

# People's struggles in Latin Asia - I - Philippines, colonial protests during the Spanish era

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**The French original had to be much shortened because of editorial constraints (thus, some few corrections have been introduced here). An even longer version is now under preparation and will be posted online in French... as soon as possible.**

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At the end of the nineteenth century, the Philippines was the first country in Asia to be liberated from colonial power. The first anti-colonial revolt against Spanish rule occurred from 1896 to 1898, further extended by the resistance to the American conquest. Ultimately, at the turn of the twentieth century, the US replaced a defeated Spain, initiating a new colonial cycle.

The Philippines is comprised of an archipelago composed of 7,107 islands, the vast majority of whose population lives on 20 islands. The geographic dispersion of the Philippines has greatly influenced

the history of popular struggles in the country. But one unparalleled historical factor explains the distinctiveness of the Philippines in Asia: an early and prolonged character of direct colonial domination.

Colonialism in the Philippines began in the sixteenth century, as in Latin America - 300 years earlier than most Asian countries. The process of formal decolonization was not complete until the aftermath of World War II, as in most of the rest of Asia, but 100 years later than in Latin America. Thus, the Philippines' colonial era lasted an exceptionally long four centuries. Another particularity of the country was that Spain reigned as the dominating colonial power before the archipelago became one of the few direct colonies of the United States, a unique succession for Asia.

Colonial powers of the archipelago were not confronted with a mature pre-capitalist state, as in China, Vietnam, Cambodia, or Thailand. Although the Philippines ultimately did not become a colony of settlement, colonization facilitated western cultural penetration and drastic societal change. The country became the primary Christian territory in the region - in many ways, the Philippines today remains Latin Asia.

Ferdinand Magellan disembarked in 1521 on an island which later became the Philippines, but it was only after the expedition of Miguel Lopez de Legazpi in 1565 that the process of colonization seriously began. At the time, the archipelago's population was less than one million, composed of various linguistic groups. The basic social unit, usually the *barangay* (village), was small in size.

Magellan was not the first to "discover" the territory. Before the arrival of Christian Europeans, communities living along the coast and the rivers were already in contact with Chinese, Indian, and Arab merchants. In the south, Islamization of the archipelago was well underway and the sultanates were established.

Apart from the Islamized regions of the south, social differentiation and institutional representations were poorly developed at the time of Spain's arrival. It was Spain that introduced private ownership of land, previously considered common property. The polarization of classes was only asserted with the onset of the colonial framework. For two centuries Spain did not attempt to "develop" the archipelago, remaining content to use the port of Manila in the galleon trade between China and Mexico. The Spanish hoped to use the Philippines as a rear base in the conquest of China, and the archipelago became a religious and military post of the empire. Administered through Mexico, Spain's presence in the Philippines helped control its global commercial route against the English, Portuguese, and Dutch, who were often at war in the European Continent.

The country was not only Christianized through colonization. The friars became central politically, and the church was a source of economic power. The Spanish empire was built in the name of "two majesties" - God (or rather the pope) and the king. The friars, who received salaries from the king of Spain, maintained a direct relationship with the crown as well as serving as the representatives of Rome. They were present everywhere except in the Muslim south, knew the country, spoke the local dialect, organized people around the church, and remained in the archipelago when civil servants returned to Spain. The clergy was the first beneficiary of the privatization of land, becoming the Philippines' largest landowner. It invested in international and local trade and controlled banks and insurance companies by means of foundations.

The friars constituted the most important power network in the entire archipelago. On an economic level, they were challenged by private capitalist competition quite late in the empire. The church's political influence was significant because friars became agents and guarantors of pacification, with religion legitimating the colonial order. The union of church and state afforded friars considerable administrative responsibility. Friars incarnated spiritual and temporal powers, but when the regime

entered a crisis, they were enmeshed in the social and political tensions as principal channels of colonial exploitation and appropriation.

