

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Asia > Philippines > The Left (Philippines) > The Left and self-determination (Mindanao) > **People's struggles in Latin Asia - V - Philippines, protests, 1972-present**

# People's struggles in Latin Asia - V - Philippines, protests, 1972-present

Wednesday 9 September 2009, by [ROUSSET Pierre](#) (Date first published: 1 February 2008).

**This essay has been published, under the title “Philippines, protests, 1980s-present” [1], in *The International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest*. Ness, Immanuel (ed). Blackwell Publishing, 2009, vol. VI, pp. 2678-2688.**

**The French original had to be much shortened because of editorial constraints (thus, some few corrections have been introduced here). An even longer version is now under preparation and will be posted online in French... as soon as possible.**

**For the previous parts of this essay, go to:**

**[People's struggles in Latin Asia - I - Philippines, colonial protests during the Spanish era](#)**

**[People's struggles in Latin Asia - II - Philippines, protest during the US era](#)**

**[People's struggles in Latin Asia - III - Philippine Huk Rebellion, 1946-1954](#)**

**[People's struggles in Latin Asia - IV - Philippines, protests, 1950s-1972](#)**

## Contents

- [Martial Law Regime](#)
- [War in the South](#)
- [The Left: Baptism of Fire](#)
- [Armed Struggle and Social \(...\)](#)
- [The Decisive Years: 1983-1987](#)
- [February Revolution, 1986](#)
- [Developments on the Left](#)
- [1992-1996 Splits](#)
- [The Future of the Philippine](#)
- [New Directions](#)
- [Pluralism](#)

---

## Martial Law Regime

The imposition of martial law in the Philippines on September 21, 1972 had very deep consequences quite different from those foreseen by its promoters. Far from being a one-off measure, it was lifted

formally only in 1981 – and only after the 1986 February Revolution brought to an end more than 13 years of what opponents called the “Marcos dictatorship.”

The purpose of martial law was not initially to implement a policy of counterinsurgency. No revolutionary movement seriously threatened the established order. It aimed at more specific goals: to stop social radicalization and prevent the left from reorganizing after the failure of the Huks, to ensure that no disturbances interfered with the renegotiation of the agreement for US military bases on the archipelago. Washington was particularly concerned that nationalist pressure was making itself felt in institutions, far beyond anti-imperialist circles. Senator José Diokno was leading an investigation into the operations of oil multinationals and the Supreme Court was facing up to the American business lobby. Everything had to be done to ensure that the Philippines remained one of the main pillars of the US security system in Asia.

In the longer term, the US wanted the martial law regime to create a strong, centralized state as a means to “modernize” the country – to end the fragmentation of power between the state and provincial political families and their private armies. The duly reinforced government army was one of the key elements of this policy of “nation building.” Ferdinand Marcos seemed to Washington to be the man for the job. Already elected president in 1965 with support from Washington and reelected in 1969 in a violent and fraudulent election, he was no longer eligible to run for the presidency, since the constitution only allowed two successive terms. Under martial law, Marcos could remain in power and the suspension of civil liberties would give him a free hand.

However, the US strategy of “modernization” of the Philippines was flawed from the outset, relying as it did on the Marcos clan which, during a seven-year presidency, had developed an efficient clientelist network. With the proclamation of martial law, Marcos was quick to privatize the public treasury and the national state to his and his cronies’ advantage. By way of modernization, Ferdinand Marcos and his wife Imelda imposed a “conjugal dictatorship,” perhaps the most corrupt and nepotistic regime ever in the Philippines.

The imposition of martial law represented a major turning point for the archipelago, placing the army at the heart of the political regime. Within the social elite, martial law upset relationships among oligarchic families, while conditions for leftist activity were radically altered. Minority populations were prompted into armed resistance. All sectors of the opposition were affected by a wave of repression. Thousands of opponents and activists were arrested and torture against detainees was widespread. Congress was closed, the media were censored, and judges were forced to hand over undated letters of resignation to the president.

## **War in the South**

The south of the archipelago, inhabited by the Moros (Muslims), was considered by the government in Manila as an economic frontier to be taken over. The Philippine state had never recognized the Moros’ or Lumads’ (non-Muslim hill tribes) ancestral domains. Marcos issued a ruling that almost 90 percent of property in the south was “public,” and therefore could be allocated as he saw fit. The internal colonization of Mindanao by mostly Christian peasants was encouraged to reduce the agrarian crisis in the center and north of the country while marginalizing the Moros, who ultimately found themselves a minority in their own land. Powerful Philippine families and US or Japanese multinationals created vast fruit plantations, developed mining activities, or freely logged forests.

Richly endowed with natural resources, Mindanao provided an increasing share of exports, including fruit, coconut, and wood. But the local population had not benefited from this economic boom. Poor peasants who settled in the promised land of Mindanao generally remained poor, while rich Filipinos

and foreigners investing in the island became richer. However, the policy of internal colonization gave an interconfessional and intercommunity twist to the many agrarian and territorial conflicts. The Philippine establishment denigrated Moro culture, while Christian missionaries became active. Moros and Lumads were oppressed and exploited, enduring extreme poverty, illiteracy, lack of health care, and shortened life expectancy and facing numerous armed attacks to drive them from their lands.

