

Part 2 *Armed movements in Latin America and the Philippines*

Chapter 5

Ups and Downs of a Contemporary Maoist Movement: Shifting tactics, Moving Targets and (Un)Orthodox Strategy: the Philippine Revolution in Perspective

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Abstract

The Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) combines organized social movements in the cities and plains with mountain-based armed insurgency and has sustained both despite severe tensions between engaging in electoral politics and maintaining itself as a revolutionary movement. Like the Indian Maoists, it has based its analyses on Mao's characterisation of China as semi-feudal and semi-colonial. Yet in the case of the CPP this has not been dogmatic. Indeed, the CPP leadership has been very flexible in its analysis of and adaptation to changing economic and political circumstances. It has been able to form alliances with other liberation movements and their organisations. On the basis of documents and interviews with leaders of the CPP, the chapter relates the successes and failures of engagement, the internal schisms and yet survival of the CPP as a revolutionary movement. This is related to revolutionary movements outside the Philippines, including those described in this book, by singling out key issues that they all have to address.

Introduction

In an era of 'neoliberal globalisation,' and global resistance in the form of a multiplicity of alter-/anti-globalization movements, the persistence of an armed Maoist revolutionary communist movement in the Philippines may seem to be an anachronism. Today, the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), established in 1968 at the height of Mao's Cultural Revolution and student protests in the West, continues its struggle for state power. Understanding the persistence of this armed Maoist revolutionary struggle is the puzzle that this chapter seeks to elucidate. It is particularly fascinating given the major domestic and international changes that have occurred since the Party was first established a half century ago. At the domestic level, the Philippines experienced a partial democratic transition following the ousting of the Marcos dictatorship in

1986, a return to regular electoral contests, some limited economic growth and various unevenly successful attempts at social reforms, along with an expanding space for NGOs, legal political activities and greater press freedom (Caouette 2009). Internationally, we have seen the demise of Eastern European communist regimes, the temporary suspension of East-West conflict, the capitalist orientation of the Chinese communist party state, US closure of its army bases in the Philippines, and the emerging alter-globalisation movement largely organised outside the confines of a single ideological party. All of these changes would seem to make an armed communist revolution a hard-sell. Such persistence is all the more puzzling given that the CPP missed a key opportunity to seize power (or at least a share of it) with the toppling of the Marcos dictatorship, underwent bloody and traumatic internal purges and survived a major internal schism in the early 1990s.

This persistence is also surprising given that the Philippine Armed Forces have been trying for several decades now to annihilate the CPP with substantial American financial and military support. Following the events of September 11th, 2001 and the American ‘war on terror,’ the CPP was designated as a ‘foreign terrorist organization’ (FTO) by the US State Department on August 9, 2002. Officially, the CPP is not the primary target of a government campaign against ‘terrorists,’ the main targets are rather the small bandit group, Abu Sayaf, and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. However, it is clear that the Philippine Army has also intensified its repression campaign against the CPP.¹

The Philippine revolutionary movement constitutes a rich case revealing the interplay between domestic and global change and revolutionary collective action. Its trajectory offers a number of significant insights into how a Marxist-Leninist-Maoist revolutionary movement evolved through time and in particular how radical collective action and social protest are organised and can be channelled in a range of forms and modalities according to changing domestic and international contexts. In reviewing the CPP’s trajectory, my aim is to show that the CPP armed revolutionary movement has persisted over time despite domestic and international change because it has the defining elements of a social movement. With the formation of the Communist

Party of the Philippines (CPP), a new armed revolutionary movement with its own repertoire of collective action emerged. On the one hand, this communist revolutionary movement needed to distinguish itself from the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP), and on the other hand, it sought to bring a new syntax and grammar of revolutionary struggle to the Philippines. The formative years of the revolutionary movement were crucial on four counts: 1) a particular ‘repertoire of collective action’ was gradually created as a syncretic mixture of various forms of protest; 2) the self-defined identity of a ‘national-democratic activist’ was constructed; 3) a body of relatively accessible ideological and theoretical writings was developed that could be easily communicated to others; and 4) a particular organisational form of revolutionary movement, comprising a vanguard political party, a guerrilla organisation and a set of social movement organisations, was established.

Over the years, the CPP-led revolutionary movement demonstrated both skilful understanding of political opportunities and struggles combined with a highly instrumentalist approach to social mobilisation (Putzel 1995; Abinales 1996; Rutten 2008). In fact, it responds to political opportunities in a way that ensures its survival. Contrary to arguments that the movement has been dogmatic (Reid 2000; Magno 1998), a review of its past shows that it has been very flexible, not only in terms of its tactics, as many have already pointed out (Jones 1989; Rocamora 1994), but also in its interpretation of Maoist revolutionary theory. The broad and abstract analytical categories and rhetoric of the CPP have been treated so elastically that almost any change domestically and internationally can be explained and located within the grand narrative of revolution. Its frame of action is both interpretative (explaining reality) and action-oriented (it offers a way to act). It is highly voluntaristic and presents itself as *infallible*. Through a series of protocols and courses that can be mass reproduced and easily understood, but also witnessed on the guerrilla battlefield, the revolutionary movement generates a collective identity, the ‘national democrat.’ New urban-based recruits or international solidarity activists make ‘field visits’ to the guerrilla zones during vacations or take ‘exposure tours.’

