

The Revolutionary Workers' Party-Mindanao (RPM-M) and the Left in the Philippines

Sunday 7 November 2010, by [ROUSSET Pierre](#) (Date first published: 28 October 2010).

We have already published a report on the second congress of the Revolutionary Workers Party (Mindanao) [1] and a message of solidarity [2] underlining the international interest of its experience. We now publish an article situating the original place that the RPM-M occupies in the Filipino Left [3]. The article also briefly presents the development of international links between radical parties in Asia.

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The RPM-M held last August its second congress. Implanted above all in a zone where the "three peoples" of Mindanao cohabit, it occupies an original place in the Filipino Left - a radical Left where the question of unity remains unresolved.

The Revolutionary Workers' Party (Mindanao) - or RPM-M to use its Tagalog initials - held its congress in the Philippines, in a guerrilla camp, under the protection of a few dozen combatants. Not out of old-fashioned romanticism, but of necessity: its members are threatened by many armed groups. It is impossible under these conditions to meet like anyone else in a city, even in a discreet meeting-room; the danger is too great.

Nine years after its foundation in 2001, the RPM-M thus held its Second Congress, in the mountains of Mindanao, a big island of in the south of the Filipino archipelago. As its name indicates, it is indeed above all a "Mindanaoan" party: it acts in the most militarized region of the country, marked in particular by a very long conflict between the government and the militant organizations that are implanted in the Muslim populations, the "Moros". Rather than go back over the congress itself - for that I would refer readers to the above-mentioned report already published on this subject -, I would like to try to explain what makes the originality of the RPM-M within the Filipino left.

The rebellious offspring of the CPP

The first element of explanation is to be found in the contradictory heritage of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). This party, Maoist, was in the 1970s the only party capable of organizing

resistance to the dictatorial regime of President Ferdinand Marcos. Because of this it profoundly marked a whole generation of activists. However it proved unable, at the beginning of the 1980s, to understand that the dictatorship would be overthrown by a new combination of majority mass mobilization and minority military rebellion, and not as a result of an offensive of the guerrilla forces, as envisaged by the leadership of the party.



The armament of a combatant of the RPM/RPA who is protecting the delegates to the congress: a grenade launcher attached to an assault rifle.

The heritage of the CPP is deeply ambivalent. It incarnated a great revolutionary and militant tradition, but also very bureaucratic orientations and practices. It experienced terrible internal purges, fed by a paranoiac fear of infiltration. Whereas a full-scale revaluation of its references was becoming urgent, its leadership refused to organize a debate in the party by holding a congress, causing many people to leave the party and leading to several splits in the 1980s and 1990s. Since then, the party has embarked on an ultra-sectarian trajectory, going so far as to assassinate cadres of other movements on the left.

The majority of the present-day currents of the radical Left in the Philippines, including the RPM-M, come from the Communist Party. All of them have been confronted with the same challenge: to preserve the revolutionary traditions of the past while profoundly modifying the political and programmatic conceptions inherited from the CPP. Some of them have taken up this challenge with more success than others. The RPM-M is one of the organizations which have best succeeded.

A new pluralist Left

The second element of explanation lies in the form taken by the crisis of Filipino Maoism. Initially, a space emerged which allowed very minority components of the Filipino Marxist Left, non-Maoist, to establish their existence outside its ranks and to enlarge their audience. Ten years later, ruptures occurred within the CPP. However, in a clandestine party and in the absence of debate organized on a national level, the splits took place in a disorganized fashion. In addition to the individual departure of many members, various structures of the CPP declared their independence. This was the case of commissions (united front...) and secretariats (peasant...), but also of important territorial, regional organizations, in the North, the centre and the South of the archipelago.

The crisis of the CPP thus gave rise to several revolutionary organizations, often coming from a regional history. Since then there have been attempts at regroupment (some are underway at present), but still today, to understand what are the various components of the radical Left in the Philippines, you have to know where they come from: from what region? from what sector of activity?

