

## Rizal, Ninoy and the Revolution

HINDSIGHT By F Sionil Jose | MANILA, Philstar, 6/15/08

When we mark this month the 147th birthday of Jose Rizal, we are assured of the man's status as our national hero. Since Ninoy Aquino was killed and his death also brought about the fall of an oppressive regime, there are those among us who consider him a national hero, too, on a pedestal no different from that of Rizal's.

Maybe it is time that we assess the comparison; after all, both were killed at the height of their manhood and intellectual powers.

I first knew Rizal when I was 10 years old and was given by my Grade Five teacher, Soledad Oriol, his novels, *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Felibusterismo*, in their first English translation by Derbyshire.

Much earlier, I heard his name uttered by the elders in our barrio, particularly by my grandfather who was in the revolution of 1896. The preparation of the Rizal Day float was led by my grandfather. It consisted of the newest bullcart in the barrio, the spokes of the wheels wreathed with the tricolor in papel de Japon, the horns of the carabao wrapped with garlands... In the center of the cart sat our prettiest girl in baro at saya; behind her, our handsomest young man in rayadillo trousers, barong and red scarf, the brim of his straw hat raised in the manner of the revolutionaries of that period; in his right hand, an unsheathed bolo. The parade ended before the monument of Rizal in the plaza and, towards late afternoon, we listened to speeches extolling Rizal and condemning Spanish colonialism.

I first met Ninoy in 1950 or thereabouts. I was then on the staff of the Sunday magazine of the Manila Times. Being too poor to afford a typewriter, I used to stay in the office to type my stories and one evening, he came to me. He was told by Dave Boguslav, the editor of the Times, that the best writers in the paper were in the magazine, and may I please read his copy?

He was in short pants, he introduced himself as a cub from the University of the Philippines. One thing about Ninoy, he knew how to please people. His copy was quite neat and he really needed little editing. I just reminded him that writing news stories required directness, simplicity, short sentences. He was a fast learner, and after four visits, he stopped bothering me with his copy.

My acquaintance with him continued through the years, and when we opened Solidaridad Bookshop in 1965 and the journal *Solidarity* in the same year, he was a frequent visitor, and on several occasions, he participated in the seminars sponsored by the journal. Even at an early stage, it was obvious that Ninoy was very bright, that he had a keen, inquiring mind, that he read a lot and absorbed a lot. I knew he read all those books for he discussed some of them in great detail.

When Marcos released Ninoy from prison for a few days of "furlough", Nestor Mata, Nick Joaquin, Greg Brillantes and I paid him a visit at his house in Times Street in Quezon City. Upon getting there we were photographed, fingerprinted by his military escorts who were all over the place. We had very little chance to talk to Ninoy in private. Going back to the bookshop, I told the writers who wanted to visit Ninoy of the process by which one would be able to see him. No one wanted to go with me when I decided to pay him a second visit.

Ninoy's family is rich, but not half as affluent as the Cojuangcos to whom he was related by marriage. He was deeply aware of the roots of discontent 'the agrarian problem'. After all, it

was in Central Luzon, his bailiwick, where the Huk uprising started and its leader, Luis Taruc, was his personal friend; he helped the Taruc family in all the years that Ka Luis was in jail. He had a plan for agrarian reform which, in hindsight, included his wife's Hacienda Luisita. In the interest of improved production, the big estates should not be divided; they should be made into corporate farms, the workers given shares which they can redeem and profit from.

Ninoy was bothered by his father's collaboration with the Japanese in World War II and he made an effort to work with the Americans, including the CIA, to gain favor with them. Unfortunately, when he was in exile in the United States, the Reagan White House ignored him and all the opponents of Marcos who were there; Reagan, after all, was the best ally of Marcos until the latter became a liability rather than an asset.

Ninoy believed in revolution; he expounded on it before a small group he knew very well but we didn't know to what extent he had worked to advance it. I saw glimpses of it only after he died. During all those years that he was in prison, he continued reading; but his reading now included books on philosophy and religion. And when he was released on furlough, on my second visit to the Aquino house in Times Street in Quezon City, he took me to one of the rooms where we could be alone. The house was crawling with soldiers in civilian clothes, among them the late Willie Jurado who, Ninoy said, was Marcos' personal agent.

He assured that the room was not bugged and he said that he still believed in revolution but that we couldn't afford a million Filipinos killed as was the case with Vietnam.

There must be a way, he said, by which violence could be minimized. A million Filipinos; that is too much. Perhaps just a few hundred will do.

I told him that once violence was unleashed there was no way it could be controlled; I was repeating the old argument that Pepe Diokno used. Besides, I had already told him earlier. There is the danger that the United States will be involved. "I will take care of that," he said.

I also told him that as long as Marcos was in power, that revolution could not proceed, although Marcos himself was the best recruiter for the revolutionary army.

So was Rizal intensely aware of the agrarian discontent; his own family was forced out of their estate in the Dominican-owned hacienda in Calamba, Laguna. Rizal's Cabesang Tales, who turned against his oppressive friar landlord in the novel *El Filibusterismo*, affirms the revolution.

Ninoy wanted to go home after his heart surgery in the United States. I told him at that last meeting in Times Street that Marcos would get him because he was the only contender for power, with a political machine and popularity to contest Marcos in an election. He was so sure that he had friends in the Armed Forces who would help him. "Johnny Enrile," he said with great confidence, "is a friend. He will protect me."

