

Beyond labels

The Left in the Philippines

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These days, the question catches me at the oddest of moments. Sometimes, it comes at 2:30 in the morning when I am just about to go to sleep after a long and tiring day. The other day it caught me just as I was having a most enjoyable dinner date with my wife and our daughters and son. Just now, it grazed my mind again, as I begin to organize my workload this lovely Sunday morning. With the whole Left movement being so contentious with one another, is it worth it to give up one more day that can be more fulfilling spent with the family?

It is both painful and frustrating to talk about the Left in the Philippines today. More so in front of a non-Filipino audience. But I do so not only as a Filipino leftist but as an international solidarity worker as well and in the honest belief that even negative experiences can contribute to our forward movement. Asked to talk about the Left in the Philippines, I decided not to write an abstract treatise, because an academic I am not. Nor a theoretical analysis, because neither am I an ideologue. Instead, I thought it best to share with you the reflections and feelings of an active participant in the Philippine movement for change.

Historically, (and I say this with pride), the Left has led the fight against colonial and neocolonial domination. It has been at the forefront of the struggle of the peasants for social justice and worked hard to establish the trade union movement. It was mainly the sustained efforts of the Left that led to the successful removal of the US bases on Philippine soil. The Left in the Philippines, as one political observer stated, *"lent vision and energy to the mobilization of workers, the urban poor, fisherfolk, indigenous communities, women, students, teachers, government employees and other groups for the just pursuits of their interests."* And in the never-ending battle for democratic freedom, civil liberties and human rights, tremendous sacrifices were asked of them. Many gave up their lives. Countless others were tortured and salvaged (a Filipino euphemism for extra-judicial execution). There were those who simply disappeared. Families were broken up. Beloved children were left for others to care for. Between the promise of a shining future and a successful career or the Movement, it was more often than not the Movement that won the dedication and commitment of many brilliant individuals.

The steadfast and selfless commitment of the Left to work for change no matter the odds were on the one hand, inspiring to the masses they constantly reached out to; and on the other, became a source of wonderment to those outside its circles who could only understand fulfillment and success in terms of monetary value.

Yet today, the Left in the Philippines is in shambles. Wracked by bitter factional fights, it is a mere shadow of what it was a little more than a decade ago. Its attention has been focused on organizational differences and quarrels about turf if not pelf. Ideological debates on who has the

correct line has led to a tragic diminution of its strength especially at a time when its unity is needed most.

So many problems face the nation. So many issues regarding the people's welfare need resolution. Each day the people's rights to a humane and decent existence are trampled upon. Across the nation, millions of Filipino children are hungry and malnourished. National funds that can be better spent on social needs and basic services are constantly wasted by our officials and self-anointed leaders. Stealing has truly become a national pastime.

The inequitable conditions that overwhelm our nation have not changed. They have, in fact, gotten worse because of the new policies brought about by globalization. To be sure, the silent must find their voice, the meek must struggle to be recognized, the weak must endeavor to seek courage and strength in their unified and collective stand so that they may assert the justness of their empowerment.

But how are they to do this, when the Left that has historically been their rallying standard in their struggle for change for a better life has subdivided itself like an amoeba? Indeed, how can they be effective and resolute when the sector that can most effectively demand accountability remains a divided house, itself seemingly unaccountable. We who are members of the generic Left but are not part of the ongoing squabbles ask: How long will this go on? Cannot the question of whom has the "correct line" be resolved later or at another level? Why not let the events prove if a person or group is genuinely opportunist or not? Are not the gains of one, the gains of all?

Are we so certain of the hues and tints of the brilliant colors of a vision that lies beyond the mountain that we will not countenance an interpretation of a lesser tinge? Are we so blinded by our ultimate objective that we can no longer see the road that must be traveled together to even reach the foot of the mountain that must be scaled?

