



The 18-year reign of President Marcos of the Philippines (left) and his ex-beauty queen wife Imelda

(right) came close to collapse when violent protests gripped Manila following the assassination

Marcos: bad deal

PRESIDENT Reagan banked on an uneventful visit when he decided to include Manila in his autumn tour of the Far East.

The 7,100 islands that make up the Philippines had become a tame outpost of U.S. territorial influence, ruled with a rod of iron by a President who would not tolerate opposition to his political aspirations.

Then Benigno Aquino decided to go home. He left Harvard, his refuge from arrest, and arrived back at Manila Airport on August 21.

Within three minutes he was dead on the tarmac, killed by a single shot in the head.

Inevitably, the fingers of accusation pointed at the government of his old adversary, President Ferdinand E. Marcos, and his ambitious wife, Imelda, known as the 'Iron Butterfly'.

But whether friends of Marcos were implicated or not in the assassination made little difference. He had decreed a New Society, but his time had already run out: the scale of the problem had outgrown the capacities and vision of one man. And his political credibility was shattered when the American President announced that he had scrubbed Manila off his itinerary.

MARCOS was elected to power in 1965, the leader of over 32m people whose welfare he was determined to improve.

He soon realised that land reform was the key to change.

There was no reason why people had to starve in the Philippines. There are 13.5m hectares of arable land, 8m of which were in agricultural landholdings.

Half of the agricultural land, 4.1m hectares, produced rice and corn, the staple diet of the Filipino. Of this land, 1.1m hectares were cultivated by tenants in 1972, the year in which Marcos declared martial law.

Today, the population is over 50m, and millions of landless workers still struggle for an existence.

A million people marched at the Aquino funeral, a powerful measure of the popular opposition to the autocratic rule of the Marcos family.

What went wrong with the vision of a New Society, in which a well-meaning president had martial law and millions of dollars of U.S. aid to transform a feudal structure into an economically efficient and socially just society?

THE LESSONS of history were not lost on Marcos: land reforms all over the world have been thwarted by the landowners who controlled the political processes.

Democracy is not the hand-maiden of agrarian justice for the exploited tenant farmer.

If Marcos was to create his New Society, he had to be tough: in his view, power had to be exercised without the constraints of Congress.

He later justified his actions in these terms:

"Uppermost in my mind was the urgency of emancipating the tenant from his centuries-old bondage, not only because it was essential to the nation's political stability but also because, bound to the soil and beholden to his landlord, the tenant had no incentive to produce."

And agrarian reform was the most potent instrument for resolving civil unrest.

"It was our conviction that only genuine land reform — one that provided in practice what it set out in theory — could provide a solid basis for the new order we envisioned when we initiated the democratic revolution."

One of his ardent advocates is Miss Milagros German, a judge in the Intermediate Appellate Court who specialises in land reform disputes.

She has now analysed the obstacles to the democratic introduction of reforms prior to the declaration of Martial Law in 1972.

"Till then, because most members of the defunct Congress were big and powerful landowners, they would not

pass the laws — as they did not — despite their protestations for the poor come every election time.

"The farmer could not be what he wanted to be, could never realise his potential for economic and social growth, unless and until he owned the land he tilled. Tenancy had made him indolent, had broken his will, and had robbed him of the initiative to better his ancient condition.

"Such was the state of things, until one man suited the word to the deed. Without a bullet fired or a drop of blood spilled, the rebellion of the poor was accomplished."

THE PRESIDENT'S friends are convinced that martial law was a vital step in the direction of reform, for the early attempts at change were met with violent opposition. Reports Miss German:

"Many mini up-risings erupted in the rich sugar lands of Pampanga in the island of Luzon and pocket-size wars started between landlords and tenants in rice-producing granaries of the country.

"However, after the restructuring of the society after martial law was declared and the New Society took over, there was less discontent and resentment and the wall that separated the tenant and the landholder began to thin out."

