

Philippines: How the CPP-NPA started in Bicol

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Late-breaking research for a book on Philippine armed groups brought me to “Ka Maning” (a nom-de-guerre) and this “scoop.” He is a surviving member in his mid-60s of the five-man all-Bicolano expansion team (two have since died) which the CPP central leadership first deployed to the region in early 1969, shortly after the 26 December 1968 founding of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and before the 29 March 1969 founding of the New People’s Army (NPA). His story of how the CPP-NPA started in Bicol has never before come out, even in the CPP’s own accounts of its history.

The account usually given, even in summing-up documents of the Bicol Regional Party Committee (BRPC), is that it all started there in 1970 when Bicolano student activists of the “First Quarter Storm” (FQS) of street demonstrations of that year in Manila came home to organize in the region. The most notable of those activists was the late Romulo Jallores of Tigaon, Camarines Sur who later became “Kumander Tangkad (meaning tall)” of the first NPA unit in Bicol, based in his hometown. Thus, this early 1970s period of the CPP-NPA in Bicol has been referred to by later CPP cadres as “panahon ni Tangkad” (the period of Tangkad).

“Ka Maning” told me that the CPP’s Bicol expansion team of which he was part was deployed at about the same time another CPP expansion team was deployed to Negros Island in the Visayas. The Bicol expansion team, this “first five,” soon constituted itself as a regional party committee even though there were no party forces and units under it at the time. The team members were all of student activist background, mostly as members of the CPP-led youth activist organization Kabataang Makabayan (KM, Patriotic Youth). Since three of its five members were from Tigaon, Camarines Sur (the other two being the team leader the late Ibarra Tubianosa from Irosin, Sorsogon and the late Francisco Portem from Polangui, Albay), it was natural for the team to be based in Tigaon.

From this base, it started its mass work and organizing mainly among rural peasant folk in that countryside vicinity but also among student youth and a few middle-class allies in the cities like Naga, Iriga and Legazpi. But when the CPP’s Negros expansion team was nipped in the bud by the authorities in August 1969, the CPP central leadership ordered its Bicol expansion team to abort mission and pull out from the region. However, at least two members, including “Ka Maning,” decided to stay on and persevere with the expansion work, even as they were soon cut off from the center. In his view, it is the unauthorized character of this expansion work which accounts for its cutting out from the CPP’s official accounts of its history.

The thing is, this unauthorized expansion work in Bicol bore fruit. One key link was made in February 1970, middle of the FQS, when the late Ruben Jallores, another KM activist from Tigaon, visited his hometown and got to speak with “Ka Maning” particularly about Ruben’s younger brother Romulo. The latter figured prominently in the FQS “Battle of Mendiola” on 30-31 January 1970 when he and his activist group commandeered a fire truck to ram Gate 4 of the presidential palace Malacañang. He was then photographed atop the fire truck, romantically wearing a beret a la Che Guevarra, and so had drawn some attention, including of the authorities, as a semi-legendary “Ka

Che.”

There was a need for Romulo to leave the Greater Manila-Rizal (GMR) area and the tightening military-police dragnet there for the relative safety of the countryside. And so, this was arranged around March or April 1970, with Romulo returning to his hometown but specifically to its countryside. After two weeks of “exposure” (immersion) there under the auspices of “Ka Maning,” Romulo decided to stay on in this new and “higher” arena of struggle. He then went back for the last time to the GMR area, particularly to his base in Taytay town of Rizal province, to get his activist group there to join him in the countryside.

This group was the University of the East (UE)-Taytay Chapter of the Samahang Demokratiko ng Kabataan (SDK, Democratic Association of Youth), a fraternal but rival youth activist organization in relation to the KM. A surviving leader of this SDK UE-Taytay Chapter, “Ka Amad,” now also in his 60s, has in turn told me that this activist group was then no longer satisfied with doing mass work in the GMR area and felt a need to move on to “serve the people” and “learn from the masses” in the countryside where the “real action” was. The whole 10- or 11-person first line of SDK UE-Taytay decided to accept their comrade Romulo’s invitation to go with him to Bicol.

This initiative was without the blessings of the CPP. Thus, another reason for its absence from official CPP history. In fact, “Ka Amad” would later on be subjected to CPP disciplinary action for “factionalism” because of that unauthorized initiative, as well as certain “revisionist influences” associated with SDK’s 1968 split from KM. In his view, the dynamics of KM-SDK fraternal (sectarian, some would say) rivalry also played itself out during this early period of CPP- and NPA-building in Bicol. Be that as it may, the SDK UE-Taytay whole first line’s initiative to go to Bicol gave CPP-NPA expansion work there its needed boost in 1970-71.