Since the early 2000s, the ideologically orthodox CPP has ventured into new experiments such as electoral participation and setting up several legal electoral parties, including Bayan Muna, Anakpawis, Gabriela, Migrante, COURAGE, ACT, and Katribu. More recently, the CPP through its legal mass organisations has successfully inserted itself within into the anti-globalisation movement while continuing to be rooted in rural areas, given its Maoist strategic line, with the New People's Army (NPA) launching tactical offensives from time to time. In the sections that follow I review the history of the CPP highlighting key moments and features that reveal the interplay between its interpretative and action-oriented dimensions.

Re-establishment and Drawing the Revolutionary Line

The 're-establishment' of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) in late 1968 came as a result of a party split within the PKP (Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas).² It initially began when members of the PKP, dissatisfied with its orientation, strategy and positions decided to challenge the aging leadership. Tension between these ambitious young revolutionaries and the old guard of the PKP became most intense when the former requested that a review of the PKP's history be written in preparation for an upcoming congress. One of these young cadres, Amado Guerrero (José Maria Sison's first *nom de guerre*), an English literature professor at the University of the Philippines, volunteered and wrote a critical analysis underlining the series of mistakes committed by the PKP leadership. This document began a spiralling process wherein debates around the appropriate revolutionary strategy, the appropriate combination of armed struggle and mass movement, and theoretical understanding of the Philippine political economy all became intertwined. The process would eventually come to an end with the formation of the CPP in 1968.

Making Sense of Favourable Conditions

By the time of the 1969 election, there were growing tensions within the ruling elites (Anderson 1988: 18). At the same time, electoral competition had become more and more expensive

essentially because of the practice of vote buying and increasing violence.³ There was also growing discontent among the middle class who were starting to demand greater political participation and social reforms.

A key event in the emergence of a new revolutionary movement had been the founding of the Kabataang Makabayan (KM or Patriotic Youth) on November 30, 1964. PKP Youth Section Secretary Sison, along with other student leaders, played a central role in organising and leading KM. The youth organisation formed and trained a new generation of activists.⁴ At the time, Mao Tse-tung's writings and the Chinese Cultural Revolution held the greatest interest for this new generation of activists. In fact, the Filipino professor of Asian Studies Armando Malay explains:

As in the Western countries, a certain amount of faddist ostentation attended the gestative period of Maoism in the Philippines. Mao jackets, caps, and badges became status symbols, worn as so many political statements denoting either adherence to Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tse-tung Thought, or a recent visit to the People's Republic, or better yet, both. (Malay 1984: 48)

The Vietnam War, which had direct connections with the American military bases in the Philippines, played a key role in symbolising 'imperial power' (Abinales 1988: Chapter 3, 1984: 28; Chapman 1987: 74).

Equipped with what they took to be the most advanced 'theoretical tools', KM leaders, including Sison, were able to develop an 'organisational package' that had the power of linking the present with the past, creating a new and attractive path to channel the energies of the radicalised students (Sison 1967: 4).

While fighting the PKP and trying to secure control of legal institutions and mass organisations, Sison was revising his draft review of the PKP's history. This document entitled 'Rectify Errors and Rebuild the Party' was to be discussed during a founding congress for the 're-establishment'

of the Communist Party of the Philippines. By mid-1968, Sison and his followers felt that they had gathered enough momentum to plan this Congress.

Founding Congress

The Congress for the Re-establishment was quite modest. Many have recalled how fourteen young urban activists and intellectuals gathered in a barrio about four hours from Manila, in Pangasinan, Central Luzon to re-establish the Communist Party of the Philippines.⁵ The group decided to use December 26, 1968, Mao Tse-tung's birthday as the founding date, to mark clearly their connection with Mao's thought.

The Congress itself did not last very long and consisted mostly in adopting a series of documents probably already discussed in the few months preceding the Pangasinan Congress (Nemenzo 1984a: 64, 1984b: 80). All of those who participated in the discussions became Central Committee members and several were elected officers, including Sison who was elected as Chairman. A first executive committee and a political bureau were constituted. At that point, the newly re-established CPP did not yet have a real armed force, but it was only a matter of weeks before it did. In January 1969, Sison and the CPP forged an alliance with one of the remaining units of the Huk army led by Dante Buscayno and planned to establish the New People's Army (NPA) (Nemenzo 1984b: 80).

The official date for the formation of the new insurgent army was March 29, 1969, the 27th anniversary of the Hukbong Bayan Laban saHapon (or the People's Army against Japan, also referred to as the Huk army).⁶ When it was established, the NPA consisted of about 65 fighters with only 35 firearms between them, of which only nine were automatic rifles (Sison with Werning 1989: 60).⁷ The NPA helped give a degree of credibility to Sison's 'master plan' for an armed revolution in the Philippines.

On May 12-13, 1969, the CPP held its first Central Committee Plenum. The Plenum was held in a small barrio Sta. Rita in Tarlac, the same barrio where the NPA had been founded two months earlier and now the 'secret party headquarters' (Sison with Werning 1989: 64). The Central Committee expanded to 22 members with the inclusion of Dante Buscayno and seven other NPA commanders and peasant leaders. The Plenum adopted resolutions aimed at intensifying party rebuilding and the armed revolution (CPP 1965: 5). Not long after, on June 9, 1969, the Philippine Army (AFP) raided the small CPP/NPA's headquarters located in a tunnel in Barrio Sta. Rita. The raid turned out to be a fortuitous event for the fledging revolutionaries. Hoping to alert the population and deter followers, the AFP (1970) published a series of pamphlets entitled 'So People May Know.' By doing so, the AFP failed to understand the popular appeal that the new movement would gather.

