

Popoy Lagman's Leninist Vision of the Philippine Revolution

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Today marks the 20th anniversary of the assassination of Filemon "Ka Popoy" Lagman by enemies of the working class. As a comrade of Popoy, drafting this reply is my personal contribution to commemorating his legacy.

An article penned by John Malvar and posted in the World Socialist Website [\[1\]](#) slammed Popoy as every bit a Stalinist as his rival Joma Sison. I am tempted to say that Malvar's article is a slander—but no. Slander is the favorite retort of Stalinists and Maoists like Joma, and even others in the Rejectionist camp who cry "paninirang-puri" (defamation) every time they are criticized for their slogans or tactics. Slander and defamation are the responses of self-proclaimed vanguards who believe that only they possess the correct line and ideas for the revolution. Instead, I'm going to treat Malvar's criticism as a theoretical polemic against Popoy's conception of the Philippine revolution.

In his vision of the class struggle of the working class in the Philippines, Popoy consistently advocated for a continuing or permanent revolution that will pass from the democratic to the socialist stage. This conception of a proletarian revolution is undoubtedly Leninist. This is crystal clear from his writings from the period of the split with the Stalinist-Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) in the early 1990's to the founding of a revolutionary party, the Partido ng Manggagawang Pilipino (PMP) in 1999.

In contrast to the Leninist continuing revolution, Joma laid down the Stalinist-Maoist framework of a two-stage revolution that paid lip service to proletarian leadership. In the two-stage revolution, the democratic revolution was disconnected to the socialist stage because the essential requirements for ensuring agency by the working class was missing. In the CPP's program and practice, the focus, nay obsession, was on national democracy to the detriment of a socialist platform. It organizes and mobilizes workers on the basis of a program of national democracy not socialism. Instead of concentrating on the class struggle of the proletariat, the CPP sought to directly organize all the "democratic" classes from the peasantry to the petty bourgeoisie to what it called the national bourgeoisie. The proletarian leadership in the two-stage revolution is therefore only by proxy, through the CPP directly organizing other classes, not directly by a class conscious working class movement that inspires and allies the revolutionary peasantry.

How was it possible then for Malvar to accuse Popoy of being a Stalinist rival of the CPP? By simply glossing over Popoy's ideas in the "Counter-Theses" and imposing a preconceived notion that Popoy was no less a Stalinist than Joma.

Malvar read Popoy's "Counter-Theses" but appears not to have understood it. Or didn't take the arguments in the "Counter-Theses" seriously since it does not conform to his a priori opinion of Popoy. According to Malvar: "While Lagman himself might have denied it, his criticisms amounted to an attempt to turn the CPP away from the Maoist variant of Stalinism which it upheld, back toward

the Soviet Stalinist perspective: a two-stage revolution and an alliance with the capitalist class, but a party based predominantly in the urban working class and with a program that made explicit references to socialism.”

However, Malvar cannot present one instance in the “Counter-Theses” where Popoy advocated for an alliance with the capitalist class during the democratic stage. In fact, it is not possible for Malvar to quote Popoy for nowhere in “Counter-Theses” did he say that an alliance with a “national bourgeoisie” is necessary.

Unlike Joma who explicitly included the petty bourgeoisie and even the national bourgeoisie in the “united front” that is one of the three instruments—along with working class leadership and the people’s army—in advancing the national democratic revolution, Popoy always insisted that the proletariat must ally with the peasantry in order to abolish feudalism and complete the democratic tasks of the continuing revolution.

In the “PPDR: Class Line Vs. Mass Line” part of the “Counter-Theses,” Popoy wrote: “This is a new-type of democratic revolution because, with the leading role of the proletariat in the people’s revolution, it will be a continuing revolution towards the transition to socialism. It will and it must smash all the remnants of feudal and colonial rule to facilitate the free development of the class struggle.”

Further, in the founding “10 Theses of the PMP,” which was almost entirely written by Popoy, it is stated:

“Una sa lahat, hinalinhan ng Maoistang Sisonistang partido ang Marxista-Leninistang linya ng permanenteng rebolusyon ng bastardong konsepto ng “dalawang-yugtong rebolusyon” na mekanikal na pinaghiwalay ang pakikibaka para sa demokrasya sa pakikibaka para sa sosyalismo.

