

## ALFREDO R. A. BENGZON

ALFREDO R. A. BENGZON was born in Tarlac, a province in the central plains of Luzon, Philippines, on 20 October 1935. He was the fourth of five children born to Jose Bengzon, an accomplished lawyer from the northern province of Pangasinan, and Antonia Jimenez, daughter of the mayor of Jose's hometown. At the time of ALFREDO's birth the Bengzon family was based in Tarlac, where Jose had taken the position of manager of a large bus company. Shortly after, however, Jose successfully campaigned for a seat representing his home province in the National Assembly. The family then moved to Manila, taking up residence in the Paco district. It was there in 1941 that ALFREDO entered first grade in the nearby grammar school of his father's alma mater, Ateneo de Manila.

BENGZON's education had barely begun, however, when Japan launched its campaign to seize the Philippines at the start of World War II. In December 1941 he and his classmates were peremptorily sent home from school. As bombing of the city intensified in the days that followed, the family pasted dark paper over the house windows and retreated for safety to the basement during raids. When the fighting was over and a Japanese colonial administration replaced the American one, Assemblyman Bengzon was out of a job. To make ends meet, Antonia organized a chocolate-making business at home. She and her daughters mixed cacao with brown sugar, pressed it into metal frames, and wrapped each piece in a thin sheet of paper. This wrapper bore the family trademark, dutifully stamped by young ALRAN—BENGZON's lifelong nickname—and his brothers.

In 1942 the family went to live with BENGZON's grandparents in Lingayen, Pangasinan. Although there was a Japanese garrison in the town and tense relations existed between the new occupiers and the local residents, life was safer there than in Manila. Nevertheless, the family kept its distance from the Japanese and BENGZON remembers that his father, walking in town, would take the long way round in order to avoid having to bow to the foreign sentries. Secretly they supported local guerrillas. BENGZON resumed school at the public Lingayen Elementary School where, amusingly, all mention of the United States

had been ordered deleted from the schoolbooks by the simple expedient of pasting the offending pages together.

As the fortunes of war shifted and an American counterattack seemed more and more imminent, the family moved out to the countryside and prepared for the worst by constructing banana trunk barricades around their nipa hut. The fighting bypassed them, but several relatives who had remained in town died.

Back in Manila, the Paco district had been badly damaged and Assemblyman Jose Bengzon now decided to settle his family in the suburb of San Juan. A disused Chinese noodle factory became the family compound. Young BENGZON briefly resumed his grade four studies at Saint John's Academy. As a newcomer he was made to sit in the front of the classroom with the girls. The boys taunted him and, for the only time in his life, he did poorly at school. His father transferred him to Ateneo de Manila as soon as it reopened and, in this rigorous Jesuit-run academy where his father and many of his other male relatives were educated, young BENGZON was in his element.

Indeed for the next twelve years, BENGZON was almost wholly absorbed in the life at Ateneo. He thrived in the school's atmosphere of high academic achievement and extracurricular life. During high school years, he and his classmates competed in all things: sports, debating, the Christmas-package drive, and of course in scholarship. Each class sought to make its special mark on the institution, and in doing so classmates formed lifelong bonds of friendship. ("The Ateneo," says BENGZON today, "is not just a school, . . . it's part of your family.") At the same time, BENGZON was exposed to the attractive role models of his Filipino and American Jesuit teachers, who not only instructed but also led the boys in games, clubs, and camping expeditions and who encouraged them to excel. Fr. John D. Delaney, the dean, awakened them to social issues. But the greatest influence on the young BENGZON was his third-year teacher, Fr. Catalino Arevalo, S.J., who is regarded by ALRAN and his family as one of them.

By the time of BENGZON's final year of high school, the Jesuits had moved Ateneo from the crowded, war-damaged streets of downtown Manila to a spacious new site in suburban Quezon City. He and his classmates had sometimes gone camping in the area before, and even now they occasionally found snakes "sneaking up to the classroom." BENGZON's was the first high school class to graduate from this new Loyola Heights campus. His father, who was now secretary of justice in the administration of President Elpidio Quirino, was the commencement speaker.

Having decided to continue at Ateneo for his baccalaureate degree, BENGZON now pondered his course of study. Most of the men in his family were lawyers but he disliked law. Business, he thought, was “dirty.” Engineering was an alternative but advanced mathematics intimidated him. By a process of elimination, BENGZON decided to take the premedical course but to concentrate on liberal arts. This, he says now, was “one of the best decisions I ever made.”

During his first year of college, BENGZON made another important decision. Driven by his strong religious feelings and the powerful example of his teachers at Ateneo, he decided to enter the Society of Jesus. By 31 July 1953 he had met the entrance requirements and had been invited to begin formal religious instruction at the Sacred Heart Novitiate in Novaliches. A round of “farewell” parties preceded the big day.

In the midst of this, BENGZON began to have second thoughts. He knew that becoming a Jesuit meant submitting himself completely to the discipline of the order. He now asked himself, “Am I ready to obey everything? Am I ready to give up my freedom?” His Jesuit novice master encouraged him to ignore these last minute doubts as temptations of the devil, but he was in turmoil. Backing out would be embarrassing: what would people say? With his parents abroad, he faced the dilemma alone and, in the end, did not enter the novitiate. However, he continued to attend religious retreats regularly and kept open the option of entering the religious life. But his life soon gained a momentum that drew him in other directions, and gradually the allure of the priesthood faded.

As BENGZON now plunged with renewed vigor into the liberal arts, he also kept up a busy round of extracurricular activities with his friends. He wrote for the college’s magazine, *Heights*, and eventually became its editor. As a member of the Social Action Club he tutored children in the public schools. And under the direction of Fr. James B. Reuter,\* he sang in the glee club and discovered the pleasures of dramatics. A featured player in the Ateneo Players’ production of *Cyrano de Bergerac*, he appeared in the first dramatic play to be televised in the Philippines. So taken with acting was he that, for a time, he flirted with the idea of becoming a professional actor. Despite such distracting fantasies, however, BENGZON stayed on course academically. He graduated magna cum laude in 1956 and immediately entered medical school at the University of the Philippines.

