

## **NINYO AQUINO: A HERO FOR ALL SEASONS**

*Privilege Statement of Sen. Nene Pimentel at the Senate*

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The great French dramatist Jean Anouilh (1910-87) incisively categorized human beings into two classes.

He said:

“There are two races of beings. The masses teeming and happy — common clay, if you like — eating, breeding, working, counting their pennies; people who just live; ordinary people; xxx. And then there are the others — the noble ones, the heroes. The ones you can quite well imagine lying shot, pale and tragic; one minute triumphant with a guard of honor, and the next being marched away between two gendarmes.”

I am sure that the Frenchman Anouilh had not met the Filipino Benigno S. Aquino, Jr. Yet, he could have very well spoken those lines in reference to him.

Indeed, our people watched with awe the incredible feats of Ninoy, the Wunderkind, from the '50s at the start of his teenage life all the way to his mid-life. Then some 30 years later, in horror they witnessed TV footages and still pictures of Ninoy “lying shot, pale and tragic” on his arrival at the tarmac of the Manila International Airport.

To be more precise, the tragedy played out on August 21, 1983 at the Manila International Airport.

### **Under house arrest**

On the afternoon of that day, I was in my study in my house in Cagayan de Oro where at the time I was under house arrest on charges of rebellion against the martial law administration.

The phone rang and the voice at the other end said that my friend, Ninoy, had just been shot dead at the tarmac of the Manila International Airport.

Although I had previously warned Ninoy about that tragic possibility should he come home from Boston where we met in 1982, now that it happened, the incident left me completely shattered and shocked beyond belief.

What a waste of talent, I told myself. I knew that Ninoy did not have to come home at the time or at all while martial law ruled the land.

### **Solitary confinement**

He was among the first to have been arrested upon the proclamation of martial law by President Ferdinand Marcos in September of 1972. In fact, five years after its proclamation, a kangaroo military court convicted and sentenced him to death by firing squad in 1977.

The martial law regime, however, did not or to put it, perhaps, more accurately, could not, execute Ninoy. Executing him would have had the effect of tempting the fates against the martial law ruler. And so in lieu of executing him, his solitary confinement was continued for more than seven years — the duration of his detention under martial law — in an attempt to break his spirit.

But Ninoy's spirit would not simply cave in to the coercive repressions imposed on him by the martial law regime.

### **Hunger strike**

In fact, before the military kangaroo court sentenced him to death, Ninoy did a hunger strike in 1975 that lasted for 40 days — some people say longer than the immortal Mahatma Gandhi ever did in his hunger strikes against the British Raj. In any case, the hunger strike weakened him to the point of death. Only the pleadings of his wife, Cory, their children, Maria Elena, Aurora Corazon, Victoria Eliza, Benigno Aquino III (who is now our colleague in the Senate) and Kris, and Jaime Cardinal Sin convinced him to end the hunger strike so that he could fight again another day for the people.

The hunger strike did not dull his fighting spirit but it probably led to a heart attack that he suffered in March 1980. The ailment called for an operation. But Ninoy told those who had access to him that he would rather die in prison than allow doctors who were under the control or influence of the martial law ruler to do the operation here.

Fearing that he might die in prison, the martial law authorities allowed him to go to the US for a heart by-pass operation that was successfully done in May 1980.

### **Enemy of the regime**

Soon after the operation, Ninoy was once again visible in the anti-martial law forums in the US. He had marked himself as an implacable enemy of the martial law administration. It was, thus, too risky for him to go home then.

### **Extra mile**

But as the fates would have it, in 1983, three years after his heart surgery, he made public his decision to go home. His family and his friends in the US ranging from the businessman Jose D. Calderon and the anti-Marcos activist Heherson Alvarez advised him not to do so. Even the wife of President Marcos said in the media that it was not advisable for Ninoy to come home because as she had put it bluntly he might be killed upon arrival.

The advice of his family and friends, notwithstanding, Ninoy came home. He said he wanted to walk the extra mile for peace in the land and convince President Marcos that it was time to end martial law and restore the country to its democratic moorings.