The First Quarter Storm

In the context of the later 1960s – early 1970s, the CPP/NPA political programme appeared particularly attractive. There was a growing wave of social protest in Manila. Calls ranged from demands for greater democracy and clean elections, constitutional reform, and national democratic revolution. Politically heterogeneous demonstrators included students, peasants and workers and some sectors of the middle class. However, it was the students and the youth who were the most vocal and started to demonstrate regularly in the streets of Manila.

The so-called First Quarter Storm was a turning point in student and mass protest in the Philippines. It began on January 26, 1970 when an anti-Marcos demonstration was violently dispersed. In the morning, mass organisations from various political formations (Christian Left, PKP-led and CPP-led organisations) held public rallies in different locations. In the afternoon, they marched and converged on the Philippine Congress where Marcos was to address both the Congress and Senate to deliver his 'State of the Nation' address. When Marcos and his wife Imelda were about to leave Congress, the angry students tried to approach them. But the police moved the demonstrators on. The largest riot since Independence was followed the next day by

another demonstration in front of the American Embassy. These five days of rallies marked the beginning of the 'First Quarter Storm.' During the next three months, protest rallies and teach-ins were organised on various university campuses, including the famous barricade and seizure of the University of the Philippines campus, renamed for the occasion, the Diliman Commune. Twice during this period, Marcos invoked the possibility of Martial Law.

The period between January 1970 and September 1972 was particularly important because it saw an increasing polarisation of the student movement and intense struggles among various factions within it. During this process of greater student radicalisation, NPA guerrillas became folk heroes to many students.

Seizing the Momentum

The First Quarter Storm (FQS) was also significant because it was the juncture when 'the CPP seized the initiative from the blundering PKP and absorbed the new radical forces that spontaneously emerged' (Nemenzo 1984a: 67). Whereas the PKP was very cautious and made its existence as 'discreet' as possible, the CPP was very open about its plan to carry out and win a 'people's war.' Following the FQS, the CPP rapidly expanded its network of mass organisations, especially among students.

While mass organisations were being organised and protests were increasingly frequent, the NPA was becoming progressively more popular both in the countryside and in urban areas.⁸ In Manila, especially in university and college campuses, NPA commander Dante Buscayno and other NPA commanders were becoming local heroes and legends. Scores of activists of the First Quarter Storm would eventually join the NPA and the CPP and live underground (Sison with Werning 1987: 63). At that time, however, the NPA remained relatively small in terms of fighting capacity.⁹

Underground activities were still on-going and the Party held its Second Plenum in mid-1971. On January 25, 1972, a united front organisation, the National Democratic Front Preparatory

Commission, was established with the goals of: a) popularising the National Democratic line; and b) winning over the middle forces and isolating the enemy diehards.

Philippine Revolution 101

To understand how the incipient CPP and NPA eventually became a genuine threat to the Philippine state in the early 1980s, we must review the key CPP document, 'Philippine Society and Revolution' (hereafter referred to as PSR) written by Amado Guerrero (Sison's *nom de guerre*). PSR accomplished two fundamental things: first, it set out the CPP armed revolution as a continuation and heir of the Philippine nationalist and revolutionary tradition, and second, it 'organised' and 'explained' Philippine contemporary reality in such a way that it made sense to revolt. In a way, this document more than any other, was able to capture the imagination of a large and heterogeneous following made up of students, religious leaders and intellectuals as well as peasants, agricultural labourers, workers and the urban poor.

PSR needs to be seen in the context of Sison's gradual emergence as the chief entrepreneur of the new revolutionary movement, the 'national democratic movement' (informally referred to, until now, as the 'nat-dem' movement). Sison's 'framework' derived its strength from ability to invent its own genealogy from four sources: the Philippine nationalist movement of the late 19th century; Philippine economic nationalism of the 1950s; the early Philippine communist movement; and, the international revolutionary movements, especially those with a Maoist revolutionary perspective (Weekley 1996: 23).

In fact, PSR is best seen as a textbook on Philippine revolution. Organised into three main chapters, 'Review of Philippine History,' 'Basic Problems of the Filipino People' and 'People's Democratic Revolution,' PSR follows a didactic logic.¹⁰ First, it surveys Philippine history in a way that leads to the second chapter detailing the three basic ills of the Philippine society - US imperialism, feudalism and bureaucratic-capitalism. Having understood Philippine history and

the basic ills of a semi-feudal and semi-colonial society, PSR proposes a model of collective action, the people's democratic revolution.¹¹

With PSR, Sison was able to 'order reality' and infuse it with historical meaning. At the same time, he was also fighting for the leadership of this wave of student protest that was much larger than the KM and other CPP-linked mass organisations. PSR's publication had an immense impact on the expansion and development of the CPP and played a crucial role in assisting it to recruit and transform student activists into 'national-democratic' activists and party members.

PSR had the advantage of following a 'successful revolutionary model' that is, the Chinese revolution.¹² It is built similarly on Mao Tse-Tung's works 'Chinese Revolution and the Chinese Communist Party' completed in December 1939 (1967: 305-334). As with the Chinese revolution, PSR argues that the Philippine revolution needs to be under the class leadership of the proletariat while its main force is the peasantry, which constitutes the 'largest mass force in a semi-colonial and semi-feudal society' (Guerrero 1979: 158). The revolution can only succeed if it has the peasants' support. By adapting the successful Chinese formula and its 'theoretical lexicon,' Sison and Guerrero established the grounds for debates and theoretical exchanges to take place within the Party.

