People's struggles in Latin Asia – III – Philippine Huk Rebellion, 1946–1954

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The French original had to be much shortened because of editorial constrains (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.

For the other parts of this essay, go to:

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

People's struggles in Latin Asia – II – Philippines, protest during the US era

People's struggles in Latin Asia – IV – Philippines, protests, 1950s–1972

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The Huk Rebellion, a major rural guerilla peasant movement, began in 1946 in the months following the Philippines' declaration of independence and was quelled only in the 1950s, after deeply marking the history and popular consciousness of the country. The Hukbalahap/Communist Party (Partido Kommunista ng Pilipinas, PKP) armed struggle was an act of self-defense in response to escalating levels of savage repression by government forces. As the insurrection grew, the movement ascended from a protective strategy of defense to a moment of revolutionary liberation.

Situated in Central Luzon, the Huk made use of an explosive social situation, reflecting a popular historical tradition of resistance under the threat of geographic isolation. At independence, regional disparities remained considerable in the archipelago, as resistance to the Japanese occupation

during World War II and accession to independence had not been the occasion for a “founding struggle” creating a new collective political and national identity. Independence did not reduce entrenched social divisions that punctuated antagonisms among the dominant classes, working classes, and peasants along political and regional divisions. The dislocation of the Japanese war and occupation only intensified resentment.

Aftermath of World War II

Following independence, the pretense of democracy concealed the upper classes’ fear and aversion of the Hukbalahap resistance that was gaining prominence nationally [1]. At the provincial level, large and wealthy families wielded political power outside of the rule of law, and were free to use private armies to punish and impose laws arbitrarily. The ruling family death squads assassinated with impunity popular movement leaders and representatives of competing clans running for election. With state power fragmented, smuggling syndicates flourished and in various regions violence became the norm, distorting traditional patronage relationships. With US support, anti-communism supplied an ideological cover for repression.

In urban areas, the immediate postwar era saw the emergence of a middle class that was subordinated to the key foreign and domestic capitalist interests. US firms supplied capital that dominated trade and mines while in the rural areas the landed oligarchy, especially planters on sugar cane haciendas, directed the export-oriented agro-industry.

Communist and leftist forces for liberation were suppressed by the armed forces, including many former guerillas, supporting the US geostrategic concern that the Philippines archipelago was vital to its interests with the rise to power of the communists in China and leftist forces throughout East Asia and Southeast Asia.

Reorganization of the Peasant and Worker Movements

In the provinces of Central and South Luzon, after liberation, a new organization emerged more powerful than the former PKP: the National Peasants’ Union (Pambansang Kaisahanng mag Magbubukid, PKMP [2]). When PKM military units were disbanded, many Huks joined, and it became among the biggest peasant organization in the history of the country.

In urban regions, the Committee on Labor Organization (CLO), established in March 1945 and soon renamed the Congress of Labor Organizations, maintained dominance. Under Japanese occupation, union development was not seen as a priority of the PKP. But in the postwar era, the Huks actively sought to reconstitute the urban movement. The CLO was rooted in Metro Manila, organized on “industrial lines,” with a federation for each industrial sector: printing, tobacco, water, petrol, and so on. Ten months after its formation, the CLO grew to 80,000 members. In the Visayas in the center of the archipelago, José and Jesus Lava reactivated the Federation of Workers of the Philippines (Federation Obrera de Filipina, FOF), a 70,000-member organization with established links to the CLO.

In response to the deteriorating economic conditions in the first year after the war, 49 strikes broke out, and workers often emerged victorious. Centered on concrete economic demands, the struggles in particular organized the unemployed. In connection with the Democratic Alliance, protests extended to political and anti-imperialist issues. However, the popular peasant, urban poor, workers’ movements and progressive parties were suppressed by the violence of the upper classes and the dominant capitalist order. On February 24, 1948, Manuel Joven, CLO general secretary, was abducted and then assassinated.

Democratic Alliance

In 1945–6 the progressive forces (radical or simply liberal) regrouped in a defensive political front, called the Democratic Alliance. It was composed of four organizations that each had few members: the League for National Liberation, the Anti-Traitors' League, the Anti-Japanese League, and the Civil Liberties Union. The alliance, supported by the PKM in the countryside and by the CLO in urban areas, proved capable of organizing demonstrations of tens of thousands. Six of its candidates were elected to the Congress in Central Luzon in the 1946 elections, but they were denied the right to take their seats in government.

