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# TIME



## The New Aquino

Can Noynoy save  
the Philippines?

BY ISHAAN THAROOR



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WORLD

# The Next Aquino

In an echo of the past, the late Corazon Aquino's son Noynoy is running for President of the Philippines. Is he up to saving his beleaguered nation?

BY ISHAAN THAROOR/ZAMBOANGA CITY

IT'S PAST MIDNIGHT IN ZAMBOANGA and Benigno (Noynoy) Aquino III slouches in his chair, a glass of Coke in one hand and a cigarette in another. He's tired and bleary-eyed and wracked by a cold. A grueling day of audiences, processions and interviews in three different provinces across the southern Philippine island of Mindanao is drawing to a close in the hotel lobby. While aides and well-wishers murmur around him, Aquino stands and holds out his arms as if awaiting handcuffs. They are lined with scratches and bruises—the toll of ceaseless hours of plunging into throngs of supporters and pressing the flesh. He grins: "It's another demonstration of people power."

For the Philippines, Aquino is an unlikely man of the moment. At a rally earlier in the day, tens of thousands had crammed into a stadium to hear the presidential candidate speak. Kris Aquino, his youngest sister and a celebrity talk-show host, revved up the crowd alongside her husband, an equally telegenic basketball star. High-school dance troupes garbed in yellow—the Aquino colors—spun cartwheels on stage. Yet when 50-year-old Noynoy emerged, hunched and bespectacled, amid blaring music and streams of confetti, he cut an awkward figure. Shirt loose, pants baggy and hair thinning, he looked more an abashed computer nerd than the sort of brash, swaggering politician that has become the stock-in-trade in the Philippines.

The movement that has swelled around Aquino in the past year, launching him as chief contender for the Philippine presidency ahead of the May 10 general elections, hinges on a legacy far larger than his own. His charismatic father, Benigno (Ninoy) Aquino Jr., was the country's greatest champion of democracy before being gunned down in 1983, presumably by agents of the ruling dictator Ferdinand Marcos. Then his mother, Corazon (Cory) Aquino, a once meek housewife, became the figurehead of a popular rebellion in 1986 that toppled

Photograph for TIME by Steve Tirona—Silverlens







Marcos and gifted to the global lexicon the now immortal phrase of democratic revolution—*people power*. Not for nothing is Nelson Mandela said to have praised Noynoy Aquino when they once met, quipping, “You chose your parents well.”

By his own admission, Aquino would not be running at all had it not been for the massive outpouring of public grief and affection that followed his mother’s death from cancer last August. He says he now walks the same path first trod by his revered parents. “They made automatic in me the preference to take up the cudgels for those who have less in life, for the powerless,” he says. “Why should I veer away from their footprints?”

This moral mandate has proven especially poignant ahead of the elections—winning Aquino a lead in opinion polls despite a relatively undistinguished political career (he’s currently a member of

his opponents—including a wealthy billionaire—draw their funds from a coterie of vested interests, Aquino claims to be operating on a shoestring budget. Perhaps overstating the point, Aquino staffers in Manila display dozens of piggy banks filled with coins pooled together by schoolchildren. Chris Tio, a Cebu businessman who has left his work and family behind to volunteer for the campaign, shakes with emotion when recounting the virtues of the Aquino cause. “The Senator is a humble man at an extraordinary moment,” he says. “We’re in a fight for the soul of this nation.”

### Frozen in Time

YET, FOR ALL THE ZEAL HE INSPIRES, AQUINO himself is also a product of the status quo. Both his parents, Ninoy and Cory, came from pedigreed stock—landed, aristocratic families that have long been part of the ruling establishment. Similarly, Aquino’s vice-presidential running mate, Mar Roxas, is the grandson of Manuel Roxas, the country’s first President. Arroyo, their erstwhile foe, is the daughter of Diosdado Macapagal, another President from the early days of the republic. And though they eventually faced each other as enemies, Ninoy and Marcos were members of the same fraternity at an elite Philippine university. Like a pantomime of ancient Rome, Manila’s political landscape has been shaped for generations by the intimacies and vendettas of an entrenched rank of patricians.