Fulfilling Prophecy: Marcos' Declaration of Martial Law and Institutionalizing the Revolutionary Work

The declaration of Martial Law in 1972 by President Marcos fulfilled the prophecy of PSR. As Sison/Guerrero wrote: '[F]ascism is on the rise precisely because the revolutionary mass movement is surging forward and the split among the reactionaries is becoming more violent' (Guerrero 1979: 125). As channels for reformist political change seemed to go nowhere and political space for legal protests was being closed, the more did the revolutionary alternative appeal to already mobilised students, as well as to some elements among the workers and middle-classes, including the Church sector.

In the early 1970s, the newly established CPP and NPA were at most a secondary threat to the Marcos regime compared to broader efforts from other political groups and political oligarchs. At the time, the CPP was trying to capitalise on the ongoing social protests to accelerate its expansion (Guerrero 1979: 161). Central Committee members were deployed in various regions of the country with the task of initiating and building both underground and legal organisations. By 1970, organising efforts were going on in various provinces of Central Luzon, Negros Oriental and Occidental, other parts of the Visayas and Mindanao.¹³

While Martial Law was anticipated by the CPP/NPA, it nonetheless had an impact on the revolutionary movement. The impact was most severe in the urban areas, especially in Manila, where there was a slowing down in the expansion and heightening of CPP revolutionary activities.¹⁴ First, a number of urban-based party cadres and activists were arrested in the days following the Declaration of Martial Law.¹⁵ Second, several lines of communications within the party were lost. Third, many CPP members and sympathisers underground were forced to leave the cities for rural areas (Guerrero 1974).¹⁶ And fourth, it cut off some support from sympathisers and allies because now that it was significantly more dangerous, the ‘cost’ of supporting the movement became much higher (Rocamora 1983: 16).

Because many key CPP cadres and members were forced to leave the urban areas, various CPP bureaus stagnated or were dismantled. Communications among departments, regional party committees and the national leadership were also made more difficult. The rural bases of the guerrilla movement played an important role in the early years of Martial Law as ‘sanctuaries’ for party cadres, members and mass activists who were forced to leave the city and live ‘underground.’ Many in fact would end up joining the NPA (Chapman 1987: 97-104).

Mass arrests, widespread repression and a growing realisation that Marcos had his own interests in mind in the so-called ‘New Society’ combined to make the revolutionary alternative quite attractive by the mid-1970s.¹⁷ The Party showed considerable creativity and adaptive skills in

adjusting to the changing context. Within two years, legal mass organisations began to resume open protests.¹⁸ One key factor for the resurgence of these open protests was the role of the Preparatory Commission of the National Democratic Front. Seven months after the Declaration of Martial Law, the NDF was established on April 24, 1973.¹⁹ Initially, it tried with relative success to enlist the members of various organisations that were part of the Movement for a Democratic Philippines (MDP), banned under Martial Law, including the Christians for National Liberation (CNL).²⁰ The Church played a courageous and determining role in initially protecting and later mobilising urban poor communities.

Fine-Tuning the Revolution: Codifying and Structuring the Revolutionary Movement

The relative lull in the revolutionary movement's expansion, especially in the urban areas, lasted approximately until mid-1975. These were important years for learning and assessing how to take the revolution forward. Both theoretically and organisationally, the first two years helped synthesise and establish methodologies that would serve the movement well under the Martial Law regime. Two key documents marked the early period of Martial Law; the first was 'Specific Characteristics of Our People's War' completed in December 1974 and the second was 'Our Urgent Tasks' completed in 1976 following discussions held during the 3rd Plenum held in December 1975 (Sison with Werning 1989: 83).²¹ These documents were key for adjusting the armed revolution to Philippines conditions and laying down a concrete program of action.

For some analysts, 'Specific Characteristics' represents the first true departure from the Maoist model and Sison's original attempt to adapt armed revolution to the Philippine context (Abinales 1992: 35).²² The 1974 document introduces new categories that depart from Mao's writings. One innovation was to talk of 'pink areas,' somehow located between white areas (unorganised, usually urban areas) and red areas (organised and consolidated areas, usually guerrilla bases). A second novelty was to talk about 'semi-legal' activities, described as being between legal and illegal activities (Guerrero 1974: 5-7). This creative conceptual stretching would prove to be quite useful, because it permitted description and naming of a broader set of situations and

tactics. Given the complexity of launching a people's war in a vast archipelago, notably different from the Chinese context, and having learned from the past four years, Sison suggested adjustments to the organisational framework of the NPA. The main ones outlined in the document were: 1) '... to adopt and carry out the policy of centralised leadership and decentralised operations;' 2) 'The development of the central revolutionary base somewhere in Luzon will decisively favour and be favoured by the development of many smaller bases in Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao;' 3) '... take the policy of 'a few major islands first, then the other islands later;' 4) '... develop self-reliance; maintain our guerrilla units within a radius that is limited at a given time to avoid dissipation of our efforts but wide enough for manoeuvre; and advance wave upon wave, always expanding on the basis of consolidation;' 5) 'Each regional Party organization should see to it that at the present stage it develops only one, two or three armed fronts;' 6) 'The regional executive committee of the Party should be based in the main front;' 7) '... Mountains are usually the natural boundaries of provinces. Thus, we can maintain influence in several provinces even if we were to operate from only one mountainous border area' (Guerrero 1974: 6-7).

