



## **Agrarian Reform in Conflict Areas: The Bondoc Peninsula Experience**

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**ABSTRACT.** This paper explains the historical evolution of the reform-oriented peasant movement in Bondoc Peninsula, and the causes and consequences of the violent opposition to its initiatives by landlords and the armed movement in the area.

**KEYWORDS.** agrarian reform · peasant movements · Bondoc Peninsula · rural violence

### **INTRODUCTION**

Bondoc Peninsula is a narrow strip of land located at the southernmost part of Quezon province. It is approximately eight hours away from Manila. It has twelve, mostly poor, fourth to fifth class municipalities. The peninsula has remained largely agricultural, with copra as its biggest produce since the 1950s.

In recent years, Bondoc Peninsula has made a mark as an agrarian-reform hot spot due to the violence that attended the land-rights claims of peasant organizations in the area. The peasant movements that evolved in the mid- to late 1990s have reshaped and reframed the land-rights struggle of thousands of landless tenants in the area through various collective actions and creative engagements with the government.

Their initiatives, unfortunately, brought them at odds with the armed movement and the landowning elite in the area who are extremely opposed to agrarian reform. The failure of landlords and the armed movement to stop the growth of peasant reform movements eventually led to increasing incidences of violence and human rights abuses that victimized peasants and their communities. The violence against peasants will continue for as long as landowners continue to rule with impunity and the armed movement refuses to respect the autonomy of the peasant movement.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

According to most accounts, the peninsula remained sparsely inhabited until the early part of the twentieth century. By the 1930s to the late 1960s, Bondoc Peninsula was declared as a frontier area suitable for resettlement. This attracted waves of migrants from Bicol region and the Visayas who went to the area in search for land to till (Franco 2005, 122).

It was the nonlocal elite, however, who accumulated much of the land through actual ground claims, private survey undertaking, and judicial applications. By the 1970s, in a 1989 study by the Asian Institute of Management, land concentration had become so skewed that 44 percent of the most productive agricultural land was owned by 1.1 percent of the area's population. Through monopoly over both private and public lands, the region's elite accumulated political power and soon created their own despotic enclaves ruled by *batas ng hacienda* (hacienda law).

When the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) took effect in 1988, the three biggest haciendas in the area were the Hacienda Reyes (estimated at 8,000-12,000 hectares), the Uy-claimed areas (about 3,500 hectares), and the Matias hacienda (2,500 hectares). This skewed land ownership led to the emergence of a share-tenancy relationship where farmers get 30-40 percent of the gross harvests. This exploitative relationship resulted in widespread poverty among peasants in the area. In 2000, the Philippine Coconut Authority estimated that coconut farmers earned only PHP 10,000 per hectare every year.

The evolution of the agrarian reform movement that currently attempts to reconfigure the skewed landownership in these and other haciendas can be explained by the following key events.

## MAJOR TURNING POINTS

The passage of the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) in 1988 provided landless peasants nationwide an opportunity to "own directly or collectively the lands they till." Peasants in the Bondoc haciendas, however, were unorganized and unaware of their rights under the said program. They were therefore in no position to take the opportunities under the law.

In 1989, the Bondoc Development Program (BDP), a bilateral development cooperation between the governments of Germany and

the Philippines, was implemented in the area. Poverty alleviation was its main goal, and agrarian reform was one of its key result areas. The BDP provided legal support and conducted seminars to support peasants claiming their land rights.

In 1996, the BDP contracted community organizers to organize peasants in the municipalities of San Narciso and Buenavista. Through this project, tenants in the said municipalities came into contact with community organizers who are oriented toward maximizing the positive provisions of the government's agrarian reform program. Alongside organizing, sustained legal education through the BDP raised the peasants' consciousness regarding land and human rights, which eventually formed the basis of their collective actions. The success of this initial project led to the expansion of organizing work in the other towns with heavy concentration of land ownership, including San Francisco, San Andres, and Mulanay.

By 1999, there were forty-eight hacienda-based organizations with a district-wide federation called the Kilusang Magbubukid ng Bondoc Peninsula (KMBP). In the same year, the peasant movement recorded its first major successful breakthrough, with the distribution of a 155-hectare property owned by the Reyes family in Buenavista, Quezon. The said breakthrough further convinced tenants that land redistribution under the government agrarian reform program was a realistic option.

In this breakthrough, successful agrarian reform was made possible through collaboration, cooperation and partnerships of various agencies of the government, civil society and farmers organizations. The support that was given to the DAR (Department of Agrarian Reform) by the Task Force Bondoc Peninsula members particularly the DOJ (Department of Justice), DND (Department of National Defense), and the PNP (Philippine National Police), was hailed by national media, describing the event as a "shining example of what could be achieved if different agencies and organizations would only work together to carry out a priority government program." (Tañada 2005)

Between the years 2000 and 2004, organizing expanded to the remaining biggest haciendas in the area, including Hacienda Villa Reyes, Hacienda Matias, and Hacienda Uy. Concrete gains in land tenure improvement of peasants accumulated over time despite the loopholes in the agrarian reform program.

By the end of 2009, 3,800 family members of KMBP collectively controlled more than ten thousand hectares of productive coconut lands. These include lands that were formally reformed by the government (distributed lands and leasehold areas) and lands controlled through peasant initiatives, which covered classified forest areas and private lands with dubious claims. Once in hold of evidence that claims of big landlords were dubious or spurious, KMBP members ended their tenancy relations with the claimants by boycotting share payments, allowing peasants to fully benefit from the land. The share-payment boycott initiative covered a network of landholdings with dubious ownership claims to include the 201-hectare Aquino property in Mulanay, a 4,000-hectare portion of Villa Reyes, the 133-hectare Uy-claimed property in San Narciso, among others.