### **Freedom shot**

But upon landing at the Manila International Airport, burly men, strutting with the harsh mien of unbridled authority went up the plane and brusquely hustled him down the steps of the plane's ladder. Then, a shot rang out and seconds later, Ninoy was seen by his co-passengers lying down on the tarmac bruised and mortally wounded.

The shot reverberated throughout the country but instead of scaring the people with the awesome display of martial law power, it freed them from their lethargic acceptance of martial rule and roused them to a fever-pitch revulsion of it.

At Ninoy's wake, thousands of people from all segments of society — the rich, the poor, men, women, and children — paid him their last respects. And 10 days later, more two million people walked 12 hours from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. beside his bier to escort him to his final resting place or watched from the sidewalks more in anger than in sadness at what they thought was a senseless sacrifice of the life of a man who was destined for greatness.

### **Return of democracy**

In 1986 or three years after Ninoy's assassination, the people had enough of martial rule. And it was, now the turn of the executor of martial rule and his family — public and private — to leave the country and go into exile in Hawaii. Their leaving heralded the return of a democratic government to the land.

These are matters of fact that in my mind make Ninoy truly a hero, an instrument of God, of the fates if you like, whose death purchased for the nation the rights and liberties that we now enjoy in this country.

### **A hero made or born?**

But was Ninoy a hero made or was he hero born?

The question may sound academic but it has a bearing on whether or not Ninoy deserves the accolades that he has been receiving from our people since 1986 when martial law was finally uprooted from the land.

Skeptics probably entertain the view that setting aside August 21 of every year is an example of an undue honor for the man who would be hero.

I beg to disagree. It is not the setting aside of August 21 to commemorate the day of Ninoy's assassination every year that makes him a hero. To belabour the point, it is rather the sum of his selfless deeds that makes him so and gives meaning to August 21 as a celebratory occasion for the people to remind ourselves of the meaning of his life and especially of his epic death.

### **Not in his case**

But to go back to the larger question of whether or not heroes are made or born, I am not too sure that there is a neat "either or" reply to it. At least, not in the case of Ninoy.

From his early years as a young man, Ninoy had already showed signs of fast tracking his life with heavenly support.

He talked fast, worked fast and lived fast. And the heavens apparently complicit to his agenda of speed in everything that he did opened the gates of opportunity for him.

### **Fates' hands**

Thus, all the people who had touched his life — for better or for worse — were cast, to use a motion picture phrase - in the role of supporting actors.

Note the following fortuitous events.

In the '50s, when Ninoy was 17 years old — the age when many teenagers would rather do the boogie on the dance floor than work out on things of national interest — another great Filipino, Chino Roces, saw the potential of Ninoy for greatness. He provided Ninoy with a platform to show to the nation what he could do as a journalist.

Chino who ran the Manila Times, arguably the most widely read daily in pre-martial law days, sent him to Korea to cover the war between North and South sides of the nation in 1950.

Incidentally nobody knows for sure who it was that decreed that North Korea's Kim Il Sung should make war on Syngman Rhee's South Korea. But when the war came, it created a

venue for Ninoy to show his courage and grace to live literally under fire even as he was still in his teens.

### **Presidents, too**

At 18, when Ninoy came home, his reportage of the Korean War earned him the Philippine Legion of Honor medal that was bestowed on him by President Elpidio Quirino. Who moved President Quirino to do so? Maybe some people close to the president. But who motivated the latter to act as they did, nobody really knows. Perhaps, it was the Almighty or the Fates, if you will.

Then, before he was 20, President Ramon Magsaysay created another arena for him to prove his mettle. This time he was asked him by the President to act as his negotiator with Luis Taruc, the Supremo of the Huks, the rebel band that upset the peace of the land for so many years since the end of the Japanese War in 1944.

Was it sheer luck that impelled no less than the President of the country, Ramon Magsaysay, and the Huk rebel leader, Luis Taruc, to rely on Ninoy to broker the government's search for peace with the Huks?

Again, nobody can say for sure. But whatever it was that caused President Magsaysay to ask Ninoy to be his emissary to Taruc, the Huk Supremo to talk peace in 1954, the thing is that Ninoy succeeded in that endeavour. Taruc who had taken the boy presidential agent seriously ultimately returned to the fold of the law.

