

Aquino rearranges the deck chairs

by Linda de Hoyos

In the aftermath of the attempted Aug. 29 military coup in the Philippines, President Corazon Aquino is frantically searching for some means to give her government an aura of stability, as she faces dissolution of her political bases of support.

The paralysis of the Aquino government is now apparent to the world, even to the U.S. press, which has portrayed Aquino as the heroine who rescued the Philippines. In the face of the national crisis, Aquino has canceled trips to ASEAN and the Vatican scheduled for October. In addition, the other ASEAN nations, looking askance at the escalating internal strife in the Philippines, are threatening to cancel the December ASEAN heads of state summit sited in Manila.

In an attempt to make a clean slate of it all, Mrs. Aquino on Sept. 9 accepted the resignations of her entire cabinet. The idea for the mass resignation reportedly originated with Finance Minister Jaime Ongpin, in a likely bid to force out his chief opponent, presidential executive secretary Joker Arroyo. It took a full two weeks for the dust to settle, before Mrs. Aquino announced the changes that had been made:

- Salvador "Doy" Laurel resigned as foreign minister and refused re-appointment, although he remains vice president. The move highlights the increasing disaffection between Aquino and Laurel, whose uneasy alliance in 1986 was a precondition for the downfall of Ferdinand Marcos. Laurel, with presidential aspirations of his own, has signaled that he no longer wants to be hitched to Aquino's wagon. His replacement as foreign minister is General (ret.) Yan, who moved up from his post as deputy foreign minister.

- Finance Minister Ongpin was replaced by Vicente Jayme, a technocrat in the finance ministry who is not expected to buck Ongpin's policies of obeisance to the International Monetary Fund. Thanks to Ongpin's negotiating skills, the Philippines is set this year to pay \$3.7 billion in debt service, as against \$5.3 billion maximum in export earnings. Although Aquino was reportedly looking for a replacement for Ongpin's sidekick, Central Bank chief Jobo Fernandez, so far she has found none.

- Defense Minister Rafael Ilete has been retained. However, informed sources from Manila report that without informing Ilete, Aquino offered Jose Laurel III, of the Laurel

family, the post of both defense and foreign minister. The offer was turned down.

- Joker Arroyo has been removed from his post as presidential secretary. Arroyo's ouster was a concession to the military, which hates Arroyo for his record of defending terrorists as a "human rights" attorney. However, his influence is expected to remain; his replacement is Catalino Macaraig, Arroyo's deputy, whom he appointed seven months ago.

In short, although the shifts are designed to give a more "right-leaning" appearance to the Aquino government, the cabinet reshuffle resembles so much shuffling of the deck chairs on the Titanic. The military continues to be bitterly opposed to Aquino, based on the perception that Aquino continues to play an even-handed policy between the military and the New People's Army insurgency, which will lead to an inevitable victory for the NPA.

At the same time, Aquino's popularity is fast eroding, as the attempted coup functioned to tear up the Cory myth. In Manila, citizens are sporting tee-shirts that say "Cory—Sorry." Disaffection with the government was heightened when Leandro Alejandro, the young secretary general of the Bayan Labor Federation, was gunned down on Sept. 19. Only a week before the coup, Manila's labor unions had been out in the streets protesting a government-set hike in the price of gasoline. After the Alejandro murder, a Bayan spokesman declared that the Bayan "holds the Aquino regime responsible for this heinous crime." Speaking at a rally of 10,000 protesting the murder, Alejandro's wife proclaimed that the assassination shows "that the government of Cory is like Marcos; it uses fascism." Although her husband had worked with the Aquino government, the young widow stated that she now intended to "go to the hills" to join the NPA.

Government in the wings?

Meanwhile, the Grand Alliance for Democracy (GAD), the coalition of nationalists which challenged Aquino in the congressional elections May 11, declared that it has formed a "shadow government." GAD spokesman Blas Ople, a former labor minister under Marcos, reported that the group's decision came in reaction to the "ongoing and irreversible government breakdown." Ople stated emphatically that the GAD did not support the Aug. 28 coup attempt, but would "propose a political formula" if the nation is faced with a dilemma of a military dictatorship or an NPA victory.

The GAD program centers on three points:

- a program of national economic recovery, including the rejection of the Ongpin pact with the banks, and a pegging of debt service to 10% of export earnings;

- decisive action against the NPA and a modernization program for the armed forces;

- a "federalist" solution to the demands for autonomy from the armed Muslim groups of the linchpin southern island of Mindanao.