Without the suppression of the trappings of democracy, according to



● Mme. Justice German

How Filipinos were paid off:

- Cash payment in 25 years, tax-free bonds.
- Payment of shares of stock; tax-free 6% Land Bank.
- Full guarantee of 15 equal annuities made by tenant farmer.
- Payment of the pensions with insurance.
- Exchange of stocks in government-controlled corporations where they have holdings.

of their political rival, Benigno Aquino. Here, FRED HARRISON studies the Marcos vision of a New

Society – and the landowners' opposition to it.

or new society?



this analysis, the deadly grip of the landlord class would still be throttling the Filipino population.

"The tenant-farmers would still be where they were in yesteryear," insists Miss German, "always hoping that some day their aspirations for a better life would be answered by ownership of the lands they tilled."

This view is endorsed by Conrado F. Estrella, the Minister of Agrarian Reform, who told *Land and Liberty*:

"You can't have land reform without a totalitarian regime or declaring martial law, because landowners are either in the government or Congress, or their lawyers are in the government. They resist land reform.

"The President called in the landowners and told them that 'if the communists come and take over, you will not only lose your land, you will lose your life. And we are not going to confiscate your property anyway; you will be compensated'.

"He was appealing to them not to begrudge what he was doing. These were people who voted for him."

Faced with the tough task of persuading the landed elite to part peacefully with some of their acres, Mr. Estrella soon realised that he would have to take a lead himself. He told me:

"You can't implement a reform if you do not lead by example. So I told my neighbours that if they were

waiting for me to give up land, they should go to check with the records to see how much I had received in bonds for my 130 hectares."

MARCOS presented the Philippines with a new constitution in 1973. This provided that "the State shall formulate and implement an agrarian reform program aimed at emancipating the tenants from the bondage of the soil and achieve the goals enunciated in this constitution."

Presidential decrees tumbled out of the palace. One of the most important was P.D. 27, which was designed to liberate rice and corn tenants from feudal landlordism.

Says Mr. Estrella: "The decree issued in the President's own handwriting, like the emancipation of negro slaves by President Lincoln, sought to redress the peasantry's valid and legitimate grievances that gave rise to violent conflict and social tension."

Why, then, are there still millions of landless peasants? Why is there such powerful opposition to a government which, since martial law was lifted in January 1981, has seen fit to detain 1,100 people as political prisoners?

Why is it that the conservative Catholic archbishop, Cardinal Sin, speaking at the funeral of Benigno Aquino, could with apparent endorsement refer to the communist guerrillas of the New Peoples Army as "my countrymen in the hills who fight for a cause you believe in"?

The short answer has to be that the land reform has failed to match the scale of the problem.

The reason for this is that Marcos chose, as his model, a land tenure system that was guaranteed to exclude the majority of the population from the benefits of agrarian change.

● Over 20 years, the population has increased by nearly 20m. Yet a mere 53,000 landless families have been re-settled on public land. Three of the settlements are costing \$38m. Another one, in Southern Leyte, is being financed by West Germany for DM 24.2m.

● The legal status of many peasants has been changed, which has increased their dignity and security of tenure. Nearly 37,000 have received emancipation patents.

● Leasehold contracts now give greater protection to 668,700 farmers. And 393,000 farmers have received Certificates of Land Transfer covering 679,700 hectares.

● The Land Bank has paid P1.5bn to 1,119 landowners for 213,900 acres. And 1,417 landowners have received payments directly from 9,918 tenants working 13,763 hectares.²

Meanwhile, population growth continues to outpace economic development in both the rural and urban sectors. Despite the vast sums of foreign aid, the Philippines is not able to establish an industrial base fast enough to meet the demand for jobs.

The reform was not a total failure. Armed with secure titles, the former share-croppers were willing to intensify their efforts, and agricultural output has indeed increased.

But the landowners continue to derive the greatest benefits, and they still harbour thoughts of recovering the lands after the departure of President Marcos.

WH Y WAS Aquino assassinated? The autocratic nature of the Marcos rule inevitably invites Western democrats to suspect that he might have been behind the plot to eliminate his arch political rival.

Others have suggested that his wife, Imelda, may have been implicated – which Marcos has denied. If the Marcos family was behind the slaying they were very ham-fisted about it. As the President said on TV, the death in those circumstances was bound to embarrass the government.