### **Concepcion townsfolk**

Two years later, in 1956, it was the turn of the people of the town of Concepcion, Tarlac to propel Ninoy, the boy-wonder, into national prominence even as he had actually only run for a local elective office, that of town mayor.

The electorate of Concepcion voted for him as mayor even if he was 19 days short of the age required by the law for that position. He was subsequently disqualified which normally would be a minus factor in the biodata of any politician. But as the fates would have it, in the case of Ninoy, the disqualification became a plus factor because the incident indelibly etched his name in the minds of the voters of the nation as a young man to watch.

### **Governor**

Three years later, in 1959, Ninoy won election to the vice governorship of Tarlac. Two years later in 1961, through deft political moves that could only be deemed providential, the governor gave way to his assumption of the governorship of the province. His stint as governor afforded him a local theatre on which he manifested his competence for national political leadership.

### **Survivor**

In 1967, Ninoy ran for senator and won as the only Liberal Party senatorial survivor of the Nacionalista Party rout of the opposition senatorial candidates. The fact that only Ninoy among the eight LP candidates for senator won was momentous enough but the Nacionalistas — dictated by the fates — unintentionally crowned his victory with more sheen.

His political opponents in the Nacionalista Party tried to prevent his assumption of the senatorial office on the ground that he was under age. They failed because the fates had other things in mind for Ninoy and the Supreme Court came to his rescue.

### **Precedent-setting**

The Court said that while it was true he was underage at the time of the election, he was already of age when he was assuming the office of Senator. It was a precedent-setting judgment. And fit for a man who was destined for greater glory.

The marvellous mundane achievements of Ninoy in his multifaceted career were but preludes to the greatest performance of his life. And that was when he met his fate on August 21, 1983 at the hands of assassins alluded to earlier.

### **No reason**

If one were to look for reasons for Ninoy's coming home, I would say that he had more reasons for not doing so. He was enjoying the comforts, the safety and the freedoms of people who lived in that the bastion of democracy, the United States of America.

He could have opted to stay in exile. And he could have justified it with a thousand and one excuses as to why he could not yet come home.

He did not offer any alibis. He came home.

### **Heavenly decree**

I venture the opinion that the reason he succumbed to the siren calls for him to come home was that the heavens had decreed it to be so.

He had to come home and meet his fate. "If it is my fate to die by an assassin's bullet, so be it," he said shortly before a gun in August (1983) felled him.

### **A hero for our times**

Although the gun of August shot him dead, it also shot him up onto a secure place in the pantheon of our national heroes.

In any case, in 1986, three years after his death, our people led by his widow, Corazon Aquino, recovered the liberties we lost under martial law. It behoves us to mention in this connection that the defection from the Marcos government of the then Secretary of National Defence Juan Ponce Enrile — now a colleague of ours in the Senate — and of the then Chief of the Philippine Constabulary Fidel Ramos — triggered the positive response of the people to the call of Jaime Cardinal Sin to support what is now known internationally as People Power, a phenomenon that we can proudly claim as our own. With the toppling of the martial law regime in our country, People Power started a worldwide trend to remove authoritarian regimes bloodlessly.

### **Heroic dimension**

But to go back to our thesis, the supreme sacrifice of Ninoy presented Philippine society with a heroic dimension that it sorely needed and at the time when we needed it most.

For months before his assassination, foreign wags had started to air scurrilous statements that the Philippines was "a nation of 60 million cowards" who did not have the courage to stand up to one-man rule.

That observation, it must be said, was not true at all. There were people who fought the martial law regime in various ways — some peaceful, others violent. But it was the assassination of Ninoy that gave a nationally recognizable face to the heroic dimension of our society.

### **Worth dying for**

Despite its inherently evil connotations, Ninoy's assassination — as the Fates had decreed it — was, thus, a good thing for the Philippine society as a whole.

For as the philosopher Jean Baudrillard asked, "What is a society without a heroic dimension?"

Ninoy Aquino offered his life to answer the question and in the process proved the sceptics wrong. He also showed that he was right along with those of us who believed in our people: that indeed, the Filipino was worth dying for.