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By this time BENGZON was already acquainted with his bride-to-be, Luisa Lourdes Angara, or Nini. They had met on a blind date on 19 December 1955 (he remembers exactly) and had attended the Ateneo senior prom together. ALRAN was instantly attracted; she was so modest and refined. But their romance developed slowly. Nini was still in high school and visited Manila only occasionally from her home in Baguio. Even after she matriculated at Saint Theresa's College in Manila, BENGZON held back. Medical school was absorbing most of his time and he could see her only on the rare free weekend. Besides, it would be years before he could support a wife and family. He considered breaking off the relationship but did not. When he completed his formal training at the University of the Philippines and an overseas scholarship beckoned portending a lengthy separation, the families of Nini and ALRAN took the initiative. They encouraged the young couple to marry and to accept their financial assistance. This was happily agreed to, and on 20 May 1961 ALFREDO and Luisa were married. Eight months thereafter, following ALFREDO's residency in neuro-psychiatry at Philippine General Hospital, they left the Philippines for a five-year sojourn in Europe and North America.

In the course of his medical training, BENGZON had explored a wide range of potential specialties—psychiatry, cardiology, gastroenterology, and others. He admits that he was attracted to neurology in a somewhat perverse way. Because his mentor was so demanding, BENGZON was drawn into the field in his effort to please the unpleasable Dr. Romeo Apostol. When Apostol became fatally ill, the dean, Dr. A. B. M. Sison (who was also BENGZON's uncle), urged him to continue advanced studies in neurology and found opportunities for him to do so abroad. The first was a research fellowship in neuropharmacology at the *Nervenklinik Freie Universitat* in West Berlin. The Berlin Wall had risen just a short time before and friends warned that divided Berlin was not a safe place to be. Nini was pregnant and, moreover, neither she nor her husband knew a word of German. Nevertheless, the BENGZONS resolved to go.

Armed with the book, *Deutsch Sprechen fur Auslander*, young Dr. BENGZON plunged into the foreign world of German academic medicine, studying the language at the Goethe Institute in the mornings and neurology at the clinic in the afternoons. Within two months, his German was good enough "to argue with a German taxi driver," he recalls proudly. He was soon abreast of the difficult curriculum as well. Germany was an eye-opener. He found the country both hospitable and, where clinical instruction was concerned, rather formal. German efficiency impressed him. In the midst of the 1962 Cuban missile crisis, he recalls, even foreign students were provided with a prearranged escape route from the city. As ALRAN pondered

the Germans and studied feverishly, Nini cared for their new son, Jaime Alfredo Gabriel, born just a month after they arrived.

By March 1963, the Bengzon family had moved to the United States and settled in Madison, Wisconsin—just in time for the arrival of son number two, Joseph Anton Raphael. Dr. BENGZON now took up a residency under the University of Wisconsin's chief of neurology, Dr. Francis Forster. Forster took the broad view that training should include management as well as medical skills. In two and a half years, BENGZON became Forster's senior resident, in which capacity he virtually ran the neurology department. BENGZON was comfortable in the American Midwest, with its casual outings so conducive to family life, and came to consider Madison his second home. By the time the family departed in September 1965, it had expanded once more with the addition of son number three, John Andrew Michael.

The next step in BENGZON's prolonged postgraduate education was a one-year appointment, beginning in October 1965, as senior fellow in electro-encephalography at the Montreal Neurological Institute—which is how son number four, Jerome Albert Serafin, came to be born in Canada. The family pilgrimage finally came to an end in Bethesda, Maryland, where, six months before returning to the Philippines, BENGZON was an international postdoctoral research fellow at the United States National Institute of Neurological Diseases.

By this time BENGZON had gained a state-of-the-art education in his field. He could easily have remained in North America and made his career there; he had tempting opportunities. Moreover, he knew that the kind of advanced research he loved was not being done in the Philippines, and both he and Nini enjoyed the independence of life in the United States. Nevertheless, in May 1967, they returned to the Philippines, pulled back by the strong emotional ties of home and family and by the desire to give something in return for their many advantages. Furthermore, BENGZON had felt the sting of racial discrimination in North America, and "we both agreed we didn't want to be second-class citizens."

The next few years were full of difficult adjustments as BENGZON launched his medical practice and settled into teaching at the University of the Philippines. For a time he was depressed, and more than once he and Nini considered going abroad again. A trip to the United States in 1969 convinced them, however, that the Philippines was truly home, and they have remained there ever since.

Aside from teaching and practicing medicine, BENGZON was soon embroiled in the affairs of the ABM Sison Hospital, the private hospital

in which his parents were major stockholders. Dr. A. B. M. Sison, his uncle and former dean, was president and had staffed the hospital with his colleagues and former students. BENGZON found the hospital to be disorganized, undercapitalized, underutilized, and riven by internal conflict. Not surprisingly, it was losing money. BENGZON understood little about business at the time and confronting Sison, his senior relative and benefactor, ran against accepted Filipino behavior. Instead of making a fuss, he simply quit the board though not the practice. But as things moved from bad to worse, BENGZON asked Martin Bonoan, a leading businessman whom he was treating for migraine headaches, what could be done. What Bonoan recommended was to seize control of the hospital management by mobilizing the support of its stockholders. (As BENGZON recalls, when Bonoan told him to “gather proxies,” he naively inquired, “What’s a proxy?”).

However, he took Bonoan’s advice and at the stockholders’ meeting his insurgent group gained eleven of the twelve seats. A new team, with BENGZON as executive vice-president and Dr. Augusto Sarmiento as president and medical director (replacing Sison), brought professional management to the hospital for the first time. As if to underscore this change, the hospital’s name became Medical City General Hospital. In three years, it moved from loss to profit. This experience was BENGZON’s introduction to politics as well as to business and prompted him to enroll in a Master of Business Administration (MBA) program for senior executives being offered by his alma mater, Ateneo de Manila University. This he managed to squeeze into his busy schedule consisting of practicing medicine, managing Medical City, teaching, and playing golf—his new passion. In the midst of all this, in June 1972, a fifth and final son, Joaquin Augusto Angelo, was born to the Bengzons.