Territorial dispossession and cultural or religious oppression sparked a revival of armed resistance, and in the late 1960s Moro nationalism began to assert itself. The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) was formed in 1972, the year Marcos declared martial law, receiving international support in Malaysia and Libya among other Muslim countries. The MNLF managed to recruit up to 30,000 combatants. The bulk of the Philippine army was mobilized against it and war raged from 1972 to 1976, with later periods of negotiations interspersed with fighting.

## **The Left: Baptism of Fire**

The martial law regime ruthlessly suppressed the left, including the “old” Communist Party of the Philippines (PKP). Key figures of the PKP capitulated to the Marcos dictatorship in 1974 and joined the government. While few members within the academia retained influence in theoretical debates [2]. While the PKP maintained international links with the pro-Moscow communist parties worldwide, in the Philippines it ceased to be an active component of the left.

Leaders of the PKP, like Francisco Nemenzo, and rural units of the party (in Central Luzon) that refused to surrender were unable to rebuild a significant organization. This was also true for Christian Socialists and independent Marxist intellectuals. Many leftist organizations disintegrated, including a small Trotskyist group, or were paralyzed, while the social democrats (SDs) in the Philippines remained bound to the Jesuits.

### **National Democratic Movement**

The national democratic movement was politically in a better position. Structured by the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), from the start it sought to initiate armed struggle.

Only 14 delegates participated in the CPP Congress, which had only 20 or so founding members and some 75 close sympathizers. The New People’s Army (NPA) was formally established in March 1969 with about 65 members, equipped with 35 firearms (including only nine automatic rifles). But the new party was a promising starting point. The chairman, José Maria “Joma” Sison, alias Amado Guerrero, was a figurehead for radicalized youth who identified with Maoism in the late 1960s. He was joined by Sixto Carlos (from the Union of Democratic Youth, SDK) and Rodolpho “Rudy” Salas (aka Bilog).

To a large extent the CPP was the product of a fusion between José Maria Sison and the insurgency organizations of Bernabe Buscayno (*Kumander Dante*), himself a second-generation Huk, who was leading an armed group coming from the peasant uprising of the 1940s and 1950s and which had severed links with the PKP [3] - the “old” Communist Party. Buscayno offered the new party military experience and roots in rural Central Luzon. He became commander in chief of the NPA, while Sison was head of the party military commission. In 1970, a group of young army officers led by Victor Corpuz rallied the movement. Four years after its inception in 1972, the “new” Communist Party had 2,000 underground activists, often living in slums and villages.

The National Democratic Front (NDF) was established in April 1973, using the shock of martial law

to convince various organizations and personalities to join the movement. In 1977, Horacio “Boy” Morales, the executive vice-president of the Development Academy of the Philippines, made front page news when he announced that he had joined the underground.

### **Christians for National Liberation**

Father Ed de la Torre favored a theology of struggle and in February 1972 founded Christians for National Liberation (CNL). CNL members were essential participants in the national democratic movement, both in public life and underground. Philippines communism included secular, atheist, and anti-clerical tendencies. Before martial law, Sison’s Kabataang Makabayan (Nationalist Youth) had fought in the universities against the Catholic student movement led by Christian Social Democrats. However, in their mass activism – among workers, villagers, and poor urban communities – communists worked with priests, seminarians, and religious activists who rejected the dictatorship. By linking with religious groups, the CPP strengthened its roots and recruited new cadres.

CNL’s relationship with the NDF was, however, ambivalent. From the outset CNL provided the NDF with a broader basis than either the CPP or the NPA. Pushed underground by the dictatorship, CNL was logistically dependent on the Communist Party, which never allowed the Front to develop an independent national structure.

### **Failure of the Philippine “Yan’an”**

Less than four years after its foundation, the CPP needed to expand under a harsh dictatorial regime, an arduous task. From the late 1960s to the early 1970s, the CPP took the momentous decision to concentrate on building up a few stable NPA base areas in Central and Northern Luzon, most significantly in the provinces of Tarlac, Isabela, and Bicol. These isolated revolutionary groups were brutally suppressed by the government army and most of the NPA survivors sought refuge in the cities.

The CPP wanted to create a Philippine “Yan’an,” referring to the base area where Mao’s Red Army had settled after the legendary Long March. It was a misinterpretation of the Chinese experience: the Red Army had been born out of mass revolutionary uprisings and the Long March was a forced retreat rather than a free choice. Joma Sison had unsuccessfully sought to reproduce a strategic Chinese model in the Philippines. His response to this failure was *Specific Characteristics of Our People’s War* (1974), which took into account the peculiarities of the Philippines experience. Focusing mainly on geographic data (the fact that the Philippines was a mountainous archipelago) and the fact that it was dominated by US imperialism, he concluded that the armed struggle had to begin simultaneously in various parts of the territory to disperse enemy forces from the beginning. The updating of the CPP’s strategy continued with the adoption by its Central Committee of a resolution, *Our Urgent Tasks* (1976), stressing the need to undertake mass action in all popular sectors and give greater importance to semilegal and urban activities.

