

Philippines: The meaning of the 'Noynoy' Aquino presidency

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June 13, 2010 — On June 9 Senator Benigno Aquino III ("Noynoy" Aquino) of the Liberal Party, the son of former President Cory Aquino, was proclaimed president by the Philippines Congress. Noynoy was a former senator "with little legislative record to speak of", according to the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* newspaper, which nevertheless campaigned hard for Noynoy Aquino's presidency, soon after Cory Aquino's death in August 2009.

Paradoxically, with the restoration of the Aquinos to the presidency, the elections have also resulted in the restoration of the Marcoses to national politics, with the former dictator's son Bongbong Marcos being elected to the Senate, Imelda Marcos winning a seat in Congress and her daughter Imee Marcos winning the governorship of their political bailiwick, the province of Ilocos Norte.

Almost 25 years after the fall of the Marcos dictatorship and the installation of Cory Aquino's "revolutionary government" in 1986, what does the Noynoy presidency mean for Philippines politics?

Mass expectations

According to a Social Weather Station survey conducted in March, the number of registered voters who are optimistic that their lives will improve in the next 12 months has increased across all classes. The survey confirms what we already knew: the expectations of the masses have increased as a result of the Noynoy victory.

This is in a context where mass expectations had been crushed under the insatiably corrupt presidency of Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (known as GMA) and the people, especially the middle classes, demoralised by the regime's ability to hold on to power. Hence people's expectations are now rising, but from a state of very low expectations. The sullen hatred of the people for the GMA regime and their desire for an honest government are the key political factors that led to Noynoy's victory. This is also what Noynoy has promised: an end to corruption and for a clean government. For a people who expected literally nothing from the GMA government, who were demoralised and even fearful of the prospects of GMA prolonging her rule, this promise alone was enough.

As Sonny Melencio points out:

*"Noynoy's victory is a confirmation that the main issue in the election was the high-handed corruption of the Arroyo regime. People voted for Noynoy because they were sick and tired of the never-ending cases of graft and corruption involving the Arroyo family and their sycophants. Noynoy's campaign slogan *Kung walang corrupt, walang mahirap* [No corruption, no*

poverty] may not be true (as poverty emanates not mainly from corruption but from class exploitation and class rule) but it rings a bell and has attracted a broad number of people to support Noynoy in the election. "During the campaign, it was not only Noynoy who represented the people's ire against Arroyo. 'Erap' Estrada [former president ousted by people's power in 2001] also thrived on it, and the fact that he landed number two in the count despite his perennial number-three status in the surveys proved the validity of the anti-Arroyo sentiments."} Melencio also points to the media support for Noynoy: _ {"What Erap lacked was media support -- the support of some of the media moguls -- and it was this support that catapulted Noynoy to a very early lead in the surveys and in the people's minds. The media campaign for Noynoy started immediately after Cory's body had been laid to rest on August 5, 2009, or nine months before the elections. After this, almost not a day passed that Noynoy was not mentioned in the media, or graciously featured in the ABS-CBN TV stations that supported his presidential campaign to the hilt."} {{{Unifying the ruling class}}} A key agenda of the Noynoy presidency will be to unify the hitherto badly fractured ruling class. The Estrada camp has already publicly declared it's willingness to make amends. Even the Marcoses are putting out feelers, and according to newspaper reports Imee Marcos and Noynoy Aquino have been exchanging "text" messages. Given that the Liberal Party is a minority in the Senate, there is pressure on Noynoy from the Liberal Party machine to bring on board senators from other elite factions, including Bongbong Marcos. The possibility of compromises with the Arroyo political clan and its trapo [traditional politicians] backers, who still have substantial clout in the new Congress, should not be ruled out either. Noynoy also has the backing of big business, represented by the Makati Business Club. He has the support of the governments of the United States, Europe and Japan, as indicated by the "courtesy calls" paid by their ambassadors even before Noynoy was officially declared the winner. Their message to the Filipino elite was clear: He's the man and make sure that the result is proclaimed without any disruptive bickering. According to Frank Pascual: _ {"While the Liberal Party, historically a party of the landlord class, is a major player and the biggest faction influencing Noynoy, there are other forces, including extremely conservative forces around him, such as big business... Noynoy has also earned a lot of good will from Western nations: the same pheonomena as during Cory's time. This is an indicator of renewed big business confidence, as the previous regime was very difficult to deal with, even in bourgeois terms. "For the ruling class, Noynoy is the best choice, especially after GMA. Reducing corruption can be good for big business, but whether it translates into benefits for the people is another matter... The Cory presidency was installed by a different phenomena [a mass upsurge against the dictatorship]. Noynoy does not have that kind of flexibility to pursue the peoples agenda."} Of course Cory Aquino herself compromised with Marcos cronies in order to stabilise elite rule. She compromised with Marcos' generals, for example, several of whom are still in place. As a result of this she was unable to bring the perpetrators of her husband's assassination to justice, as this would have involved challenging the military hierarchy. The same dilemma haunts Noynoy Aquino. While various factions of the elite have indicated their willingness to smoke the peace pipe, for the moment, it is extremely unlikely that this will continue beyond the initial phase of the Noynoy presidency. Major divisions will continue to