'Specific Characteristics' was also significant because it identified specific tactics for how to actually conduct the armed revolution. Given the balance of forces, Sison argued that it was necessary for the guerrilla movement to launch a 'protracted war' in multiple locations at the same time.²³ It was important to concentrate on building up and securing mass support. Such mass support could help the NPA acquire more weapons but would also increase security in facing the Philippine military. The main forms of attack should be 'raids' or 'ambushes' on small 'enemy' forces and only when the NPA could be sure of wiping it out. A great deal of flexibility, timeliness, and quick decisions were also required to balance between tactical offensives, organising rural communities and propaganda work.

Almost five years after its Second Plenum (held in January-February 1971), and a little more than three years after the imposition of Martial Law, the Party held its Third Plenum in December 1975. Martial Law had revealed that the structures and methodologies developed

during the Second Plenum in 1971 were inadequate to deal with the new context (CPP 1972: 7). The Third Plenum was important in defining concrete measures and methodologies to combine legal and illegal tactics, and to reach out, organise, and mobilise mass and underground organisations. An important item of the Third Plenum was discussion of the document ‘Our Urgent Tasks’ (OUT) that Sison/Guerrero had drafted. After having adapted the Maoist protracted people’s revolutionary war to the Philippines context with its specific peculiarities and having defined protocols to strengthen the party organisationally, the next major contribution of OUT was a programme of action for the coming years, more specifically a systematic listing of procedures to build the revolutionary mass movements in rural and urban areas, expand and strengthen the New People’s Army, and bring about a broad united front.

The strategic line remained ‘to encircle the cities from the countryside’ until such time that the NPA would be ‘capable of moving on the cities from stable revolutionary bases in the countryside’ (CPP 1972: 18). To complement the development of the mass movement and the NPA in rural areas, OUT prescribed an expansion of the urban revolutionary mass movement. Economic strikes could be transformed into political strikes and demonstrations. In urban poor communities, OUT suggested that it was best to rely primarily on organised workers and the urban poor to conduct the work of organization rather than send youth activists as before.

Taken together, these documents and discussions from the Third Plenum contributed significantly to systematising and codifying a series of step-by-step protocols aimed at expanding and consolidating the armed revolution. The conceptual toolbox was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it helped party cadres and NPA commanders define a program of action. On the other hand, it acted as a ‘mental jail’ because it forced upon them a series of concepts and definitions to wrestle with while trying to understand the political and revolutionary situation, especially when ‘unexpected’ or ‘un-theorised’ events happened (Rocamora 1994: 21, 23). If the pre-Martial Law years saw the emergence of a specific syntax and lexicon for the CPP, the years following Martial Law served to establish the rules and protocols of the revolutionary ‘grammar.’

A New Momentum

Following its Third Plenum and when the various adjustments proposed in OUT were circulated, the revolutionary movement experienced its greatest momentum (1976-1985). It began expanding at a faster rate across the archipelago and there were clear indications that legal mass organisations were able once again to launch protest activities in urban areas. By 1978, it had become clear for increasingly large segments of the population, including parts of the Philippine bourgeoisie and nationalist elite, that Martial Law was evolving into a patrimonial regime centered on the Marcos couple and their retinue of cronies. With growing social discontent, the revolutionary movement became increasingly acceptable to middle forces, including large sections of Church workers.²⁴

When Marcos declared a snap presidential election in 1985, the national democratic movement under the leadership of the Communist Party of the Philippines had become the dominant and most powerful leftist political force in the country. One observer estimated that it possibly represented as much as 80% of organised leftist activists.²⁵ By 1985, the CPP claimed that its guerrilla army, the New People's Army (NPA), included 15,000 full-time and 20,000 part-time armed combatants. A year later, the United States estimated that there were about 22,500 full-time and 15,000 part-time armed combatants.²⁶ The CPP/NPA controlled about 18% of all *barangays* (the smallest local government administrative entity), and was active in 59 provinces out of a total of 73.

Weeks after Marcos' unexpected announcement of a presidential election to be held in February 1986, the CPP's Executive Committee called for a boycott of the election without convening a special meeting of the Executive Committee or a meeting of the Politburo. The elections and especially the vote counting turned out to be quite fraudulent. Soon after, on February 16, presidential contender Corazon Aquino, the widow of political opposition figure, Benigno 'Ninoy' Aquino (assassinated in August 1983 on his arrival in the Philippines from exile in the United States), organised a popular rally and, declaring herself the winner of the election, spearheaded a people's disobedience campaign. In the end, Marcos's dictatorship was ousted by

a combination of military coup and a popular uprising in Metro-Manila, later baptized the EDSA Revolution.²⁷

During the EDSA revolt, the revolutionary movement was significantly marginalized as it was side-stepped by an odd alliance between reform-oriented groups, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, and factions of the military and opposition elites gathered around the figure of Corazon Aquino (Anderson 1988: 24). This massive mobilisation combined with diplomatic pressure from the United States eventually forced the Marcos couple to leave the country without the revolutionary movement having been a key player or present in the events.

Many within the CPP argued that the revolutionary movement was not able to seize the political opportunity provided by the snap election and people's revolt. Critics pointed out that the revolutionary movement found itself in the position of being a mere observer. The Party later assessed its boycott position as a 'tactical blunder.'²⁸ The decision also led to an important questioning of the Party leadership and the eventual demotion of then CPP chairman, Rodolfo 'Rudy' Salas who had led the Party since José Maria Sison, the founding party chairman, was arrested in 1977.

Electoral Boycott: A Tactical Blunder or Missing Out on a Key Juncture?