As a result of that new though unauthorized infusion, mass work quickly gained ground during that period in Bicol, especially in Camarines Sur and Albay. Eventually, there would be an initial mass base for the armed struggle in this region. The seeds of the NPA in Bicol were planted and germinated in Tigaon. The SDK UE-Taytay group had brought with them three firearms to start with – a shotgun (nicknamed “Papa”), a grease gun (“Mama”), and a cal..38 paltik (craft-produced) revolver (“Baby”). This was eventually augmented by better firearms from various sources, from both inside and outside the region, but not by much. No one in the group had military training, other than “Ka Maning” who took a Reserve Officers Training Course (ROTC) in college but was more inclined to political work. It was Romulo who took the military lead, more due to a “romanticist” and adventurist bent which lived up to his GMR area nickname “Che.”

Romulo’s armed group decided to start bearing arms during mass meetings. This had the immediate impact of strengthening the confidence of the masses in their base area. This also made the group more effective in imposing some discipline among them. But the very first encounter of Romulo’s armed group with security forces, the Philippine Constabulary (PC) of that time, on 26 August 1971 in San Pedro, Iriga City was not planned. After this, Romulo’s armed group moved on to “cleaning” (eliminating) bad elements (cattle rustlers, rapists and other criminals) in the localities where they operated, organizing the peasants and implementing “revolutionary land reform.” This armed group then started carrying the name “NPA” with Romulo as its “Kumander Tangkad.” But his adventurist bravado and “purely military viewpoint” proved to be his undoing and that of the first NPA forces in Bicol by the end of 1971.

Earlier, in mid-1970, “Ka Maning” already felt the need for the guidance of the CPP central leadership, also in accordance with Mao’s teachings about “the party commanding the gun, not the gun commanding the party.” But he also wanted to argue the correctness of the decision of the remnants of the original Bicol expansion team to stay on and persevere with the work, instead of

pulling out as ordered. So, he wrote the CPP center to reconnect and to argue from a position of relative success of the independent initiative to open and develop a new guerrilla front in Bicol, the first successful expansion outside of and non-contiguous to the first CPP-NPA base in the Central Luzon region and even ahead of the latter's contiguous expansion to the Cagayan Valley region, notably Isabela province.

He argued that this mode of far-flung and non-contiguous expansion was suited to the uneven development of this semi-colonial and semi-feudal country, and that expansion should be undertaken wherever it was viable. He was eventually called to a meeting later in 1970 with the CPP center which then accepted the Bicol group's position of expansion to viable areas even if far-flung from the central revolutionary base. At the same time, the meeting marked the resumption of the CPP center's supervision over revolutionary work in the region, albeit with some relative autonomy of the regional CPP-NPA organization. The rest is history, to put it tritely but aptly.

In fact, according to "Ka Maning," the CPP center soon after applied the Bicol expansion model by deploying a new expansion team to Panay Island in the Western Visayas region. And this model had since been replicated in most other regions, resulting in the nationwide expansion of the CPP-NPA to all regions, except Muslim Mindanao, following the tried-and-tested formula of "multiple guerrilla zones" under "decentralized operations." But this Bicol expansion model, as we said, has not been given due credit in official CPP history. Before this model, the main notion of CPP-NPA expansion was "wave upon wave" from a central revolutionary base, initially in the second district of Tarlac province in Central Luzon established in early 1969. The successful expansion from here to nearby Isabela in Cagayan Valley in early 1971, which is what has been highlighted in official CPP history, followed that erstwhile main notion.

The CPP center did initially deploy expansion teams to Negros and Bicol in early 1969 but the soon-after failure in Negros occasioned a decision to scrap such far-flung deployments – until the eventual success of the unauthorized initiative of the Bicol group to continue with its started expansion work, even without the supervision of the CPP center. Of course, such supervision was eventually resumed when the need for it was felt, especially for the most crucial level of all-rounded and delicate NPA work. Under such general supervision as well as its own regional *diskarte* (the way one plays one's cards), the NPA in Bicol has grown in four decades to be currently the second strongest region of the NPA, after Southern Mindanao. Still, this experience of how the CPP-NPA started in Bicol shows that its pioneers can be proud of the contributions of their initiative and daring, and that there is a role for this and even for historical accidents in history.

P.S.

* SOLIMAN M. SANTOS, JR. is a Bicolano human rights lawyer, peace advocate, researcher and writer, who majored in History at UP Diliman. This piece arises from research for a coming book he is co-authoring entitled *Primed and Purposeful: Armed Groups and Human Security Efforts in the Philippines*, co-published by the South-South Network (SSN) for Non-State Armed Group Engagement of which he is Regional Focal Point for Asia. He and his wife DLSU Literature Professor Paz Verdades M. Santos recently co-edited the book *Militant But Groovy: Stories of Samahang Demokratiko ng Kabataan* (Manila: Anvil Publishing, Inc., 2008).