Students in Ateneo’s MBA program were encouraged to apply their lessons to situations they were personally familiar with. BENGZON therefore studied problems common to hospitals. For his thesis he examined why hospitals fail as businesses, comparing the experiences of Manila’s leading hospitals. His thesis later became the master plan for managing Medical City.

BENGZON’s growing acumen as a manager of health care soon led to his involvement in another enterprise. When the Philippines’ leading investment bank, Bancom Development Corporation, began diversifying in the early 1970s, its president, Sixto K. Roxas, approached BENGZON to set up a health care subsidiary that could package medical services for corporations and other subscribers. This led to the formation of Bancom Health Care Corporation, which specialized in health care consultancy and organized the Philippines’ first health maintenance

organization. BENGZON headed the organization from 1974 to 1978, until it became independent of Bancom and was reorganized as Integrated Health Care Services, Inc. (Intercare), with BENGZON still as president.

By this time, much had changed in the Philippines. The late 1960s and early 1970s were marked by political turbulence. In 1972 President Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law, an act that once again prompted the Bengzons to consider leaving the country. Instead, he chose to apply himself quietly to his medical practice as well as the affairs of Medical City and the corporation; he confined his dissent to off-the-cuff comments in his medical school lectures and private conversations. Even so, word of his lectures got around and his colleagues on the faculty warned him to tone it down. On three occasions in the latter half of the 1970s, emissaries from Marcos approached him to become minister of health. He thought it over seriously but concluded, given the nature of the Marcos government, that it would not be possible to serve it and remain thoroughly professional at the same time.

A few years later, however, he did agree to help design the Philippine Medical Center, a project of Mrs. Imelda Marcos. This appealed to him because Mrs. Marcos had set only two criteria for the center: it must be excellent and it must be Filipino. BENGZON envisioned a national health center that existed at the apex of a network of interlocking and mutually enforcing medical facilities covering the gamut of treatment and training. (Satellite facilities, for example, would specialize in pediatric medicine, kidney and heart disease, and so on.) "The concept was very good," he recalls, but somehow financing for the project fell through and the Marcoses abruptly abandoned it.

BENGZON was not acquainted personally with Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino, nor with his wife Corazon, or Cory. But he had followed Ninoy's opposition to martial law intently and gathered his hospital staff to watch the former senator when he campaigned for election over television from his jail cell, in one of the more bizarre moments of the period. Still, up to the early 1980s, BENGZON's own opposition to martial law was relatively passive.

The assassination of Ninoy Aquino on 21 August 1983, however, jolted him. The day after, he joined the throngs viewing Ninoy's body at the Aquino home. He had intended to stay only briefly but, once there, he somehow felt compelled to linger for hours. In the days that followed, he was drawn to the funeral activities and to the masses of people who found solace in gathering by the martyr. He joined the candlelit procession that accompanied Aquino's body to Santo Domingo Church. Sometimes, waking at one or two in the morning, he

would drive to the church just to see, "to make sure" that people were still there keeping vigil. The mourning crowds heartened him and he began to notice that among them were "the elite, business people, people with means, unafraid, coming out and bringing food." After the funeral, he attended the traditional nine-day novena. On the third day a homily by Fr. Jose Blanco so moved him that he begged Blanco to permit him to reproduce it. He mimeographed the homily at the hospital and "scattered it," he says. He was becoming an activist.

A month after the Aquino assassination and on the anniversary of the declaration of martial law, BENGZON found himself amidst a sea of demonstrators massing at a public square in Manila known as Liwasang Bonifacio. The group of marchers from the hospital had been warned to stand clear of the radicals, who identified themselves with red flags and banners. (At this time there was substantial fear among the middle class of the so-called Left, a fear fueled largely by government propaganda.) But the hospital marchers arrived at the designated meeting point too late to join the moderates: "When we got there, there was nobody but the red flags. So we marched with them. And we found that, hey, they are like us." This was BENGZON's introduction to the left side of the Philippine political spectrum; he found that the Left was neither threatening nor as different as it had been portrayed. "My God, that was a real education," he says, "the university is in the streets."

In this atmosphere of heightened political awareness and public passion, like-minded people began to find each other. BENGZON now met occasionally with Jaime Ongpin, Vicente Paterno, Emanuel Soriano, and other neophyte activists from the business world and academe. (Ongpin and Paterno were prominent businessmen, while Soriano was a former president of the University of the Philippines). They began networking with others in opposition to Marcos, including politicians—all this in the hope of providing some kind of direction to the swelling dissent and frustration that followed the Aquino assassination. This was especially critical because Marcos had scheduled legislative elections for May.

When enthusiasm seemed to be waning in December, BENGZON, with Dr. Antonio Perlas, organized a symposium called "Yellow Fever," at which Soriano, Paterno, and the Jesuit president of Ateneo and constitutional scholar Joaquin Bernas spoke publicly about the country's political crisis. BENGZON and his confederates realized it was important to find common ground among the oppositionists, especially on the issue of boycotting the May election. To this end, he and Soriano convened a private meeting at BENGZON's house on 2 January 1984. Attending were Bernas and another Jesuit scholar,



Fr. Bienvenido Nebres; Agapito “Butz” Aquino and Jose “Peping” Cojuangco, brother and brother-in-law respectively of Ninoy Aquino; Salvador “Doy” Laurel, head of UNIDO, the largest political party in opposition to Marcos; and a host of others (like businessman Jose Concepcion) who were later to play important roles in the movement to end the Marcos dictatorship. On the issue of election boycott, the group debated passionately. Following a second somewhat larger meeting elsewhere a few days later, it resolved to participate—but only on certain stringent conditions, including some that would virtually require Ferdinand Marcos to relinquish his power to rule by decree. Subsequently, this decision was adopted formally by a congress of oppositionist organizations called Kompil.

The Kompil Pact was an early high point in the movement to bring Marcos down, and the unity shown, says BENGZON, “was beautiful” but did not last. Within weeks both Laurel and Aquino had backed away from a boycott. Meanwhile, Marcos had promised limited electoral reforms, resulting in the oppositionists being divided for the May election after all. Some contended for seats in the legislature, while others insisted that there should be no compromise with the dictatorship. BENGZON stood with the latter. He refused to register and, despite disillusionment and fear for himself and his family, worked doggedly to promote a boycott.