The reorientation of the mid-1970s was only partial as the party’s ideology remained a version of Maoism from the period of the Chinese Cultural Revolution. Joma Sison adhered to a simplified vision of the history of the Chinese Communist Party, often far removed from reality. He did not seek to assimilate the experience of other liberation struggles (in Vietnam, Cuba, or elsewhere) and blurred the originality of the Philippines social formation by defining it as “semi-feudal” and “semi-colonial” [4] without using the word “capitalist.” Sison’s 1970 book *Philippine Society and Revolution* remained the party’s Bible, which stressed the primacy of rural work and the armed struggle.

However, the mid-1970s reorientation (and the great courage of the national democratic activists) was sufficient for the CPP to regain the initiative. Its timing was appropriate. After several years of inactivity, social struggles resumed while the bulk of the government army remained entrenched against the MNLF in the south of the archipelago. In October 1975, a strike by 5,000 workers at La Tondeña distillery in Manila opened a brief period of workers' struggles.

## **Armed Struggle and Social Resistance**

The early years of martial law proved difficult for the Communist Party. After the destruction of the initial guerilla units, the bulk of the leadership was arrested in 1976-7, including José Maria Sison, his wife Juliet, and Bernabe Buscayno. Nevertheless, the party redeployed its forces, expanding its social base and creating guerilla fronts in a growing number of islands. In 1980 social protests erupted again in factories and slums, which helped the CPP to strengthen its semi-legal networks, its trade union influence, and its community organizing among the urban poor fighting eviction, such as in the giant slum Zone One Tondo (ZOTO). Thus the CPP was able to promote the creation of new sectoral popular organizations, sometimes national in scope.

The Philippine agrarian structure remained highly diverse. In the mid-1980s about 10 million people were employed in agriculture, of whom 15 percent had a land title, 15 percent tilled public sector land and did not have a land title, 20 percent rented their land from landowners, and 50 percent were permanent or seasonal agricultural workers. While unreliable, these statistics give an idea of the nature of rural labor, although they conceal the complexity of the relationships of domination. For example, a small farmer under contract to a multinational company might be in a state of dependence worthy of a landless peasant, while a farm worker subjected to exploitation and hunger might aspire to become a farmer. The situation was different where the capitalist market had grown widely, as in Luzon, and where, as in the particularly poor island of Samar, agricultural self-sufficiency and traditional village structures were still important.

The peasantry was usually directly organized by the NPA around a gradual land reform program. In large plantations, however, the CPP supported the creation of unions. Thus, in the same region and in the same economic sector, producers could be organized differently. For example in Negros, small sugar cane producers living on the mountain slopes were under the NPA while workers in large plantations were organized by the National Federation of Sugar Workers (NFSW).

The Communist Party adapted to local conditions. The perspective of overthrowing the Marcos dictatorship through armed struggle gave a common purpose to urban and rural organizing in the various social sectors and islands. Because of the primacy of armed struggle, the CPP sometimes radicalized workers' strikes to the point that union activists had to go into hiding to escape repression. By joining the NPA, the CPP contributed, in the words of the party, to the "proletarianization" of the guerillas. The CPP's policy provoked tensions among trade unionists seeking to consolidate their social base in the factories. However, the May First Movement (Kilusang Mayo Uno, KMU) was founded in 1980 to defend class struggle unionism against the official Philippine labor confederation, the TUCP, which collaborated with the dictatorship although it was recognized internationally by the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU).

The legal component of the national democratic movement grew considerably during the first half of 1980. The women's umbrella organization GABRIELA was created in 1984, and in 1985 the Peasant Movement of the Philippines (Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas, KMP). The multi-sectoral coalition Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (New Patriotic Alliance) - Bayan for short (a Tagalog word meaning both nation and people) - brought together all the organizations identified with the national

democratic bloc, as well as a few others, including the League of Filipino Students (LFS), the Medical Action Group (MAG), and the Alliance for Concerned Teachers (ACT).

The underground component of the movement also strengthened significantly. According to the CPP publication *Ang Bayan*, the party had 10,000 members in 1980 and around 30,000 in 1983. The number of military fronts increased from 28 to 45, the number of rifles from 4,000 to 10,000, the number of full- and part-time NPAs from 8,000 to 20,000, and the number of provinces where guerillas operated from 43 to 53.

### **The Decisive Years: 1983-1987**

In the early 1980s, the dictatorship was clearly in crisis. In the aftermath of World War II, the Philippines had been seen as the best-placed Southeast Asian country in the race for development. It was now the poor man of the region -and the only one where a communist guerilla was growing. The Marcos dictatorship was not the only culprit in this failure: the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank were clearly implicated as well. The authority of the regime and of the international financial institutions declined, while contradictions within the ruling class became more acute.

It was at this point that Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino decided to return to the Philippines. A key figure of the moderate bourgeois opposition, he represented a major clan that had been excluded from power by the dictatorship. He was murdered on August 21, 1983 on the tarmac of Manila international airport, which now bears his name. For all sectors of the opposition, this assassination represented a declaration of war, signaling that the Marcos regime was not ready for any concessions.