Ang usapin dito’y hindi ang paggamit ng termino kundi ang interpretasyon at aplikasyon. Mismo si Lenin ay gumamit ng sariling pormulasyon — continuing revolution — para sa konsepto ni Marx at Engels ng permanenteng rebolusyon. Iba rin ang hugot dito ng mga Trotskyista. Inaabangan nila ang pagsiklab ng pandaigdigang rebolusyon kaya’t obligadong maging “permanente” ang rebolusyon sa mga bansa. “First of all, the Maoist Sisonite party replaces the Marxist-Leninist line of permanent revolution with the bastard concept of the “two-stage revolution” that mechanically separates the struggle for democracy and the struggle for socialism.

The point here is not the use of the term but the interpretation and application. Even Lenin used his own formulation—continuing revolution—for Marx and Engels’ concept of permanent revolution. The Trotskyists have their own conception. They await the eruption of the world revolution thus it is necessary to make the revolution in countries “permanent.” [Note: My translation]”

Whether the term continuing or permanent revolution is used, it was evident to Popoy that the proletarian revolution in the Philippines will have to complete the democratic tasks in alliance with the peasantry but, on the basis of working class leadership, then move on to the socialist stage. This conception of a proletarian revolution is undoubtedly Leninist. This was sharply spelled out by Lenin in “Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution,” which was a polemic against the Mesheviks who didn’t want to advance radical democratic demands lest the liberal bourgeoisie abandon the 1905 Revolution whose participation they saw as necessary in achieving victory. In contrast, Lenin insisted that the democratic revolution must be pushed to the limit and it can only be done against the wishes of the liberal bourgeoisie through the militancy of the revolutionary peasantry of Russia.

This perspective of a proletarian-led democratic revolution resulted to Lenin's formulation of a democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry. The democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry will provide the best foundation for further advancing the class struggle to the socialist revolution.

The difference between Popoy's Leninist conception and Joma's Stalinist-Maoist line for the Philippine revolution is clear. The latter explicitly wants an alliance with the national bourgeoisie to win the democratic revolution which is disconnected to the socialist revolution since the working class is organized along national democracy not socialism. For Joma, this makes sense since the national bourgeoisie will be repelled by socialism but can be attracted by national democracy, which is really a program for local capitalist development. Before this concept became appropriated by Stalin and Mao, this was basically the Meshevik line that Lenin debated against in "Two Tactics of Social Democracy in the Democratic Revolution."

Popoy applied the Leninist line to the Philippine revolution by arguing that the working class has to be mobilized—even during the democratic stage—by a program of socialism not national democracy. However in recognition of the immediate democratic tasks of the Philippine revolution, the proletariat will have to ally with the peasantry and this means coming to terms with their demand for the eradication of feudalism. Nowhere in his writings did Popoy advocate for an alliance with national bourgeoisie. In private conversations, he even questioned whether a national bourgeoisie exists in the Philippine in the period of globalization.

Given Popoy's conception of the Philippine revolution, where then does the difference with Malvar lie? Popoy affirmed Lenin's continuing revolution while Malvar upholds the particular interpretation of Trotsky's permanent revolution by WSW. Herein lies the distinction—Malvar conflates the democratic and socialist revolution into one. While conceding that there are indeed democratic tasks that the proletarian revolution will have to complete, Malvar argues by quoting Trotsky, that this can only be done under socialism. This conflation of the democratic and socialist stages into one may be Trotskyist but it is certainly not Leninist. But there are in fact revolutionary parties coming from the Trotskyist tradition whose understanding of permanent revolution hew close to Lenin's concept of continuing revolution.

Malvar engages in historical revisionism by claiming that Lenin abandoned the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry—in other words, the continuing revolution—for Trotsky's permanent revolution after the April Theses of 1917. Yet the historical record is crystal clear—the October Revolution ushered in a democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry in the form of the soviets of workers, peasants and soldiers which took power on the basis of a program of "bread, peace and land."

