

# Philippines socialists' long march

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**Socialists in Mindanao, Philippines, take a very practical approach to the struggle for revolutionary change, focusing on democratic rights, mass campaigns and improving people's basic living conditions. Daniel Princen explains.**

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A country plundered of its natural resources, its tropical forests decimated: simmering armed conflicts: a corrupt state, carrying a debt of billions, incapable and unwilling to ease the daily suffering and hunger of its citizens: millions forced to work abroad...The Philippines is a textbook example of the effects of neoliberal globalization.

For years the Revolutionary Workers Party of Mindanao (RPM-M) and its predecessors have been trying to organise the poor and oppressed of Mindanao, the large island in the south of the Philippines archipelago, to struggle for change. The party, since 2003 a section of the Fourth International, has its roots in the maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP).

In the 1970s and 1980s the CPP and its allies in the National-Democratic movement had complete hegemony over the left in the Philippines. The fall of the corrupt regime of Ferdinand Marcos in 1986, however, turned out to be a defeat in victory for the CPP. The organisation that had made such great sacrifices to wear down the dictatorship found itself isolated from the mass movement because of its insistence on the primary role of armed struggle in the countryside and the boycott of elections.

Members of the CCP or "the old party", as it is referred to by former members, still cling to the interpretation of Maoism it started out with in the 1960s. For them, the current regime of president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo is not really different from that of Marcos. They see the country as still "semi-feudal and semi-colonial".

Certainly the official democracy is a sham. Since 2001 more than 1,000 social justice and human rights activists have been murdered or "disappeared". Nobody has been convicted for these crimes, even though it is an open secret that the murderers and torturers are to be found in the military, the police and the many private armies.

At least after the monopoly on power by Marcos and his cronies competition between factions of the ruling elite has opened up some political space, something the National-Democrats also implicitly admit by participating in the elections with their own electoral formations. Since the fall of Marcos, the Philippines has become more and more integrated into the global economy. Big landlords are still powerful but the export of raw materials and cheap labour have become more important and the role of capital in agriculture has increased. A growing part of the population lives in the cities.

**Breaking with old ideas**

The RPM-M and its predecessors had been in contact with the Fourth International since the 1990s, trying to orient themselves in the new situation. Harry Tubongbanwa, once a CPP leader in Mindanao and now a leading RPM-M activist, explains: 'We consider our struggle to be a fight against imperialism that must be part of an international struggle of progressive and socialist organisations'. His party sees a need to fight for basic democratic fights and now gives more attention to legal mass campaigns. 'We came to the conclusion that we can't take power by focusing solely on armed struggle, the struggle needs to take several different forms, including electoral ones.'

For the RPM-M democracy and self-determination are integral parts of the struggle for revolutionary change. Mass-movements are the key: arms are necessary to protect movements and activists but do not guarantee victory.

Members of the party's armed wing, the Revolutionary Peoples' Army secure party gatherings in the mountains of Mindanao and protect villages sympathetic to the party from criminals and private armies. Other tasks involve training self-defence groups of indigenous people that resist the destruction of their native lands by mining companies and also helping peasants with harvesting and planting.

In 2005 the RPM-M negotiated a ceasefire with the national government. In return the party demanded that the government install running water and electricity for dozens of isolated, impoverished villages in Mindanao. Says Harry Tubongbanwa: 'We initiated peace negotiations because we saw an opportunity to improve the living conditions of the people'. Adds another RPM-M activist: 'It's hard to make a revolution with people who are starving and unsure how they'll make next week.'

Tragically, the most recent clashes involving RPA fighters were with the New People's Army of the CPP. The CPP has denounced every left group that does not follow the National-Democratic framework as traitors and counter-revolutionaries. Numerous left-wing activists, including several RPM-M members, have been murdered by the maoists.

### **No easy victories**

The focus on open mass movements created new challenges for the RPM-M. Especially in Mindanao, far away from the cities, the army, police and local potentates are free to use violence to ensure their kind of law and order. Revolutionary socialists cannot work openly or publicly defend their opinions. The party is forced to work on two levels; a legal level through NGO's and above-ground political formations, and an underground level. Party members make contacts on the legal terrain and carefully introduce selected new people to the underground level.

Mindanao is a troubled part of a troubled country. Since the 1970s, the national army has been fighting the CPP and also separatist Islamic movements, a conflict that sometimes became a full-scale civil war. Anti-war campaigning and relief work for the war-victims are priorities in for socialists in Mindanao. Others are active in movements of small fisher folk and peasants. Their work shows a very practical interpretation of anti-imperialism and of the struggle against poverty and foreign and Philippine capital. For example, activists help villagers to co-operate with each other and become more independent of multinational corporations by setting up an alternative seed-bank of unpatented, traditional rice seeds.

The RPM-M is now a growing organisation of some 2,500 members and for the first time is expanding its work beyond Mindanao, all the time undergoing deep changes. For example women's liberation is an integral element in all the work and the party has organised a lesbian, gay, bisexual

and transgender group – both radical steps in this conservative, very patriarchal country.

Recently, young activists set up an autonomous youth organization in solidarity with the party. They named it Katipunan, after the secret society that organized a revolt against Spanish colonialism more than a century ago. The original Katipuneros dreamt of a Philippines where everybody would enjoy kalayaan – freedom and justice. That dream is still very much alive.

**Daniel Princen**

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