

Taking on the Philippine axis of evil

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In 2007, Walden Bello was elected to the House of Representatives of the Philippines as a representative of Akbayan Citizens' Action Party. He resigned before the end of his third term to protest the policies of President Benigno Aquino III. He is running for vice-president of the Philippines on a ticket with presidential candidate Leodegario "Ka Leody" Quitain de Guzman. Tempest's Ashley Smith interviewed him about his campaign and politics in the Philippines.

Ashley Smith: I've been following your campaign for vice president with great interest. Why did you decide to run? What is the nature of your ticket and your platform? Who are the candidates you're running against?

Walden Bello: I was initially pushed to try to run for president. I really did not want to, because I felt somebody younger and more vigorous should. I am 76! So, I was very happy when the prominent labor leader Ka Leody decided to run for president under the auspices of [Laban ng Masa](#), which translates as People's Struggle. I backed him fully. Then he asked me if I would run as his vice-president. I thought about it and decided to punch in and go for it.

We are running against what we call the Axis of Evil. Now, I know that this comes from George Bush. He applied that label to the wrong people, but we're applying it to the right ones—the presidential candidate, Bongbong Marcos, the son of our notorious dictator, Ferdinand Marcos, and vice-presidential candidate Sara Duterte, daughter of our current, authoritarian president, Rodrigo Duterte.

The two are the worst combination of political figures in the Philippines imaginable. We feel that you cannot defeat them by just opposing their authoritarianism and warning against the danger of the return of dictatorship, and leave it at that. You have to give people a vision of the future and policies that break with neoliberalism.

This is our strategy to overcome our country's particular history. We had the Marcos dictatorship in the 1970s and 1980s. We got rid of that with the People Power Revolution in 1986, and won formal democracy. There was a lot of hope that swept the country at that time.

But, now more than 30 years after the revolution, there's great disappointment. We had elite democracy that really was reduced to competition among the rich for control over the state and protection of their wealth. So, today, inequality is extremely bad. About 30 percent of the population is in poverty.

Faced with that fact, many people see the only way to improve their lives is to leave the country and work in places like the United States, Australia, and the Middle East. They feel they have no hope for a better future at home. We think you can't give them hope unless you have an analysis about what happened to our revolution, why it did not meet the hopes of the people.

Part of the answer is corruption, which is a problem in many other places, including the United

States. But the deeper issues involve the ways neoliberalism has been implemented in the Philippines. There has been a total opening up of the economy, the destruction of manufacturing, and the destruction of agriculture. That has led to people losing jobs in industry and on the land. There are few jobs for people, so they become migrant laborers in other countries.

That's why we devised a 25-point program that we have since reduced to 13 points. It basically addresses all the key problems of the country.

If we want to win and dry up the swamp that breeds the authoritarian right, a challenge to them must address the basic issues of inequality and poverty, and present an alternative to the policies that have created those problems.

To address inequality, we propose taxing the rich at 3 percent of their income. We call for an end to the neoliberal policies so that we can revive manufacturing and agriculture.

We also put forward policies to defend human rights. We want to make sure that Duterte, our outgoing president, is prosecuted for killing 27,000 people in his terrible war on drugs. In fact, we've called for him to be brought to the Hague on charges of crimes against humanity. He deserves a cell in the Hague.

Our program covers a whole range of issues. We have called it a democratic socialist alternative for the Philippines. Some people still have worries about socialism, but we have tried to explain that it's democratic management of the economy through participatory democracy. That's the hopeful future that we're offering.

As for our other rivals, there's the current vice-president of the Philippines, Leni Robredo, who is running on the Liberal Party ticket. She confines herself to promising to preserve democracy and protect human rights. But that's not going to cut it at this point in time. She provides no answers to the deep inequalities in our society. And then there's the boxer Manny Pacquiao, who tells people, "If I can do it as a boxer, I can also make you rich." There are some others, but the biggest threat is really the Marcos-Duterte Axis of Evil.

It's an uphill struggle. The Duterte-Marcos team takes advantage of the fact that nearly half of Filipinos were either small children during the period of martial law during the 1970s or were born afterward. They do not understand how bad the Marcos dictatorship was. So, the Axis of Evil makes clever use of the internet to convince people that those were the glory years of the Philippines, instead of being a nightmare.

Marcos right now is polling at about 50 percent of the vote. That's very scary. You have a lot of Filipinos who basically think he is the savior of the country. He doesn't even have a program except that he's going to bring back the glory years under his father.

It's an uphill struggle, but we're out in the districts campaigning like we've never campaigned before. We're criticizing elite democracy and explaining why it failed to solve our national problems. And we're explaining why a return to authoritarian rule will make our predicament worse. We're presenting democratic socialism as a solution that preserves democracy, rebuilds our economy, and overcomes inequality.