Marcos still controlled the legislature after the election, even though a few dissenters had been elected. BENGZON and his friends, therefore, redoubled their efforts. He, Soriano, Antonio Perlas, and, later, Narcisa “Ching” Escaler, Ramon del Rosario, Alberto Lim, and Bernas began meeting regularly to engage in political brainstorming. The Facilitators Group, as they now called themselves, met at the hospital on Wednesdays. Fearing a crackdown, they adopted code names and devised an ingenious plan that allowed them, disguised as doctors and patients, to continue their meetings. They also organized training sessions for new members of the legislature, a crash course on how to analyze the budget, and seminars on nonviolent political resistance.

Opposition to Marcos continued to mount but remained badly divided. Seriously ill and no longer able to contain the public outcry, Marcos responded with occasional acts of exemplary brutality and repression. Despite this, BENGZON continued to join in the increasingly angry street demonstrations. At one of these, in September 1984, he and Nini witnessed the shooting of a fellow oppositionist standing nearby.

In the midst of such uncertain times, what plagued BENGZON was the absence of a coherent contingency plan. The next presidential

election was scheduled for 1987, still three years off, but it was widely rumored that Marcos would precipitously call a “snap election,” a strategy that, if timed well, could catch the opposition off guard and appear to validate the president’s spurious claims to democracy. Besides, BENGZON asked, what would happen if Ferdinand Marcos died tomorrow? Everyone agreed that a mad struggle for power would ensue.

Brainstorming on this problem over a series of meetings, BENGZON and his group—now expanded to include Butz Aquino, Wigberto “Bobby” Tañada, and Ricardo “Baby” Lopa (brother-in-law of Cory Aquino)—came up with the idea of identifying potential contenders for the presidency among oppositionists and, as BENGZON put it, “get the quarrel over with.” At a critical meeting held at the Bengzon residence, the group decided to ask three senior oppositionists without apparent presidential ambitions to help them execute their plan: Corazon Aquino, Jaime Ongpin, and former senator Lorenzo Tañada. The Convenors Group met for the first time on 13 September 1984 and set to work, with Bernas, del Rosario, Soriano, Bobby Tañada, and BENGZON himself acting as its staff. They proceeded to identify eleven potential standard-bearers from among the rival oppositionists and proposed that, in the event of an election, they choose a single presidential candidate from among themselves, with the three main convenors serving as tiebreakers.

To emphasize the common purpose of their endeavor, the convenors asked all eleven protocandidates to sign a Declaration of Unity in December and agree to certain propositions, including the removal of American military bases in the Philippines and the legalization of the Communist Party of the Philippines. Salvador Laurel and Eva Estrada Kalaw refused to sign. Later, Laurel formed another group, the National Unification Committee (NUC), also dedicated to identifying an appropriate presidential candidate, should the opportunity of an election arise.

In the months that followed, as rivalry between Laurel’s NUC and the Convenors Group deepened, Mrs. Aquino played an important role in mitigating conflict by forming a two-person arbitration board with her good friend, former justice Cecilia Muñoz Palma, the NUC’s chairperson. By this time, in fact, many people had concluded that only Cory Aquino herself could heal the rift in the opposition and present a united challenge to Marcos. Although BENGZON at first favored other potential candidates, by the third quarter of 1985 he had concluded with others in his group that it was time to prepare for Mrs. Aquino’s candidacy. She, however, continued to demur and as Laurel’s candidacy gained momentum, BENGZON and his like-minded activists grew tense.

Through his staff work for the convenors, BENGZON had become personally close to Lorenzo Tañada, the group's critical link to the country's left-of-center "cause-oriented" organizations. As the crisis deepened, it was to him that BENGZON turned for reassurance. "Do you think we can persuade her?" he asked. "I think she will run," replied the old man with a smile.

When President Marcos announced in early November that there would indeed be a snap presidential election—eventually scheduled for 7 February 1986—virtually all the non-NUC oppositionists, including the other potential standard-bearers of the Convenors Group, declared for Cory Aquino. Justice Palma resigned from the NUC, and a hastily organized coalition became Mrs. Aquino's party. When Aquino finally announced her candidacy on 3 December 1985—and shortly thereafter, Salvador Laurel reluctantly agreed to serve as her vice-presidential runningmate—the political momentum had long since overwhelmed the initiative-taking efforts of BENGZON's little group. The country's politicians were now firmly back in the saddle. In the dramatic election campaign that followed, however, several of the group's members served as Aquino's brain trust, among them BENGZON himself, Bernas, Soriano, del Rosario, Lopa, and Antonio Gonzales. With her, they drafted the major policy speeches of the campaign. As head of a volunteer group called Victory, BENGZON helped to mobilize a small army of citizens to campaign effectively for Aquino.

After the election, when Aquino's apparent triumph was nullified by Marcos's official declaration of victory for himself, BENGZON and his confidants remained active. They now channeled their political activities through a business group called Manindigan, which participated in a national protest against Marcos's theft of the election and called upon senior Marcos appointees to resign.

The series of events that finally broke Marcos's hold on power began on 22 February, when erstwhile Minister of Defense Juan Ponce Enrile and Constabulary Chief Fidel Ramos defected to Mrs. Aquino. BENGZON heard about the breakthrough after making a house call on a long-time patient who was, ironically, a well-known associate of the beleaguered president. Settling his wife and children in the family compound, BENGZON drove to Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (EDSA), where hundreds of thousands of Filipinos now gathered to protect the defectors. Here he joined the throngs. On the second day, he saw his own children there. They had defied his instructions to stay home. "What are you doing here?" he demanded, "It's dangerous!" "Then why are you here?" they countered. "That was the whole story of those days in EDSA," he says now. In jubilation and amazement, BENGZON, his family, his fellow activists, and millions of Filipinos watched as the

much-feared Marcos counterattack failed to materialize and the dictator eventually fled the country.

