

Follow Aquino's example, churches implore Filipinos: Choosing democracy

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Church leaders have urged Filipinos to help remove new signs of despotism and to protect the democracy for which former president Corazon Aquino fought and sacrificed.

“She taught us to be on guard against any more tyrants and the necessary struggle we have to take to uphold civil liberties,” the National Council of Churches in the Philippines said in a statement on the eve of Aquino’s burial on August 5.

“The signs of the present government point to a situation where we must continue to care and dare to fight,” noted the statement, referring to the government of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.

Aquino, age 76, died of colon cancer August 1. She was swept to power in February 1986 in a church-backed “people power” revolution, which ousted Ferdinand Marcos, who had ruled the country for 20 years, 14 of them under martial law.

She was the widow of the late former senator Benigno Aquino Jr., who was assassinated in 1983 on his arrival at the Manila International Airport following a three-year exile in the United States.

As president, Corazon Aquino restored democracy, cleaned up government, freed political prisoners jailed by Marcos, and initiated peace talks with communist and Muslim rebels.

Commentators praised Aquino for immediately relinquishing power after her six-year term, for refusing backing to run for reelection and for stressing that her role was to consolidate democracy.

In recent years, Aquino had criticized reported abuses and corruption under Arroyo, including moves by Arroyo's allies to amend the constitution drafted under Aquino.

The Council of Churches, the Episcopal (Anglican) Church of the Philippines and the Catholic bishops' conference have all issued statements opposing these moves to amend the constitution. They have expressed fears that the amendments are intended to allow Arroyo to stand for a second term, something the present constitution forbids.

In a statement, Episcopal bishops on July 30 likened these moves to what Marcos did when he amended the constitution in 1972 and later declared martial law to prolong his rule. However, Arroyo's executive secretary, Gabriel Claudio, said August 2 that the president's office had urged its allies in Congress to drop efforts to amend the constitution.

As Aquino was laid to rest, church leaders exhorted Filipinos to be vigilant for democracy. Catholic bishop Socrates Villegas of Balanga said at the funeral mass on August 5: "We promise to love this country as you loved us. There is darkness in our land because you are gone. But we know we have enough lights within us because you have shared with us your fire." *-Ecumenical News International*