Yet the few facts that are available do seem to suggest that the guilty ones are to be found in the Manila power structure rather than among the guerrilla bands in the jungle.

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● Conrado Estrella

● Turn to P.117

"excessive consumption by a few and deprivation for the majority". The appropriation by landowners of the benefits of technological advance is presented as "the benefits of economic development do not reach the poor to enable them to buy basic goods and services."

The philosophy of Bread for the World is, apparently, that the exercise of power to seize land is akin to an earthquake or an erupting volcano: it cannot be stopped; we can only succour the victims.

There is no suggestion in the booklet that the "acquisition of resources" by those holding the reins of power led them into any unethical behaviour. Not a word is said about their exaction of tribute from those they had dispossessed or of reaping where they had not sown. Having established themselves as land-owners they, according to Bread for the World, became "stewards" of the land with responsibility for caring for and preserving "that which had been entrusted" to them.

As the authors put it: "The created people do not own the land, but are entrusted to use it and care for it by the Creator, the owner . . . God's will is for the created people to be good stewards with all that has been entrusted to them."

AGAINST this background, it is small wonder, perhaps, that the remedial measures proposed in the booklet are designed for application in kid gloves with a large spoonful of sugar. Their purpose is not so much to sweep away the basic injustice and release the people from bondage as merely to "change the trends of landlessness".

● First of all, say the authors, there should be land reform or, more precisely, "reforms in land distribution and tenancy conditions." But these "will require a willingness on the part of the powerful and affluent to share the earth's resources with those now dispossessed."

No specific proposals are made, but there is favourable reference to the "successful" land reforms carried out in Japan after World War II and in Taiwan after 1949. On the other hand it is conceded that the reforms in Mexico, from which "a new class of landholder developed", have largely been a failure, while attempts at reform in India and the Philippines were thwarted by the landowners almost before they had started.² (Presumably, the owners did

not have the requisite "willingness to share the earth's resources . . .")

● Secondly, there is the process of improving the "stewardship" of land: "The challenge is to promote change leading to the ethical stewardship of the earth and its resources in all parts of the world."

● And finally, closely linked with the hoped-for improvement in the quality of "stewardship", is prayer. "The Christian hope for social change and the alleviation of hunger in the world is shown to be rooted in the power of God to bring justice in the world."

Whether Jose Rodriguez or Abdul Malek would be much impressed by these suggestions for improving their lot must be extremely doubtful. The great flaw in a physical re-distribution of land is that it can only benefit a fortunate few. The basic injustice to the mass of the people still remains. And in any event, the experience of India and the Philippines, El Salvador and other countries does not inspire confidence in the ability of landowner-dominated governments to carry through such reforms.

Nor does the expressing of pious hopes about so-called stewardship, nor the offering of prayer — sincere though it may be — attack the root of man's inhumanity to man in these troubled areas of the world.

To end the evil system that allowed some men to "own" the land while the rest became trespassers in their own country, requires human action, not pious words.

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that, if these milk-and-water proposals are representative of those favoured by the Church, then the Church must walk in fear; fear of the forces committed to preserving the present set-up; fear of a "big bad wolf" it lacks the confidence to oppose.

It is certainly clear that, when it comes to the all-pervading injustice of land monopoly, the Church has no stomach for a full-frontal battle. The Church is prepared to fight the good fight but not, apparently, to put right a shameful wrong, only to palliate its worst excesses.

Notes:

1. Land & Hunger — a biblical worldview. Bread for the World Educational Fund, 32 Union Square East, New York.
2. In India, landowners divided their land among their relatives to make it fall below the newly set limit. In the Philippines, where the land reform programme applied only to rice and corn lands, owners planted other crops.

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● **MARCOS:** from P.111

Conspiracy theories will continue to abound until the full story is known. One of these could be constructed on the basis of the words uttered by Conrado Estrella, during an interview in the grounds of Harvard University just a few weeks before Aquino left the campus for his fatal journey home.

Mr. Estrella told me: "The land-owners hope that something will happen to Marcos. If it did, they say they will get their land back, but the peasants say that if the landowners try this, there will be bloodshed."

Those words may yet turn out to be the epitaph for Marcos's New Society.

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