Some leaders of the PKP were members of the executive council of the Democratic Alliance. However, the Democratic Alliance leadership was dominated by reformists who had a moderate program. They supported Sergio Osmeña in the presidential election campaign of April 1946, a race that was won by Manuel Roxas of the Nacionalista Party.

Rural Crisis and Agrarian Struggle

At war's end, the stability of traditional rural social relationships was in disarray, undermined by capitalist development in agriculture [3]. The impersonal economic character of the legal contract replaced old personal ties between landlords and tenants. For peasants, a moral contract was betrayed. Landowners frequently seized on the subordinate position of peasants to unjustly demand services, but they also were forced to assume customary responsibilities in dramatic situations: granting no-interest loans, distributing food rations in times of scarcity, supplying medicine and hospital treatment for sick children, and authorizing subsistence plantation (rice, vegetables, fruit) on plots of land. In an environment of deep exploitation and great poverty, the obligations of wealthy farmers to their tenants represented a crucial and legitimate security net for peasants.

The breach in the moral contract between wealthy landlord and tenant farmer was brutal, beginning in the 1920s and expanding into the next two decades. The capitalist "modernization" of law reinforced the legal right of landowners, eroding the traditional right of land users. After World War II inequality expanded dramatically: the rural elite earned spectacular wealth from the world trade in rice and sugar and seized on the precariousness of the peasant condition as mechanization displaced rural jobs. The popular feeling was animated by injustice, abandonment, and adversity in the face of the unilateral violation of customary obligations in Central Luzon and beyond, constituting the basis for future struggles.

The PKP program included land redistribution and socialization of much of the economy. In local struggles, land ownership was the primary focus of protests. In the 1930s and 1940s, land struggles were often aimed at reforming the tenancy system rather than its abolition, including respect for landowners' customary obligations. Land redistribution was not a traditional demand as peasants retained an embellished memory of patron–client relationships, explaining in part the success of the counterinsurgency of the 1950s by the Magsaysay regime: the promise of a moderate agrarian reform would seemingly restore protective patronage links.

An ideology of justice punctuated peasant resistance to repression and nurtured efforts to avenge the criminal behavior of landlords and their surrogates, frequently the police. Before taking up arms in the postwar rebellions, the peasantry exhausted all forms of struggle: petition for redress to authorities, strikes, demonstrations, or secret appropriation of part of the harvests. Peasants frequently relocated in search of more human landowners, free land, or complementary non-agricultural work. But the conditions of exploitation became uniform and peasants turned to lawyers and intellectuals for legal assistance in the courts, often in vain. Due to the parliamentary regime,

unlike other Asian countries at the time, peasants could explore electoral action, linking with clientelist or progressive parties. But peasants were unsuccessful in these efforts at redress.

The geographic and cultural dispersion of the Philippines has always hindered [4] the capacity of workers and peasants to unify against the dominant classes. In the 1930s and 1940s landlords recruited the most deprived peasants into private armies, the Cawal ng Capayapaan (Knights of Peace) and the Civilian Guards. In resistance, peasants organizing cadres gave rise to numerous exchanges of experience among rural communities, contributing to the advent of a collective consciousness broadening peasants' vision beyond the horizon of the village and creating horizontal links among activists. Similarly, the anonymity and dominance of the new capitalist rural market economy placed into sharp relief exploitative class relationships that were previously hidden behind the idiosyncrasies of local patronage relationships. The rebellion of the Huks was made possible by the decades-long tradition of organization and multifarious struggles among peasants in Central Luzon, of which resistance against the Japanese occupation was only one expression.

The peasants exhausted all peaceful means of appeal and protest against the propertied classes to reconstruct a tolerable life in the rural areas. In response to legal means, the authorities increased repression, which in turn pushed peasants to join the rebellion, as they had done in resisting Japanese occupation. The resumption of armed struggle in Central Luzon was not imposed externally but was a product of regional history, and it was not reproduced identically in other parts of the archipelago. In the interim, the PKP hesitated before reengaging in armed struggle.