persist and right now the issue of bringing GMA and her cronies to justice for corruption and plunder needs to be resolved. Meanwhile the unresolved historical legacy of the Marcoses, will continue to persist, even in the background. {{{The Marcos revival: a Cory legacy}}} According to Frank Pascual: _ {"The Marcoses have never been out of power in Ilocos, but at the national level it's been a different story. Powerful political clans such as the Escuderos of Bicol [who were former Marcos cronies] are aligned with Noynoy, but brought along Bongbong Marcos in their campaign. This is classic elite politics as they wheel and deal within their own class."} Sonny Melencio explains: _ {"The crony system put in place by Marcos was restored by Cory with a liberal-democratic façade. This system continues today. The assets of the Marcoses and their cronies were not confiscated and their economic weight was never comprehensively undermined. Even their political space, especially in their local bailiwicks tied to land and trapo politics in Ilocos, was not seriously contested. Cory placed some local government officials and administrators in Illocos who continued to make deals with the Marcoses. There were real possibilities that opened up to undermine elite rule, but Cory never acted on this and it was never her intention to do so. This and her legacy of the system we have today, shows the serious limitations of the Cory revolution."} This troublesome Cory legacy is poignantly described in an open letter to Noynoy by F. Sionil Jose, a well-known author and publisher, who writes, {"Prosecute the crooks. It is difficult, thankless and even dangerous to do this. Your mother did not do it -- she did not jail Imelda who was the partner in that conjugal dictatorship that plundered this nation. Watch her children ... heirs to the billions which their parents stashed aboard. Now the Marcoses are on the high road to power, gloating, snickering at our credulity and despicable amnesia."} In times like these, it pays to have a long memory. There can be no trapo politics without corrupt trapo elections, and the May 10 elections witnessed some of the biggest vote-buying in election history. The election of a popular president, who won by a landslide, has obscured the level of the election-related corruption. The media and the Catholic Church hierarchy praising the election process has also made it harder to expose the extent of vote buying. While Noynoy was elected on an anti-corruption platform, ironically, the two most honest elected public officials in the entire country, governors Grace Padaca (in Isabela) and Ed Panlilio (in Pampanga), were voted out as a result of a sustained campaign against them by the political clans in their respective provinces. It is estimated that some 1 billion pesos was spent against Grace Padaca in Isabela with P500 and P1000 notes being distributed like leaflets. {{{Prospects}}} According to Ric Reyes: _ {"We can expect Noynoy to run after GMA and her cohorts who are responsible for all those gargantuan corruption scandals which marred the latter's presidency. His chances of success? Fifty-fifty is my estimate given GMA's continuing clout in Congress, the Supreme Court and the Ombudsman. "We can also expect Noynoy to take steps to rationalise the bourgeois state's functions and operations in accordance with the demands for transparency and accountability' — a major plank of the agenda to modernise the Philippines state, the same agenda espoused by forces which supported him like powerful sections of the big bourgeoisie, namely the Makati Business Club and one or two media moguls and which gained currency among the middle classes. This is also the agenda being pressed on those at the helm of the Philippines state for years — the US, European and Japanese governments and global multilateral agencies which lost no time in recognising his victory. I can also see a 50-50 chance for

