



**Perry Diaz**

# PerryScope

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*Perry Diaz . . . .*

## *Cory's Legacy*

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- In the wee hours of August 1, 2009, former President Maria Corazon “Cory” Sumulong Cojuangco Aquino -- “Tita Cory” to millions of Filipinos -- passed away. Her death was caused by cardio-respiratory arrest, the result of colon cancer she was battling since March 2008.

In the wake of her death, the Filipino people mourned her passing in a way no other leader in recent history was accorded with. It was a testament to what Cory had lived for . . . and fought for.

Some say that Cory’s presidency was accidental. Some say it was transformational. But many believe that it was divine providence that brought her power. I believe in all three.

Cory’s role in life was to be a “plain housewife.” And she played that role perfectly until her husband, the late Senator Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino Jr., was incarcerated by the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos. Ninoy’s only crime was his opposition to Marcos. When Marcos declared martial law in 1972, Ninoy was one of the first to be arrested and detained. Cory became the sole provider to her young children, playing the role of father and “plain housewife.”

When Marcos allowed Ninoy to go to exile in the US at the behest of President Jimmy Carter, Cory and the children went with him. They stayed in the US for several years until Ninoy decided that it was time to go back home. However, he was aware that by doing so he would be imprisoned again and probably assassinated. But he was determined to go

back home to meet his fate saying that “the Filipino is worth dying for.”

On that fateful day of August 21, 1983, when Ninoy’s plane landed at the international airport in Manila, several soldiers in uniform boarded the plane to take Ninoy into custody. As Ninoy was stepping out of the plane, he was fatally shot at the back of his head and rolled down the staircase onto the tarmac. Someone in the plane took a video as soldiers dragged Ninoy’s dead body to a waiting vehicle. Shown on television, the gruesome scene shocked the world.

That moment changed Cory’s life forever. It was the moment for her to step up to the plate to continue Ninoy’s unfinished mission. It was the moment for her to go back home not only to bury her husband but to lead the Filipinos for their fight for freedom. It was the moment of her calling. And there was no turning back.

The political turmoil that followed the assassination of Ninoy became the turning point of the Marcos dictatorship. Under pressure from US President Ronald Reagan, Marcos called for a “snap election” in February 1986. Anti-Marcos leaders immediately formed the Cory Aquino for President Movement and, within a week, one million signatures were collected. Reluctantly, after meditating for 10 hours at a convent, Cory agreed to run. Little did she realize that she was about to change the history of the Philippines.

The Marcos-controlled Commission on Elections showed

Marcos leading in the “snap election.” However, the unofficial tally showed Cory leading. Consequently, on February 15, 1986, the Batasang Pambansa (Legislature) proclaimed Marcos as the winner. Civil unrest ensued and spread throughout the country like wild fire. It was the beginning of the end of the Marcos dictatorship.

On February 22, 1986, Marcos’ key allies, Defense Secretary Juan Ponce Enrile and Armed Forces Vice Chief of Staff Fidel V. Ramos staged a revolt which mushroomed into a popular uprising -- “people power” -- against the Marcos regime.

On February 25, 1986, Cory Aquino was sworn in as president by Supreme Court Associate Justice Claudio Teehankee at the Club Filipino in San Juan. On that same day, Marcos was also sworn in as president at the Malacanang Palace. However, by nightfall, Marcos fled to exile in Hawaii in a US military plane.

I saw Cory when she visited San Francisco in September 1986 on her way to address the US Congress. The Fil-Am community of the Bay Area held a reception for Cory at the cavernous Moscone Center in San Francisco. It was an emotional visit for Cory because it was in an apartment in suburban Daly City that Ninoy plotted his return to the Philippines. At the packed Moscone Center, thousands came to see Cory. She stirred up the audience when she said, “You can take the Filipino away from the Philippines but not the Philippines from the Filipino.” It was a call to all Filipinos to be proud of their motherland once again. And they heeded her call.

I saw Cory for the second time when I joined a group of about 12 Fil-Am community and political leaders who accompanied then Gov. George Deukmejian of California on an official visit to the Philippines in 1988. When we went to pay a courtesy call on Cory, I was surprised that she was

not staying in the Malacanang Palace. She occupied a modest sized two-story building next to the palace as her office. She chose not to live in Malacanang and commuted daily to her private residence. I understand that she never set foot in Malacanang. It is then understandable why Cory’s children refused to have their mother lie in state in Malacanang. After all, it was the place where Marcos stayed for 21 years.

Last July 19, 2009, when Cory was near death, I was interviewed by Ging Reyes of ABS-CBN about my thoughts of Cory. After several minutes of talking about Cory’s legacy, Ging pointedly asked me, “And what do you think was the difference between Cory Aquino and Gloria Arroyo?” “Day and night,” I replied. Ging asked, “Why?” And I said, “Cory brought the brightest days in the lives of Filipinos while Gloria brought the darkest days in their lives.”

Cory will be remembered for generations to come. She changed the constitution in 1987 to make sure that martial law will not happen again. “People power” was embodied into the constitution and gave the armed forces the supreme duty to defend the people and the state. The 1987 constitution is sometimes referred to as “Cory’s constitution.” Yes, it was her baby maturing into adulthood. But some politicians want to change it for reasons that a large majority of Filipinos do not agree with.

It did not then come as surprise that Cory made a wish not to change the 1987 constitution. With Cory’s passing, the move for charter change might eventually die. And each time somebody would attempt to change it in the future, I am pretty sure that the people would defend “Cory’s constitution,” our constitution. And Cory lives in our constitution.

As Ninoy proved that the Filipino was worth dying for, Cory proved that the Filipino was worth living for. And she left a lasting legacy that freedom is worth fighting. In her memory, let’s live up to that legacy.