The PKP and Armed Struggle

The Hukbalahap and the PKP were officially outlawed only in March 1948. Negotiations continued with mixed success until June 1948, on each occasion failing on the question of disarmament as revolutionaries in local areas were repeatedly under attack. The Huks initially limited themselves to measures of local defense. In May-June 1947, those among the PKP national leadership still hoping for presidential compromise became a minority, as talks continued in spite of the intensification of repression. Huk leaders were abducted and killed. Juan Felco, who had participated directly in negotiations with Roxas, was arrested by men in uniform and disappeared. In August through November, the government launched a massive offensive in Central Luzon, deflating popular morale. Huks continued a defensive posture but, to reduce pressure, began expanding their bases in other provinces of Luzon and the Visayas.

Manuel Roxas died suddenly of a heart attack on April 15, 1948 and was replaced by his vice-president, Elpidio Quirino, who resumed negotiations with Luis Taruc, the emblematic figure of the rural resistance. An amnesty on ambiguous terms was proclaimed on June 21, 1948, and Taruc and other elected members of the Democratic Alliance were finally authorized to sit in Congress. However, in the field, units of the Constabulary Police and the Civilian Guards continued their attacks. With promised reforms aborted, the interregnum finally came to an end on August 15, 1948, and Huk leaders returned to the underground armed struggle. The Democratic Alliance disintegrated and the theater of military operations expanded into the Central and Southern Luzon. The Huks adopted a new name, the Army of National Liberation (Hukbong Mapagpalaya ng Bayan, HMB). Political education was reinforced, and after three years of adopting a defensive posture the leadership of the PKP announced a renewed surge in the tide of revolution.

The radicalization of the PKP did not exclude political maneuvering and HMB provided critical and discreet support to the Nacionalista Party during the 1949 electoral campaign. But the presidential elections of 1949, which included José P. Laurel, who had collaborated with the Japanese

occupation, were considered fraudulent and electoral politics entirely lost its legitimacy. A political crisis emerged among the elites as the economy deteriorated, with unemployment spreading and political corruption becoming widespread. In 1949, after the Red Army and the Communist Party had taken power in China, the PKP leadership concluded that a revolutionary situation existed in the Philippines and called for the overthrow of "the imperialist-puppet regime." The atmosphere shifted from optimism to euphoria in the party ranks. In January 1950, the leadership predicted that the following two years would be decisive in preparing for the conquest of power. For many, victory seemed at hand.

The revolutionary armed forces rapidly expanded, with the PKP commitment to the armed struggle reaching its zenith from 1949 to 1951. Between 11,000 and 15,000 Huks were armed, a figure similar to 1946–8 during resistance to the Japanese occupation. The regional stronghold of the resistance was situated in provinces that made up "Huklandia": Nueva Ecija, Pampanga, Tarlac, Bulacan (and Laguna and Batangas). But the theater of operation expanded as two commands expanded to six, and by 1951 the resistance grew to 27 provinces in Luzon in sectors of Panay and Negros (Visayas), and even Mindanao. The year 1950 appeared to be a turning point in the Huk Rebellion. But the PKP dangerously underestimated the capacity of US reaction.

Counterinsurgency

The period 1949–50 marked the eve of the declaration of the Korean War. In Vietnam, French expeditionary forces were coming up against increasing resistance. For Washington policymakers, the development of a new revolutionary center in the Philippines was unthinkable. The Philippines was one of the first countries in which the US carried out a comprehensive policy of counterrevolution.

Militarily, the counterrevolution integrated the Philippine Constabulary into the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). Subsequently, the AFP expanded beyond external defense and took direct charge of the counterinsurgency, through the creation of New Battalion Combat Teams (BCT), with improved armaments and equipment. The AFP made extensive use of napalm bombardments and the intelligence services were reorganized, reinforced by the CIA under the direction of Edward G. Lansdale.

