

Worse than a crime - The electoral politics of the NDF and the CPP in the Philippines

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The year 2010 has only just begun but we might already know what's going to be the most unlikely election coalition of the year. The legal National-Democratic (ND) movement of the Philippines, politically aligned with the underground Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines, has made an alliance with multimillionaire Manuel 'Manny' Bamba Villar Jr. and indirectly with Marcos' admiring son, Ferdinand 'Bongbong' Marcos jr.

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When Manny Villar announced he would be running for president of the republic of the Philippines he immediately looked like a strong contender. After all, he is one of the richest men in the country – worth about 830 million dollar. His financial capital can buy a lot of political capital in a game still characterized by 'goons, guns and gold'. Alas, the first of Augustus 2009 Cory Aquino, still popular and fondly remembered as a symbol of democracy, died. From out of political obscurity her son, Benigno 'Noy' Aquino III, became a contender for the top position of the republic, officially announcing his candidacy on September 9. In the months after this announcement Aquino was leading in the polls.

Same old, same old

Satur Ocampo of the party-list Bayan Muna and Liza Maza of Gabriela Women's Party, both part of the National-Democratic coalition Makabayan or New Patriotic Alliance, had already been negotiating with Manny Villar for two spots for senatorial seats under his campaign banner. The rationale behind this alliance? The NDs say it's because of Villar's 'pro-poor' stance and program. As if there has ever been a presidential candidate that did not promise to fight poverty. But Villar, the NDs maintain, is different. The difference is not in Villar's political career and there's in fact very little reason to take Villar's commitment seriously.

Like other politicians from the ruling elite, Villar has jumped from one party to the other during his career. In the nineties a member of Lakas – party of current president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo – he later was a member of Estrada's coalition Laban ng Makabayang Masang Pilipino.

Estrada of course, was a wealthy man who styled himself as an outsider to the corrupt political circles of the Philippines. Just like Villar. And Estrada styled himself as a champion of the poor. Just like Villar. Their similarities and earlier alliance notwithstanding, as Speaker of the House of Representatives Villar presided over the impeachment of then-president Joseph Estrada just before

'Erap' was ousted by the People Power II uprising. A good politician knows when to leave a sinking ship...

After 2000 Villar was twice elected to the senate. In 2003 he left his days as an independent behind him and joined the Nacionalista Party (NP). The NP is the oldest party of the Philippines, originally founded as a vehicle for the ilustrado elite collaborating with the 'benevolent assimilation' of the American colonial regime. In 2004 Villar became president of this party that is still supporting, despite her damaged credibility, the presidency of Gloria Macapagal Arroyo.

His record during the years? In 1992 Villar was the House representative in the government's negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in Washington D.C. This was during the presidency of Fidel Ramos – the period that neoliberalism was anchored as the economic orthodoxy of the country. After the rocky years of Aquino's presidency, Ramos aimed to make the Philippines an attractive site for foreign capital. In the words of COURAGE (Confederation for Unity, Recognition and Advancement of Government Employees) trade-union it was during Ramos presidency that 'the country was opened to a complete control by foreign monopoly capital.' Under the banner 'Philippines 2000' Ramos propagated a neoliberal policy that he said would bring the country the status of Newly Industrialized Country by 2000. If anything, the country became a newly-deindustrialized country when a significant part of its production base killed was killed by international competition in the 'open' market propagated by the IMF.

Villar was not just one of the many politicians that marched the Philippines economy into a hole. Villar was, according to his website, a 'key member' of the House's economic team, playing a crucial role in the liberalization of the banking system under president Ramos. With the help of both houses of the Philippine Congress, the Ramos government passed laws to implement liberalization, deregulation, and privatization. Villar supported Ramos' policies that included for example laws that permitted foreign investors a 100 percent ownership of local businesses and granted foreign off-shore banks access.

Is Villar's record only that of an champion of economic liberalism? Well, he also persuaded subdivision homeowners to open up their roads to the general public to ease traffic jams in Manila, designated Certain Areas in Las Piñas as Tourist Spots, led a dedicated tree-planting drive and organized the 'Manpower on Wheels' Program, a livelihood training school housed in a van that makes the rounds in poor areas. In over 15 year, about 5000 students graduated from this program. Token reforms are sometimes described as drops in the ocean. Considering the massive poverty in the Philippines, these three examples, listed as successes on Villar's website, are small drops indeed.