Mobilizations against the dictatorship rose rapidly. The urban middle classes took to the streets in their thousands. Sectors of the Philippine left that had been marginalized as a result of martial law found a new political space. Contacts were established between a Christian Socialist movement represented by Ronald Llamas (which had some popular roots in poor urban districts), cadres who had previously broken away from the PKP (among them Francisco Nemenzo), and independent Marxist intellectuals (such as Randolph David). These contacts led in 1986 to the creation of Bisig, an independent socialist organization.

The manner in which the Marcos regime descended into crisis did not correspond with the CPP blueprint. Its leadership's vision was for a "gradualist" strategy, in which a military stalemate had to be reached before the question of power could be raised. This was far from being the case in the mid-1980s. Thus, a decisive section of CPP's leadership failed to recognize the depth of the regime's crisis, which was developing under unanticipated conditions with mass mobilization in the cities at its center rather than rural armed struggle.

The political experience of the CPP and the national democratic movement was much richer than the official program would suggest. But it was no longer sufficient to "adapt" the line to regional conditions, as several territorial or sector leaderships had already done. The emphasis had to be shifted to the national level, which could not be achieved without the agreement of the executive committee.

The issue of united front policies and alliances was posed in new terms with the revival of pluralism on the left. Underground, the NDF began opening up, proposing to include political organizations independent of the CPP. But in 1982 the movement was dealt several serious blows: the murder of the highly regarded Edgar Jopson by the military, and the arrests of Isagani Serrano, a member of the party's executive secretariat, Boy Morales, chairman of the NDF, and Ed de la Torre, the founder of CNL. The transformation of the NDF did not occur.



Similar developments occurred above ground. Broad ad hoc coalitions were created, and some party members wanted the umbrella organization Bayan to include a wide range of non-CPP-led movements. But, although it was the largest coalition of popular movements ever in the Philippines, politically Bayan was the narrowest of all those formed after 1983. Almost all the groups were part of the national democratic bloc [5] – with the notable exception of former senator Lorenzo Tañada.

The political situation quickly evolved when Marcos, eager for legitimacy, called snap elections in February 1986. Corazon “Cory” Aquino, the widow of Benigno, and Salvador Laurel (from the classical right) ran against Marcos in the presidential race. Most of the democratic movement supported Cory Aquino. Sharp divisions appeared in the Communist Party. Traditionally, the CPP boycotted elections but many wanted to engage in the electoral battle this time, or at least did not want to oppose participation. Nevertheless, the executive committee voted for an active boycott by a very tight margin: 3 in favor of a boycott and 2 against. The party was placed in a very awkward position in the face of the anti-dictatorial upsurge.

### **February Revolution, 1986**

Ferdinand Marcos was sure he would once again control the elections, as did the majority of the Communist Party leadership. They were both wrong. Within the US administration, many wanted the dictatorship to reform itself, but it was too late. The powerful anti-dictatorial mass movement upset predetermined scenarios. Under its pressure, all the regime’s contradictions reached breaking point. The Catholic hierarchy withdrew its support for the presidential couple, as did business and many provincial oligarchic families, giving notice to Washington to choose its allies. The army was divided, with a small fraction preparing a coup d’état.

The election campaign took on a strong extra-institutional flavor, with a “parliament of the street” imposing its legitimacy against a rump National Assembly. When Marcos declared himself reelected, rebel soldiers occupied their barracks, led by two “repentant” members of the military: Defense Secretary Juan Ponce Enrile and Acting Chief of Staff Fidel V. Ramos (two of the key architects of martial law). The church called on the population to protect them. A huge crowd blocked the approach of loyalist regiments. The military rebellion should have been easily crushed, but the mobilization of millions of people in the capital and the provinces made all the difference. On February 26, 1986, the presidential couple fled into exile in Hawaii: it was the victory of “People Power” and the “EDSA uprising” (from the acronym of a major thoroughfare, Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, which runs alongside the rebel army barracks near the gathering of demonstrators).

A remarkable alliance had thus occurred between a fraction of the army, the Catholic hierarchy, sectors of the bourgeoisie and the traditional oligarchy, the urban middle classes, popular sectors, and the organized left. But the weight of the latter was considerably weakened by the paralysis of the Communist Party. The CPP and the national democratic movement had played a key role in bringing the Marcos regime to crisis (together with the MNLF in the Bangsamoro land). But at the decisive moment, when millions of protesters invaded the streets and demanded the departure of the dictator, the Communist Party was busy preparing guerilla camps for an offensive that it expected to launch after the presumed reelection of Marcos. Many of its activists undoubtedly participated in the mobilizations (and did not boycott the election), but the national democratic movement was unable to significantly influence the course of events.

The February Revolution was a composite affair. Above all, it was anti-dictatorial (despite the presence of a military faction planning a coup d’état). Populist, religious, and Marxist ideas were represented. The expression of anti-imperialism proved marginal, although US President Reagan

was booed for his support of Marcos, and there was evidently an element of restored national pride: the overthrow of the dictatorship had been carried out by the people and not granted by Washington, as had been the case for independence. On yellow T-shirts (the color of the Aquino supporters), "People Power" was written on one side and "I am proud to be Filipino" on the other.

In the aftermath of the February Revolution, the balance of power was still unstable. The forces ousting the dictator had sharp political differences. The government included individuals from the repressive right (Juan Ponce Enrile) and others from the left, such as lawyer José Diokno, who had been a stalwart in fighting martial law. The balance between civil administration and military power also remained uncertain. February 1986 began a period of transition that lasted for about two years.

