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Maneuvering Manila Isn't So Easy

By PAUL GIGOT

MANILA—This tropical city is 10,000 miles from Washington, but judging by the U.S. visitors it could be Capitol Hill.

Rep. Jack Kemp dropped by for a chat with President Ferdinand Marcos last week, joining a troupe that has included CIA boss William Casey; former U.N. Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick; Adm. William Crowe, chairman-designate of the Joint Chiefs; Sens. John Kerry and John Melcher; Rep. Stephen Solarz, plus assorted State Department big shots. They've all come to assess the troubles in the Philippines firsthand, and, more important, to continue a two-year effort to urge Mr. Marcos to "reform" his struggling 20-year-old rule.

They have all mostly been whispering into the wind. Despite nearly two years of prodding, Mr. Marcos still stubbornly resists most of the changes that both the U.S. and many Filipinos believe are needed to ensure a democratic transition from the Marcos era.

U.S. Influence Limited

As this fact sinks in, you can be sure that some Americans will begin to call this a "failure" of U.S. policy. They will then demand that the Reagan administration take more drastic action, such as withdrawing all support from the Philippines. The New York Times is already taking this line. Americans on the left claim to favor "nonintervention," except for authoritarians who have long been U.S. allies; then they hunt for "leverage" that can produce miracles of political change.

If only it were so easy. Events over the past two years in Manila suggest that U.S. influence with Mr. Marcos and in the Philippines generally is very limited. Most of the reforms that have taken place have resulted from Filipino, not American, pressure on Mr. Marcos. The lesson is that, unless the U.S. is willing to commit troops or support a coup, the fate of authoritarians and their countries is beyond much U.S. influence.

This isn't the first case of such stymied U.S. influence. Washington won't sell arms and seems to have quit backing multinational-agency loans to Chile, but the Pinochet dictatorship appears undeterred. South African Premier P.W. Botha has just demonstrated that he, too, can ignore the threat of U.S. sanctions. Yet this lack of leverage is all the more striking in Manila, because ties with the Philippines are among America's strongest anywhere. The U.S. has two big military bases north of Manila and has long been generous with aid. Filipinos and Americans fought to-

gether in World War II, and even today Filipinos visit or emigrate to the U.S. by the tens of thousands each year. One local parody of the Philippine left goes like this: "Yankee, go home (and take me with you)."

Yet even here, a determined dictator can deflect American pressure. Take military reform, a high U.S. priority. Most people agree that the Philippine military needs better discipline and morale to prevail against the growing communist insurgency. To do that, most people also agree, it needs to replace top officers corrupted by Mr. Marcos's patronage.

The symbol of this effort is Gen. Fabian Ver, who rose under Mr. Marcos from chauffeur to chief of staff. Gen. Ver is among those charged with conspiring to kill Benigno Aquino two years ago. Mr. Marcos has put him on "temporary leave" during the trial. The U.S. doesn't want Gen. Ver reinstated, in part because his successor, Fidel Ramos, is a well-regarded West Point graduate who has started to clean up the military. American emissaries have told Mr. Marcos this to his face and Sen. Melcher even said it publicly.

Yet Mr. Marcos insists that if Gen. Ver is acquitted, he'll get his old job back despite U.S. wishes. Philippine cabinet members say the best the U.S. can hope for is a compromise in which Gens. Ver and Ramos both resign. Yet this would merely open the chief-of-staff post to another Marcos protege, Gen. Josephus Ramos. Two other top Filipino generals who would also have influence after Gen. Ver's departure happen to be relatives of First Lady Imelda Marcos. The net effect on the military would be zero.

Similar obstacles have prevented economic reform. Mr. Marcos is a champion economic meddler, and the U.S. wants changes that let the market work. Mr. Marcos has at least bowed to a standard International Monetary Fund austerity package. But on major issues he stone-walls. Two of his favorite cronies or their surrogates continue to dominate the sugar and coconut industries, for example, and the reason goes to the heart of Mr. Marcos's power. If Mr. Marcos abandons his top cronies, he loses major sources of political funding. He also sends a signal to every other client.

"It's the *padrone* mentality. He has to take care of his own," says someone who knows Mr. Marcos well. "If he cuts off one, then every rat will leave the sinking ship."

It's also instructive to look at where Mr. Marcos has agreed to reform, because Americans have had little to do with it. Mr. Marcos agreed last year to scrap a succession plan that would have made it

easy for his ambitious wife to grab power. He was responding, though, to pressure from businessmen and voices in his own political party. "The U.S. was irrelevant," says Arturo Tolentino, an architect of the compromise.

A reform movement independent of Mr. Marcos has also developed this year among junior officers in the military. Yet U.S. diplomats admit the movement caught them by surprise, while the Filipino reformers say they'll do anything to avoid being associated with the U.S. "We remember Diem in Vietnam," says one.

Similar fear of American taint makes it difficult for the U.S. even to help ensure a fair election. An independent citizens group known as Namfrel did yeoman work making 1984's assembly elections the fairest in decades. It needs both more money and more manpower to make the next election truly honest, however, and the CIA conceivably could help. But Jose Concepcion, Namfrel's chief, considers any such funding the kiss of death, because it would damage the group's reputation for independence. "[That rumor] causes me all kinds of trouble," he says.

Faced with these realities, Filipino oppositionists and American moralists will surely demand that the Reagan administration press Mr. Marcos further. One idea is the "carrot-and-stick" proposal of Rep. Solarz, threatening aid cuts unless Mr. Marcos makes specific reforms.

A hint of how well this works occurred earlier this year when Mr. Solarz pushed aid cuts through the U.S. House. (Most aid was later restored in a House-Senate conference.) Mr. Marcos's defense minister quickly proposed that the U.S.-Philippine bases treaty be abrogated, while Mr. Marcos took the unsubtle step of having a medal (left over from World War II) pinned on his chest by the Soviet ambassador. Some of this was surely bluff, but it is always possible that Mr. Marcos could start playing ultranationalist and snub the U.S. altogether.

Dealt Out of the Game

Another idea is a show of U.S. moral indignation—a complete withdrawal of aid and a retreat from the bases. This would surely damage Mr. Marcos's domestic standing, but to an uncertain end. In the happiest scenario, the democratic opposition triumphs. But what if it doesn't? Mr. Marcos, his back to the wall, might himself crack down, or elements in the military assert themselves, or the growing force of the hard left play its hand. Whatever happens, America wouldn't be a player because it already will have dealt itself out of the game.

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None of this means the only U.S. choice is to sit on its hands and wait for the revolution. Public and private statements of the kind regularly made by Ambassador Stephen Bosworth here at least tell Filipino democrats we're on their side. And whatever leverage our aid does provide can be earmarked to free more of the economy and train a better military. But unhappy as it may be, the truth is that U.S. influence is limited. The Philippines isn't any longer an American colony; the days when we could select leaders or anoint the next, better general are long gone.

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