him to succeed here in the face of the resilience and stubbornness of the rentier capitalists and semi-feudal warlords and politicians who comprise a significant section of the national elites and who dominate the local elites.

“As to the national dream of deliverance from poverty for the majority and the huge social inequity of wealth and opportunities, the Noynoy presidency has more limitations than the watch of his mother, Cory Aquino, to accomplish anything significant in this direction. For one, he studiously avoided making any tangible promise to solve the Hacienda Luisita agrarian reform case. He did not touch the labour contractualisation issue. His promise to provide decent jobs to the millions of unemployed and underemployed simply cannot be realised without a radical departure from the neoliberal framework of the Philippine state, without industrialisation and strong social justice measures, all of which he never touched in his campaign. The huge votes he got from the masses are unorganised and are not reflective of working-class power and clout.”

To end poverty the poor must be in power, to paraphrase Hugo Chavez, president of the revolutionary government in Venezuela. The result of the May 10 elections has been to deeply entrench elite rule. Both houses of Congress are dominated by the traditional political clans who have held sway over Philippines society and politics for decades. They have reproduced themselves through newer generations of sons and grandsons, daughters and granddaughters, who now sit in Congress. The expectations of the masses do not aspire so high that they believe that the Noynoy government will eliminate poverty.

Corruption

What about corruption? Will the Noynoy government be able to eliminate corruption, which is what it has promised to do? Noynoy himself, unlike GMA, will no doubt attempt to set an example of an honest presidency, but what about the rest of them? Corruption has been the essence of elite rule, of the trapo system, in this country. To get rid of corruption Noynoy has to confront the system of elite rule itself. To believe otherwise will be a fundamental error.

This will require a revolutionary government, not of the Cory type — which was declared a revolutionary government but did nothing revolutionary — but of the Latin American type, i.e. that of Bolivia and Venezuela. These governments have not only put in place new constitutions with substantial political reforms, they have also rejected outright the neoliberal economic agenda and have implemented economic programs that massively increase expenditure on social welfare programs, such as health and education, and have also taken a series of measures that have increased the standard of living of the working class and the poor, including through the granting of substantial wage increases. Presidents Evo Morales and Hugo Chavez openly espouse the need for an alternative economic and social system based on socialist principles. Noynoy’s record as a senator gives us very little confidence that he is a Morales or Chavez or even a Lula de Silva [president of Brazil]. And the Liberal Party is a far cry from the Workers’ Party of Brazil, both in terms of its origins and political record.

As the author F. Sionil Jose states in his open letter to Noynoy: *“To succeed you have to betray your class.”* There is no reason to believe that Noynoy is prepared to do so and any such “hope” will be dangerously misplaced.

Given the forces around him -- the Liberal Party, the Makati Business Club and other secret and less-secret factions of the elite -- his best shot is more likely to be an attempt to — in the words of the infamous Romula Neri, the former National Economic Development Authority director-general and GMA ally — “moderate their greed”, i.e. to modulate the worst excesses of plunder and

corruption of the system of elite rule.

With the prospects of a more united ruling class and perhaps a more moderate and less rapacious exploitation of the masses, does this mean that we are now facing a lengthy and stable period of a renewed and more benign Philippines capitalism?

Frank Pascual argues that this is not the case:

“Noynoy still has to spell out for the ruling class how exactly it will benefit from his rule. And given the sorry state of the Philippines economy, there’s not much to divide up among the greedy elite. The Philippines economy will also suffer from the crisis of the capitalist system as a whole and this will be a problem faced by the Noynoy government in trying to stabilise the system. After a brief honeymoon period, the usual infighting among the elite will start again.”