Politically, Lansdale selected a new strongman, Ramon Magsaysay, a former member of the anti-Japanese guerilla forces in Luzon with close ties to the Americans. His ultimate accession to the presidency was carefully planned with US support and the active participation of the CIA. In 1950, under President Quirino, Magsaysay became defense secretary, taking charge of the army and directing the new Office of Psychological Warfare – renamed the Civil Affairs Office (CAO). Magsaysay publicized his efforts throughout the Philippines and developed networks independent from the political party apparatus, presenting himself as a popular man of action, the opposite of the aristocratic Quirino. He visited villages, walked barefoot in rice fields, and ate ostensibly with his hands, a traditional practice in the Philippines.

In 1953, Magsaysay won a landslide victory in the presidential elections. His rise to power became a model for Washington, which used its inspiration in other countries of the region, and again in the Philippines some 15 years later. Washington also forced the Philippines to renovate its democratic façade. Just as the 1949 elections had openly been "dirty," so the 1951 senatorial race appeared "clean." The National Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) was created with American support. The army intervened in the campaign to "guarantee" equity, an intervention that created a dangerous precedent but which, at the time, was accepted by public opinion. The Nacionalista Party

of Jose P. Laurel won the contest, trust in the elections was restored, and Magsaysay was declared "man of the year."

Magsaysay launched a program of agrarian reform, appropriating the slogan "land for the landless." He created the Presidential Assistant for Community Development (PACD) – a CIA project. Thousands of development workers were sent to the villages, appearing to the peasants as direct envoys of the presidency. While the land reform measures implemented were quite limited, their psychological impact was real.

Psychological warfare was the trademark of Lansdale, the CIA, Magsaysay, and the Philippines military. In October 1950, PKP leaders (including José Lava) were captured and party documents seized. Lansdale opened talks with the Catholic hierarchy, the Iglesia ni Kristo, and the Chinese community. Magsaysay launched vast anti-Huk propaganda operations, including disinformation, media infiltration, and intervention in universities and schools, frequently using US missionaries in his operations. The army tried to infiltrate the revolutionary ranks and recruit informers. The operation launched a "resettlement" program for repentant Huks, the Economic Development Corps (EDCOR), a program that was limited in scope but useful in terms of political propaganda.

Beyond electoral demagogy, many US officials sought genuine capitalist agrarian reform. But landed elites were strongly opposed, and Washington sought to maintain good relations with the rural aristocracy. As revolutionary pressure faded, the reform projects lost much of their radicalism, and all the concrete content of the agrarian laws adopted in 1954–5 was eliminated.

Nevertheless, through counterinsurgency, the Philippine regime and the CIA scored points through maintaining permanent military pressure, multiplying civic action and psychological warfare measures and providing peasants hope for an improvement in their lot through restoring credibility in the electoral process and giving Magsaysay a populist image.

From Decline to Defeat

Revolutionary optimism was short-lived. A posteriori, the year 1954 was decisive. In February–March, the government launched an important military offensive, Operation Milagrosa, with more than 20,000 soldiers and air force units. The offensive was a harsh blow to the morale of the Huks, especially when Luis Taruc, their famous leader, surrendered on May 16, 1954. This surrender sanctioned a conflict within PKP leadership, which had already begun in 1951 when Luis and his brother Peregrino proposed a turn toward parliamentary struggle and opposed the Lava brothers [5]. Even in Central Luzon calm was progressively restored: the armed units were forced to become more and more mobile to avoid the AFP, and survival for the Huks became more tenuous. In 1956, the leadership of the PKP resigned itself to adopting the principle of legal/parliamentary struggle, but in June 1957 the party was for the second time outlawed by decree. The leaders of the PKP and the Huks were killed in battle or captured one by one. Jesus Lava himself was finally arrested on May 21, 1964, marking the end of the "centralized" armed struggle. Only local pockets of resistance remained.

In the 1950s the geographical extension of the armed and social struggles in the Visayas and in Mindanao was limited. When the PKP had been committed to total military victory, it sent most of its urban cadres to the countryside to reinforce rural guerillas, neglecting the task of urban mobilization. During the 1950s, in contrast to other countries in the region, students remained politically passive and indifferent to social issues. Faced with the US global policy of counter-insurgency, the Huks were isolated and the PKP could not fall back on traditional bases of support in urban areas.