Given the marginalization of the national democratic current, the elites were able to resolve the crisis in their best interests. The accession to power of Aquino, herself a member of the oligarchy and very close to Archbishop Sin, fostered a virulent ideological offensive against the CPP and the Marxist left by the Catholic hierarchy and the apostles of economic liberalism. In 1988, the Aquino regime finally took shape and the coalition government became narrower. The extreme rightist elements (Enrile, Vice-President Salvador Laurel) joined the opposition. However, after the death of José Diokno and the departure of many figures of the left, the center of gravity of Aquino's cabinet shifted rightwards, to the delight of Washington. A precarious agreement was negotiated with the armed forces, stabilizing the country, and economic growth resumed after several years of recession and stagnation.

Nevertheless, the structural crisis of the Philippines regime was not overcome. The return to democracy meant above all the return of political provincial families and the resurgence of the elitist and clientelist system of the 1960s. There was one notable difference, however: under Marcos, the army had entered politics. The attempted coup d'état in December 1989 demonstrated that the military was not content to return to the barracks. In 1992, retired General Fidel Ramos succeeded Aquino as president. Military factions are now part of the Philippines political landscape.

## **Developments on the Left**

Political prisoners were freed after the fall of the dictatorship and took part in the lively post-February 1986 debates. Ed de la Torre and Boy Morales distanced themselves from the official Communist Party line, launching the Popular Democratic (PD) current. Other activists from the national democratic tradition joined the newly constituted socialist organization Bisig. Both PD and Bisig presented a much more democratic vision of socialism than that offered by the CPP. The national democratic movement itself seemed ready to innovate. Former detainees, including José Maria Sison, constituted a legal political party in 1986, the Partido ng Bayan (People's Party, PnB), which ran in the elections. Within the CPP, substantive discussions took place, including publicly in the journal *Praktika*, on a wide range of issues.

### **Post-February 1986 Debates**

In May 1986 the communist leadership criticized itself publicly over its decision to actively boycott the elections. However, questions remained over how an executive committee of five could have taken such a decision without referring to the political bureau and the central committee, against the advice of many cadres. The February Revolution cast new light on already existing ideological differences and raised other issues.

Seen from outside, the CPP appeared to be an ideological monolith. But there was real diversity in its political practice and conceptions. In 1978, the CPP in the capital had participated in elections in



spite of the official boycott policy; the experiment was a failure and the regional leadership was sanctioned. During the 1980s, in Mindanao, the CPP had incorporated the notion of a general territorial strike (*welgang bayan*) in its overall perspectives. The tumultuous events of 1983-6 confirmed that the strategic blueprint elaborated in 1968-70 was far too rigid. Cadres such as Nathan Quimpo (aka Marti Villalobos) proposed drawing lessons from Latin American revolutionary experiences and from the flexibility of Vietnamese practice, arguing that success depended on the practical ways of combining forms of struggle depending on particular circumstances.

Cadres involved in mass organizing did not systematically subordinate themselves to the armed struggle and sought to address the immediate needs of their social base in more practical ways – what others denounced as reformism. These divergent approaches ultimately led to a sharp disagreement on how to use (or refuse) the official land reform program to advance the peasants' struggle.

While these issues – and many others – were debated in much wider activist circles than before, members of the CPP gradually discovered that paranoid purges were taking place within their own party.

### **Militarization and Purges**

Under martial law, human rights deteriorated in the Philippines as the use of torture became routine. Above ground, activists were abducted and summarily executed by paramilitary groups, including death squads, “vigilante” civilians armed for counterinsurgency, anti-communist religious sects (particularly Protestant), and landowners' and bosses goons. The civil war sometimes took horrific forms, as in the Davao region, where the army “cleaned up” the Agdao slum using religious fanatics against guerillas. Terrible acts were committed, such as the disemboweling of pregnant women, the mutilation of corpses, and torture.

Militarization affected all sectors of society. Paramilitary groups did not cease operating after the fall of the Marcos dictatorship and leaders of legal organizations were not spared. In 1987, death squads assassinated Rolando Olalia (KMU chairman) and Lean Alejandro (head of Bayan), among others.

Controlling the violence became a problem even in the NPA, as evidenced by the Digos incident. In this remote Mindanao village, a Protestant sect created an anti-communist militia. On June 25, 1989, during fighting with the guerillas, 37 villagers were killed. Medical care was given by the victorious NPA to the wounded – but two corpses were beheaded. The NDF set up an inquiry commission requesting the indictment of the NPA unit and two guerillas for beheading the corpses.

Within the Communist Party, the situation dramatically deteriorated. In the 1980s, a succession of secret purges was launched to eliminate agents who had supposedly infiltrated the revolutionary movement. In some places only a few members of the leadership were killed. But in other provinces hundreds of activists were sentenced to death and the mass base of the party was hit [6]. Several thousand CPP members were murdered, but it was uncertain whether there were any military agents among them.

