

Philippines: The Party's Over

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Book Review: *Ascending the Fourth Mountain: A Personal Account of the Marcos Years.* By Maria Virginia Yap Morales. Bughaw: An Imprint of Ateneo de Manila University Press. 2021. xvii pp, 172 pp.

Ascending the Fourth Mountain is just the latest in slew of memoirs by radicals who want to tell their stories as the generation that turned the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) into a formidable anti-dictatorship force of 30,000 cadres with a 21,000-strong New People's Army (NPA) operating in 45 guerilla fronts across the archipelago. They also saw the fruits of their work unravel in 1986, when the Party was left out in the People Power Revolution. Maria Morales was in Davao when the paranoia of the CPP's Mindanao Commission leadership led to purges and the killing of suspected spies among its cadres, resulting in the Party network's collapse.

These were the larger narratives that shaped Yap-Morales' young life. And much more. Morales' story is about how trauma she experienced living with her ex-husband. Horacio "Boy" Morales was famously known as the government technocrat who, in 1977, defected to the CPP and became head of its National Democratic Front (NDF). After 1986, Morales returned to community development work, a vocation he learned as an understudy of President Marcos' executive chief Rafael Salas. He later became President Joseph Estrada's agrarian reform chief.

The story begins with two University of the Philippines students falling in love. Boy was well-known, while Maria saw herself as "a fan, trailing after giants." He proposed marriage in 1969, after returning from advanced studies at the University of Oklahoma. She said, "Yes, but no infidelities." She "was into fantasy, like most girls of my age at the time. The romance was the thing." In 1975, the CPP recruited them.

It was at this point that the marriage frayed. She wanted some financial stability; he kept asking for assistance. She loved their children; he had no interest in becoming a father. Boy's response to a comrade's suggestion that he spend some time with his kids was, "I have been away so long, I do not know what to say to my children." She learned about his mistress (the "forest wife" in communist lexicon) only after Boy and his mistress were captured. Party bosses went out of their way to protect their prized recruit and saw no reason why she and her children should be informed. And when she made noises they sent senior cadres to persuade her to shut her mouth. To the revolution, she and her children were trifling concerns.

But some did tell her about his infidelity. Soon after Boy's defection, a comrade confessed to Maria that the Party never intended to include the mistress — "*Nadamay lang, a security problem at hindi siya asawa sa UG* (It was just that she posed a security problem; she was not the underground wife)." Boy "talked about you as if all was well between the two of you," a high school classmate who was helping with Boy's release told Maria, who writes, "I was lonely and alone in my marriage, practically a single parent with two children and mounting financial problems."

But gradually, she overcame "confusion, fear, and my growing guilt over my fractured family" and

demanded an annulment. He refused, saying he wanted to be with the family. When Maria reminded him of his skirt-chasing, he dismissed this, saying, "*Mga babae lang 'yan* (They are just women)." The breaking point came in 1998, when she objected to his appointment as President Estrada's agrarian reform chief, telling him, "If you want this, then I must have what is mine." He finally signed a voluntary financial settlement ending their marriage but reneged on the latter, whining to her that after Estrada was deposed, he was jobless. He did promise to pay what was stipulated in the settlement. Maria was graceful in her response, telling him, "I am sixty-five years old already. Do not worry because I will not take you to court anymore."

The book gives us a glimpse of how women cadres were treated inside the Party. If the ruling class has its lotharios and wife-beaters, so does the revolution. A capitalist philanderer would be in good company with a counterpart from the Politburo. Maria's friend Indai Sajor told her, "It is good that you plan to write a book and put our thoughts together. Write about the patriarchy within." Sajor added, "Patriarchy is an issue that few of us feminists in the movement are talking about...The Party had its greatness, but it also had its failures. And it was never friendly to women."

This painful story is about the elephant in the room. Horacio Morales may be an icon of the revolution, but his heroic reputation came at the expense of his family. On the other hand, Maria Morales is hardly known, save perhaps among her Mindanao comrades. And this is what the reader may miss out on - her story as a cadre and as a mother. Here is someone who was a member of the NDF council, who helped draft the CPP's Women's Bureau orientation, and upon transferring to Mindanao in 1981, demanded that the Party's Mindanao Commission allow women comrades to form an organization of their own. Here is someone who helped organize the *welgang bayan* (people's strike) that paralyzed the transport system of all of Mindanao and who also very much involved in the internal debates of the early 1980s. This is also a mother who did her best for her children, making sure they were fed, out of harm's way, and acted as their moral anchor.

Ascending the Fourth Mountain is a remarkable story of a woman, an ex-cadre and a feminist, who confronted her demons, overcame her trauma to be whole again.

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