush, this will accelerate the gradual disintegration of the never very united Philippine islands into a collection of tribal or feudal mini-states. Sly old Ferdinand Marcos knew exactly how to hold his country together, using bribery, gifts, patronage and, when necessary, force. Cory Aquino clearly does not.

All of which means that a lot more trouble lies ahead for the Philippines. New military revolts are likely by soldiers convinced that a weak and confused Aquino will lose the war with the communist guerrillas. And opposition from powerful landowners, the business community and from numerous supporters of the exiled Marcos will grow.

One of these nights, army rebels may even succeed in a coup and Manila may wake up to find a young colonel as the new leader. It would be a shame to see the nation's infant democracy and its present affable president swept away. Many Filipinos, though, would probably welcome a strong, masculine hand on the tiller. Aquino's politics of caring, compassion and compromise have been a dismal failure.

It's time, in the Philippines, for some hard-headed action.

Punch



"I can never remember our postal code."