

Maybe Cory should quit

NEW YORK — For the past seven days, elite soldiers of the Filipino armed forces have been making their latest — and so far unsuccessful — attempt to overthrow the elected government of Corazon Aquino. Close to 80 have been killed and more than 500 wounded as loyal troops and rebels fought it out in downtown Manila and Cebu City.

Aquino will likely survive this latest coup — thanks in good part to the swift intervention of U.S. jets from Clark Field that prevented attacks on her palace and on army headquarters by rebel air force units. The outgunned and outnumbered rebels have started peace talks with government troops.

The coup may have failed to topple her government, but it has made it perfectly clear that it's time for Cory Aquino to resign.

When Aquino and her "people power" movement overthrew old Ferdinand Marcos and his shop-till-you-drop wife Imelda, the outside world applauded. Particularly so North America, where Aquino seemed to step right out of one of those dippy, made-for-TV dramas about one housewife's struggle against male-caused adversity.

Of course a woman could run the Philippines! Cory was just what the nation needed after the frightful old Marcos.

North Americans simply did not understand the Philippines. First, and most important, the collection of islands known as the Philippines is a totally feudal culture. In the European middle ages, the king's writ extended no further than the capital's walls. Beyond, he had to rely on the co-operation of barons and local warlords. The Philippines runs exactly the same way.

All of Aquino's talk about promoting land reform and helping the nation's truly desperate poor proved so much hot air. Her wealthy family is one of the nation's biggest feudal landowners; her relatives took over key positions in government and industry. Even so, she had almost no influence

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outside of Manila. Nor was she able to do anything about endemic corruption or the growing communist guerrilla movement, often described as a second Khmer Rouge for its murderous acts and fanatical ruthlessness.

Nice words and good intentions are not what the Philippines needs to stop its quickening downhill slide. Cory may be a fine lady, but over the past four years she has shown herself unable to go hand to hand with the country's grave problems or to deal effectively with its very macho men.

While her soldiers revolt and politicians ignore her, Cory's response has been to sulk, look hurt or go off and pray. No wonder more and more Filipinos have been looking back with nostalgia to Ferdinand Marcos. He may have been an old scallawag, but at least he knew how to run the country's feudal system.

One thing history clearly teaches: Under feudalism, if the king or queen is weak, internal unrest always ensues.

The economy is kept going only by aid from Japan and the U.S. Japanese strategists have told me they consider the Philippines their greatest potential problem in Asia. In private, the Japanese are deeply worried by Philippine instability, and the threat of a communist takeover or sputtering civil war. When Japanese investors worry, they quite rightly take their yen home. Many American investors will do the same.

Without massive U.S. and Japanese aid, there is no way the Philippines can manage its huge foreign debt and come up with some sort of land reform program that will convince the poor that they have some vested interest in the nation.

In the face of these problems, the economic elite who run the Philippines have spent their time either hiding from reality or in factional infighting. Meanwhile, the communists keep growing stronger — and more popular with the poor.

President George Bush keeps repeating that he's 100% behind Cory Aquino. By sending U.S. aircraft into action to protect her from military rebels, he made a bad miscalculation. Many Filipinos, who were previously troubled by the huge American bases, are now outraged by overt U.S. military intervention.

Pressure will mount to kick these highly strategic bases out of the Philippines. U.S. forces will probably end up scattered from Singapore to Yap and Saipan — a poor alternative to their present central position in the Philippines.

The Philippines desperately needs a strong leader. Dealing with the nation's grave problems is far more urgent than maintaining either the nice Cory Aquino in power or keeping up the thin facade of ersatz democracy in a feudal oligarchy. Time to end this soap opera before it becomes a tragedy.



CORAZON AQUINO