

AQUINO'S PEOPLE POWER LEAVES ELITE UNTOUCHED

Along the MacArthur Highway – past a bridge washed away by floods, past ragged bands of beggars, past shanty towns carpeted in volcanic ash – guards in blue uniforms and a large sign announce the more ordered world of Hacienda Luisita, the family seat of President Corazon Aquino.

There is no talk of “People Power” here. What counts is manpower – cheap, plentiful and undisturbed by calls for change. Like most private estates in the Philippines, Hacienda Luisita is a one-family, one-crop affair. The boss is Pedro Cojuangco, Mrs Aquino’s brother; the crop is sugar, planted and cut by 7000 landless workers.

Up a gentle slope on one side of the estate stands the family mansion, Villa Alto, built by Spanish settlers. On the plain below, beyond an 18-hole golf course, stables and the stock of prize fighting cocks, lies the source of the family’s wealth – a sugar mill and 6800ha of cane.

Compared with more rapacious landlords on other islands, Mrs Aquino’s family is generous. It pays a statutory minimum wage of \$A3.20 a day and provides health care, rice allowances and bus tickets for children going to school. It also allows a (tame) trade union.

But the plantation, patrolled by its own police force and troops from the presidential guard, remains a potent symbol of Mrs Aquino’s biggest failure in office: the enduring power of a land-owning oligarchy rooted in the feudal privileges of the past.

Mrs Aquino has never denied her own good fortune. Born a Cojuangco – a pillar of the country’s mestizo elite – she married into the Aquinos. Between them, the two families monopolised the entire province of Tarlac.

Ironically, it was in this alliance of family, money and land – an alliance cemented by a shared sense of noblesse oblige and contempt for the nouveau riche kleptocracy of Ferdinand Marcos – that People Power was born.

When she came to power in 1986, swept on a surge of hope and goodwill, Mrs Aquino vowed to break with her privileged past. Land reform, she declared, would form the cornerstone of her administration. But with only six months left in office, Mrs Aquino’s cornerstone seems more an abandoned tombstone.

People Power removed Marcos and sent many of his cronies into exile, but

has done little to uproot the resilient power of the landed elite. While Mrs Aquino’s family controls thousands of hectares, all but two million of 12 million farmers have no land at all; nearly three-quarters of the rural population still lives below the poverty line.

Instead of fulfilling a promise to break up the large estates early in her term, when she still enjoyed huge popularity and the power to rule by decree, Mrs Aquino left the task to Congress, which was dominated by large landowners. The result was a land-reform Bill bold in rhetoric but riddled with loopholes, many of them engineered by another of Mrs Aquino’s brothers, Jose Cojuangco.

Compared with what came before, even this is an achievement. Over the past six years, the Aquino Government has redistributed five times as much land as Marcos did in two decades – but this just shows the magnitude of the problem. For the time being, there will still be weekend golf and cock-fighting at the Hacienda Luisita.

“Canberra Times”,
December, 1991.