## **Social Stratification and Regional Differentiation**

For a long time the Spanish, Chinese, and indigenous economies intermingled. Feudal practices and institutions were imported from Spain, but European feudalism, as such, did not develop in the Philippines. The impact of commercial capitalism was felt rapidly; under the influence of the world market and of Chinese trade, the precolonial relationships of production were gradually dissolved. With the increase in mixed marriages, the influence of Chinese *mestizos* increased. As a result of privileges granted traditional dignitaries, a class of propertied Filipinos, called the *principales*, was formed in association with the colonial power.

The colonial era gave birth to a peculiar social hierarchy, dominated from top to bottom by Spaniards, the *mestizos* (particularly Sino-Filipinos, as Hispano-Filipino was less common), the indigenous *principales*, and finally the people. Private appropriation of land resulted in new social polarization between landlords and tenants, and friars often became absentee landlords. The clergy competed with the Chinese for the control of local trade and, in the villages, with *ecomenderos*, Filipinos given the status of subjects of the Spanish crown. In light of the theopolitical characteristic of Spanish colonialism, tensions often turned violent between the clerical hierarchy and civil servants.

The social, economic, political, and linguistic unification of the country was never completed by the administrative and religious structures of the colonial power. With the decline of the Spanish empire and rise of Britain in the seventeenth century, the British and Chinese played an important role in developing and integrating the Philippines into the global market. While the archipelago's social formation remained deeply marked by the Hispanic clerico-commercial order, Chinese immigration proved more widespread and durable than that of the Spanish. At the onset of the seventeenth century, more than 20,000 Chinese lived in Manila and the surrounding areas and played an increasingly important role in commercial activity.

The Philippines' complex historical heritage is combined with the particular geography of the country. In the archipelago maritime and land communication is often difficult; the ocean separates the islands and the mountain chains isolate the plains from one another. These factors strengthened considerably the forces of regional differentiation in the country and bear witness to its linguistic diversity. Tagalog, which obtained the status of the national language, is the mother tongue of only 30 percent of the population and is spoken primarily in the capital of Manila. Other languages and dialects are spoken in the rest of the archipelago. For many Filipinos, Tagalog remains a second language, the diffusion of which was promoted in the late twentieth century by television.

Political life too remained regional, with large provincial families exerting remarkably important influence. The deep-rootedness of the church, the shaping of social class through a colonial framework, the strength of regionalism, the presence of a non-Hispanized population [1] in the south and in the mountain ranges of the archipelago were factors weighing strongly upon the birth of a national conscience and social struggles. These factors also shaped the degree of identification of Filipinos with their Asian region. In the Philippines, more westernized than its neighbors and mostly Christianized, the sentiment of belonging to a Southeast Asia of Islamic, Buddhist, and Confucian cultures is not instinctive.

## **Early Resistance**

Colonial expeditions were confronted with armed resistance, like that carried out by Lapu-lapu which cost Ferdinand Magellan his life, or that of Lakandula and Soliman against Legazpi. In 1587, many traditional chiefs were condemned to death for instigating a revolt in Manila. Many uprisings were later carried out against exploitation imposed by the friars, such as those in Samar Island in 1649.

Abolition of the tribute, a collection that led to many brutalities, and the end of forced labor and conscription, often keeping villagers from fully harvesting their crop, were the most widespread demands during Spanish rule. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, rebellion often took the form of native upheaval against Christianity and its representatives. But Catholic rituals also sometimes combined with traditional beliefs as proof of the early ideological domination of colonial rule. In the center of Luzon, where social structures were most developed, as early as 1660 resistance was less religious, non-native, and more directly political.

Certain regional upheavals acquired large mass bases and long resisted military expeditions sent to crush them. This was the case of the struggle initiated in the Province of Bohol by Francisco Dagohoy, lasting 85 years from 1744 to 1829. Deep-rooted socially, this struggle continued in spite of the death of Dagohoy. The popular upheaval first took advantage of the conflict between Spain and the Netherlands, then of the world decline in Hispanic power and the repercussions of the Seven Years' War in Europe: the British even occupied Manila in 1762 and the center of Luzon Island became the scene of numerous struggles in the following years.