That, ultimately, has been more of a bane than a boon for the Philippines. From being the second richest country in Asia in the 1950s, it has dropped to among the continent’s poorest and least dynamic. During the Marcos years, key industries were turned into monopolies run by friends and allies, creating a culture of crony capitalism that still lingers. While Arroyo is generally praised for guiding the economy to stability during the recession, much of the growth in the country is the result of remittances sent back by a legion of Filipinos encouraged to work abroad—currently an estimated 9 million to 11 million people, or roughly 10% of the country’s total population. With little job creation at home, analysts point to the Philippines’ inability to grow its middle class. “The basics for success are here, at least in terms of human capital,”



## ‘The Senator is a humble man at an extraordinary moment. We’re in a fight for the soul of this nation.’

—CHRIS TIO, AQUINO CAMPAIGN VOLUNTEER FROM CEBU

the Philippine Senate). Popular opinion turned long ago against the current President, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, who has been in power for nearly a decade. Her administration is mired in sundry allegations of graft and electoral fraud. The law bars Arroyo from seeking re-election, but many critics see in her reign traces of the nation’s authoritarian past. Analysts point to a decline in the independence of institutions like the judiciary and an increasing gap between the wealthy few and the 30% of the population living below the poverty line. Says Aquino: “It’s as if we’ve backslid to the days of Marcos.”

Aquino’s campaign has styled itself as the panacea for an afflicted country. If you listen to his supporters, he is the righteous change candidate, destined to overhaul a stagnant status quo and redeem democracy, which has had a long and torturous history in the Philippines. While

says Greg Rushford, a Washington-based expert on trade who has monitored the Philippines for over 30 years. “But there is a lack of seriousness in the political leadership—institutions are dominated by an uncaring wealthy class.”

Aquino says he cares: he speaks eagerly and repeatedly about empowering the people by delivering them “freedom from hunger.” His campaign has made curbing corruption its No. 1 goal; translated from Tagalog, its main slogan reads, “With No Corruption, There’s No Poverty.” Aquino says some \$6 billion would return to the national budget each year were it not for graft in the system. But he and his nine rival candidates (who all, to varying degrees, have spoken out against corruption) are going up against a problem that is hardwired into the country’s politics—one whose American-style democracy echoes the cutthroat days of Tammany Hall and whose hacienda culture of feudal oligarchs would seem familiar to much of Latin America. “There are ties of clan, family and region that are stronger than the nation,” says Ramon Casiple, a leading political commentator in Manila. “To this day, it’s all about patronage.”





**Mother's mark** Aquino flashes the L sign first invoked by Cory during People Power in 1986

The rot in the Philippine system was perfectly illustrated last November, when gunmen in the service of the Ampatuans, a powerful ruling family in the Mindanao province of Maguindanao, ambushed the entourage of a rival politician, killing 57 people, including over two dozen journalists. The grisly massacre—some bodies were grotesquely mutilated and defiled—shocked the country and made global headlines. But while Arroyo has arrested leading Ampatuans and called for a ban on guns ahead of the polls, her opponents cite the clan's long-standing ties to her administration, which, they say, doled out generous state funding from Manila in exchange for support during local elections. "The incident dramatized the way feudal politics play out in the Philippines," says Marites Vitug, editor of *Newsbreak*, a respected Manila newsweekly.

What enraged many observers, beyond just the prevalence of naked warlordism in some of the poorer reaches of the country, was the audacity of the attack. It's a symptom, say Vitug and others, of a culture of impunity that has cemented itself in the Philippines over the decades and become exacerbated under the present

government. A 2009 U.S. State Department report chronicled widespread extrajudicial killings and the disappearances of human-rights activists and leftist journalists, as well as the mistreatment of Muslims in the country's insurgency-ravaged south. It called corruption in the Philippines "endemic."

Rumors of politicians abusing their power swirl constantly in the voluble Philippine media, but little gets done to bring anyone to justice in a country whose courts are infamous for their low conviction rates. Arroyo became President in 2001 after being at the forefront of mass protests against perceived corruption in the administration of Joseph Estrada, a populist former movie star. In a rare instance of prosecution, Estrada was convicted of "plunder" in 2007, only to be pardoned by Arroyo months later. He's now among the front-runners in this May's presidential polls.

#### Like Mother, Like Son

AQUINO IS NOT THE ONLY CANDIDATE promising social renewal, but he seems well suited for the part—carrying himself with an air of almost Gandhian simplicity

and uprightness. Ahead of his decision to run, he consulted in seclusion with the nuns of a Carmelite convent. He later exasperated aides by sending back shoes purchased for the campaign trail because they were too expensive. Unmarried, he leans on his four sisters for support. "Someone had to tell him that a shirt has to fit in a certain way," sighs Kris. "That his jeans can't have pleats."

But this modesty has not won over all. Aquino's chief rival in the elections, Manuel Villar, is a suave, smiling businessman with a rags-to-riches story, rising from a Manila slum to become one of the wealthiest and most powerful men in the country. He scoffs at Aquino's thin political record: "Has he done anything?" Villar himself has held influential seats in the Philippine Congress for over a decade and some accuse of him of using his political clout to grow his own real estate fortune, a charge Villar dismisses. His campaign spending has dwarfed that of other candidates, funding lavish TV ads and radio jingles, and he's associated with a roster of big-ticket allies, including world-champion boxer Manny Pacquiao. "I am not a movie star. My parents weren't heroes," Villar tells *TIME*. "The playing field needs to be leveled somehow."