Torture was used systematically to force suspects to admit to crimes they had never committed. Innocent people confessed and gave the names of nonexistent accomplices: with the infernal logic of torture, purges became rampant in many provinces. The bonds of trust between the CPP-NPA and the population were severed. The 1980s purges raised serious questions, such as how such violations could have been committed by the revolutionary movement, which for so long had won the moral high ground, and how it could have used the same methods as the dictatorship it so vigorously

denounced. These and other questions were addressed in the book *To Suffer Thy Comrades* by Robert Francis “Bobby” Garcia, a survivor of the purges who had been tortured in Southern Tagalog NPA camps.

## **1992-1996 Splits**

After 20 years of struggles, the failure of its boycott policy, and the traumatic experience of its paranoid purges, in the context of a changing national and international climate, the Communist Party was forced to take stock and many members called [7] for a congress, only the second since its foundation in 1968.

Any reassessment of the CPP line had to take a critical look at the legacy of José Maria Sison. He was the only CPP leader whose writings are authoritative and published (apart from the official resolutions). In this the CPP is quite different from most other revolutionary parties in Asia. This peculiarity is all the more notable because Sison was jailed from 1977 to 1986 (during which time the movement expanded most rapidly), and since 1987 has been living in Utrecht, subject to major restrictions on his movement.

Joma Sison and his allies within the leadership (Benito and Wilma Tiamzon) refused any questioning of the party’s original orientation. The debate therefore set the Reaffirmists against the Rejectionists: those who “reaffirmed” the validity of the 1968–70 documents against those who “rejected” them. In addition, the paranoid purges became a posteriori part of the factional fights, Sison blaming his opponents for the disaster, while in reality the whole party was responsible. In this context, the holding of a congress was refused.

A split in the party was unavoidable. In 1992–3, important leaders, territorial units, and commissions left the CPP or were expelled: Ricardo “Ric” Reyes (Politburo and Mindanao Commission member), Romulo “Roily” Kintanar (head of the NPA), the United Front Commission, the Peasant Department, the International Desk (Home Bureau), the Manila-Rizal (Capital) Regional Committee with Felimon “Popoy” Lagman, part of the Visayas Commission with Arturo Tabara, and the Central Mindanao Region, among others. The General Command of the NPA and the National Organizing Commission were also officially disbanded. Because the complete name of the party was the Communist Party of the Philippines-Mao Zedong Thought (CPP-MLMTT), many Rejectionists deleted the MTT (Maoist) reference, retaining the ML, which is why in the Philippines, unlike most other countries, Marxist-Leninist is not Maoist.

Rejectionists were not the only victims of the factional fights. Rudy Salas was expelled while he was CPP Chairman in 1977–86 – during the time Sison was in jail. In 1997–8, another split/expulsion occurred in Central Luzon in spite of the fact that this regional leadership had reaffirmed its Maoist reference. A whole generation of activists had been organized in the struggle against martial law by the national democratic movement. This great Philippine revolutionary tradition was now split, but its legacy could still be felt in a range of varied political and social organizations.

## **The Future of the Philippine Left**

Many members of the national democratic movement ceased their activism on account of the 1980s purges and the 1990s CPP crisis. Some organizations disintegrated, such as the PD, and a number of left leaders joined mainstream political parties. Nevertheless, the Philippine left remains the strongest in Southeast Asia.

Among the left, the CPP remains the largest underground organization and, most importantly, the best armed. New communist parties were constituted, initially rooted in one or a few regions only, but later becoming more widespread: the Revolutionary Workers' Party-Mindanao (RPM-M) from Central Mindanao; the Revolutionary Workers' Party-Philippines (RPM-P), mostly from the Visayas; the Workers' Party of the Philippines (PMP), mostly from Manila-Rizal; and the Marxist-Leninist Party of the Philippines (MLMPP) from Central Luzon. Akbayan (Citizen's Action Party) was established as a broad political party of the left. The socialist organization Bisig, a small left social democratic organization, and a number of former CPP members participated in its foundation.

Mass organizations have been influenced by the political upheavals. Out of the KMU a new union center, the Solidarity of Filipino Workers (BMP), was created in the Manila-Rizal region. The Alliance of Progressive Labor (APL) was founded in 1996 and Akbayan was closely related with this national labor center. The peasant movement KMP split, giving way to the Democratic-KMP (DKMP). Many women's organizations distanced themselves from GABRIELA and new organizations, such as Sanlakas, appeared alongside Bayan. There are many independent NGOs and associations, especially peasant associations, in the Philippines, but the most important progressive social movements are usually either part of the Reaffirmist bloc or the Rejectionist bloc, and/or are linked to Akbayan.

## **New Directions**

Elections to the Philippine National Assembly (Congress) are mostly controlled by elite political clans. But new legislation gave a limited number of seats to "party lists" representing popular sectors. Various components of the Philippine left took the opportunity to run, with some success. The Reaffirmist bloc launched several lists (including Bayan Muna, GABRIELA, and Anakpawis) and was the most successful, thanks to CPP backing. Among the Rejectionists, AMIN in Mindanao (with the backing of the RPM-M) and the Workers' Party (PM) - mostly in Manila-Rizal - won seats. Akbayan benefited from a national network and won one to three representatives in each election. Gradually, however, that democratic space has been commandeered by political fronts linked to the elite (against the spirit of the legislation) and it is unclear how long it remains open to the militant left.