## **Resistance: Late 18<sup>th</sup> to Late 19<sup>th</sup> Centuries**

The process of the 1896-8 revolution was deeply influenced by the amplitude of sociopolitical transformation engaged in from the middle of the eighteenth century. The weal and co-optation of the elite sharpened class polarization within the Philippine communities. A direct commercial route was opened toward Spain, and trade diversified to Europe and Asia. With a higher degree of integration into the world market, cash crop production intensified.

With the creation in 1781 of the monopoly on tobacco (abandoned in 1883), then in 1785 of the Royal Philippine Company (abolished in 1834), the colony gained financial and commercial independence from Mexico. Trade liberalization, pursued with the end of the galleon trade in 1813, stimulated the development of the monetary economy of the Philippines. Banking houses were created, foreign companies (especially British but also American) were authorized to operate in the Manila region, and competition between Chinese-British and Spanish firms became fierce.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the social pyramid still followed the ethnic constitution of the country with, from top to bottom, the *peninsulares* (Spanish holding positions in the Philippines), the *insulates* or Creoles (Spanish born in the archipelago and considering themselves real Filipinos), the *mestizo* Spanish, the *mestizo* Chinese, the natives, and the Chinese. Chinese immigration was mostly male and the number of Sino-Filipinos increased considerably; it gained importance especially after the eviction of the non-Catholic Chinese in 1755. Among a population of four million, 250,000 were Chinese mestizos, 20,000 Spanish mestizos, and 10,000 Chinese.

In 1850, the Philippines again opened up to Chinese immigration. The Chinese subsequently regained their position in trade and finance as Sino-Filipinos switched to agriculture, becoming more Filipino than Chinese and often adopting Philippine names. Sino-Filipinos integrated into large

provincial families and into what was to become the national elite. Land concentration progressed rapidly throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, giving birth to the hacienda system, which combined an active integration in the world capitalist market with quasi-feudal forms of exploitation inherited from the church.

The national market was consolidated – although without abolishing regional powers – and new elites emerged who were sensitive to the ideals of the Enlightenment and who sent their children to study in Spain. The elites faced limitations imposed by colonial rule and strong social resentment. The Cadiz Constitution, proclaimed in Spain in 1812 and the following year in the Philippines, resonated with people's aspirations for equality. The quick abrogation of the constitution in 1814, with the advent of the absolutist regime in the colonial metropolis, sparked the 1815 revolt of Sarrao during which the *cailanes*, or common people, attacked the *principales*, or rich Filipinos. Class antagonisms proved stronger at this time than opposition to colonial rule [2].

As rice production declined and competition grew fiercer from foreign textile producers, the socioeconomic situation of many Filipinos deteriorated due to foreign control over the import-export market. Many contradictions undermined the established order: between rich and poor, peasants and landlords, within the elite, between the *principales* and Creoles, but also between the *peninsulares* and Creoles, considered akin to the rebels in Latin America. Within the church, an equality movement was formed as native priests demanded that Filipinos join the clergy long dominated by the Spaniards. The authoritarian tightening of colonial administration provoked a brief mutiny in Cavite in 1872, after which three Filipino priests, Fathers José Burgos, Mariano Gomez, and Jacinto Zamora, were executed. The brutality with which a resulting minor revolt was crushed unified various components of the Philippine society, all the more so because one priest who had three-fourths Spanish blood was nevertheless considered an *indio* by the authorities.

The term “Filipino” was originally reserved for Creoles or Spaniards born and residing in the Philippines, but its usage came to denote the social elite, including Chinese *mestizos* and the culturally Hispanicized urbanized natives.

## **Culture, Class, and Nation**

The constitution of the international market, the evolution of the Philippine social formation, and the growing rejection of the colonial order fostered the assertion of a national conscience and a modern conception of a nation in the second half of the nineteenth century. The *ilustrados*, influenced by European liberalism and the ideals of the French Revolution, shaped its ideological formulation. Consequently, the dominant conception of the nation reflected their social status, not simply the cultural identity of the country. The paternalistic contempt for the people legitimized the domination of a class, but it also implied that the archipelago was not yet ready for independence. It announced many future compromises with the more “advanced” western powers.