Whichever way the wind blows

Since the days of the Ramos presidency, Villar has changed tack somewhat. In a speech for University of the Philippines College of Business Administration Alumni in 2004 Villar stressed a 'nationalist perspective' against globalization's dismantling of trade barriers. But, this 'does not suggest at all that we must be overprotective of our own industries to the exclusion of foreign investors.' The next year, Villar would, together with Satur Ocampo and others, criticize IMF policy – while keeping mum about his own part in shackling the Philippine economy to the IMF. Nowadays, he supports bills providing micro-credit to struggling farmers and makes ads supporting free college education. These ads are part of media campaign that, according to conservative estimates, has cost 2 billion pesos since the third quarter of 2009.

The platform that Villar's now running on and that has enamored the NDs for their multimillionaire 'class enemy' is full of promises. Just like Gloria Macapagal Arroyo was full of pro-poor promises in the 2004 elections. In the nineties, Villar embraced neoliberalism, a policy that he started to criticize

after it lost its legitimacy. Until a while ago, he supported 'GMA' – a president he started to criticize after she lost legitimacy. A good politician knows when to leave sinking ships...

The NDs point to the incorporation of points of their Makabayang coalition in the platform of the Nacionalista Party. True, the platform speaks of progressive economic reforms and the review of the Visiting Forces Agreement. What is lacking though is any hint of all these reforms will be financed. Proposals to make the financing all the promised reforms viable, for instance through higher and more efficient taxing of the upper-classes, would probably not be very popular with the NP's backers. Filipino industrialists however are promised more tax breaks.

So how did a multimillionaire representative of the political elite – what is called a 'trapo', traditional politician in the Philippines – end up with the so-called 'militant left'? Villar had already announced he would be running for president on the 6th of June but made his candidacy official only in early September. Early November, Villar had entered in the final stages of talks with the NDs regarding an electoral alliance. But half-way November, the NP sealed its alliance with the Kilusang Bagong Lipunan (KBL) of Ilocos Norte representative Ferdinand 'Bong-bong' Marcos Jr. On this occasion, Villar declared the NDs had been informed about this alliance and had agreed to it. The NDs however, disagreed – temporarily at least. Almost immediately they stated the alliance with Marcos complicated their alliance with the NP and on November 24 Ocampo and Maza announced their independent candidacy for the senate under the Makabayan banner. This was after the NDs had been rejected by the Liberal Party camp of Aquino.

However, less than three weeks after announcing their independent candidacy, Maza and Ocampo returned to the NP camp. What changed their minds? Marcos had left the KBL in the meantime – a meaningless gesture since Marcos had filed his certificate of candidacy under the NP name and the KBL was described by Ocampo himself as 'moribund'. The NDs apparently also extracted a 'promise' from the NP that it would push for the compensation of victims of human rights violations during martial law.

There is very little politics involved in all of this. Remember, Villar and even Marcos himself declared when first announcing their alliance that they saw no obstacle to working with the NDs. As Marcos put it; 'We are not the issue, if we are the issue then we would be on opposite sides, but the issue now here is poverty, the issue now here is unemployment, the issue now is education, the issue now is health care, the issue now is foreign relations. These are the issues that we have to fight and we find that we agree on that'. Marcos hasn't changed his political views or made any promises. Marcos' presence was enough to make the NDs doubt the commitment of the NP towards compensation, so why is an extra promise enough to bring Ocampo and Maza back into the fold?

Business as usual

The talk about programs and the commitment of Villar towards helping the poor seem to be all so much hot air – even Marcos jr., who defends the reign of his father as the time when the Philippine workers had it best, mouths pro-poor rhetoric and says he agrees with the 'progressive' NP platform. There is nothing in Villar's history to make one think he is committed to progressive causes. More importantly, one should ask the question if Villar's commitment is even relevant. The Philippines is a country dominated by imperialism, its poverty is structural; it's not the result of mis-management or the personal corruption of politicians. Corruption is not the prime cause of poverty – other corruption plagued countries did manage to develop. Philippine politicians are not inherently incompetent, the endemic mismanagement is one of the results of the corruption which puts public service jobs up for sale, as jobs that can be exploited for personal gain. Even with the best of intentions,

it's naive to think that a change of personnel at the top of the government will mean a change in the functioning of the entire state apparatus.