During the next two years, the Party leadership seemed quite disarticulated and undertook several initiatives (ceasefire, peace negotiations, electoral participation, etc.) without a clear sense of where these would lead. Three different processes seem to have marked those confusing years (1985-1987). The first was a significant claim for autonomy from some party organs and units that was rooted in scepticism towards the Party central leadership. A second was the emergence of dissenting voices within the Party and the growing importance of party-associated non-government organisations (NGOs). The third was a growing impatience to achieve political and military gains pushed by factions of the New People's Army at a time when the party membership and militancy were declining.

While the Party seemed to be going in several directions, the Aquino regime managed to survive a series of coup d'état attempts and was able to launch a massive counter-insurgency campaign. With financial and military assistance from the USA, this campaign was nationwide. After an initial opening to negotiations with the movement and the release of political prisoners, Aquino gradually aligned herself with the more conservative elements in her regime. By March 1987, the Aquino government announced its 'Total War Policy' against the revolutionaries. Several leaders of mass organisations were threatened if not killed. Aquino's counter-insurgency campaign also combined socio-economic work and community organising with massive military operations.

The period starting with EDSA brought into the open dilemmas that had been simmering since the CPP's early days: the role and place of legal work and mass organisations, electoral politics, and how to react to political opportunities while maintaining ideological leadership. Internal party dynamics, numerous arrests and a high turn-over of staff, hindered the revolutionary movement's ability to learn from the range of new experiences it was confronting with the Aquino regime. In addition, the upsurge of the first half of the 1980s and the clear momentum for mass organising, as well as the time pressure to 'act' swiftly as 'victory' seemed close by, created a younger generation of cadres who did not have the same theoretical and revolutionary experience as the founders. Although protocols and organising techniques, developed in the 1970s under Martial Law, continued to provide models, these younger activists and party cadres saw themselves more as 'doers' than 'thinkers,' more pragmatic than theoretical.

Adjustment to the new context was made all the more difficult by a series of traumatic internal purges that added to the party's misfortune. A few months before EDSA, the revolutionary movement experienced some of its darkest moments with a massive and extremely costly (in terms of human lives) anti-infiltration campaign in Mindanao. The Mindanao and other internal purges profoundly damaged moral and social norms and trust within the revolutionary movement. They undermined the precious and essential social network solidarity that had previously existed and had provided much safety and cohesion.²⁹ The combination of the EDSA debacle and the internal purges brought the morale of revolutionary leaders to a low point.

On top of this, there were other dynamics at work. One symptom that threatened the more militant character of the Party was gradual bureaucratisation and the tendency for ‘revolutionary apparatchiks’ to dominate the organisation.³⁰ Another trend that became increasingly pronounced in the late 1980s was questioning the adequacy of the Party leadership’s analysis. Third, in late 1989, the problem of recruitment for full-time cadres in the underground became more pronounced, especially in Manila.³¹ The availability of funds and jobs within above-ground NGOs also created a set of dilemmas for revolutionary work. NGOs were not new to the revolutionary movement but their numbers increased rapidly after EDSA. Two different processes were at work. One was an attempt to seize the financial opportunities provided by all the agencies and funds that started to flow into the Philippines following the demise of the Marcos dictatorship. The other was that NGOs involved in development work became a way for many cadres to remain part of the movement while at the same time having a legal status and enjoying some of the benefits of more open political space.

Internal Implosion and Persistence in a Different World

During the years of the Aquino regime, from 1986 to 1992, the revolutionary movement was never able to regain its momentum. Six years after the 1986 ‘tactical blunder,’ political analysts, and former and current revolutionary movement personalities, estimated that the party had experienced a 40% drop in its armed combatants, the same in terms of controlled territory (Bello 1992), a decline of 15% in party membership, and a massive drop of 60% in the ‘mass base’ or popular support (CPP 1993: 5).

The years from 1989 to 1992 contained moments of lively effervescence in terms of theoretical and strategic debates within the CPP. This was a time when multiple pathways existed and were hotly discussed internally until a faction of the Party leadership reacted and closed down the debate. This decision became a point of no return. This daring move sought to stop the debate by

reaffirming the basic orientation and principles of the Party as well as the strategy of protracted people's war.

In 1991, the exiled founding CPP chairman, José Maria Sison writing under his second pseudonym, 'Armando Liwanag,'³² launched a rectification campaign that sought to reaffirm the basic principles Amado Guerrero (his first *nom de guerre*) had outlined more than twenty years earlier in his paradigmatic *Philippine Society and Revolution*. In late 1991, the first version of 'Reaffirm our Basic Principles and Rectify Errors' began to circulate in Europe and the Philippines. The 'Reaffirm and Rectify' document, along with a 'General Review of Important Events and Decisions from 1980 to 1991,'³³ were later slightly revised and approved during the 10th Plenum of the Central Committee held in July 1992.³⁴ The 'rectification process' rapidly turned into a bitter dispute because many party cadres and members who differed with Sison's assessment and felt that he was trying to shift the blame to some individuals and re-assert his leadership. The accused replied that, in reality, the so-called deviations had had the collective approval of the highest authorities of the party.

Internal tensions reached a climax when the dispute broke into the open in what became known as the 'fax attacks' (Magno 1992: 1). In December 1992, Sison began sending faxes to a leading Philippine newspaper, identifying specific party cadres and charging them with being agents of the state and traitors to the revolution. This was the breaking point. Following this, not only did debates and splits become public and exposed in the mass media, but also new political blocs began to emerge while the Rectification campaign imposed tight discipline on members who chose to stay with the Party.³⁵

Rescuing an Orthodox Revolutionary Movement with Unorthodox Tactics

By late 1994, most of the tension and stress due to the division and break up of underground organisations and the fight over legal institutions, had significantly diminished.³⁶ The *Reaffirm* CPP bloc (RAs) had established its bases and was undergoing an ideological consolidation

whereas the main lines of division between the various factions of the *Rejectionists* (those who rejected Sison/Liwanag's 'Rectify and Reaffirm' paper, and referred to as RJs) were becoming increasingly clear. As time passed, each of these blocs experienced further divisions. However, comparatively speaking, the Reaffirm bloc remained the least fractured.