The country's cultural identity was more profoundly marked by its colonial heritage than is usually the case in Asia, at least partly because of the lengthy colonial domination. The dances, songs, poems, and popular legends of the Philippines reflect a Hispanic influence. An “imaginary” memory was established in which the history of the Spanish royalty intermingled with indigenous themes. The church contributed to this by translating into vernacular languages an edifying metropolitan literature. This mythical history fed on the stories of the European wars against the Moors, which had consequences on the relationship of Christianized Filipinos with the Muslims in the south.

This process of cultural integration permitted the creation of an original culture combining oriental and western (Spanish, then American -but also Arab) traditions. The “authentic” Filipino is the fruit

of these successive blends.

## **The Revolution of 1896-1898**

The revolution of 1896-8 resulted from the convergence of movements against colonial administration and against large landlords; thus it targeted the Spanish Catholic Church. The revolution simultaneously addressed the questions of independence, the republic, social justice, and the emergence of an indigenous church - within and without Catholicism.

The *ilustrados*, both in Spain and in the Philippines, launched in 1889 a magazine called *La Solidaridad*, through which the new propaganda movement made itself known. The latter did not question the colonial framework but fought for democratization. On July 2, 1892, La Liga Filipina was formed to enlarge the social base of the movement, demanding reforms. Four days later, José Rizal, the most well known among the founders of the Liga, was arrested and deported to Dapitan in the south of the archipelago. The Liga was dissolved, but gave birth to two organizations: the Cuerpo de Com-promisarios with the affluent *ilustrados* supporting *La Solidaridad* on one side, and, on the other side, the Katipunan, which was a secret society established by militants, admittedly educated but from more modest origins, like Andres Bonifacio, a figurehead of the association. The members of the new intelligentsia were not necessarily rich. Marcelo H. del Pilar, who wrote in Tagalog and whose ideas, more radical than those of Rizal, influenced Bonifacio, died in a state of poverty in Spain in 1896.

The Katipunan fought for separation from Spain and not for a deeper assimilation. It promoted peaceful agitation as well as armed revolution. It embodied the radicalization of a socially intermediary sector, exercising generally skilled or liberal professions, but peripheral to the elite. The Katipunan was sensitive to the indignity of the colonial condition and reacted against the opportunism of the wealthy and the class polarizations at work within the greater Philippine society itself.

The revolutionary movement focused its attention on eight Tagalog provinces of Luzon where the urban influence on the countryside was the strongest, and where the commercialization of agriculture and the concentration of land in the hands of the church were most advanced.

In August 1896, the colonial administration, which had learned of the existence of the Katipunan, launched a wave of arrests, which triggered the start of the revolt. The governor-general proclaimed a state of war, ordering the execution of detainees, including José Rizal, in spite of the fact that he had, from detention, repudiated the revolution. Rizal incarnated the reformist *ilustrados* promoting the rationality of the Enlightenment against the superstition of the people. He was nevertheless much respected before his death by the natives and considered a healer in the Tagalog regions [3]. His assassination after a mock trial plunged the reformist policies of the elite into a dead end. The popular milieus, for their part, likened the execution to the martyrdom of Christ. The armed struggle spread rapidly to provinces throughout Luzon Island and some other islands.

Political and personal conflicts soon appeared within the revolutionary cadres. The influence of Andreas Bonifacio declined because of successive military defeats against colonial forces. The influence of Emilio Aguinaldo, son of an affluent Chinese *mestizo* family, was reinforced. Regionalism and provincialism contributed to the weakening of the revolutionary movement. The turning point came in early 1897. A government was established; led by Aguinaldo, it was composed of provincial dignitaries. Bonifacio, who refused to recognize it, was arrested, summarily tried, and executed. The leadership of the revolution fell under the control of the elites.



The Aguinaldo government led without glory. After new military defeats, he signed an agreement with the colonial powers denouncing as bandits those who had pursued the armed struggle. Later, Aguinaldo and his followers went into exile in Hong Kong, where they pocketed 400,000 pesos as “indemnity” given by the Spanish government; 200,000 more pesos were given to the leaders of the Republic of Biak-na-bato, which remained in the archipelago.