The renewal of left activities and ideologies concerned many fields of activities, three of which are discussed here.

### **Indigenous Peoples**

Minority populations live in strategic areas for a guerilla group like the NPA: mountain ranges where military bases can be established and from where it is possible to operate in several provinces. Indigenous peoples in the Philippines are often warring tribes and many NPA fighters were recruited from among them.

Various hill tribes were allied with the CPP-NPA against the Marcos dictatorship to protect their habitat from mining, logging, and major infrastructure works; for example, Igorots (Kalinga and Bontoc tribes) from Northern Luzon struggled against the World Bank-funded construction of dams on the Chico River.

The Communist Party incorporated these areas of struggle into its national strategy, but it refused to recognize the self-governance of the tribes in their ancestral domains: the right of self-determination was to be exercised only after victory. This issue probably explains, at least in part, the April 1986 split within the NPA, when Conrado Balweg founded the People's Liberation Army of the Cordillera

(CPLA).

During the 1990s, some Rejectionists adopted a new approach. The RPM-M operates in areas populated by Lumads (indigenous peoples of the island). It felt it necessary to recognize the right to self-determination of the minority populations, respecting their decisions concerning the struggles to be carried out. This is all the more important because, in part of Mindanao, some Lumad ancestral domains are located within the perimeter of other ancestral domains claimed by Moro tribes. Thus the peace movement, which is very much alive in the south of the archipelago, has to find a way for two combined rights of self-determination to be respected in order to overcome the war situation there.

### **Feminist Networks**

On issues of morality, the CPP is traditionally conservative. It issued strict rules prohibiting sex before marriage (although some leaders had more freedom than members). In addition to the authoritarian Puritanism shared by many Asian Maoist movements, the influence of religious members (especially priests) was notable. The CPP monitors courtships, marries its members, and serves as marriage counselor, thus combining the roles of the family, the church, and the state. Since the 1980s feminist networks have grown and diversified. But they face the influence of the churches in the archipelago. Legislation does not permit divorce or abortion, and campaigns for birth control face many obstacles. The political left is reluctant to confront the churches in this area because it depends on the religious authorities to protect them from repression. Thus, defending the rights of women is often not considered an immediate priority.

### **Participation in the Movement for Global Justice**

Thanks to its Christian organizations and the presence of Filipino political exiles in many countries, including the US, the Netherlands, and Australia, the national democratic movement has established an extensive network of international solidarity and funding. The NDF opened an international office in Utrecht.

Other components of the Philippine left have played an active role in the global justice movement, with key personalities such as Walden Bello from Focus on the Global South and Lidy Nacpil from the Freedom From Debt Coalition (a member of Jubilee South). Philippine social movements are also internationally active through other broad networks, including Stop the War Coalition and Stop the New Round Coalition (against the World Trade Organization). The role of migrants – and especially women migrants – is also important. At least 8 million Filipinos (10 percent of the population) work abroad. The Philippine social fabric would crumble without the \$US14.5 billion they send home each year.

## **Pluralism**

Over the last 15 years, the Philippine left has evolved in two opposite directions on the important issue of pluralism.

### **The Transformation of the CPP**

At the time of the 1992–3 splits, the CPP leadership pronounced a death sentence on the main figures of the opposition. For a time, only middle-ranking cadres of other underground organizations were silently targeted by the NPA. In January 2003, however, Romulo Kintanar was shot dead in a Manila restaurant by his former comrades. For the first time, a well-known personality had been

executed in the capital city, with maximum publicity.

The CPP justifies such killings by claiming that the victims are in fact “enemy agents” or “criminals.” But in its official organ *Ang Bayan*, it denounced as “counterrevolutionary” all other organizations of the progressive and radical left, and many left personalities. Any “counterrevolutionary” may one day be sentenced to death. Dozens of activists have already been executed (sometimes after being tortured) by units of the NPA. In some provinces, such as in Bondoc peninsula, the situation is dire: peasant cadres related to Akbayan have fallen victim to both landowners’ goons and the NPA. In January 2005, many organizations participating in the Porto Alegre World Social Forum issued a “Letter of Concern,” urging the CPP to renounce its policy of threat and assassination against other components of the Philippine left.

## **A Plural Left**

Much of the Philippine left has followed the opposite trajectory to the sectarian development of the CPP, recognizing the legitimacy of pluralism in the people’s movements and the need for unity. This question of pluralism (and democracy) has become most central for the Philippine progressive and revolutionary left. Unification of the various Rejectionist organizations formed after the 1992–3 CPP split proved difficult. But they have engaged in many broad networks with Akbayan and other organizations, giving rise to a new political coalition: *Laban ng Masa* (Struggle of the Masses).

Despite remaining one of the most vibrant in Southeast Asia, the Philippine left has been unable to regain the political initiative. Every time the regime enters a crisis, it is still the elite that imposes a solution – as when President Joseph “Erap” Estrada was overthrown in January 2001 under the pressure of street demonstrations. Philippine military factions are still in the political game. The situation is nonetheless challenging. Social movements face the consequences of capitalist globalization and government neglect, while the closure of many factories has weakened militant unions.