Having gained a more consolidated position within the Philippine Left by the late 1990s, the ideologically orthodox CPP ventured into new territory such as electoral participation, successfully inserted itself within the anti-globalisation movement while continuing to be rooted in rural areas, upholding the strategic line, with the New People's Army launching from time to time tactical offensives. As early as 1998, Sison recognised that there was potential to be explored within the party list.³⁷ This project of Party List participation (a portion of the seats in the Philippine Congress are elected using a proportional system) materialised in 2001, when CPP-led organisations in the Philippines put up a political party, Bayan Muna! (Nation First).

Twenty years after launching the Rectification movement, the multiplication of political blocs, experiments with the formation of electoral political parties of the Left, tensions between new social movements and older ones, and fights among and between NGOs and popular organisations aligned with certain political factions, are still on-going. This might or might not be part of the unfinished process of reconfiguration of the Philippine Left.

Conclusion: Philippine Revolutionary Movement: An Anomalous Persistence?

The CPP is still a very long way from the day it can seize power in Manila. Yet, its persistence and ability to bounce back after major internal schisms are worth discussing. Three features emerge. One is the movement's capacity to learn from the past, while remaining clear about the strategic line of revolution at the rhetorical level, a capacity to deploy and use a range of unorthodox tactics. Another feature is the second coming of José Maria Sison as the central figure of the movement, as ideologue, strategist and tactician. A third feature is that Rectification simplified the revolutionary movement's structures and organisations, which has meant more cohesion and a reduction of the institutional autonomy that marked the past. There has been a

return to clear protocols and modular action prescribing very detailed lines of conduct and objectives. The Party has used its international experience and skills to connect with various anti-globalisation movements, making it possible for the revolution to appear quite contemporary and yet remain Maoist at its core. With Sison's exile in Europe and the support of some European Maoist Parties, the revolutionary movement has also been able to maintain a wide network of solidarity groups within the Philippine diaspora covering a vast array of issues (migrant workers, youth, women, union and labour issues, human rights, international solidarity with people's struggles, etc.). These groups contribute directly and indirectly to the revolutionary movement with finance, logistics and through organising abroad.

The Philippine revolutionary collective action frame might persist for several years because it gives meaning to action and rebellion more than it explains reality. Over the years, a number of scholars have sought to challenge the description of Philippine society as semi-feudal and semi-colonial as presented in *Philippine Society and Revolution*, but they have not managed to reduce its appeal and capacity to organise reality, so that it helps people understand or rationalise why they engage in such high risk activism. This indicates that there is more going on than just an academic exercise; people engage in violent collective action because it makes sense to them in the circumstances. Another reason for expecting the CPP revolution to persist is the demographic availability of new members, meaning that there are many potential recruits, mostly in rural areas where the CPP has focused its efforts since the beginning of its 'Second Rectification Campaign.' While the first generation of CPP cadres came from the student movement, there is now recognition that the largest number of members and guerrilla fighters are from peasant and worker (urban poor) origins.³⁸

Other leftist political parties, who find it hard to work together and constitute a potential alternative to the CPP's control of the radical left agenda, are also helping the CPP maintain its credibility. Even if the anti-globalisation movement offers potential for non-Maoist leftist groups to connect to international progressive movements beyond the limited circle of Maoist

communist parties, the revolutionary movement, despite an orthodox Marxist-Leninist-Maoist rhetoric, has always been extremely responsive to political opportunities.

Given all this, the CPP and its armed revolution are likely to persist for many more years without ever winning, because of its ability to maintain vibrant and active international links and creative political engagements in the legal arena while maintaining an armed insurgency that can capture the imaginations of peasants and the urban poor living in economically marginal areas as well as activists and diaspora members who are exposed to and feel connected to a living revolutionary movement 'at home.'

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Notes

1 This has been particularly evident in the increasing and alarming number of extra-judicial killings carried out against suspected sympathisers of the CPP between 2001 and 2008. See Philip Alston's report (2007).

2 The term 're-establishment' was used by those who split from the PKP to indicate that the new CPP represented the true heir of the original Communist Party of the Philippines established on November 7, 1930. See Richardson (1984); Hoeksema (1956); Allen (1985).

3 Bonner reports that the 1969 election 'cost Marcos a staggering \$50 million, which was \$16 million more than Nixon had raised for his successful presidential bid the year before' (1987: 76).

4 Some of the elected members of the first KM national council would eventually become key personalities and members of the Central Committee of the re-established Communist Party of the Philippines, among them: José Maria Sison, Nilo Tayag, and Carlos del Rosario. See Katabaang Makabayan (1965: back cover).

5 See Chapman (1987: 77); Jones (1989: 18-19); Nemenzo (1984a: 62-63); Weekley (1996: 28-30).

6 As Jones has written: 'Sison had purposely selected the date – the twenty-seventh anniversary of the founding of the World War II Hukbalahap communist guerrilla organization – to formally launch the reconstituted communist army, the New People's Army' (1989: 31). There are many accounts of the Hukbalahap, for some of the more useful see Kerkvliet (1979: 61-109); Lachica (1971); Taruc (1953).