### **VIOLENCE AGAINST AGRARIAN REFORM MOVEMENT**

From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, the area was a hotbed of armed insurgency. The New People's Army (NPA) gained support from landless peasants through its promise of implementing "genuine agrarian revolution." Its minimum program of *tersyong baligtad* (inverted sharing scheme) was supposed to improve the lives of farmers by increasing their take of the share at two-thirds of the produce (while the landowner gets one-third of the produce). Its maximum program of free land distribution is premised to come after the victory of people's war. However, the armed movement failed to implement even its minimum revolutionary agrarian reform program, especially in the biggest haciendas. To a large extent, it was this disappointment over the NPA's failed promise that prompted many landless tenants to wage their own independent campaign of ending their poverty and exploitation through the use of the government's agrarian reform laws.

Relationships with the armed movement turned sour after the tenants started engaging with the government's agrarian reform program, which the NPA denounced as reformist. The peasants' assertive actions, like the boycott of share payments, were also deemed "premature." The NPA attempted to suppress the growth of autonomous assertion of organized peasants in several haciendas, initially, through dialogues. When these failed, the NPA resorted to intimidation, harassment, and killings in select cases, under the guise of delivering revolutionary justice.

Landlords, on the other hand, unleashed their impunity through a combination of violence and legal offensives. Through armed goons,

peasants were forcibly evicted—their houses burned, crops destroyed, and farm animals confiscated. Peasant leaders were also physically attacked or killed. In some instances, the assaulted peasants were the ones charged in court because the goons had gone to the police ahead of them with fabricated stories.

Five peasant leaders were killed in the course of their struggle for land reform: two by the NPA and three by the landowners' private army. Scores were also injured in attacks by armed goons. A number of families had to be evacuated to avoid being harmed. Despite the cycle of violence, however, reform-oriented peasants persisted in their land-rights claims.

After failing to stop the peasant movement's reform initiatives, landlords resorted to filing various criminal cases against tenants. As of the end of 2009, 326 criminal cases were filed against 228 members and leaders of KMBP. As a consequence of criminalization, more than three hundred members of KMBP had been jailed since 1996. In many of the past cases, farmers who were not represented by a lawyer failed to submit their counter-affidavits, and the cases were resolved only on the basis of the complainant's affidavits. These cases were filed and resolved piece by piece, obscuring the pattern of systematic filing by just a few complainants against the farmers over a period of time.

The criminalization of agrarian reform set the precondition for violence and human rights violations. There have been instances where combined contingent of police, army, and armed goons made arrests during unholy hours (between midnight to early morning), sowing fear among farmers facing charges and creating a reign of terror on the community as a whole. In addition, the farmer-victims either suffer unnecessary detention, go into hiding to avoid arrest, or divert scarce resources to various financial requirements of defending themselves in court.

Violence against land-rights claimants is aggravated by the weak response of state agencies. Peasants in Bondoc Peninsula often resort to social pressure mobilization to push the government to act on their demands for protection or effective agrarian reform law implementation.

## RESPONSE TO VIOLENCE

The Bondoc Peninsula peasants and their allies have initiated various campaigns and measures to minimize the violence against peasants. Many of these actions were aimed at intensifying the pressure at various levels and spheres of government to make it more accountable not just

for implementing agrarian reform more effectively but also for protecting peasants against violence. These actions were also aimed at raising the accountability of non-state armed actors to human rights and international humanitarian law. These include the following:

- Local and international fact-finding missions during periods of violence
- International campaign and solidarity work
- Institutionalization of human rights observation
- Creative and effective social pressure/mass actions
- Improvement of the criminal justice system
- Multi-stakeholder dialogues
- Filing of legal actions/complaints
- Continuing legal and human rights education
- Strengthening agrarian reform implementation through an interagency mechanism

## CONCLUSION

In many areas of the country today, the implementation of agrarian reform will continue to be characterized by violence targeting land-rights claimants. This is expected in a country where landlords are mostly conservative and are extremely opposed to land reform. Various forms of violence will be employed by landlords to protect their interest of keeping their lands intact. But landlords are not the only source of violent opposition to land reform. In Bondoc Peninsula, the armed movement competes with the government in regulating land-based relations to advance its own interest. When reform-oriented peasants defy such regulation and assert their autonomy, the armed movement also resorts to some measures of violence that oftentimes victimize defiant peasants.

Violence is further encouraged by the weak presence of state or when the government and its institutions are beholden to the landlords' interests. In situations where government institutions are weak, such as the case of Bondoc Peninsula, it is necessary for farmers to link up with local, national, and international allies within and outside the state to more effectively confront violence and protect and advance their land and basic human rights.

The response of various state and nonstate actors locally and internationally during and after periods of violence in Bondoc Peninsula

guaranteed an open space for peasants to continue contesting their land rights in various levels and spheres within and outside the state. It is for this reason that the Bondoc peasants' land-rights claims are relatively successful. KMBP members today continue to struggle for the redistribution of more than twenty-three thousand private and public lands through the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program Extension with Reforms (CARPER) and the Community-Based Forest Management Program (CBFMP).✿

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