AS: What role has the Communist Party's National Democratic Front played during this period?

WB: They continue to be a force in Philippine politics with, I think, seven members in the House of Representatives. In the beginning of Duterte's rule in 2016, they were supportive of him. They

adopted that position in the hope of securing a peace deal to bring an end to their military confrontation with the state.

I thought that was a bad strategy, and I said so at the time. They were willing to sacrifice everything, including their claim to be fighting against fascism, to curry favor with Duterte. But he struck an alliance with the police and the military instead, and adopted a very strong anti-communist stance.

He intensified the counterinsurgency and repression of all progressive activists. That led the National Democratic Front to move into opposition, where they have been for the last few years, after their initial mistaken support of Duterte.

AS: What is the character of the Duterte-Marcos bloc? You've described it as authoritarian. Other people sometimes describe it as fascist. That has led to a debate on the left about how to defeat it. Some conclude that you have to join with the liberals to defeat them and not present a programmatic alternative of the kind you've just described. What is your response to these arguments?

WB: The Duterte-Marcos bloc is an example of the authoritarian and dictatorial legacies of their fathers. They contend that democracy has made a mess of the country, and what's needed is strong leadership. Of course, they don't say dictatorship or authoritarianism, but it's quite clear that they think those are the solution. That's why we've called them the Axis of Evil. It gives people a sense of the danger they pose.

There are people who say that you have to unite with the liberals. You have to support Leni Robredo in order to defeat them. But we're saying that you cannot defeat them by just defending elite democracy and rights as they exist now. That's all Robredo stands for. But that system has failed, and its failures have bred the Axis of Evil. If we want to win and dry up the swamp that breeds the authoritarian right, a challenge to them must address the basic issues of inequality and poverty, and present an alternative to the policies that have created those problems.

Running a liberal campaign in defense of elite democracy is a dead end. It won't win. That's why a very credible survey has Robredo polling at 20 percent of the vote, way behind Marcos and Duterte at 50 percent. That poll was taken just when our campaign was getting launched. So, the fact that we didn't get one percent is something that worries us, but we're just getting started.

I think that we'll be able to get those numbers up. We want to go all the way and win. That's why we're running. I think we can win. We have [a few] months to go and we're campaigning really hard.

Most people think that we'll get at least a decent showing. If we don't win, we'll lay the groundwork for future electoral campaigns on our platform. Look at what happened with the Pink Tide in Latin America. Lula ran about three times before he finally won in Brazil. The same is true in other countries where the left has broken through and won national elections.

AS: Let's step back from the electoral arena. What is the broader political and economic conjuncture in the Philippines? What is the state of the pandemic and the economy?

WB: The Philippines has been one of the worst places to be during the COVID-19 pandemic. Something on the order of 47,000 people have died. The absolute numbers have been much worse in places like the United States, Brazil, and India. But more lives could have been saved if the government did not take this very top down, militaristic approach to the pandemic.

It was not participatory. It did not bring people into the process of addressing the crisis. So, the government did not understand the issues on the ground and did not give people the chance to

shape how the pandemic was handled.

We had a lot of difficulty securing vaccines. There was also enormous corruption when it came to the purchase of personal protective equipment. The pandemic had a devastating economic impact. In Southeast Asia, the Philippines has suffered the worst loss in our gross domestic product.

There's been an absolute lack of coordination in providing social welfare to people, despite the fact that a number of budgetary measures were passed to do so. Many people are still waiting for money. So, the pandemic has made a bad economic situation in the country far worse for most people.

Of course, the Philippines has been growing—but on neoliberal terms. There is no redistribution of wealth. Land reform has ground to a halt. Any government revenue that's been raised comes from excise taxes, which target the middle class and the poor. But there's enormous tax evasion, especially among the rich, so people are really quite disgruntled.

In these conditions, one can understand how people would look to a guy like Marcos. While he offers no substantive program, he says, "If you vote for me, we can return to the years when my father was the president, when we were at the top in Asia. I'm going to bring back that era."

It's very understandable that he has an appeal, given the widespread disillusionment with elite democracy and neoliberalism. People can turn to strong leaders in the hope for solutions. Duterte used this approach in 2016. He was a one-issue candidate, running a law and order campaign promising to control crime and kill drug dealers and even users. People saw him as the strong leader who could solve the problems of elite democracy.

AS: Given that political scenario, let's turn to talk about social and class struggle in the country. Have these conditions produced protests and strikes? How does the Philippines compare with other Asian states where there is increased militancy from below?

WB: I wish that I could say that the country's dire situation has produced more struggle. Over the last few years, strikes have actually gone down. What labor organizing there has been focused on ending contractualization and demanding regularization of employment.

