



—The Women's Media Circle

**Nikki**

# WOMB

## An All Women Political Party In The Philippines

Founder Nikki Coseteng Talks to Madhu Kishwar

*The Philippines is one of the few countries in the world today which has a woman (Cory Aquino) heading its government. Even more unusual, it has a women's political party called WOMB (not Aquino's party). WOMB emerged from women's active participation in the struggle against the Marcos dictatorship which fell in 1986.*

*In the interview from which extracts are reproduced below, one of the leading founder members of WOMB, Anna Dominique Coseteng, popularly known as Nikki, talks about the women's party, about women in politics, and about her own political involvement. Nikki is one of 18 Congresswomen. In the next election, she intends to stand for the Senate.*

*Nikki is most unlike the stereotyped image we tend to have of a woman politician. Although she is the mother of two teenaged children, she could pass for a funloving college student. Her looks and her style of dressing make her look like an eye-catching fashion model straight from the pages of Vogue. Yet, there is more substance to her political involvement than to that of many a seasoned politician. She is one of the few members of Congress who are still desperately struggling to highlight the continuing violations of human rights in the Philippines. Amnesty International has recently indicted the Filipino government for these violations. Nikki is also one of the few who is not in the business of making money from politics, and is not known for corruption — as many Filipino politicians are.*

*Although Nikki possesses many of the qualities that can make a woman successful in a man's world on men's terms, she is also unusual in her commitment to women's issues. Her commitment is evident when one takes into account the context — a country whose polity is dominated by a conservative Catholic church, so that issues like the right to abortion or to divorce are almost unmentionable, and even Cory Aquino dare not take an open stand on them. Nikki is one of the few to take a stand on these issues, although she confesses that WOMB cannot vigorously campaign around them, for fear of isolation.*

*The women's party does not confine itself to a narrow definition of women's issues. It is as committed to land reforms, and various other progressive economic measures for the benefit of the poor, and is also active on human rights issues. Nikki is chairperson of the human rights committee, and faces great hostility from the ruling party for this work.*

*Recently, Nikki was convenor of the Sisterhood is Global dialogues in the Philippines. A panel of five international women activists were invited to initiate debate on women's rights issues. This interview was conducted by Madhu Kishwar on that occasion.*

*How did you come into politics? Were you trained for it or how did it happen?*

It depends what we mean by politics. Is it just running for public office or is it a preoccupation with what one thinks is best for one's country and the process of bringing about those changes? In the latter sense, I became politicised at an early age. I was a university student in Manila in the early seventies which were the hottest years of the anti Marcos struggle.

Marcos was elected in 1965. 1973 was to be the election year. According to our law, no one can serve for more than two

terms. Marcos had completed two terms so he was not eligible to stand for election. To ensure that he stayed in power, he declared martial law in September 1972.

Different sectors began to protest, but students were in the forefront, mostly in Manila University. Demonstrations were led up to the palace by chanting students. The students suffered heavily. They were gassed, they were clobbered, they were arrested and tortured.

*Were the students led by some party or were they independent?*

They mobilised their own ranks through

their own organisations, most of which soon had to go underground. The students were against the American intervention, against the nuclear bases set up by the USA in the Philippines, and pro land reforms.

*What kind of land reforms are required?*

The majority of peasants in the Philippines do not own land. They are really landless workers. The National Organisation of Peasants conducted a number of mass actions. Industrial workers too called strikes, sitdowns and

go slow agitations.

*What were the other sources of people's dissatisfaction with the Marcos government?*

In the late seventies, the economy collapsed. Marcos and his cronies had been siphoning money out of the country. Most people were extremely poor and had no buying power.

The government was heavily subsidising American big business, at the people's cost. For instance, Dole, an American company, cultivates pineapple on tens of thousands of hectares in the Philippines. This causes heavy erosion and flooding. When floods occur, Dole gives out a few sacks of rice to those whose lands have been flooded. Government dredges out the water at its own expense, which means subsidising the American operations. Pineapple is exported or sold to very small sections in this country. Most Filipinos can barely afford to eat salt and rice.