Corazon Aquino was sworn in as president in a hastily arranged ceremony on Tuesday morning, 25 February. The next day she named the first twelve members of her cabinet. On the evening of 27 February, President Aquino asked BENGZON to be her minister of health. He talked the offer over with his father, now retired from the Supreme Court, and as BENGZON remembers it, "he looked approvingly at me, kissed me, and said only one word: patience."

On 2 March 1986 BENGZON called on the incumbent minister at the Ministry of Health and immediately set the tone for his new administration by announcing, "We are not only here to change the cast. We are here to change the script. But until I am ready to change the cast I want all of you to stay in your places." Thus, BENGZON found himself presiding over the vast system of health care that spanned the Philippines. It included 537 hospitals, 2,000 clinics, and 10,000 village health centers, and employed doctors, nurses, midwives, sanitary inspectors, nutritionists, and pharmacists by the thousands—62,000 people altogether. Health, in fact, is the third largest government ministry in the Philippines, next only to defense and education.

Despite this, the health ministry had never received high government priority. It was a "second division department," says BENGZON, "not at the bottom but certainly not at the top." Its stature was concomitant, he believes, with the view of most people that "health is an expenditure rather than an investment." As the country's new health chief, BENGZON would attempt to change this perception; in a stunning early triumph, he succeeded in persuading Aquino's government to raise the ministry's budget by 537 million pesos.

Under the Marcos administration, major components of the health care system existed separately, without effective coordination. Competing members of Marcos's political machine, including his wife and his brother, each controlled some of the components, making the system highly politicized. BENGZON now argued for a truly comprehensive Ministry of Health, and Aquino duly placed all the relevant components—including specialty centers for heart, lung, kidney, and children's diseases, as well as the nation's medicare system—under the unified management of his ministry.

With the help of Mario Taguiwalo and Rhais Gamboa, two young aides recruited from Medical City and Intercare, BENGZON began the task of putting his new ministry ("a pretty sick patient") in order. He began with a thorough review of the ministry's personnel. During the

first month of his term, interviewing staff occupied 90 percent of BENGZON's time. He began with the heads of major programs such as maternal and child care, nutrition, and tuberculosis, then moved on to senior staff members in the central office, and, finally, to regional and district heads. Working with Taguiwalo, Gamboa, and his psychiatrist colleague Antonio Perlas, BENGZON developed a set of questions designed to elicit not only the employees' professional competence but also their insights into the work of their divisions and their capacity for leadership. BENGZON largely attempted to establish an informal atmosphere at these interviews. But where he believed employees were answering dishonestly, he became quite formal and sharp, armed beforehand with personnel files and audit reports to back up his claims. Careful notes were taken on each person and in marathon "after hours" sessions, BENGZON, Taguiwalo, Gamboa, and Perlas would deliberate on each senior employee. "We weren't simply making a judgment by looking at the record and interviewing them," emphasized BENGZON, "we also listened to others out in the communities where they did their work." (One hapless regional director, BENGZON discovered, kept a list of drug company kickback payments pinned to the wall of his bathroom.) Altogether, the new minister interviewed some six hundred Ministry of Health officials during his first year.

In the end he pruned his ministry selectively, weeding heavily only at the top. One regional director was promoted, three were retained, and seven were retired after being told individually by BENGZON that their performance was "not acceptable within the standards of this new administration." Altogether sixty persons within the hierarchy were removed and replaced by others from within the ranks. Honest and efficient leadership, BENGZON believed, would set the tone for the vast majority who stayed on.

BENGZON also acted swiftly to bring an end to one of his ministry's most notorious practices. By virtue of its size, the Ministry of Health was the single largest purchaser of pharmaceuticals in the Philippines. Its annual procurement accounted for some 10 percent of the market, at that time worth about 15 billion pesos, or U.S.\$750 million. For a period of eighteen years under the Marcos regime, 80 percent of this business had gone to a single drug manufacturer owned by a friend of Marcos's. It was the country's leading pharmaceutical manufacturer and, says BENGZON, "the most accomplished in terms of organization, financial clout, and technology." Even so, it cornered only 25 percent of the domestic market for drugs. The difference between that 25 percent and the company's 80-percent hold on government purchases, asserts BENGZON, was "what you got from being a crony." He concluded that criteria for bidding in the ministry had been routinely made to favor this supplier, even though legal formalities had usually been

adhered to. The company was henceforth barred from bidding on health ministry contracts until it returned half a billion pesos to the government, an amount believed to represent what it got for its connections to Marcos.

Aside from cleaning house and acting swiftly to wean the ministry from bad habits acquired under the former dictatorship, BENGZON further used the early months of his tenure to set forth publicly goals that reflected his own long-evolving philosophy of public health. "Health," he said repeatedly, "is a basic human right, and the task of the Ministry of Health is to make the enjoyment of this right a reality for every Filipino." In a speech to doctors, he set out the principles that would guide him in charting a new course for his ministry. He believed, he said, in "self-reliance as a nation" and promised that under his stewardship "health care in the Philippines would not be driven by the needs or interests of foreigners." He also believed in close cooperation between the private and public sectors but noted that it would be his role as minister to speak for the public sector. And, he added, "I believe in the principle of the greatest good for the greatest number."

Mobilizing the ministry to honor these commitments required a thorough overhaul of its structure and apparatus. It had grown over the years "by patchwork, by adjusting to personalities, [and] by responding to momentary concerns." Now, BENGZON was determined to streamline it "according to priorities in health."

Deputy Minister Mario Taguiwalo became his chief of staff and Rhais Gamboa, his deputy for finance and management. Working as a team, the three men reorganized the ministry to eliminate wasteful duplication of effort and to reduce, from forty to seven, the number of individuals reporting directly to the minister. They brought a new analytical approach to the ministry's daunting mandate to deliver health services to millions of Filipinos. By defining public health needs, they were able to rationalize the ministry's operations and services, thereby making the most of limited resources.

As BENGZON explained, "To keep a baby well via immunization costs only a few pesos, but to treat the baby when he gets measles will cost a few thousand." He therefore redirected the ministry's efforts toward keeping people healthy. Immunization was a case in point. The ministry already had an immunization program, of course, but when BENGZON assumed control, only 30 percent of the country's children had actually been immunized. "We restudied the program, dealt with the facts, developed some insights, and using the same people, turned

the resource [program] around.” Three years later, 90 percent of the children had been immunized.