Observers say the presidential race has become a contest between Villar's populism (and deep pockets) and the Aquino family legacy. The battle bears the echo of an earlier rivalry: like Marcos, Villar is running at the head of the Nacionalista Party, which vied in the past with the Aquinos' Liberal Party. (He is also backed by Marcos' son, Bongbong.) Marcos' refusal to accept an electoral loss to Cory triggered the People Power movement and catapulted her into the presidency in 1986. Her administration is credited with doing much to pull the Philippines away from the dark years of Marcos' martial law, bringing back foreign investors and rewriting the country's constitution. But, unlike her husband Ninoy, Cory was never a natural politician and was seen by critics at times to be weak and indecisive. She was also beset by the conspiracies of pro-Marcos forces and victim to three failed coup attempts. Shrapnel from a 1987 attack by rebellious troops is still lodged in her son's neck.

Noynoy Aquino says he has forgiven the soldiers who once sought to kill





**Best of pals** Villar, left, and his running mate Loren Legarda flank champion boxer Pacquiao

him—some are now in politics as well—and is not concerned about the threat of an interfering military. (Mutinous officers in 2006 also sought to oust Arroyo.) He talks with ease and intelligence about his plans to expand the country's middle class with microcredit programs, to boost industry, universalize health care, fix education and shake up the judiciary. But there are doubts about how savvy an operator he will be when thrown deep into the murky world of Philippine politics—one, by his own admission, that he has considered forsaking in the past "so not to be compromised anymore." Winnie Monsod, a prominent TV pundit who once served in Cory's administration, says Aquino "doesn't have his father's charisma, but he has his mother's sincerity. Whether that's enough, I don't know."

### Keeping Hope Alive

THERE'S A CAUTIOUS OPTIMISM THAT IT just might be. "People sometimes don't see it," says Maria Elena, Aquino's eldest sister, widely known by her nickname "Ballsy." "But Noynoy's very stubborn. He knows what's right and what's wrong." Executive power in the Philippines is far-reaching—by some counts, Arroyo made thousands of government appointments—and experts hope the next administration will build up the stability and independence of the country's frail political institutions. Aquino is seen to be surrounding himself with a team of largely honest, well-intentioned politicians. "He may not be the ultimate architect of change, but he could

push open the door for real reform," says the commentator Casiple.

Vitug, the magazine editor, says Aquino's promise lies in his incorruptible image. "Our trust in politics has been so eroded that people just want a new leader who will do the very basic—who will not be corrupt, who will be good," she says. But this is also tethered to a far deeper affection. "The people remember his parents," says Monsod. "For them it's like going back to Camelot."

Aquino is more humble about his role, fitting for a person who has lived quietly for much of his life in the shadow of his parents' legend. "We are just instruments put in the right position to execute God's will," he says with the sort of religious solemnity his mother became famous for. After leaving office, Cory had turned to painting. The walls of her old Manila home are lined with watercolors of flowers, rosaries and scenes of sylvan idyll far from the tumult and violence that often filled her political life. Aquino's rise follows his mother's retreat from the maelstrom and there's a palpable steeliness beneath his unimposing demeanor. "I crossed my Rubicon in 1983," says Aquino, referring to the year his father was assassinated. "I cannot accept that he would die for nothing."

Neither can countless Filipinos. As

Aquino's convoy heads to the rally in Zamboanga, the city nearly empties out entirely onto the streets to greet him. Yellow banners and ribbons—first popularized by Ninoy's love for the 1970s pop song "Tie a Yellow Ribbon Around the Ole Oak Tree"—festoon almost every rickety fence and street light in a town governed by politicians aligned against the Aquinos. The roads teem with Zamboangans of all walks of life, barefoot street kids and housewives holding parasols, all clad in their own makeshift yellow Aquino gear (the campaign didn't at the time have a budget to mass-produce T-shirts). The procession teeters to a snail's pace for over three hours, as thousands swarm around, their hands held up forming Cory's famed L sign—meaning *laban*, or "fight." So much confetti and shredded paper billows out of office buildings that, over the wail of sirens and the ceaseless chanting of "Noynoy!", tropical Zamboanga looks like it's covered in a layer of snow.

Romy Mercado, a friend of Aquino's since high school and a close aide, says they have been received in such fashion nearly everywhere. The campaign, according to Aquino himself, is quickening something "dormant" in the Filipino people. "I haven't seen anything like it since the days of Cory and People Power," Mercado shouts over the din, sitting one vehicle behind Aquino's. But when asked to talk more about his experience of that now faraway time, Mercado is unable to respond. Head in his hands, he's too busy wiping away the tears. —WITH REPORTING BY SUNSHINE DE LEON/MANILA ■