### **From One Enemy to Another**

In spite of the assassination of Bonifacio, the crisis of Katipunan, and many self-proclaimed leaders’ desertions, the popular rebellion was revived in Luzon and other islands like Cebu and Panay. But the emergence of the United States as a new world power and the 1898 Spanish-American War radically changed the framework of the struggles.

In May of that year, American Marines destroyed a Spanish fleet in Manila Bay. Washington had already negotiated with the Hong Kong-based Filipino exiles who, on May 9, returned under their protection to Cavite. Five days later, Aguinaldo formed a new government and on June 12 proclaimed independence from Spain, placing the country under the protective umbrella of the United States. Through this proclamation, he succeeded in rallying local leaders of the resistance and presenting himself again as president.

The Philippine revolutionary forces easily won over the Spanish. The US immediately took control of the capital, with more than 10,000 expeditionary corps. Meanwhile, the Filipinos won battles in the Visayas, in the center of the archipelago, and in the Negros region Hispano-ophile landlords turned against their masters. On January 23, 1899, the first Republic of the Philippines was proclaimed. Still, two developments raised uncertainty over the success of the revolution. On social issues, the elite ascertained its control over the new regime: the land of the friars was seized – but was to be distributed to dignitaries and landowners rather than to the peasants who supported the war efforts. On the international front, secret negotiations between Madrid and Washington plotted the annexation of the country by the new imperialist power.

At the time of the Treaty of Paris, signed on December 10, 1898, Spain controlled only isolated positions in the Philippines – this fact did not keep it from selling a country that it no longer possessed. On December 21, President McKinley issued a proclamation of Benevolent Assimilation, commanding the expeditionary corps to conquer the whole of the archipelago. In a move largely unexpected by the Philippine nationalist movement, Aguinaldo gave ambiguous instructions – to take up once more the struggle for independence, but prepare to accept an American protectorate or annexation if this objective seemed out of reach. The US opened hostilities on February 4, 1899. After two years of fighting, on March 23, 1901 its forces captured Aguinaldo, who on April 19 called an end to the armed resistance. The rallying of *ilustrados* for the new occupying forces increased, although the popular resistance continued. Those who were opposed to conciliation, like Apolinario Mabini – a former prime minister in the Philippine government – were cast aside, if not assassinated. Such was the destiny of General Antonio Luna, considered the best military leader of the revolution.

### **A Battle of Memory**

Independence from Spain gave way to a new colonial order. It was defeat within victory. The first major revolutionary experience of the modern Philippines presents characteristics that will be again found in the future, every time such struggles gain ground. The central questions of degree of independence, who shall hold power, and who shall benefit from reforms, are interconnected. The

class cleavage affirmed itself again and again within the anti-colonial movement. The propertied elites tended to compromise with the foreign power, particularly with the United States. The economic and military superiority of the US does not alone explain the outcome of the war. The divisions within the nationalist movement itself also played an important role.

History is written by the conqueror. In the pantheon of leaders of the anti-colonial movement, it is José Rizal who has officially been named the national hero. Surely, he was the subject of a truly popular cult. But he was also an emblematic figure acceptable to the propertied elite as well as to the new dominant power. For their part, the left and the labor movement celebrate Bonifacio Day every year on November 30. A century after, the revolution of 1896–8 and the war that followed remain the focus of a never-ending battle of memory.

## **Pierre Rousset**

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## **P.S.**

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[http://www.revolutionprotestencyclopedia.com/subscriber/tocnode?id=g9781405184649\\_chunk\\_g97814051846491183](http://www.revolutionprotestencyclopedia.com/subscriber/tocnode?id=g9781405184649_chunk_g97814051846491183)\* On the International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest, see on ESSF:

[The International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest – 1500 to the Present](#)

[A presentation of the "International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest: 1500 to the Present"](#)



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## Footnotes

[1] Correction from the “non-Hispanic” of the printed version

[2] Correction from the printed version where the word “during” was added.

[3] Correction from the printed version which eventually (and wrongly) stated, after shortening the original: “Rizal exemplified the reformist *ilustrados*, opposing the rationality of the Enlightenment in favor of the superstition of the people. He was nevertheless much respected before his death and considered a healer...”