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Philippines: The tragedy of the Left is that of our country - Benito and Wilma Tiamzon, and the fate of the CPP

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Captured Communist Party chairman Benito Tiamzon and his wife Wilma Austria, also a high-ranking cadre, are the embodiment of the Philippine left that was once a hope for the country, but has turned out to be a tragedy.

I knew the two, as they were members of the Communist Party's eight-man Regional Committee for Metropolitan Manila and Rizal province that I headed in the early 1970s until our arrest and imprisonment in 1974.

Tiamzon headed our labor union operations, while Wilma headed a sub-regional organization covering Pasig and other Rizal eastern towns, and later on the regional committee's "education bureau"—i.e., the unit in charge of educating the organization into Marxist worldview and strategy.

Benny and Wilma were exemplars of the core of the Left revolution (or attempted revolution) that emerged in the 1970s: lower and middle-class students just out of their teenaged years, disgusted over Philippine oligarchs and politics and the brazen social injustice of our country, and whose coming of age was in a period when the Left seemed on the verge of creating a new world.

Benny and Wilma were socially committed intellectuals. He was taking up political science while she took up sociology before they dropped out to become full-time activists.

It was Marcos' martial law that drove thousands of students, including the best and the brightest, into the Communist Party. Those Marxist claims that the state was a violent instrument of the ruling class all of a sudden appeared at that time to be so true.

It would only be later that we—including Tiamzon—would learn that Party chairman Jose Sison in fact, and ironically, played a crucial role in the imposition of martial law: He ordered the Plaza Miranda bombing of Liberal Party leaders in August 1971. That created what Sison termed as another "revolutionary flow", much needed when that which broke out in 1970 seemed to be dying out like some youthful fad.

That convinced Marcos about a year later to impose martial law which allowed him to remain in power beyond his second, and last term. The bombing gave him a good excuse that politics in the country had become too violent and anarchic that it needed strongman rule—as our neighbors in

Southeast Asia had.

Benny didn't come from a rich family, but he certainly wasn't poor. His family either had a small business or a farm in Marikina. Wilma, thin as Mia Farrow at that time, I thought, was more well off, and lived in a middle-class neighborhood in Pasig. As is the story of many middle and upper class couples, they met as students at the University of the Philippines.

The SDK

Benny and Wilma wandered into the Revolution through the Samahang Demokratikong Kabataan (SDK), which in the late 1960s consisted of mostly U.P. anti-establishment intellectuals, the Pinoy version of hippies, and even well-off bums claiming "existential angst" who got into Marxism since their idol Jean Paul Sartre had also embraced leftist politics. It was also a kind of imported fad. The "SDK" acronym alluded to the radical American SDS (Students for a Democratic Society), that rattled the US Establishment.

The SDK was totally different from the purportedly more militant Kabataang Makabayan. Sison organized the KM as the task given him as head of the youth bureau of the pro-USSR Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas. That was before he broke away from it to embrace "Mao Tse Tung Thought" and establish his own Party—not coincidentally in 1969 when Sino-Soviet relations broke down.

After the massive student demonstrations of 1970, which became the political debut of Sison's party, the KM would be the recruitment organization for the CPP, with wide-eyed teenagers gradually convinced that it was only US imperialist propaganda that made communism seem so bad. There wasn't an Internet at that time to check those claims.

It was after the SDK leadership in 1970 became Party members and took orders from the Party's Youth and Students Bureau that there was a mass recruitment of their full-time activists, including Benny and Wilma, into the communist ranks organization.

Most of us in the regional committee, including Benny and Wilma, were arrested in July 1974.

Benny and I had a falling out days after our arrest, which turned out to be a permanent one. A few days in the cramped cell in Camp Crame, I started doing some yoga exercises and even sat in the lotus position—to keep my wits. Benny made fun of it, and even comically assumed the lotus pose. I got mad, jumped from my second-level cot, shouted at him with so many "p" words. In my rage, I can't even remember now if I did hit him.

A silly, juvenile brawl? Precisely. We were in our early twenties, pretending to be Che Guevarras with one comrade even idolizing Ilich Ramirez Sanchez ("The Jackal") so much that he named his son after the Venezuelan terrorist.

Idealistic, gullible

That was what our Party and the Revolution mostly consisted of: Young men just out of their teens, so idealistic that, after the ruling class is overthrown, we will create society without poor people, but so gullible we believed Albania led by Enver Hoxa was a Maoist paradise in Europe.

That was a lifetime ago, and many of the Maoist revolutionaries have taken different paths.

The dear leader Sison is in the Netherlands, together with National Democratic Front head Luis Jalandoni, enjoying the lifestyle of the most liberal country on earth. His right-hand man, Jose Luneta, reportedly for some queer reason lives in Germany, while his finance man is a Spanish citizen. I wanted an academic life, but had wandered into journalism. Some of the third-generation of revolutionaries—the likes of Teodoro Casino—are enjoying the perks and power of being a congressman.

Many of my comrades then, such as my close friend Ferdie Arceo, were killed in firefights with the military. Some couldn't adjust to a normal life, becoming alcoholics until their cirrhosis killed them in some urban poor house. One of Sison's closest operatives and propagandist lives now very comfortably in Canada, but still ranting against US imperialism.

Some are still high-ranking cadres, claiming to represent the masses, but who go home in the evening to their upper-middle class homes. Others have stayed on, and now are in their 60s, toothless because there are no communist dentists with them in the mountain guerilla zones, and with utterly no plans and finances for their twilight years on earth.

And after more than three decades, the Philippines continue to be poor. Social equity and injustice are still as prevalent, even worse today.

The cigarette vendor you see through your car window, the domestic help in your house, your gardener will never get out of their godforsaken class, and so will their children and their children's children. Overseas work—our nation's escape valve—isn't available to them, as they haven't even finished high school.

Although their efforts didn't totally make theirs egalitarian societies, unarmed socialist, or just even just trade union movements in the US, Europe (especially Scandinavia), and Great Britain were successful in enacting laws to force capitalism to devote more of its output for the masses' welfare.

If not for such leftist movements, there wouldn't be such things as universal, free medical care and education, huge unemployment and retirement benefits, cheap mass transit systems, high taxation rates for the rich, in most advanced countries today.

Wakaoji

There is the tragedy of the Left in the Philippines. What it tried to wipe out in our country, poverty and inequality, have become worse after three decades. The Left hadn't changed that a bit.

The Left has even made us poorer: Why would both local and foreign businessmen do business in "communist-infested areas?"

The best—or worst—example of this was the NPA's kidnapping of Japanese Mitsui executive Nobuyuki Wakaoji in 1987.

That was the period during which Japanese capital—for various reasons such as the yen depreciation—invested abroad in such massive scale as never before seen. It was the flood of Japanese capital into Malaysia and Thailand that triggered their amazing economic growth in the 1980s and 90s. But at that time, because of the Wakaoji kidnapping, Japanese companies evaded the Philippines like there was a plague here.

People like Benny and Wilma devoted their lives for a cause they believed would end poverty and the

cruel exploitation of man by man. Now, Benny and Wilma aren't charged with subversion, but for multiple murder and attempted murder, very unfairly putting him in the category of the Ampatuans charged for the Maguindanao massacre. The Philippine ruling class even refuses to recognize their struggle, as all ruling classes all over the world and in history have branded revolutionaries as bandits — now terrorists.

The ruling class of the 1960s are richer now, included in listings of the world's billionaires —and foreign businesses are raking it in here because the price of labor continues to go down, as it would in a poor society.

The tragedy of the Left is that of our country.

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P.S.

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