The RPM-M comes from the regional organization that was responsible for the party's work in the centre of Mindanao (thus its name, at the time: Central Mindanao Region or CMR). This region broke en bloc, in 1993, with the leadership of the CPP, taking with it all the structures that were

under its responsibility: the underground party, the guerrilla forces (which took the name of Revolutionary People's Army, RPA), mass work, legal organizations... The essential characteristic of the CMR was that it had the responsibility for the "link" between the "three peoples" of Mindanao: the "majority nationality" in the Philippines ("Christians" for short), the Moros (Muslims) and the Lumads (mountain tribes), the latter still constituting one of the principal social bases of the RPM-M, which is quite original.

A new generation of activists

The third element of explanation is the question of the transition between generations of activists. Even more than in many other countries, this constitutes a challenge in the Philippines. The "historic" cadres of the revolutionary Left fought under the Marcos dictatorship, overthrown in 1986, a situation that the majority of today's activists never experienced. The congress of the RPM-M showed that this transition between generations was well underway: the majority of the members of the new national leadership are "young" (in the sense of "post-dictatorship").

Between the period of the CPP and today, the current which constituted the RPM-M has undergone a profound political evolution. Internationalist and in search of an alternative to Maoism, it joined the Fourth International where it is playing a growing role. New sectors of activity have been developed, such as the electoral field. The conception of the armed struggle has changed. The "democratic question" has become a central preoccupation in the functioning of the party, in relations with the social movements and in the recognition of the right to self-determination of the tribal communities... However, the RPM-M cannot escape the constraints imposed by the situation in Mindanao. The peace talks with the government have not been fruitful. The party must always protect itself from many armed threats. So even though stress is laid on legal mass activity, there remains a clandestine party equipped with a guerrilla force with a "defensive" role.

An uncertain situation on the left

The fourth element of explanation relates to the difficulty of constituting a party on the level of the whole archipelago. Most of the Filipino organizations are mainly implanted in a limited number of provinces and social sectors, according to their origins, even if they have broadened their political networks. The RPM-M is conscious of the problem and impelled a regroupment with other regional structures coming from the CPP. But this fusion was a painful failure. It is now the turn of the Power of the Masses Party (PLM) to attempt a regroupment, in the region of Manila. The question of unity is posed and will be posed in the future with other formations of the radical Left, such as the Workers' Party (PM), again in Manila, or the Marxist-Leninist Party of the Philippines (MLPP), originating in Central Luzon.

Akbayan - the Citizens' Action Party -, a legal formation, has become one of the main components of the Filipino Left. The influence of currents which were never in the Communist Party, like Bisig, is dominant there, even though it also includes former members of the CPP. At the time of the recent presidential elections, Akbayan supported the candidature of "Noy" Aquino, who won. Some of its cadres today have semi-governmental responsibilities, while knowing that the new regime will not break with the elites. This "cohabitation" should in theory finish fairly quickly, once the experience has been gone through, with the risk, if not of opening a crisis within the party, of weakening the militant Left as a whole.

The radical Left of the Philippines remains the most important in South-east Asia, but it has lost the

political initiative over the last twenty years – due to a considerable extent to the ultra-sectarian course of the CPP. No one organization can respond to this situation on its own and the question of unity remains sharply posed.

Pierre Rousset

Simplified outline of the Filipino political left

The Filipino Left includes a large number of organizations and currents. To simplify things, let us regroup them in three “families”.

The Communist Party.

Although weakened, it remains the main underground organization, and the best armed. It embarked after the splits in 1993 on an ultra-sectarian course. It leads the New People's Army (NPA), the National Democratic Front (NDF) and an important “bloc” of legal forces called “reaffirmist” (RA), because they “reaffirmed” the validity of the orientations laid down in 1968 and in the principal programmatic documents of the CPP. The “reaffirmists” have elected members of Parliament.

The “Rejectionists” (RJ).