The program of the October Revolution was democratic not socialist. First, the Soviet state implemented land redistribution—the Socialist Revolutionaries' (SR) program of land-to-the-tiller. This policy was even less radical than the Bolshevik program of land nationalization which was state ownership of land that will be farmed by individual families. Nonetheless even nationalization of land was a democratic not a socialist policy as Lenin explained in the Bolshevik program. However, the appropriation of the SR agrarian program was a necessity to forge and preserve the alliance with the peasantry. In fact, it can be argued that the key challenges of the early period of the Russian Revolution from the Civil War to the New Economic Policy was how to sustain the alliance of the proletariat with the peasantry in the face of the counter-revolution and imperialist aggression.

Second, the Soviet state did not immediately expropriate the bourgeoisie in October 1917 as workers' control not workers ownership was instituted. Only banks and foreign trade were promptly put in state control. Gradually the private property of the Russian bourgeoisie was indeed

confiscated but this is far from Malvar's fantasy of the socialist stage of the revolution being instantly necessary. The Russian experience clearly reveals the correctness of Lenin's line of a continuing revolution from the democratic to the socialist stage.

Beyond the Russian Revolution, the experience of all revolutions in the backward capitalist countries from China to Cuba to Vietnam to Nicaragua, show the necessity for grappling with the democratic tasks of the proletarian revolution. In no sense can the experience of the 20th century proletarian revolutions be understood using the WSWS framework of overstepping the democratic revolution and skipping into the socialist revolution. Instead it is Lenin's conception of a continuing revolution from the democratic to the socialist stage that shines a light into the class dynamics of the Chinese, Cuban, Vietnamese and Nicaraguan revolutions. In all these countries, despite the dominant capitalist dynamic of their societies, the persistence of the peasantry as remnants of feudalism and domination by imperialism called for concretely wrestling with the democratic question and highlighted the democratic tasks of the proletarian revolution which could not be disregarded.

In the Philippines, the very same problematique of the peasantry confronts the working class in its program for proletarian revolution. It is in recognition of this fact that Popoy applied Lenin's idea of a continuing revolution to the proletarian revolution in the Philippines. Basing on an understanding of Philippine society as capitalist despite all its backwardness, Popoy advocated for the Party to exclusively organize the working class instead of dispersing its forces into mobilizing the "democratic classes." With the Party organizing the working class into a powerful mass movement, the latter will become the vanguard class which will inspire, through its militant struggles, the peasantry to take the road of revolution—without the Party directly undertaking the task of organizing the democratic classes. The proletariat can only be organized as a hegemonic class if it is conscious of its historical task, thus the imperative for it to be organized on the basis of socialism not national democracy which is merely a program for local capitalism. To advance the proletarian revolution, the working class will have to ally with the peasantry by satisfying the latter's class demand for the abolition of landlordism. This implies the completion of the democratic tasks of the proletarian revolution and exposes the fallacy of overstepping the democratic revolution.

Malvar creates the myth of Popoy as a Stalinist on the basis of two fallacies. One, by alleging that Popoy called for an alliance with the national bourgeoisie. I dare Malvar to find one quote from "Counter-Theses" or the "10 Theses of the PMP" where Popoy does a Joma by arguing for an alliance with the capitalist class.

Second, by claiming that Lenin abandoned the formula of a democratic dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry in favor of Trotsky's "permanent revolution" that skips the democratic stage. Popoy explicitly and concretely applied a Leninist not a Trotskyist nor a Stalinist perspective to the Philippine revolution. Like Lenin, Popoy advocated for an alliance with the peasantry but with the proletariat exercising leadership to facilitate the revolution's continuation into the socialist stage.

Popoy may have been felled by physical assassination in 2001 but his theoretical legacy and Leninist conception of the Philippine revolution endures despite attempts at character assassination.

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P.S.

- <https://partidongmanggagawa2001.blogspot.com/>

Footnotes

- [1] <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2020/11/27/lagm-n27.html>