

HISTORY IS GLOSSED OVER AS A

Dictator's widow woos the electorate once more

Return of Imelda



FUNERAL: Imelda and children with her husband Ferdinand's coffin in 1993

From Sally Beck
in Manila

FORMER Philippines First Lady Imelda Marcos is in reflective mood: "I'm selfless, I really give it all," she says.

This is a somewhat surprising statement, not least because the Guinness Book of Records attributes the biggest robbery in history to Imelda and her late husband, deposed president Ferdinand Marcos.

The Philippines government claimed that the extravagant couple milked £3.3 billion from the country's economy during 20 years of autocratic power. Imelda subsequently received an 18-year prison sentence for corruption. At the moment she is out on bail pending an appeal.

But Imelda is insistent. "I'm a giver," she says. "This could have been my day of rest but if there is one day I can use to help an old friend..."

This is the former beauty queen's way of explaining that she is taking a break from her own campaigns. Despite a ban on holding public office, Imelda is running for congress, aiding son Bongbong in his bid for the senate and helping Marcos loyalist Vicente Magsaysay to win government office.

It quickly becomes apparent that supporting Mr Magsaysay is not a philanthropic act by the 68-year-old Imelda, rather another opportunity for ruthless self-promotion. Imelda is on a quest, she wants to become "Mother to the Philippines".

She wants to be back in power and tomorrow, when Filipinos go to the polls, she intends to win a place on the political ladder. Today is an all-out illustration of her determination.

It starts at a penthouse in upmarket Makati, in Manila's financial district. The luxurious 34th floor apartment, with its polished wood floors, priceless antiques and oil paintings (with a spotlight illuminating a portrait of Imelda), has been lent to her by a friend. This is because the government has sequestered all the Marcos property, effectively making Imelda homeless.

In a corner of the largish drawing



MISSION: Imelda helps son Bongbong

room is a baby grand piano, the top of which has been turned into something of a rogues' gallery.

Seven rows of framed photographs show Imelda with international political figures whom she jokingly refers to as "the monsters of the world".

There is Imelda with Gaddafi, Castro, Saddam Hussein and Chairman Mao.

She reveals that Mao once paid her the "greatest compliment". Apparently when asked: "Why do you admire Mrs Marcos so much?" Mao replied: "Well because she is natural, and that's perfection."

At the memory of this, Imelda beams like a small child awarded 10 out of 10 for her homework.

TUCKED behind the rogues are more shots of Imelda with seemingly less important figures from her past — Ronald Reagan, film star George Hamilton, Prince Charles and Princess Margaret.

She walks in and your eyes are instantly drawn to her feet. While poor Filipinos struggled to eat, Imelda became infamous for owning 1,500 pairs of shoes.

"Not 3,000," corrects Sol Vanzi, Imelda's Press secretary. "When Cory Aquino took over from the Marcoses and moved into Malacanang Palace, she counted shoes, not pairs," she



MORDED: Admiring crowds greet Imelda as she canvasses for her son while pressing her own case for office

Picture: HARVEY MANN

says. Imelda adds: "In my cupboards there were only shoes, no one found any skeletons."

She is dressed in red and navy, the colours of the Filipino flag and, yes, that includes her shoes: a modest pair of red, peep-toe, embroidered espadrilles. The rest of her outfit comprises navy ski-pants, a red jacket and a scoop-neck blouse showing an inch or two of cleavage. Over her right shoulder is a red and blue silk scarf; on her left is pinned a gold, pig-shaped brooch and beneath that is an enamelled brooch of the Filipino flag.

"I'm beginning to enjoy my martyrdom," she says with a false-sounding laugh. Imelda says that the government is trying to disqualify her from standing for congress, telling her she has not been resident in her home town of Leyte for the required 12 months.

It has also withdrawn her eight bodyguards, an entitlement of former First Ladies. "Perhaps my title has expired? They just don't know what to do with me but I am having fun."

Today's "fun" — helping Vic Magsaysay — starts with a coach trip. Oddly, the single-decker is plastered with posters that say "Vote Bongbong Marcos", not "Vote Vic Magsaysay"; and there are "Vote Imelda Marcos" cards in her Gucci bag.

After an hour, the coach stops at the

Spanish-style villa of Jaime Opinon, Imelda's lawyer. Imelda has more than 300 outstanding civil and criminal writs. "My husband said exaggeration is another form of falsification," she says, dismissing them as she might irritating fan letters. She leaves after signing several documents.

Next stop is Sacrifice Valley, home to a strict Catholic organisation run by Imelda's friend, Maria Leonzon. The dictator's widow is obviously still immensely popular because barefoot villagers mob her as she arrives. She stays 10 minutes and, back on the coach, whispers conspiratorially: "They will vote for Bongbong. They love him, he's like his father."

SHE ARRIVES two hours late at Vic Magsaysay's rundown colonial-style house. Vic served the Marcos government for 20 years and is a nephew of the respected President Ramon Magsaysay, killed in a plane crash in the Fifties.

"When we need help, Madam Marcos is always willing," Vic announces, constantly addressing Imelda as "First Lady". After a short speech, in which she mentions Bongbong, Imelda croons a Filipino love song ("Give me your help because I am pitiful and dying") to the 150-strong crowd.

The day's real business — Vic's campaign — begins at 6pm in the

village square. Imelda joins Vic and five other candidates on the campaign platform but only six villagers have arrived. By the time Imelda speaks two hours later, 500 people are waiting.

Her speech is not about voting for Vic, but this is no surprise. It seems instead to concentrate on promoting Bongbong and clearing the Marcos name. "Did I kill anyone?" she asks the crowd. "What did I steal? I just gave. All I am guilty of is trying to make the Philippines a place of beauty."

In Imelda's eyes there has been no crime. She glosses over her years in exile, the plundered billions and her husband's years of repressive martial law. She portrays herself as a sort of three-dimensional Disney character, probably Snow White.

As for helping Mr Magsaysay, if her presence alone was enough then she achieved something because she spent no time extolling his virtues. The real reason for the trip becomes clear when she lets slip: "I would say 250,000 extra votes. Not bad for a day's work."

And although she spent the day plugging Bongbong she confesses: "If the people wanted me to be president instead of Bongbong it would not be a problem, for him or for me."

So says the self-proclaimed giver, the woman who would like her epitaph to read "Here lies love". Someone else has coined the word Imeldific. "It means frivolous, extravagant and excessive," says Imelda adding: "I am perceived to be everything you'd think ugly." Somehow the Imelda roadshow has gone horribly awry.

'This could have been my day of rest. I give all to the people. I am a giver. Did I kill people? What did I ever steal? I just gave'

'I owned only 1,500 pairs

of shoes, nothing like 3,000'