Since the 1990s, the labor movement has been really quite weak. When Duterte came into office, he promised he would end contractualization. The labor movement pushed him to honor this promise, but management and capital pressured him to break it, which he did.

Ka Leody, my running mate, has been a key leader of the labor movement. In fact, he and I recently supported a strike by contractual workers against Handyman Enterprises that scored a big victory.

Workers at such companies want regular jobs, rather than contingent, contract labor. These agencies hire workers, pretend to be their employer, and deploy them to other companies. Once there, the agency has no more control over their rights. They are simply a front for management to be able to bust unions or keep them out of their firms. The labor movement has been set back by these conditions.

In the countryside, we had a big push for agrarian reform during the last decade. In fact, I was one of the principal authors of a major land reform bill in 2009. Numerous struggles laid the basis for the bill. It secured more land for poor farmers. But in the last few years, the big landlords have countered those efforts and taken back a lot of land.

So, the level of struggle remains fairly low. A big part of the problem is that a lot of the best militants from the ranks of workers who could provide much-needed leadership have gone abroad.

In fact, the government has a labor export policy. This policy has two damaging impacts. One, it offers this illusion that you can improve your situation if you go abroad—and that that is the only way you can improve it. Two, it sucks many of the people who would be key militants out of the country.

In the context of this low level of struggle, we have tried to advance demands with the hope of reviving social and class struggle.

AS: I would like you to expand on this a little bit. We've seen this phenomenon internationally of the left compensating for the weakness of movements by campaigning for electoral office. But if and when they secure national office, they face domestic and international constraints that block reforms. So, how do you avoid that trap of getting in office without the mass support to drive through social reform?

WB: This is a key challenge. We've tried to anticipate this by visiting areas where there are prospects for mass struggles. We emphasize that you have to combine electoral and mass struggles to effect real change. So, we hope our campaign helps revive struggle in the country.

I must say that we're in an experimental stage of how to do this. We know the pitfalls to avoid. I was part of this social democratic party, Akbayan Citizens' Action Party. I represented it in Congress for about six years.

Akbayan made an alliance with the Benigno Aquino III's Liberal Party, who was in power before Duterte. I thought it was the right thing to do at the time, but I made it clear that we had to make sure that if the Liberals were not responding to people's needs or were adopting policies against their interests, we would criticize them or even leave the alliance. But the social democratic party ended up subordinating itself to the Liberals.

It was a real struggle I was personally involved with. Aquino adopted double standards in enforcing his anti-corruption campaign. He went after his opponents for their corruption but tolerated it among his friends. I said you can't do this because it will destroy any credibility and our party would be destroyed by it.

Aquino also adopted a new treaty on [military] basing rights with the United States. I came out very strongly against this. It reached the point where I was more in opposition to Aquino than his formal opposition. The breaking point for me came when the United States ordered Aquino to carry out a raid on someone Washington considered a "high value" terrorist. This resulted in the deaths of 44 policemen who carried out the raid.

I realized then that I could no longer stay in this alliance with the Liberals. I could not accept the corruption, collaboration with the United States, and the deaths caused by Aquino's anti-terrorist efforts. I could not participate in the social democratic party's alliance with Aquino. So, I resigned my seat in Congress and told my party to put somebody else in my place. I think it's the only recorded resignation on principle in the history of the Congress of the Philippines.

I cite this example to show that if progressives are not careful, they can subordinate themselves to liberals and, before they know it, become an adjunct to their party.

What happened was a tragedy. That's why we formed this new coalition, People's Struggle, to avoid this subordination to the Liberal Party and provide a genuine alternative to them and the Axis of Evil.

AS: I want to ask you more about the international dimension of the campaign. You

mentioned the United States basing of force in the Philippines just now as one issue. The country finds itself in the midst of this increasing rivalry between the United States and China for hegemony in the Asian Pacific region. Obviously, the United States is the dominant power. But China is trying to stake out its position in the region. That is producing conflict between the two.

The Philippines has been caught up in this rivalry because it has its own claims to islands and fishing areas bringing it into conflict with China. The United States has tried to weaponize that to block China's rise. How have the Duterte-Marcos Axis of Evil positioned themselves in this rivalry? How do liberals position themselves? How does your campaign approach those issues?

WB: This is a very, very important question. The Aquino administration, which preceded Duterte, struck a total alliance with the United States. That is the tradition of the Liberal Party and Leni Robredo today.

Duterte initially positioned himself as an ally of China. He wanted the investments to come in through the Belt and Road Initiative. At the same time, he leaned toward China because of his grudge against Barack Obama, who had criticized him for human rights violations in his war on drugs.