BENZON’s survey of the nation’s health needs convinced him that a major hindrance to the “right to health” in the Philippines was the high cost and unavailability of adequate medicines. He discovered that, whereas the Ministry of Health spent 18 to 20 percent of its annual budget on drugs, the government had never articulated a national policy defining the public interest in the manufacture and sale of pharmaceutical products. “In all aspects of pharmaceuticals,” he observed, “whether in the manufacturing, use, promotion, education, information, trade, or commerce—it became a matter of who was pushing what.” In short, “there was no policy or program standing up for the Filipino as patient and consumer.”

In June 1986 BENZON convened a task force with representatives from the ministry, academe, the medical profession, and the drug industry to study this problem. For several months it pored over all available information and studied the national drug policies of other countries, making on-site studies in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Bangladesh. Its report, issued in November, became the basis for a comprehensive consultation where BENZON challenged representatives from all relevant sectors to put forward their positions and support them with facts, figures, and a cogent rationale. BENZON’s team at the ministry then distributed summaries of these to all participants for their comments and criticisms. Issues related to the manufacturing, labeling, pricing, and promotion of drugs were identified and debated at length in face-to-face meetings that followed. Ninety-nine individuals and sixty-one organizations participated in these consultations, including several government agencies, the Drug Association of the Philippines, the American Chamber of Commerce, and representatives from professional medical societies and academe.

In early 1987 (not long after Minister BENZON became *Secretary* BENZON in the Department of Health, by virtue of a new Constitution approved by voters in January), he and his team drafted a National Drug Policy, which he presented to President Aquino at the beginning of April. On 30 April she publicly announced its adoption.

The new policy had “four pillars,” easily remembered by the acronym QRST (known to doctors as the four waves of the electrocardiogram): Q for quality assurance, meaning safe and efficacious medicines; R for rational use; S for self-sufficiency in drug manufacturing; and T for tailored procurement, meaning that the Department of Health, as the nation’s largest single purchaser of pharmaceuticals, would tailor its purchasing to reinforce the other

goals of the policy. The new policy, noted BENGZON, would establish “the primacy of the public good over private interest in the health sector.” He understood that, in the Philippines, this was a revolutionary goal. But by “changing laws and regulations, building organizations, educating people, setting economic forces in motion, and utilizing public discussion to build consensus and pressure,” he sought to achieve it through reformist means.

The Bureau of Food and Drugs (BFAD) is responsible for keeping watch over the pharmaceutical industry in the Philippines. BENGZON now mobilized this subagency of his department to improve the quality of medicine produced and sold in the country. As in the department as a whole, his new broom swept aside a small number of senior officials implicated in unprofessional ties to the industry and inspired a new tone of vigor and integrity among the staff—a staff that he expanded and nurtured with better salaries and advanced training. A new headquarters building and state-of-the-art laboratory opened in 1987, which vastly improved the bureau’s ability to monitor the quality and safety of drugs. This was important since under the new drug policy, the department had moved quickly to set more stringent standards for drug manufacturing. Bucking complaints from manufacturers, BENGZON used the department’s purchasing power to pressure them to follow the new standards; he then deployed teams of inspectors to ferret out substandard products in factories and drug stores. With his assistance, the bureau used its newly acquired clout to force several substandard companies to close down, as well as suspended the operations of eighteen others until deficiencies were corrected.

BENGZON also moved to stop the sale of dubious and unsafe medications. In 1986 when he took office, 265 drugs that had been banned or restricted in other countries were being sold in the Philippines. By 1991, all but twenty-eight of them had been banned or otherwise removed from the market; the remaining twenty-eight were under litigation.

The biggest battle, says BENGZON, was for rational use. Here, he points out, they were trying to change an entire culture that believed there was a pill for every ill, and they were fighting the vested interests of multinationals as well as the pharmaceutical industry. Filipinos, BENGZON clarifies, were accustomed to believing that a medicine existed for every condition and that brand-name medicines (preferably foreign) were best. This mentality was reinforced by the promotion of these medicines in sometimes misleading public advertising and, more significantly, within the medical profession. Pharmaceutical companies offered a variety of ethically suspect inducements to encourage doctors to purchase their products. Practically all medical meetings and



conventions, he explains, were fully underwritten by drug companies; “med-reps” plied doctors with entertainment, gifts, and free samples of their firm’s products; and prescription slips for certain drugs served as raffle tickets, with homes, cars, and trips abroad as prizes. “Where do you draw the line between ethical promotion and bribery?” he asks. Moreover, embassies and chambers of commerce representing major drug-exporting countries tried to influence the government to block regulations affecting their access to the local market. All of this mitigated against rational use of medicines.

At the heart of BENGZON’s campaign to combat these influences is the Generics Law, signed by President Aquino on 13 September 1988. This law requires, first of all, that the generic name of medicines be used every time a medicine is labeled, advertised, prescribed, or dispensed. Brand names may be given, and even recommended, but only when the patient is provided with the generic name as well. Second, the law provides for the publication of a list of 297 essential drugs (with a complementary list of 283 more) in a format that cross-references generic names with trade names. Third, the law authorizes a government-led information campaign to popularize the new rights and responsibilities described therein and to instruct the citizens about how to take advantage of them. For violations, the Generics Law authorizes penalties ranging from reprimands and fines to suspensions of the license to practice medicine or pharmacology.

A series of administrative orders (AOs) spelled out the law’s specific requirements. For example, AO55 (governing labeling) stipulates that “the generic name and brand name shall be rendered using the same typeface, font, and color, with the generic name appearing immediately above the brand name and rendered in a point-size bigger than the brand name.” AO63 (on dispensing) requires pharmacists to “inform the patient/buyer of all available drug products generally equivalent to the one prescribed with their corresponding prices.” In doing so, says the regulation, “the drug outlet shall not favor or suggest any particular product so that the patient/buyer may fully and adequately exercise his option to choose.” Strict enforcement of the Philippines’ Pharmacy Act of 1969, which forbids dispensing certain medications without a prescription, was required.