Cut through all the rhetoric and a few facts tell all one needs to know about the rationale behind the alliance; campaigning is expensive and candidates need an apparatus to grease the wheels and to organize a successful campaign. The NDs don't have an apparatus that can enable them to take part in the senatorial elections by themselves. But the NP does. The NDs do have a base – they claim an electoral base of around 3 million votes. And the NP needs votes. A campaigning machinery for the NDs in return for votes for the ruling class NP: there is nothing else behind this alliance but rank opportunism- programs matter little. Ocampo even admitted as much, saying Villar was the only candidate who would accept the NDs. The NDs went looking for people that would trade them seats in return for votes – and Villar was the only taker. The NDs can only offer remarks about Villar's person and a vague NP program – a program the NP thinks is so important it's not even on their website and that's so progressive that even Marcos jr. agrees with it – to justify their alliance. But since when are elections in the Philippines determined by ideologies? Just how serious are we supposed to take the promises of a trapo?

Rep. Raymond Palatino of the Kabataan Partylist, part of the ND bloc, wrote a piece trying to defend the ND politicking. Named 'Misunderestimating the Philippine Left' the article is an exercise in attacking strawman arguments. He never mentions them, but the piece is clearly for a large part an attack on the social-democratic Akbayan coalition that has chosen to support Aquino.

Palatino rants about 'armchair activists' and the media prejudice against leftists but he gives few reasons to support the ND-NP-Marcos alliance. He mentions the need for coalition politics – as if the choice is between cooperating with admirers of dictators and elite politicians or not cooperating with anybody at all. Palatino complains that leftist politicians are held to other standards than mainstream politicians – aren't leftists supposed to be different from the mainstream politicians? Leftists want to change the way politics is done so we hold self-proclaimed leftist politicians to other standards. Otherwise, what is the point?

Finally there is the argument that Villar's welcoming of leftists will open the way for further participation of the left in electoral politics. But the questions we should ask are; which participation? On which platform, based on which social forces and in whose interest? The leaders of the NDs function as generals of a mercenary army of votes; whichever bourgeois politician can give them the best shot at a few seats can count on their support. Villar is hoping to use the leftists as his 'useful idiots', the NDs are trying to manipulate the NP for their gain. What none of them is doing is building an alternative force or engaging in the election campaign to mobilize support for viable progressive reforms.

Palatino rhetorically ask which revolutionary principles were violated by Ocampo and Maza. Their whole candidacy is a breach of the principle of never lying to the people you claim to represent. For one, their campaign reinforces the traditional system of politics in the Philippines in which principles are flouted to win seats and resources. Two, by trumpeting Villar as a candidate for 'change' and 'reform', they reinforce illusions people in their desperation might still have in certain trapos. Third, they cooperate in repeating the lie that poverty and inequality is caused by 'bad governance'. Fourth, they assist in the senatorial campaign of Marcos jr. The NDs could learn something from African revolutionary Amilcar Cabral; 'Expose lies whenever they are told. Mask no difficulties, mistakes, failures. Claim no easy victories.'

Even a donkey only hurts himself by the same stone once

The NDs refuse to learn from history. Estrada and Arroyo both mouthed populist rhetoric when it

was in their advantage, just like Villar. In both cases sections of the left and self-described progressives went along with this. We know where this lead to. The Philippine left is badly in need of a national force that can represent the popular classes in all arenas, including electoral politics, a force that is genuinely democratic, not lead by a manipulative, self-appointed vanguard. (Is there any reason to believe Ocampo and Maza take all the nice things they are saying about Villar serious themselves?)

Building such a force is a project opposed to the interests of the ruling elite. It's an illusion to think it can be created by hitching a ride with a trapo. The lack of an alternative is already making itself felt in the 'protest fatigue' that was visible during Arroyo's presidency. She's hugely unpopular, her presidency is discredited. But still, protests against her remained relatively small, never achieving anything like the scale that is needed to 'oust Gloria' like the NDs demand. This fatigue can not be separated from the lack of a progressive alternative; 'why work hard to oust Gloria, only to replace her with another trapo?', people think. It's the job of the left to educate people about the structural causes of poverty and inequality and to build movements that are not dependent on representatives from the elite but can fight for the interests of the poor whoever is sitting in Malacanang palace. The ND twists and turns are steps away from this perspective. It's the whole left, not just the ND, in the Philippine that will suffer from the kind of short-sightedness we are seeing now. French 18th century reactionary Talleyrand said it best: 'worse than a crime, its a mistake'.

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