The various peace negotiations between the government and the CPP-NDF, the RPM-M, and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF, which replaced the MNLF) have been inconclusive. The US was forced to abandon its military bases in 1991 under pressure from the anti-war movement and after a nationalist vote in the Senate (helped, it must be said, by the eruption of the Pinatubo volcano, which heavily damaged some of the bases). But the US military are back thanks to agreements allowing the deployment of their forces throughout the archipelago.

Under the presidency of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, corruption is draining public resources and the human rights situation has deteriorated considerably. In 2007, death squads murdered hundreds of lawyers, journalists, and activists (from the Reaffirmist bloc as well as from other organizations). As the situation in the Philippines goes from bad to worse, the struggle of the left has lost none of its relevance.

## **Pierre Rousset**

### **References and Suggested Readings**

Abinales, P. (2001) *Fellow Traveler: Essays on Filipino Communism*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press.

Abinales, P. (2004) *Love, Sex and the Filipino Communist*. Manila: Anvil.

Abinales, P. (2005) *State and Society in the Philippines*. Manila: Anvil.

- Aguilar, D. (1998) *Toward a Nationalist Feminism*. Quezon City: Giraffe Books.
- Anderson, B. (1988) Cacique Democracy in the Philippines: Origins and Dreams. *New Left Review* (1) , 169 (May-June).
- Bello, W., Docena, H., De Guzman, M., & Malig, M. (2005) *The Anti-Development State: The Political Economy of the Permanent Crisis in the Philippines*. Quezon City: Department of Sociology, College of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of the Philippines.
- Bonner, R. (1987) *Waltzing with a Dictator: The Marcoses and the Making of American Policy*. New York: Times Books.
- David, R. (2001) *Reflections on Sociology and Philippine Society*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press.
- De la Torre, E. (1986) *Touching Ground, Taking Roots: Reflection on Theology and Struggles in the Philippines*. Quezon City: Pastoral Institute.
- Estrada-Claudios, S. & Santos, A. (n.d.) *The Women's Movement(s) and Social Movements: Conjunctures and Divergences*. Available at:  
<http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article530>  
 Click: [Philippines Women's Movements and Social Movements. Conjunctures and Divergences](#)
- Garcia, R. F. (2001) *To Suffer Thy Comrades: How the Revolution Decimated its Own*. Manila: Anvil.
- Jones, G. R. (1989) *Red Revolution: Inside the Philippines Guerrilla Movement*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Morales, H., Jr. & Putzel, J. (Eds.) (2001) *Power in the Village: Agrarian Reform, Rural Politics, Institutional Change and Globalization*. Quezon City: Project Development Institute and University of the Philippines Press.
- Permanent People's Tribunal Session on the Philippines (1981) *Philippines: Repression and Resistance*. Utrecht: KSP.
- Pimentel, B. (2006) *U.G.-An Underground Tale: The Journey of Edgar Jopson and the First Quarter Storm Generation*. Manila: Anvil.
- Rocamora, J. (1994) *Breaking Through: The Struggle within the Communist Party of the Philippines*. Manila: Anvil.
- San Juan, E., Jr. (1994) *Allegories of Resistance: The Philippines at the Threshold of the Twenty-First Century*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press.
- Scipes, K. (1996) *KMU: Building Genuine Trade Unionism in the Philippines, 1980-1994*. Quezon City: New Day Publishers.
- Sison, J. M. (1989) *The Philippine Revolution: The Leader's View*. Washington DC: Crane Russak.
- Third World Studies Center (Ed.) (1983) *Political Economy of Philippine Commodities*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press.
- Third World Studies Center (Ed.) (1984) *Marxism in the Philippines: Marx Centennial Lectures*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press.



Third World Studies Center (Ed.) (1988) *Marxism in the Philippines, second series*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press.

Weekley, K. (2001) *The Communist Party of the Philippines 1968-1993: A Story of its Theory and Practice*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press.

---

## **P.S.**

\* Cite this article: Rousset, Pierre. "Philippines, protests, 1980s-present." The International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest. Ness, Immanuel (ed). Blackwell Publishing, 2009. Blackwell Reference Online. 09 September 2009.

[http://www.revolutionprotestencyclopedia.com/subscriber/tocnode?id=g9781405184649\\_chunk\\_g97814051846491186](http://www.revolutionprotestencyclopedia.com/subscriber/tocnode?id=g9781405184649_chunk_g97814051846491186)

\* On the International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest, see on ESSF:

[The International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest - 1500 to the Present](#)

[A presentation of the "International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest: 1500 to the Present"](#)

---

## **Footnotes**

[1] The title should be "1972-present" - from Martial Law...

[2] Correction from the printed version where the issue of capitulation (which had far fetched consequences) disappeared in the shortening work.

[3] Correction from the printed version: the armed group was coming from the Huks rebellion, but Dante himself was young...

[4] Correction from the printed version: "semi-feudal" **and** "semi-colonial", not "or": the two formulas always go together...

[5] Correction from the printed version which said "were part of" instead of "not part" ... the "not" was lost...

[6] Correction from the printed version: "hit" rather than "decimated"...

[7] Correction from the printed version: the party itself did not call for a congress...