Jose Concepcion, businessman and Minister for Trade and Industry in the Aquino government, is one of the main powers behind the throne in Manila. He is also the personification of the decline of the Aquino regime.

Joecon, as he is known, was head of the Republic Flour Mills (RFM) Corp and for much of his business life stayed well out of politics. The sins of the Marcos regime changed that. Concepcion was one of the disenfranchised business class — that is, those businessmen who were not among Marcos' cronies and found their business opportunities limited by government incompetence and interference on the cronies' behalf.

From 1983 the economy crumbled, business interests were threatened by the growth of the radical movement (both through trade unions and the armed insurgency) and the assassination of Ninoy Aquino showed that the Marcos regime was not considering reform. Thus, the middle classes, headed by the disenfranchised business sector, began to organise. With RFM employees prominent among the "yellow masses", Concepcion emerged as a leading figure of the opposition movement.

But Concepcion was more than this. As head of the Church (and US)-backed National Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL), and as part of the Bishops-Businessmen Council and a board member of the Church's Radio Veritas, Jose Concepcion played a crucial role in linking the business opposition with the Church, and then with the opposition forces among the traditional politicians. These forces formed the basis of the Aquino election campaign and ultimately, when belatedly joined by the RAM military forces, formed the bloc at the EDSA revolution which ousted the Marcos regime in 1986. As head of the 'neutral' NAMFREL, Concepcion was not simply an opposition political figure: he was a champion of clean government.

When Aquino assumed power, Jose Concepcion became Minister for Trade and Industry and has since been part of the inner circle of presidential advisers known popularly as the "Council of Trent". With the president in his debt, it may not be coincidental that since he took office RFM has done very well and the number of Concepcion family-owned corporations has reportedly increased from eight to 20.

Amid all these coincidences, Joecon is under fire from a number of congressional committees looking into aspects of his business and political dealings. It is claimed that RFM has received soft loans from government agencies including the social security system. Concepcion is also claimed to have used emergency law powers to establish a monopoly in the cement industry in which he has an interest.

But by far the most serious charges arise from the so-called "petroscam" revolving around the establishment of a petrochemical plant, originally by Luzon, the shoot of a Taiwanese-based transnational, in a joint venture with the government's PNOCC. When Luzon decided to change the plant's location, PNOCC pulled out. Nevertheless, a consortium of Filipino banks was to give Luzon Corp a massive loan. Such a loan to a company with no track record was unusual but perhaps not as unusual as the other financial arrangements where the remainder of the 'private' capital was to be raised through a series of debt-equity trade-offs which ultimately amounted to a massive subsidy by the Philippines government. Concepcion not only approved and defended the project, but has been accused of pressuring the banks to grant Luzon's loans.

One of Joecon's main accusers over the petroscam has been Joker Arroyo, a human rights lawyer and leading opposition figure under Marcos and a former member of Aquino's cabinet. Arroyo had been president of the government-controlled Philippine National Bank, an institution central in the petroscam, and had accused Joecon of incompetence and influence-peddling in the affair. However, on June 5 this year, Joker was sacked as PNB chief after a concerted public attack by Concepcion.

Whether Joker was simply a loser in the traditionally tough game of factional politics or a white knight fighting corruption, the fact remains that when Concepcion was accused essentially of cronism, he used the craziest of all the traditional reply of using access to the president to quash all opposition. Another of Joecon's accusers, Senator John Osmena, from a family known more for their sugar wealth than their commitment to democracy, summed it up when he said that "we got rid of the Marcos cronies only to replace them with new ones".

Nevertheless, for the moment at least, there is still a congress to pressure the new cronies and Osmena's Blue Ribbon Committee will continue its investigations in July. Perhaps Concepcion will eventually be caught out, but he is only the most obvious example of a government whose corruption and incompetence has rendered it powerless in the face of a disintegrating economic and political system.

Just as Joecon now looks like those cronies he entered politics to fight against, so the general situation in many ways resembles that of the final years of Marcos. The question which arises now from the disintegration of the state under Aquino, is whether the fractured ruling classes can again regroup and come up with a new formation to stop the rot, or whether the national democratic movement can take the initiative and build a truly new system.

Greg Ogle.