7 See also Chapman (1987: 79); Jones (1989: 32).

8 These new guerrillas were mostly urban activists coming from universities in contrast with the HMB, which recruited primarily from the peasantry. See Nemenzo (1984b: 81).

9 Based on his interviews with leaders of the CPP and rank-and-file members, Jones affirms that by 1970, the NPA could only field around 300 lightly armed guerrillas, mostly concentrated in Central Luzon (Jones 1989: 45). On the eve of Martial Law, the US estimated the number of armed guerrillas between 1,000 to 2,000 (Niksich and United States, Senate, Congress, Committee on Foreign Relations, Library of Congress, Foreign Affairs and National Defense Division 1985: 21).

10 As Weekley notes: 'The evidence and arguments are presented in tight, logical fashion – minimising the room for doubt in the mind of the reader – and in simple, often simplistic terms' (1996: 53).

11 Abinales makes a similar observation (1992: 31)

12 Written under the pseudonym of Amado Guerrero (1979), PSR's scholarly qualities have been regularly challenged, see Kathleen Weekley (1996: 53-104); Reid (2000: chapters 6 and 7).

Notes

13 CPP (1972: 8,); CPP, Regional Committee – Western Visayas (circa 1981: 3).

14 An internal Party document entitled ‘Philippine Situation’ produced around 1977 explained that: ‘After the declaration of martial law, our work in the countryside expanded (1973-74). But during the time also our work in the cities weakened ...’ (CPP circa 1977a: 3).

15 CPP (circa 1977b: 1).

16 As Chapman wrote, these activists ‘are called today the ‘martial law babies,’ those hundreds of young students for whom Marcos’ proclamation in 1972 was the signal to flee into the communist underground’ (1987: 97).

17 Martial Law contributed to the radicalisation of a number of organisations and former reformist student leaders. See Pimentel Jr. (1989: 109-167).

18 For example, around 1974, the SDK (Samahang Demokratiko ng Kabataan) released a document on legal organising under Martial Law. See Samahang Demokratiko ng Kabataan (SDK) (1974).

19 See Rocamora (1978: 2-6). When it was formed, the NDF encompassed several sectoral organisations: Kapisanan ng mga Gurong Makabayan (KAGUMA or Association of Patriotic Teachers), Kabataang Makabayan (KM or Patriotic Youth), Katipunan ng mga Samahang Manggagawa (KASAMA or Federation of Labor Union), Makabayang Kilusan ng Bagong Kababaihan (MAKIBAKA or Free Movement of New Women), Pambansang Katipunan ng mga Magbubukid (PKM or National Association of Peasants), and the Christians for National Liberation (CNL).

20 The initial Preparatory Commission of the NDF included church radicals and members of Movement for Democratic Philippines (MDP). See Abinales (1992: 34); Sison with Werning (1989: 77).

21 See also Guerrero (1974); CPP (1976).

22 See also Magno (1988); Malay Jr. (1982, 1984b: 51); Francisco Nemenzo (1984: 90-91).

23 For a large part, the rest of the document follows Mao Tse-Tung’s writings, especially ‘On Protracted War’ (1969: 113-194).

24 For the Church sector, see Youngblood (1993: especially Chapter 4, 65-100). On the ‘middle-forces,’ see Pimentel Jr (1989: 171-181). See also Timberman (1991: 98-116); Wurfel (1988: 124-127).

Notes

25 See Rocamora (1994: 5). Kathleen Weekley adds that the CPP ‘won the hegemonic place in the Philippine left ...’ (1996: 2).

26 See Porter (1987); United States Senate, Congress, Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations (1984).

27 EDSA (Epifanio De Los Santos Avenue) is the large avenue in Manila, where people had gathered to block the loyal army troops that sought to crush the military rebellion.

28 This was the expression used in the Central Committee’s publication, *Ang Bayan* (1986: 1-3).

29 Author’s interview with ‘Maude,’ September 26, 1995. Author’s interviews with ‘Pierrot,’ Manila, April 10, 1995; and ‘Fidel Vinzon,’ Manila, October 11, 1995. In fact, there were two parallel campaigns, one called Operation Missing Link (OPML) that affected mostly Southern Tagalog region, and a second called Operation Olympia that was conducted in Manila and focused on the Party central units.

30 Author’s interview with ‘Joey,’ February 17, 1996.

31 According to a leading member of the Party: ‘Fewer and fewer people wanted full-time work with the underground or to be transferred from Manila.’ Author’s interview with ‘Joey,’ February 17, 1996.

32 Although Sison himself would not officially confirm this for safety reasons, it is widely assumed that Armando Liwanag (meaning more or less loading/arming radiance/light) was Sison’s second *nom de guerre*.

33 See CPP 1993: 1-63.

34 The amended and approved version during the 10th Plenum was later published in *Rebolusyon*. See Communist Party of the Philippines, Central Committee (1993: 1-82).

35 Rocamora, one of those accused by Sison, describes these tight organizational policies imposed by the Rectification movement as follows ‘Only “Reaffirm” and other documents approved by the leadership can be discussed by Party Units. Criticism and self-criticism can be done only within Party units’ (Rocamora 1994: 111).

36 This was in contrast to early 1994, when there were still open threats made publicly and a significant number of personal attacks (author’s interview with Joey, Manila, February 5, 1995).

37 Sison, interview with author, Utrecht, April 17, 1998.

38 ‘Alfonso,’ interview with author, Utrecht, April 16, 1998.