Our economy is agricultural and is dependent on only one country — the US. They dictate the prices because we make deals only with them. Sugar was practically the only crop at that time. Even when sugar prices were booming, the farmworkers were poor because very little of the profit went back into agriculture; most of it was siphoned out of the country because the landlords had no confidence in the government, so they made sure their money left the country. When compulsory procurement prices were levied on sugar, the peasantry were the worst hit. At this crisis, many who had supported Marcos went against him because they knew he was about to collapse.

*Did women participate in the resistance to martial law?*

Yes, I think women were more active. They were very creative in expressing their disgust with the dictatorship. You saw women of all kinds parading on the streets — in high heels, in rubber shoes, or barefoot — they were all there.

There were women who gave up their careers to be part of the liberation struggle, for instance, Maita Gomez and Nelia Sancho, who were beauty queens. Maita

was married to a very wealthy man. She left and went into the struggle underground.

*What other forms did people's protest take?*

There are many unsung heroes of the media, who, despite threats to their lives, continued to keep up the power of the pen. Despite censorship, they came up with little underground newspapers. Some of us who were not underground, openly spoke in Rotary Clubs against Marcos. People would say: "Oh, she got away with it, let's join."

In different cities, large gatherings of

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## For Nelia

**Why are you so hard? they ask  
Why do you not bend a little?**

**They call it grace  
Swaying like a bamboo  
With the wind.**

**Listen to it weave  
The music of compromise  
While it kisses the ground  
At your feet.**

**Even bamboos however  
Could only bend so much.**

**When the storm comes  
Listen to their cracking  
They break one by one.**

**You could only bend so much.  
I would prefer to be a rock,  
Smoothed by years  
But unswaying.**

**Why are you so hard? they ask  
Why do you not bend a little?**

—Clarita Roja

**This poem to Nelia Sancho, a Filipino "Beauty Queen" who was arrested early in 1976 and charged for being a member of the New People's Army and the Communist Party of Philippines, is reprinted here from Manushi No. 2, 1979.**

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people expressed their sentiments through what was called "the parliament of the streets." Protest also took the form of marches, pickets, tableaux, stage plays, even crazy things like dart tournaments where the targets were the faces of Marcos' cronies, and people paid one peso for each dart they threw at them. We had concerts, skits, nationalist theatre. The numbers participating ranged from 20 to 200,000, depending on the issue and the form of action. The determination of the people to end the dictatorship was very strong.

*How did you get involved in the protests?*

I was not formally affiliated to any student organisation because my parents were strict and I had to reach home immediately after class. When demonstrations were held in college hours, I participated by missing classes. I have always been fascinated by the gap between what governments claim to be and what they actually are. I could not understand why protesting students had to be killed. We were taught in school that we had a democracy. Yet, dissenters were being killed in the most inhuman way. Despite this, more and more people joined. I felt that anyone who did not see the logic here was either blind or totally callous.

*But you come from a very privileged background. Why did you feel concerned about all this?*

It was precisely because I was fortunate enough not to have to work for a living that I was able to go and find out what was happening. If I had to work to feed jobless parents and siblings, I probably would not have reached where I am today, because I would be preoccupied with selling flowers or cigarettes, and cooking rice. So I look at this privilege not as a liability but as an asset.

The resources people like me had were tremendously necessary. The dictatorship would not want to see the resources of the rich being channelled into activism against the government. We had our ways of getting through to businessmen, bankers, politicians. Many industrialists who began by giving token amounts,

eventually ended up leading marches.

*What was your family's response to your joining the anti Marcos movement?*

Fear, tension, uncertainty. They dissuaded me, said I might get killed. But they know that if I decide to do anything they can't stop me, especially if I am not harming them or depending on them. I made it clear that if they felt embarrassed they might lose whatever they have got of me, and they could disown me.

*What was your family's attitude to Marcos?*

When Marcos ran for his first term in 1965, his running mate, Fernando Lopez, was from our province, so my family supported him. After that, they realised that Marcos had a hidden agenda, so my parents never became his cronies. My parents were in business; they didn't want to be involved in politics. But anyone who was not in the good graces of Marcos was subject to pressures. My father was disadvantaged because he kept a distance from Marcos, and his business collapsed.