In weighing up the relationship of forces that will impact on future prospects, it must be acknowledged that a progressive coalition partner of the Noynoy presidency is Akbayan, which could be in a position to influence the new government. However, the Liberal Party is refusing to back measures to ensure the election of an Akbayan senator. This is a problematic start and does not bode well for the progressive forces around Noynoy. Ultimately, Akbayan’s ability to shift the relationship of forces in a progressive direction will depend on the strength of the independent mass movement.

The mass movement and the left

What are the prospects for the mass movement under the Noynoy presidency? And what is the character of the mass movement that we need to develop in the period ahead? These will be some of the key questions and ongoing challenges that will have to be addressed by the left, specifically in the context of a honeymoon period of a popular president.

An important starting point for the left and the mass movement is how to relate to the raised expectations of the masses? Raised expectations can be a double-edged sword for the left, because it simultaneously represents the misplaced illusions of the masses in bourgeois rule, but also indicates their increased confidence.

Sonny Melencio points out:

“Higher expectations can be a positive factor for the left. The left needs to build on these mass expectations and at the same time develop them. The character of the mass movement that the left needs to develop today is one that will challenge the Noynoy government to keep its promises, however vague these might be, but as interpreted by the mass movement, and at the same time extend it to include the more substantial demands of the masses.

“For example, the masses expect that Noynoy will go after GMA and follow through with the cases of plunder against her. The mass movement must ensure that this takes place, but also put demands on the Noynoy government to go after the corrupt practices of other trapos and big business. He is also replacing some GMA appointees in the military, such as General Bangit [the chief of the Armed Forces of the Philippines], but the mass movement must also demand that this be extended to get rid of other corrupt generals who plunder the economy, carry out the cheating for the trapos during elections and who are responsible for extra-judicial killings.

“A joint declaration of labour unions was also made with Noynoy, which is extremely weak and full of motherhood statements about benefits for workers. It does not include any concrete demands. The workers’ movement needs to mobilise to concretise these general policy statements into demands for the repeal of anti-strike and anti-union laws and against contractualisation.”

According to Ric Reyes:

“There will be plenty of issues — social, economic, political, cultural, globally linked, which can objectively rouse mass movements among the working classes. But as shown by the experience of the past two decades, such mass movements can never rise to significant proportions, much less become a successful challenge to the bourgeois state, without a real political vanguard — a class-conscious, immersed among the people, competent, effective leading force that can connect with the aspirations of the people and the new standards of contemporary politics and culture. Without this vanguard, popular resistance and mass outbreaks can only become captives of reformism which will get more hype from the bourgeois media, the churches’ hierarchy and the NGO movement, which has become more of a movement for palliatives than anything else.”

A problem that is posed is the cooptation of the mass movement and the left. It will be a major problem if left leaders accept key positions in the Noynoy government and become responsible for implementing neoliberal policies. In general, however, Philippines capitalism is too weak to be able to co-opt large sections of the progressive movement. i.e. a Western-style, social-democratic agenda, is not viable in the Philippines setting. Mass movements and parties with integrity will stand by their demands and programs and maintain their independence from capitalist governments, including those of the Noynoy variety. If they don’t, there is no middle road for them. They will have to join the elite and become a part of the system of elite rule, as has been the case with social-democratic formations in the Philippines.

There will be no turn around of the objective situation under a Noynoy presidency. The economic and social crises will continue. The masses will continue to be beleaguered by grinding poverty in their daily lives. The real question is the capability of the left to respond. The left is preparing to mobilise around the state of the nation address in July. The capability of the left will also be strengthened to the extent that it can unite its forces in the streets.

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P.S.

* This article is based on interviews with leaders of the Philippines left, Frank Pascual, Sonny Melencio and Ric Reyes. From Links:
<http://links.org.au/node/1743>

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