He knew that Marcos was gravely ill; that if he died, there would be a vacuum. He must go home to fill that vacuum, to achieve his destiny.

Rizal did not have to come home. He could have stayed on in Europe; maybe he would have lived poorly there like M.H. del Pilar, but he would have survived. After all, he was a medical doctor. And he could have written more. But he returned home for, as he told the exiles in Europe, the fight for reforms was not in Spain but in Filipinas.

He knew he would face grave dangers if he returned, even sure death. He seemed prepared for that eventuality; he seemed to have accepted that fate. But he valued life, and in an effort to ingratiate himself with the rulers, he even suggested that he go to Cuba, on the side of the Spanish colonialists, not on the side of the Cuban revolutionaries, like Jose Marti. But that request was not granted.

Rizal was opposed to Bonifacio's revolution. To seek his support, Pio Valenzuela visited him in Dapitan where the Spaniards had exiled him. Rizal argued against that revolution, saying that Filipinos were not ready for it, that the cost 'and the bloodshed' would be tremendous. Such a position is made clear in his writing, particularly in the second novel, *El Filibusterismo*, where Ibarra turned Simoun returns to the country a full-fledged revolutionary. But the very reasons Rizal presents against revolution are nullified by the conditions depicted in both novels; they argue forcefully instead against the authorial denial.

And when the Spaniards executed him, his martyrdom, like Ninoy's murder, galvanized the people to act compulsively against the colonial power. His death confirmed Bonifacio's dream that upheaval was not just inevitable, it was also supremely righteous.

For all that Rizal intellectually expressed, his doubts about the use of force, his very life, and most of all his death, were in abject contrast to such views. This is one of those poignant ironies which, all the more, contributed to his greatness.

Some questions about the deaths of both Rizal and Aquino still fester in the mind. For instance, did Rizal really write the retraction before his execution as claimed by the Jesuits? Ambeth Ocampo, the historian, says there is such a document and he vouches for its authenticity. On the other hand, Austin Coates, who wrote the definitive biography of Rizal, said it never happened; Rizal would never have disavowed what he had done or written. He was not that kind of a man.

There is no ambiguity, however, about who ordered his execution: the colonial government.

Sure, Ninoy believed in revolution. But though several soldiers convicted of his murder are languishing in jail, the cover-up killings that followed his assassination have never been resolved. And though many have formed conclusions about who the mastermind is, that mastermind's identity is unknown to this very day. And one question which puzzles so many is why, when Cory was president and had all the power to uncover that assassin's identity, did she not do it?

In espousing a revolution as a solution to our ancient inequities, was Ninoy playing the usual elitist game of betting on both sides? It is a well-known ploy of the oligarchs to support both sides in a political contest and it is well known to those in power and in government that many of the oligarchs are supporting leftist elements to assure their survival just in case the left will triumph.

Shortly after EDSA 1, the former Army lieutenant Victor Corpus, who joined the NPA, visited me. I asked him if it was true that Ninoy really supported the New People's Army; yes, he said.

It was Ninoy, after all, who introduced Commander Dante Buscayno to Jose Maria Sison, the founder of the Chinese wing of the Communist Party, and Hacienda Luisita is known to have been the sanctuary for Commander Dante.

What is a national hero? It is understood that the whole nation reveres him because it is the nation that he unselfishly served, to which he gave his life. Even today, many believe that Bonifacio should occupy a higher pedestal than Rizal, that Rizal was deified by the Americans who agreed with his non-violent approach to independence. There should be no more debate about Rizal's status; even before the Americans came in 1898, the Malolos Republic already gave him that status as a national hero. He was a martyr, publicly executed for what he had done to advance the cause of this nation's freedom. He was a poet, a novelist, a medical doctor, an anthropologist, a linguist. At age 35, he had achieved so much; no country in Asia had ever produced one like him.

Ninoy was not martyred; he was murdered.

What had Ninoy achieved in his life time? He was a politician, a stirring speaker with a vast following and a political machine. He was a loyal friend; there are many of us who will confirm this. But he had actually very little to show as achievements other than political prowess.

Sure, there are those of us who believed in him, who knew he would have been a better president than Marcos because he had social vision and would surely pursue that vision and destroy the oligarchy to which he himself belonged.

Had he succeeded Marcos, Ninoy would have been harsher. He definitely had a sense of history but all these are speculations for he never really achieved the power that he so avidly sought, and for which he gave his life.

Fame and popularity are important structures in a hero's pedestal, but the elements for greatness transcend such qualities for they spring from the total essence of the hero, from his very soul.

Ninoy was famous just as he was popular, but he did not have that intrinsic greatness which Rizal possessed.

In my humble opinion, Ninoy was heroic but not a national hero.

And so, I will ask yet again, what kind of revolutionary movements do we have, if, after 40 years, such movements have not destroyed the oligarchs, the crooked politicians that have run this country to the ground?

And our leaders, particularly our very rich Filipinos, what kind of people are they if they are not humbled by their knowledge of what we have become, the hewers of wood and drawers of water for the world? Are they not shamed at all by their knowledge of our women working abroad as housemaids and prostitutes?

And our religious leaders: How could they continue with their preaching and how can they live with themselves knowing that they have failed?

Or our expensive, elite schools: Where are the Rizals and Ninoyos that they should be nurturing?

Are we a gutless, shameless race?