*Was yours one of the 500 families who supposedly rule the Philippines?*

I don't know. My mother was a university professor and came from a landowning family. My father was a banker and one of the top industrialists of the country, manufacturing ceramics and dinnerware, and sole distributor for Akai and Honda. It is true that those who own large tracts of land and are in partnership with multinational business concerns have a great say in determining who will win an election.

*How did you come to form the women's political party?*

Our party was called WOMB — Women for the Ouster of Marcos and Boycott. It is now called WOMB — Giving Life to a New Order, because Marcos has been ousted and we are not boycotting anything right now. It is an all women political party, and the only women's organisation based in the middle class and upper class.

How it happened was that some of us women who had worked together in the struggle used to meet, and we had this idea. We thought that apart from the

national interest, women's interests had also to be attended to, so we said: "Yes, why not?"

In any case, there were few alternatives available. The only party we were inclined to join was the PDF Laban, which had been involved in the struggle and whose principles we agreed with. A number of the best human rights lawyers and senators were in this party. But, unfortunately, the chairman of the party, Cojuanco, who happens to be Cory Aquino's brother, did not believe in the party principles. The leadership actually prostituted the party tenets.

*What were the aims of the women's party?*

To be a member, one has to be a woman and has to believe in the party principles. We want to liberate not just the women but the people as a whole from the clutches of America.

Our programme was a nationalist one. We were for the conservation of natural resources, more benefits for women in the workforce, equal pay for women in farmwork, and upgrading the standard of living for the country as a whole. Anything that is done for our people will benefit women, for instance, access to drinking water, electrification, schools will benefit every man, woman and child.

We also have special agenda for women, like a loan fund for women who want to enter business. We are in the process of studying a bill on this. We advocate a birth control programme which will give women a choice whether to have a child or not.

*When was the party founded and how did it fare in the elections?*

The party was formed in October 1986 just before the snap elections called by Marcos which triggered off his downfall. We put up about 10 candidates for the Congress, or house of representatives, which has a total of 200 elected members. We could not put up candidates for the Senate because we did not have enough members.

Only one candidate won — myself. It was considered an achievement because now, even in the areas where we lost, we

have an organisation. We now have around 3,500 members.

*How did you conduct your campaign?*

My case was funny because I said I would run only if I didn't have to spend my own money. We embarked on a nontraditional campaign. I called up friends and asked them if I should run. If they said "Yes" they had to give their time, energy and resources to help me win.

So it wasn't my victory. All I did was shake hands with people and tell them what I want to do for the country. That's all. Everybody else did everything else. We got donations. We had only 45 days to campaign. I won by a margin of about 14,000 votes. I had 14 opponents, of whom five were serious opponents, all of them men.

My constituency (Third district, Quezon city), was 67 percent poor. I fared best in the depressed areas. In my own area I didn't lead, although I did in some other wealthy areas. Where I live, I lost by about five votes. This was perhaps because people thought I was a communist or close to that. This kind of stupid accusation could have worked only among those who didn't know any better.

*How was your campaign different from that of others?*

I wasn't going to sing and dance. Normally, every candidate sings and dances. It is a tradition in the Philippines. I can dance but I won't dance to make people vote for me. Nor did I give out sacks of rice or canned goods which many do. Nor did I character assassinate any of my opponents.

Ironically, while some accused me of being a communist, others said I was an elitist. They accused me of having to wash my hands in alcohol after shaking hands with the poor. They said I would never be able to work for the district because I was selfish. They brought up my being a single parent, and said I had many admirers. They said I was decadent and go to discos.

I said: "Yes, I am rich. But social consciousness, the quest for justice, the protection and respect for human rights is not a monopoly of the poor."

*Do you think more women voted for you?*

It's very difficult to say. I think it helped. They said they had never had a Congresswoman from that district.

*How many women were elected in all?*

In the Congress about 18 — from different parties. And in the Senate, two out of 24.

*Did anybody laugh at you when you started the women's party?*

Yes, everybody. They said we were crazy, we would alienate half the world. But half the world is not alienated. Half the world has been ruling the world so far.

demanding employment for women, we are not breaking homes. Most women work not for lipstick or nail polish but to help put food on the family's table.