BENGZON next made full use of the schools and mass media to teach Filipinos how to take advantage of the new law; he also did his best to encourage members of the medical profession and other health workers to comply. Noting that the Philippine Medical Association (PMA) had never exerted any meaningful pressure on drug companies to reduce prices for the nation’s benefit, he asked rhetorically, “where lies the true loyalty of the medical profession?”

Although many prominent doctors supported the new law, the PMA and numerous private doctors opposed it; so did several pharmaceutical companies and their allies. Indeed “BENZON’s Law” set off a firestorm of criticism. It was unfair, claimed drug manufacturers, as it did not give them enough time to prepare new labels; moreover, they warned that it would lead to a proliferation of inferior drugs. It interfered with their right to prescribe medicines, complained the doctors, and it granted too large a role to pharmacists. Both the drug manufacturers and the doctors agreed it represented an unreasonable exercise of governmental regulation over private commerce. These constituencies found a powerful ally in the American Chamber of Commerce in the Philippines. During the deliberations over the bill in Congress, the Chamber warned that its passage would have “a chilling effect on the entire business community and a devastating effect on the possibility of job-generating investment by foreign companies.” (Four out of the five leading Philippine pharmaceutical companies had substantial American equity.) To this, Secretary BENZON replied angrily and publicly that the Philippines could not “rely on the Chamber . . . to protect Filipino consumers.” Of that fact lawmakers were thoroughly persuaded, thus “BENZON’s Law” passed unanimously in both houses.

Both the PMA and the Drug Association of the Philippines (with several multinational members) filed lawsuits challenging the new law—all were soon decided in the government’s favor by the Supreme Court. Meanwhile, BENZON was vilified in some circles as having a private interest in a generics drug company, and the gossip was soon leaked to the press. Moreover, within the PMA an ardent enemy of the Generics Law ran for the association’s presidency and won against a pro-generics candidate. The new PMA head then lobbied against the law in the media and called on BENZON to resign.

Throughout the storm BENZON stood his ground and, despite the hullabaloo, the Generics Law quietly took hold. Two years later, the department could proudly report that where drug labeling and prescription writing were concerned there was nearly total compliance. More difficult has been the task of educating Filipinos about how to take advantage of the law and weaning them from old preferences for brand names and foreign drugs. Awareness that the obsession with brand names is nothing more than a “modern superstition,” says BENZON, is only slowly “trickling down.” Nevertheless, some companies still subvert the spirit of the law by offering pharmacists inducements to carry only their brands, thus robbing the consumer of the option to use cheaper medicines, as well as by promoting their products through advertising and questionable incentives to doctors. “There are still many battles here,” BENZON says. “Mind you, I am

not against promotion or even advertising. I am simply saying that it has to be done in a way that does not subvert the original intention, which is honest information.”

Honest information, BENGZON concluded, was also an important key to the Philippines’ sagging family planning program. By 1986 the annual population growth rate of the Philippines was 2.38 percent. While this marked a considerable reduction from that of the 1950s and 1960s, when the growth rate reached 3 percent, it was still alarmingly high; unchecked, the population would double to over 120 million in just thirty years.

Furthermore, BENGZON became aware of the alarming rate of mortality associated with pregnancies, especially those that came too often or too late in a mother’s life. Spacing children two or more years apart, he learned, could reduce infant and child mortality by between 50 and 55 percent. “It would be callous, even criminal,” he concluded, “not to tell people this.” When the Population Commission (Popcom), then attached to the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), prepared a new policy statement in 1987, BENGZON helped make sure it emphasized providing Filipino couples with full information in the matter of family planning.

The influence of the Roman Catholic Church, however, was ascendant in the Philippines following the 1986 EDSA Revolution. The Cardinal himself had promoted Aquino’s assault on the dictatorship and, after the changeover, prominent Catholic clerics and their lay allies had implanted in the new Constitution certain critical elements of the Church’s social teachings. Among these was a provision making abortion unconstitutional. Although the Philippine Catholic Church was not wholly of one mind on the family-planning issue, conservative elements within it moved assertively in the early Aquino years to dissuade the government from activating any program aimed at “population control.” For them, any form of artificial contraception was wrong. There were, in Aquino’s administration, senior officials who held this view—among them, the DSWD secretary. Thus, very little had been done to place the government’s stated policy in motion, and family planning languished.

BENGZON sought a way out of the impasse. The negative consequences of unwanted, ill-timed pregnancies were clear to him. Increasingly he framed the question of family planning not as a population issue but as a public health concern; he linked the government’s stated family-planning objectives to his own department’s goals for safe and healthy mothers and children. He lobbied for his position and sought allies. Then, early in 1989, in a deft political

maneuver, Popcom was placed under the Department of Health. Among BENGZON's allies was President Aquino herself. In her State of the Nation speech in 1988 she designated family planning, science and technology, and the environment as her government's three urgent priorities. Nevertheless, addressing the members of the Philippine Population Institute in November, BENGZON said: "We will speak less of the dangers of a large and fast-growing population. We will speak more about the dangers to the lives of mothers and children in pregnancies that occur under conditions of malnutrition, ill health, lack of access to care, lack of family support for proper maternal care, and prevalence of disease." The aggregate consequences of such a program, he affirmed, would lead to demographic changes as a matter of course.

BENGZON's goal was to make family-planning information and services available to all citizens, through his department's clinics and affiliated health workers around the country as well as through non-governmental organizations active in the health sector. Local health workers, he believed, should alert patients to the dangers of too-frequent pregnancies and to the options available to prevent or postpone them, including, of course, the church-approved methods of sexual abstinence and natural family planning.

For BENGZON, the moral issues involved in using contraception are a matter of individual choice. "Our job," he said, speaking to a gathering of Catholic bishops, "is to put in the hands of an individual everything that it takes for her or him to be able to make a decision." Although many bishops agreed with this position, the Philippine Catholic Church, formally speaking, opposed efforts to breathe new life into family planning. A new round of public criticism began. By this time, however, BENGZON was a toughened public advocate, and he remained uncowed. Besides, by presenting the government's family-planning initiative as a health, rather than a population, issue, he had helped resolve a crippling ethical dilemma for many Filipinos and had gained the critical backing of the president.