Duterte made various threats to end the Philippines' alliance with the United States. He said he would end the Visiting Forces Agreement. I remember writing an article, which said, "He might be the devil incarnate, but Philippine leader Rodrigo Duterte is beginning the process of ending over 120 years of colonial subjugation." But when it came to following up on his threat, he didn't do it.

We are proposing the demilitarization of the South China Sea and diplomatic agreements to ensure that all countries' rights [to contested islands] are respected, negotiated through a common collective process.

In our campaign, we've been pretty consistent in staking out a position critical of both the United States and China, and calling for a peaceful solution to the conflict. China has claimed that 90 percent of the South China sea belongs to it. That violates the rights of the five other countries that border the South China Sea. That's simply wrong. There was a ruling in the Hague that said China's claims were invalid, which we agree with.

At the same time, I understand why China is acting the way that it does. It's surrounded by U.S. bases throughout the region. Washington has bases in Japan, Okinawa, South Korea, and the Philippines, to name just a few. In reality, the South China Sea, despite its name, is really an American lake.

China's new military bases on the islands make the news. But what doesn't make the news is all the U.S. bases and offensive capabilities throughout the region. It has offensive capabilities underwater, on the surface, and in the air that are all directed at China's industrial base in the south.

The United States also has a military strategy entirely designed to paralyze China in the first moments of a war. Given that reality, you can understand why China's response has been to try to expand its first perimeter, claiming those islands at the expense of the Philippines, Vietnam, and others.

So, we're saying that China has valid, defensive concerns. Even the Pentagon admits that China's posture is defensive. But, of course, it's trying to solve its concerns in the wrong way. What China

should be doing is talking to the Philippines and all the other Association of Southeast Asian Nations countries to negotiate a peaceful solution.

We are proposing the demilitarization of the South China Sea and diplomatic agreements to ensure that all countries' rights are respected, negotiated through a common collective process. Such demilitarization would benefit everybody except, of course, the United States. I have made this proposal a number of times, including in the [New York Times](#). But none of the countries have made any moves in this direction.

That's why it is very important that civil society in China, the United States, and countries throughout the region take the initiative to stop the slide toward confrontation. It is a very dangerous situation that could develop, against everyone's wishes, into a war. You have Chinese and U.S. warships and planes playing chicken with one another. There have been several near collisions between their fighter jets.

When I was a member of Congress, I went to Vietnam. Officials told me a collision between ships or planes could escalate into a higher form of conflict because there are no rules of the game. It's just all balance of power. And that, as European history teaches us, usually ends in terrible conflict.

Really, we're smack middle in the most dangerous area in the world right now. We have U.S. bases. So, in any conflict, we would be immediately dragged into it.

We're very clear that we want a peaceful settlement to this conflict, and we demand the total demilitarization of the region. At the same time, we've been emphatic that China has to stop grabbing those islands, stop militarizing the area, and stop harassing our fishermen.

Of course, the United States loves to foster the image of itself as the defender of Filipino fishermen and Filipino territorial claims. They're just using our just claims to support their existing hegemony. We want to put a stop to that by saying the Philippines must have an independent foreign policy. This country must stop swinging in this pendulum back and forth between China and the United States. We want to strike out for an independent position that advocates peace, demilitarization, and negotiated settlements to disputes throughout the region.

AS: One final question that flows from the internationalist position you've just outlined. What role do you see your campaign playing internationally?

WB: We see ourselves as part of an international left. We have been inspired by the victories in Latin America. We have been looking very closely at Latin America, both the failures of the past and the successes of the present. We see our campaign as part of the international revival of socialism as an alternative.

We've also been inspired by the reemergence of socialism in the United States. We've been inspired by Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, and others. In the United States, of all places, socialism is popular! This in part because people like Sanders have presented it as an attractive alternative.

So, we're part of this international trend. We are also part of an internationalist left in several other ways. We are part of the global current arguing against this dangerous rivalry between the United States and China. We are part of the international movement to stop climate change.

Finally, we are part of the worldwide movement against authoritarianism and fascism. It is a threat in the Philippines and many other places, from Brazil, to the United States, to India. We are part of the international defense of democracy.

You can't do that by restricting that defense to just talking about voting and civil liberties. You have to address social and economic issues, as well. That's why the best way to defend democracy is to deepen it and move society toward a democratic socialism.

We want this message to catch fire in the Philippines. We haven't accomplished that yet, and we might not be able to accomplish that in the next few months or few years. But we're hopeful that people will realize that they must no longer be taken in by authoritarian populist figures. We trust in their capacities to become conscious of their own interests. This is an uphill struggle, but I think it's the struggle that has to be waged.

So, I hope we win. I think we can at least capture a significant percentage of the vote and build the basis for more struggle, both at the ballot box and in society. We're doing everything we can to make sure that democratic socialism becomes the alternative that the Filipino people adopt as their own.

Ashley Smith

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