Labels. All we hear are labels. Have the bonds of the past and joint undertakings gone for naught? Cannot ideological debates be sharpened without cutting the ties that are needed to fight an acknowledged common enemy? Or, at the very least, not serve as a hindrance to united and concerted action? Can we not agree to disagree and still be able to maintain a principled unity on positions we know are common to our ranks? Instead of answers,, we are confronted by egos. Pride hiding behind the facade of lofty principles. Unwilling to yield to proposals of "lesser mortals" as this is taken as a diminution of "stature."

Would anger and animosity not be better directed at the enemies of the people? And not each other?

This situation is especially difficult for many members of the Left who sacrificed their future to work full time to contribute to the birth of a just and equitable society. Because of their dedication, many of them were alienated from their families — only to see the very movement to which they had dedicated their lives needlessly dissipate its meager resources on internecine squabbles.

Because of the disputes within the ranks of the Left, members of the elite and their paid hacks quickly dismiss the Left as a spent force and any Left critique of the status quo as outmoded and Jurassic. But it is a fact that the Philippines today continues to suffer from a stifling dependence on foreign creditors, an increasing state of massive unemployment and underemployment, overpowering corruption with a people wallowing in ever-deepening poverty — many of whom live under inhumane conditions. And the Left critique of the system that spawns such unimaginable poverty has largely been left (pardon the pun) by the wayside because of the present state of the Left as a whole which of course was aggravated by the collapse of the Socialist bloc. But mainly, the marginalization of the Left is due to the division within its ranks. A self-inflicted wound rather than

the result of external forces.

Thus mass actions on vital issues are held separately from one another. There are even times when the police are needed to prevent the various factions from clashing with one another. This, of course, has led to ridicule from the ranks of the Right. As long as the various factions refuse to work together or even agree to launch parallel actions for a start on matters of national concern, the Left will continue to be largely ineffective in the projection of their dissenting views on the basic issues that haunt our land — more so in being a recognized player in the national debate on these issues.

The problem of the Left today is how to conduct the day-to-day struggle in order to harness the forces of change and to nurture the potential of the mass movement. Most importantly, the Left can only be effective in transforming the people's consciousness if they can enlighten the people by making them aware of the unsustainability of the present system and that an alternative system is not only conceivable but attainable. Revolutionary change can only come about by a many-sided, thorough-going sustained mass action of an awakened people inspired by the desire to put in its place an alternative to an oppressive status quo. But we seem to have forgotten that while life must be lived forwards, it can only be understood backwards.

Tragically, the Philippine Left, has all but abandoned this signal task by spending an inordinate amount of time on self-immolation rather than on demolishing its real enemies.

Where have all the goodwill toward like-minded allies gone? Where are the fraternal ties that have been forged in the crucible of battle, in joint activities and campaigns in the past? Where is the basic kindness that should govern human relationships no matter the differences in persuasions? Instead of congeniality among ourselves, there is hostility. Instead of sympathy, there is acrimony. Instead of harmony, there is enmity.

Discouraging as all these must be, however, it is difficult to give up the struggle to fight for causes one believes in just because there is malevolence and bitterness in the hearts of narrow-minded individuals and sectarian groups who are willing to risk all against each other and yet are unwilling to risk even a part of themselves to fight a stronger and greater foe together.

Fortunately, absurd as it may seem to some, there are many still left (this time the pun is intended), myself included, who continue to tilt the political, social and economic windmills that try to hold our nation and our people hostage at the altar of private gain — the fractious Left notwithstanding.

Philippine history teaches us many lessons, the tragic irony is that we persist in learning so little from our past. We cannot continue to rob the people of the victory they so richly deserve by insisting on fighting tomorrow's battles today. Regardless of persuasion or faction, the challenge for us is to locate threads of one's vision in that of others, weave the fabric of unity and wave the people's banner together.

Because in the ultimate analysis, we are in the struggle, not for any group nor even for the Left itself, but for our people. And that, after all is said and done, is what truly counts.