This was not surprising. Early in her term, Aquino had made BENGZON a key member of her team. He repaid her confidence by remaining steadfastly at his job and loyal to her, even as some of her cabinet members became open political rivals or left to pursue private ambitions. She often called on him for special jobs beyond the purview of health. When, in the summer of 1986, a group of army officers and politicians still loyal to Marcos attempted a coup d'etat—by seizing a luxury hotel in Manila—she asked BENGZON to conduct the post-coup investigation. Afterwards he became part of the president's Crisis Management Committee.

In 1988, when someone was needed to pave the way for establishing an autonomous region in southern Philippines—a process that involved laying to rest a number of quarrels and armed confrontations between Muslim Filipinos and the central government—the president chose BENGZON to head the Peace Commission. (The commission likewise became involved in negotiations between the government and communist-led rebels elsewhere in the country.)

Subsequently, Aquino also appointed BENGZON to be vice-chairman of the Philippine panel assigned to renegotiate the terms by which American military bases operated on Filipino soil. He played a key role in formulating a conceptual framework for the negotiations. He saw these talks as an opportunity for the Philippines to redefine its relationship with the United States, from a colonial relationship to a partnership of sovereign nations. Additionally, he worked out the details of a compensation package, taking the position that the monetary compensation should be substantial and that the duration of the next lease should not be for more than seven years. When it became clear that the talks would not result in what he considered a just and respectable treaty, BENGZON resigned from the panel.

The euphoria surrounding Aquino's ascension to power in 1986 quickly passed, as the problems of political survival and day-to-day government came to the fore. Seven times Aquino was challenged by military coups. Moreover, her diverse cabinet, and the various forces it represented, failed to present a coherent front in the new democratic political arena. Some partners to the EDSA Revolution later challenged her openly—among them her reluctant vice-president, Salvador Laurel, and her original minister of defense, Juan Ponce Enrile. Some of her staunchest backers were driven from the cabinet as a consequence of such political power struggles.

BENGZON found much about politics ugly and was himself often the object of bitter criticisms and character assassinations. Furthermore, as Aquino's term in office approached an end, it was all too clear that many of her administration's initial hopes and goals remained unachieved. Despite the overthrow of the dictatorship, BENGZON admitted, "unjust structures and relationships" remained.

BENGZON brooded about the fate of the EDSA Revolution on 18 March 1989, when he received an honorary degree from Ateneo de Manila University, his alma mater. "Why were so many people—one-time activists and passionate reformers—so passive and uninvolved now?" he asked. "They see self-centeredness marking the posturing of formerly sincere and humble colleagues now in the limelight. They see good men wasted by ridicule and vilification. They see many

good ideas dying on the vine, cut off from the nourishment of political support, administrative follow-through, and personal attention from the powerful." All this was true, he acknowledged. So, he rhetorically inquired: "Is idealism possible in government? Can one achieve excellence and productivity in a public career? Can public service truly serve the public good instead of many private interests?" Reflecting on his own experience, BENGZON answered a resounding yes.

Government is good, he says, but government is not easy. To be an effective advocate of principled causes within the government, one must learn to find comrades and build alliances; one must be willing to slug it out politically in the public eye; and one must be willing to pay the price of one's convictions: "ridicule, vilification, and failure."

Of these, BENGZON has had his share. But overall he feels good about his accomplishments. The policies he crafted and the structures he built and improved upon, he maintains, are rational and sound. They will last. The Department of Health—his department—is now dedicated to providing Filipinos with both knowledge and choice. "When you put people in a situation so that they can make meaningful choices about meaningful issues in their lives, issues that impact on survival, comfort, dignity, and prosperity, . . . that is development. And when people talk about people empowerment, that is what they really mean."

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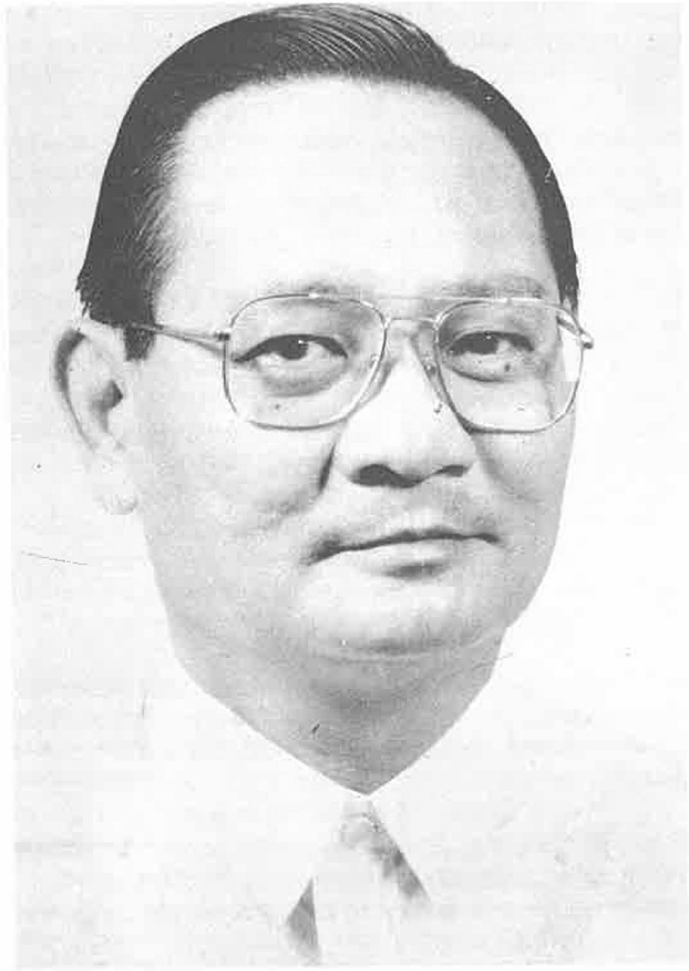
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*APAS*