

# Philippines: Pasion's Passion

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**Eduardo Tadem's book is the University of the Philippines professor's homage to the late Bartolome Pasion, his comrade in the *Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP)*, the older of the two communist parties in the Philippines.**

Ka Bart (*Ka* is short for *kasama*, Filipino word for comrade) grew up in a peasant family in Pampanga, and following his elders, joined the PKP after elementary school. He led a unit of the Hukbalahap (*Hukbong Bayan Laban sa Hapon*) against the Japanese, and after World War II, rose to become a member of the Politburo and the Secretariat in 1957. He would also be appointed head of the Party's Communist Revolutionary Intelligence Service Commission, a position he held until he was deposed in 1972.

Ka Bart organized PKP cells inside factories, and one of those he oversaw was instrumental in the successful nationwide strike against the American-owned Singer Sewing Machine Company. Party leaders trusted him so much that they sent him to Mindanao as part of an expansion team. His humble disposition was the talisman that drew a diverse array of characters to him, from village-mates to urban comrades (who often looked down on their rural peers) and, surprisingly, even those on the other side of the barricades.

For example, when the PKP decided to neutralize the ex-commander-turned-syndicate *jefe* Kumander Sumulong (Faustino del Mundo), Ka Bart's Huk (now renamed *Hukbong Mapagpalaya ng Bayan*) unit reached out to the governor of Pampanga (via a relative who was a town mayor) and the provincial commander of the Philippine Constabulary. He referred to this as "a most disgusting arrangement that we entered into," but it worked. Then while on the run in 1972, he and another comrade sought the help of a certain "Romy, who was a regular civilian ISAFP agent" who "allowed then to temporarily stay at his house until the initial effects of Martial Law subsided." Romy would always be there to lend a hand when the PKP cadre was in dire straits.

The book says very little about Pasion's ideological training. Still, he seems to have known his Marxism when he debated Mrs. Aurora Aquino (yes, Ninoy Aquino's mother) and the Catholic Women's League, who visited them in prison and tried to convert the "godless communists." Bart and his comrades "taught them about the principles and practice of Marxism-Leninism" while enjoying the food and amenities Dona Aurora and her comrades brought. I once listened to him and another ex-PKP cadre, Ka Claro, discuss Karl Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach" during an afternoon tete-a-tete at his comrade Prof. Francisco Nemenzo's University of the Philippines' faculty home. It was a delight.

When the PKP decided to come out in the open again after nearly a decade of being deep underground, Bart was one of those responsible for setting up the PKP's peasant and organization, *Malayang Samahang Magsasaka (MASAKA)*. He also helped younger cadres organize the PKP's peasant youth arm, the *Malayang Pagkakaisa ng Kabataang Pilipino (MPKP)*. When both organizations joined forces for a mass protest against the Vietnam War, they brought to Manila over 30,000 members.

But this communist swagger was short-lived. Disgruntled cadres led by the English professor Jose Ma. Sison broke away from the PKP and “re-established” the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) along Maoist lines. Then the two parties went to war against each other. In Pampanga word reached him that the New People’s Army (NPA), the CPP’s armed group, had plans of assassinating him. Any possibility of working alongside each other that Ka Bart wanted to happen came to naught.

Things got worse after 1972. Soon after Marcos declared martial law, the PKP reached a “political settlement” with the dictatorship. The Politburo then sent assassination teams to deal with those who disagreed. Nemenzo was charged with “splittism,” and only Bart’s intervention and the former’s counter-threat to the Lavas prevented the assassination (*Nemenzo was later arrested, and upon his release was unanimously elected dean by the faculty of the University of the Philippines’ College of Arts and Sciences; years later he became UP President*).

When party bosses accused Bart of financial opportunism, in a strange episode where his comrades actually did not act as judges in a Stalinist kangaroo court, Bart was able to outwit his prosecutors by accusing them of being ignorant of court procedures. The PKP decided to just expel him.

These setbacks did not deter Bart. His faction regrouped and formed the *Lapiang Komunista ng Pilipinas* (LKP) and entered into coalition talks with Nemenzo’s Marxist-Leninist Group and the leftwing urban guerrilla group People’s Liberation Movement led by another academic, Nemesio Prudente (who would become president of the Polytechnic University of the Philippines), and the human rights lawyer Jejomar Binay (who would be elected vice-president of the country in 2010). The group also reached out to the CPP and the Moro National Liberation Front. However, this attempt at a left-wing alliance came to nothing, paralyzed by mutual suspicions and disagreements over strategy.

Again, Bart was undaunted by the failure. He continued organizing, reviving old associations (like the Huk Veterans group), helping local civil society groups fight for their rights, and participating in political events like EDSA 1986. LKP joined just one attempt at bringing smaller non-CPP left-wing groups together. The *Bukluran ng Sosyalistang Isip at Gawa* (BISIG) gained better traction especially given many of them were part of Cory Aquino’s coalition. But in what has become a recurring curse for the Left after Marcos, BISIG also failed to prosper; by its second year, a rift had opened up, and the group faded into the margins.

Bart continued his political work in the 1990s and into the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. By then, he had gained stature in Pampanga politics, revered by everyone. This deference, however, turned out to be superficial. New generations of politicians and activists (and even police captains) knew very little of his political life. He also seemed to recede in the eyes of his comrades in Manila. The only time they knew of his exploits was at his wake. Tadem’s book is an admirable effort to keep those memories alive.

On July 17, 2016, an ailing Bart was rushed from Pampanga to Manila’s Philippine General Hospital. This part of the book is the most touching. Tadem writes about the difficulty the family faced in getting their father proper health care. It took nine hours before a doctor attended to him, and the family had money problems. Over and above his inflamed pancreas, deteriorating kidney and liver, doctors found cancerous growth in his esophagus and rectum. Two days later, the old revolutionary passed away.

His wake and burial were once again emblematic of how enigmatic Philippine politics can be – one that historians who rely solely on documents and texts could never explain. Sitting alongside his relatives were ex-comrades, local politicians, and retired military intelligence officers. Then to everyone’s surprise 15 fully-armed army soldiers provided “a 24-hour military vigil” for Bart who

was accorded the honor as a World War II veteran.

Bartolome Pasion, who spent over half of his life trying to overthrow political tyranny and social injustice, would be buried in the Cemetery of Heroes. Unfortunately, the place was sullied by President Rodrigo Duterte's decision to move the carcass of the dictator Marcos there.

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**P.S.**

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