These are the currents, within the CPP, who “rejected” the line of 1968 and demanded a re-evaluation of the party's orientation. They split in 1993 and often combine an underground party and a legal electoral party (or front). In the region of the capital, the splits gave rise in particular to the Party of the Power of the Masses Party (PLM) and the Workers' Party (PM); in the Visayas to the Revolutionary Workers' Party-Philippines (RPM-P); in the central region of Mindanao to the Revolutionary Workers' Party-Mindanao (RPM-M). The Marxist-Leninist Party of the Philippines (MLPP) comes from a later split in central Luzon. There exist other smaller organizations that we cannot mention here.

The “independent” Marxist and socialist Left.

Various Marxist currents never belonged to the Communist Party. They came together for the most part in 1985-1986 to give rise to the socialist organization Bisig. Today this organization plays a big role in the legal “citizens' action” party Akbayan! some of whose components also come from the CPP. Akbayan! has elected members of Parliament.

A unitary framework brings together all the organizations apart from the CPP and the “reaffirmists”: Struggle of the Masses (LnM), but this coalition at present lacks dynamism.

Asian links

Today links are being strengthened between radical parties in Asia - and the network of Asian contacts from which the NPA in France benefits is broadening accordingly.

IIRE-Manila.

The experience of the very young International Institute of Research and Education in Manila is from this point of view very interesting. The parent institute opened its doors in 1982 in Amsterdam, organizing educational courses intended for activists from all continents. It has just seen the birth of two offspring in Asia: firstly in Manila (Philippines) and then, even more recently, in Islamabad (Pakistan).

Last August, IIRE-Manila held its second educational course. We lived, ate and met on the rather cramped premises of the Institute, even though it meant removing tables and chairs, then putting pouffes on the floor to make room for the 22 participants and lecturers (some of whom were not able to remain for the whole three weeks of political exchanges).

Even though some Europeans were there (Dutch and French), most of those present came from eight countries of Asia, which were, in addition to the Philippines: Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Run by activists who are close to the Fourth International, IIRE-Manila is open to the different components of the Asian Left. The organizations present were of varied origins, including four Filipino currents who were invited to provide participants or lecturers.

IIRE-Manila thus contributes to the development of regional links between a growing number of parties. A relatively long educational course ensures a quality of exchange that short conferences do not permit. Thanks to such activities, some organizations which have known each other for a long time are starting to collaborate, more closely than in the past, in a common political project. The sessions also make it possible to invite other organizations with which relations have remained tenuous (this was the case for Indonesia) or even to invite organizations in countries where until very recently there was no contact (this was the case for Bangladesh).

Regional network of parties.

Thanks to an initiative taken on this occasion by the Socialist Party of Malaysia (PSM) - the only significant far-left organization in that country -, a new regional network of radical parties is gradually coming into existence. It benefits from the previous experience of the Asia-Pacific International Solidarity Conference (APISC) which was organized for about ten years by the Democratic Socialist Party (DSP) of Australia. When the DSP went into crisis and finally split, the Conference lost its dynamism. The new network is trying not to depend too much on the engagement of only one national organization, to provide a better guarantee that it will be lasting.

Visit to Paris.

At the beginning of October, the Asia-Europe People's Forum (AEPF) met in Brussels. Following the meeting, ten Asian delegates came to Paris to get a first-hand impression of the struggles for social rights that were taking place in France. They came from Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines. They were able to meet researchers, the Catholic Committee against Hunger and for Development (CCFD), the Lebreton Centre, the organization Right to Housing (DAL), Roms and Asian migrants, Ritimo (an information network specialising in international solidarity) and activists of Attac, the Emmaüs charity and the Solidaires trade union federation. The NPA also had the occasion to meet

with them at length.

The exchanges were all the more interesting because the French “social climate” is attracting very lively interest in many countries and because we had never up till then met some of these organizations (Indonesia), or had not yet had on the opportunity to receive them in France (Malaysia, certain Filipinos). The NPA has today more or less regular contacts in a dozen Asian countries, sometimes with one political organization in a given country, sometimes with several.

Pierre Rousset

P.S.

* Translation: International Viewpoint.

Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF (article 18719): <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article18719>

[2] See on ESSF (article 18390): <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article18390>

[3] This article was written for Tout est à nous, la Revue n° 14, November 2010, published by the New Anticapitalist Party (NPA) in France.