Second, even though divorce is not legal in the Philippines, because most people are Catholics, and the church forbids divorce, yet the reality is that men can still have five women under the present arrangement. The wives have no redress. A man can leave his wife and not give her any alimony or child support. Or he can have her stay at home while he goes around with other women, and shows himself at church on Sunday with his wife

When I supported Cory, I thought that being a woman, she would think not in terms of guns, but in terms of medicines, schools; not of loans but of higher pay for teachers; not of aggression but of health, education and farmer support. But one woman is not going to do all of that because she is basically operating in patriarchal institutions.

She did not come to power on a women's rights agenda. She does not have an agenda for women. She has not touched on women's issues in any of her state of the nation addresses.

She came to power not as a woman, but as the widow of an ex-senator who had been brutally assassinated in public. People were outraged by the way the Marcos regime handled the situation when Aquino was killed.\* Since she had suffered heavily at the hands of the regime, she became the people's choice.

Cory was not active in the militant struggle. The opposition had to unite in order to avoid the division of votes. The only way to unite was to have Aquino as a common consensus candidate.

*Has Cory managed to tackle the problems created by the Marcos regime?*

It is unlikely that she will be able to solve the problems she has inherited. It is an astronomical task.

I find it disturbing that even though we are now supposed to be a democracy, killings by the military continue. Since Cory came to power, the military budget has gone up. The excuse given is that the insurgency has to be controlled. But the fact is that the number of bullets we buy is in the ratio of about 20,000 bullets per



**A protest demonstration**

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In the beginning they laughed; towards the middle they stopped laughing; and in the end they supported. The idea that dates back to the colonial period, that women must be seen and not heard, is, I think, slowly going.

There's another peculiar thing. Many men would not allow their wives, daughters or sisters to be deeply involved in traditional party work because they would come into contact with men. But we could make husbands feel secure because we were only women in the party, so there was no reason for them to feel jealous.

*Were you never accused of wanting to break up homes?*

Yes, we were. My opinion is that in

and kids. It is a hypocritical system.

I think if divorce was legal, men would work harder at keeping their marriages going, because they would know that if they were divorced, they would have to divide the property and make maintenance payments.

Further, it is just not true that all problem children come from broken homes. Drug addiction occurs as much in unbroken homes where both parents are extremely religious, and mothers have no preoccupation besides their children.

*Does your having a woman president, Cory Aquino, make any significant difference to government policy and practice?*

\*Cory Aquino's husband, Nino Aquino, was from a prominent landowning family and was one of the most outspoken senators against American intervention in the Philippines. He was jailed by Marcos from 1972 to 1980. Then he was permitted to seek refuge in the USA. In 1983 he returned to the Philippines. As he alighted at Manila airport, he was picked up by plainclothes soldiers, and a few moments later, was shot dead in public at the airport itself. His wife was in Boston at the time. His murder triggered off a new phase in the movement against Marcos.

insurgent. While four human rights lawyers had been killed in the last 10 years of the Marcos government, five human rights lawyers have been killed in the first two years of the Aquino government. This is very alarming.

*But are not the insurgents also indulging in killings and extortions in the countryside?*

My attitude is that the insurgency should be looked at as one response by the citizenry to a government that was not responsive to the people's needs. If the number of insurgents grew from 16 to 26,000, it means they have the support of the community which is their source of food, refuge and finance.

Bullets cannot solve this problem. There is an inherent contradiction between respect for human rights and giving a call for total war against the insurgents. Most of the insurgents are disgruntled individuals who have no homes, no work, nothing. Communists are in a small minority in the insurgency.

Further, I do not think total war should be declared against any section of our people, not even against communists. It is like declaring total war on Sikhs or Hindus or whatever. We are supposed to have a free market of ideas and to be able to reach a consensus within a democratic space. All this is rhetoric unless we can put an end to human rights violations.

We should not pretend that the military does not commit such violations against the civilian population. The armed forces are paid for by the taxpayers, to uphold the Constitution and the rule of law. When government forces violate law, what do we do?

I am the chairperson of the human rights committee in the Congress, but we have not passed any bills on the subject, because there is a kind of aversion to any talk of human rights.

*Didn't Cory offer an amnesty to the left?*

Right when the peace talks were going on, some leaders of the New People's Army, which is the armed component of the Communist Party, were arrested without a warrant. This indicates that the

political will to stop the violations is not strong enough.