A Complex Experience

In spite of the defeat, the Huk Rebellion represents a rich historical experience of resistance, with a complex relationship between the peasant movement and the PKP. The PKP played a central role through systematic Marxist political training, supplying cadres and infrastructure, contributing to the geographic spread and coordination of the struggle, and inscribing an international and historical perspective. But the leadership of the PKP was unable to impose authority on the peasant movement. In several instances, important differences emerged between the political choices of the PKP leadership and those implemented on the ground by the Huks. As was the case under Japanese occupation, when the PKP adopted a policy of "retreat for defense," Hukbalahap military units neither withdraw nor reduced operations. In 1946 and 1947, the rural armed struggle resumed long before the PKP leadership agreed with the plan. In 1950 and thereafter, the capacity of the Huks in rural areas had already begun to decline, even though the PKP political bureau were calling for an offensive to be launched.

The discordance of rhythms pitted the Communist Party against the peasant movement, as if they were two organizations independent of each other. Many cadre members belonged to the PKP and the Huks. Conflicts expressed themselves through "vertical" tensions between different levels of leadership. The central nucleus of the PKP was above all composed of intellectuals, scientists, lawyers, and civil servants, while organizers and the local military command of HBM were village peasants. Veteran militants occupying key intermediary leadership posts arose from peasant and urban working-class backgrounds and were crucial interlocutors between localities and regions, cities and provinces, the Huk command and the PKP Political Bureau. The leaders of the militants included Luis Taruc, José de Leon, and Juan Felco, among others.

Beyond the question of rhythms and the controversial analysis of the relation of forces at each step of the struggle, the PKP leadership set a high bar for the peasant movement, setting out a program for social revolution but offering little support. Thus, in 1950, the communist leadership called for the overthrow of the government while the peasantry fought for an end to repression. If the workers' movement, urban poor, and students had been engaged in a common struggle with the peasants, the expectation for social revolution may have been more realistic.

The Huk Rebellion could not simply take over the torch of anti-Japanese resistance [6]. The US did not provoke the same rejection as Japan had, given that it did not occupy the country in the same way, even if [7]it played an important role in the background. No remote or border sanctuary could protect the rear base of the peasant army. Geostrategically speaking, the Huk were in a less advantageous situation in the Philippine archipelago than resistance movements in Vietnam or China. Although key socioeconomic problems remained, the Huk Rebellion raised the issues of inequality in a concrete way. Some 20 years later, this historical experience helped a new revolutionary movement.

The PKP and the HBM were defeated as organizations by the counterrevolutionary forces of the Philippine power structure and US military and secret services. But for the peasant movement as a whole, the outcome was more nuanced. Though it did not obtain radical and lasting reforms, in many areas landowners were forced temporarily to reduce exploitation. The basic right to organize, negated by brutal repression from 1946 to 1948, was again permitted. In Central Luzon, the Huks were at the origin of two peasant associations in the following period: the Federation of Free Farmers (FFF) and the Free Farmers' Union (Malayang Samahang Magsasaka, MASAKA). A tradition of organizing was transmitted from one generation to the next, although within a restrictive reformist framework.

The rebellion and return to armed struggle was not a “free choice” for the Huks but a necessity, as witnessed by the statements of peasant veterans to researcher Benedict J. Kerkvliet (1979): “Even if we got nothing, that’s not important. What’s important is that we had to fight back. And we fought so well that the big people and the government will never forget us again. […] We didn’t lie down like whimpering dogs when they started to whip us. We stood up and fought for what was rightfully ours. […] No strike, no demonstration, no rebellion fails. Protest against injustice always succeeds.”

Pierre Rousset

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* 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”

Footnotes

[1] Correction from the printed version: “nationally”, not “internationally” – the issue was to see the Huks’ influence spreading in the whole archipelago from its initial regional strongholds.

[2] Correction from the printed version: PKMP, the peasant movement, not PKP, the political party.

[3] Correction from the printed version: “undermined by” not “undermining capitalist development”.

[4] Correction from the printed version: “hindered” instead of “intensified”.

[5] Correction from the printed version: not the other way around.

[6] Correction from the printed version: in this sentence, the word “not” was lost.

[7] Correction from the printed version: “even if” instead of “and even”.