*Do you feel satisfied or frustrated with your role in the Congress?*

Both. The satisfaction comes from having a venue to speak and to be heard, which is important for activists. Satisfaction comes also from the expressions of solidarity one gets from ordinary people one doesn't know.

Frustration comes from the fact that there are only 25 or 30 of us in the Congress who feel as we do on human rights issues. We are a small minority in the house of 200.



**Nikki on the TV programme Woman Watch**

*I'm told you are involved in presenting a regular TV programme for women on a channel that is considered a government propaganda channel. What constraints do you face and what do you hope to achieve?*

The programme, Woman Watch, was started two years ago. It is run by a team called Women's Media Circle. They asked me to host it. I do this work on a voluntary unpaid basis.

Most TV programmes project women either as sex objects or as hysterical victims of exploitation. We would like to project

women as human beings with their own identities. We have taken up issues like environment, housing, prostitution, pornography, from a women's perspective. We also have beauty and fashion shows, cooking and exercise demonstrations, because we have to cater to women's interests in order to hold their attention.

We get free air time but we have to pay production costs through advertising and donations. Raising this money is a tough battle. Even if it is a government propaganda station, there is all the more reason for us to provide a balance. Although there is a tendency to support the government agenda on this channel,

and the station management would be bothered by certain subjects, we try to transcend that, and to make our programme as intellectually stimulating as possible.

*How does society view you as a single parent?*

Society considers a separated man an asset but a separated woman a liability. Separated men are looked on as victims: "His wife didn't understand him, poor guy." But separated women are looked on as always wanting to grab other women's husbands.

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*Are there any other Congresswomen who are single parents?*

Three. I think the number of single parents has grown because women have become courageous enough to accept that if things are unbearable in marriage, there is no need to kill yourself.

*Why did you decide to separate?*

I was 19 years old when I got married. I was in college. I wanted to get out of my parents' house, wanted to be free. Later, I found that it wasn't freedom I had got into. When you are young, you do make mistakes. If I were to live my life again, I wouldn't do it.

*What was the source of conflict?*

My husband was not financially secure. He was working for my father. He manifested this insecurity in many ways, mainly wanting me to live like a stereotyped housebound wife. He resented my continuing my education, my associating with people, and my desire for a name for myself, for accomplishment and fulfillment.

It has always been important to me to be my own person. Although I am 75 percent Chinese, I was not brought up in the traditional Chinese family where a woman doesn't count. I had a comparatively liberal upbringing and was taught to speak my mind. I have always resented being boxed in.

We also had different political views. He wanted to associate with the Marcos people whereas I looked on any association with that government as a handicap, because of the struggle we were waging.

Since divorce is not possible, I just walked out. I had to decide on my own, because most people would have advised me to stay on for the sake of the children. But I felt my children would never be happy in a home with no peace, where the parents were always tense. Of course, the violence was only verbal. But why prolong the agony until you get into the stage of blows?

I left and went to my grandmother's house. My two grandmothers and my mother supported me all the way.

*Does your husband pay child support?*

Not a cent. I have not talked to him since the day we separated. He has already been illegally married twice after that.

I am a fulltime member of Congress. Every member gets \$ 800 a month. I also have some money my father left, and an art gallery. My grandmother and mother have some business, a tile factory, a ceramics factory. I live in our family home with my son and daughter.

*Do you intend to remarry?*

I don't believe that's the world for me. I don't want to be "held" in that sense, unless the attitude of men changes in my lifetime, which I doubt that it will. My basic requirement is that a man should appreciate a woman for what she is and not try to fit her into the stereotype he wants her to be

*How do you see the future of the women's party?*

I think the party has to be strengthened. We are going to have local elections in 1989 for the village unit which is the smallest political unit in the country. Many more women can make it at that level. This election will be a testing ground for the 1992 national elections.

I feel people are looking for a genuine alternative. There is a good chance of a coalition which could provide a credible alternative, and of the women's party being part of such a coalition.

*How will you fundraise for the party?*

Women have tremendous potential for fundraising. People are willing to help because they know now that the women's party is a no-nonsense party. We have been able to prove that there is room for new politics and that it can best thrive under a multiparty system.

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