

Between Advocacy and Opposition: The Popular Movements Two Years After the Philippine February

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TWO YEARS AFTER THE POPULAR UP-
rising of February 1988, an elite-dominated lib-
eral democratic regime form has been effec-
tively instituted. Its populist rhetoric notwith-
standing, the new regime form has tended to
exhibit conservative characteristics, filtering the
demands from the grassroots through the
institutions of formal representation and
bureaucratic procedures that tend to restrict the
political influence of grassroots movements and
non-governmental popular initiatives.

The characteristics of the new regime form
described above present the organized forces
with distinct dilemmas. In a twilight zone be-
tween advocacy and opposition, the popular
movements have suffered from a lack of clear
perspective on their political role in the
medium term. Divided on the various issues, the
mass movements have failed to consolidate a
unified political front representing progressive
demands for sweeping social reform.

The great popularity enjoyed by the Aquino
government from the moment of the uprising's
triumph to the present affected the bases of
support of the organized forces and conse-
quently influenced their political behavior. In the
months immediately succeeding the uprising,
the organized forces found it necessary to estab-
lish close co-identification with the goals of the
new government or risk losing support from the
grassroots. Many of the leading personalities of
the Center and Center-Left groups were absorbed
into the structures of the new government.
These groups shifted emphasis from mass-
organizing to formulating state policies. The

shift immediately reflected in the organizational
decline and diminution of political significance
of those groups that have lost their political
cadres to the new government.

The mainline Left political formation — the
CPP-NPA-NDF circuit — found itself cut off from
the more moderate organized forces as the
former immediately defined its revolutionary-
oppositional posture vis-a-vis the new govern-
ment. The distinction between critical collabora-
tion and revolutionary opposition fundamentally
divided the various forces of the Filipino Left in
particular. For a while, the division seemed polit-
ically insurmountable and a broad Left united
front improbable.

The increasing "rightward drift" of the Aquino
government, however, became more palpable as
the critical issues of policy became more and
more defined. Over the last few months, increas-
ing intransigence on the part of a
conservatively-inclined government opened
new opportunities for cooperation and political
collaboration across a broad range of progres-
sive, though ideologically distinct, political
forces.

In the following pages, this paper shall
attempt a broad overview of the various strands
of the popular movement in the Philippines,
summarize the general issues that divide or
unify them, describe some of the cooperative
initiatives and draw implications on the
medium-term trajectory of mass-based politics
in the Philippines.

Spectrum of Organized Forces

As mentioned earlier, the basic dividing line

among the various grassroots movements on the progressive wing of the political spectrum involves the strategic view of the liberal democratic political arrangement instituted after the uprising of February 1986.

In the build-up of events leading to the uprising, most of the progressive groups independent of the National Democratic Front joined the mainstream of open democratic resistance to the dictatorship and participated in the electoral campaign that culminated in open popular rebellion. After the uprising, these groups found it necessary to offer the new government direct, or at least "critical," support on the thesis that the main threat to the popular movement came from the "neo-fascist" forces threatening to overthrow the new government by military means.

The option of "critical support" was a pragmatic one. While the new regime form showed reluctance early on to acceding to popular demands for sweeping social reform, it enjoyed great popularity and took command of the democratic mainstream. The "moderate" political formations were too small to advance a distinct political agenda and depended on constituencies that were highly supportive of the Aquino government. The option of immediately adopting a posture of militant opposition to the new government would have been organizationally fatal for the smaller movements. The looming threat of military take-over and the attraction of institutionalized reform proved decisive in bringing most of the smaller movements to the side of the new liberal democratic political arrangement.

The option of "critical support," however, inhibited the smaller progressive groups and movements from defining a clear and militant political perspective. This could have longer-term implications on the future of radical politics in the Philippines.

The groups and movements that adopted a position of "critical support" ranged from the radical wing of the liberal democratic stream organized into the BANDILA (*Bansang Nagkakaisa sa Diwa at Layunin*) coalition, the majority of the social democratic factions including the *Partido Demokratiko Sosyalista ng Pilipinas* (PDSP), the socialist and independent Marxist groups organized into the *Bukluran sa Ikaunlad ng Sosyalistang Isip at Gawa* (BISIG) and a number of groups and individuals breaking from the main national democratic position and adopting a "popular democracy" perspective (the most prominent of these is the Volunteers for Popular Democracy [VPD] led by Edicio de la Torre).

The main national democratic formation, including the various groups and movements associated with the Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (BAYAN), have adopted a posture of militant opposition to the liberal democratic



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government. This posture is justified on the thesis that the "US-Aquino regime" remains firmly under imperialist influence, that it represents resurrected class rule by the landlords and comprador bourgeoisie, that the military plays a decisive political role in the new government causing it to have fundamentally repressive characteristics and that the reformist liberalism of the new government is simply a "facade" that conceals its essential character. Given the broad popular support enjoyed currently by the Aquino government, the open national democratic mass movement has failed to regain the momentum it enjoyed in the last years of the Marcos dictatorship.

The revolutionary underground, for the same reasons as the open national democratic movement, has adopted a posture of revolutionary resistance against the new government, retaining its revolutionary paradigm premised on armed struggle directed towards the eventual seizure of state power. The CPP-NPA-NDF has thus far, managed to maintain its core organized strength but there are indications that the absence of momentum in the arena of open mass struggles served to cut down its rate of growth severely. The impact of a series of arrests by the military cannot be accurately estimated at this point. Over a period of several weeks, CPP lost a great number of Central Committee cadres

and almost the entire Visayas regional committee to lightning raids conducted by the Philippine military in the Manila area.

New People's Army guerrillas have continued to mount "tactical offensives" nationwide but these show little indication of drastically altering the political balance. Hampered by low supplies of ammunition and chronic shortage of firearms, it is not likely that the NPA could substantially escalate the guerrilla war in the near future. Without political momentum at the level of the open mass movement, and without the climate of discontent that characterized the Marcos period, it is unlikely that the revolutionary underground could meet the strategic timetable it announced. The revised counter-insurgency programme adopted by the Armed Forces of the Philippines appears to be taking its toll on the

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revolutionary armed forces although it is not likely that the latter forces would be scuttled in the short term.

The lingering insurgency and the counter-insurgency posture adopted by the new government have presented the non-revolutionary people's movements with peculiar difficulties. The government's counter-insurgency effort includes the deployment of often unwieldy "vigilante" groups and the extensive militarization of the countryside. This effort has effectively reduced the democratic space for mass organizing and has invited numerous human rights violations. A recent Amnesty International report indicates that the human rights situation in the Philippines has not been a substantial improvement over the situation that prevailed during the Marcos dictatorship.

As conservative politicians exercise greater influence over the policy-making process, the flow of reform is likely to become constricted. This trend has become evident in the Congressional deliberations on the proposed Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program. With landlord influence pervasive over the two houses of the legislature, the scope of the intended program has been severely reduced.

As the pace of reforms continues to fall behind popular expectations, it is likely, that some dis-

content shall resurface in the streets. But whether the mainline Philippine left with its old revolutionary orthodoxy can exercise command over renewed grassroots discontent is another question. The slow but gradual expansion of the Philippine economy has kept hopes high and prevented the expansion of discontent. The politically unorganized sections of Philippine society have shown a marked tendency towards conservatism in the aftermath of the uprising

Trends and Projections

The institutionalization of controlled representation and the deepening of the formal processes of policy-making have reduced the role of pressure politics in the present political arrangement. The revival of traditional elite-based political parties organized for purely electoral purposes overshadowed the cause-oriented groups and mass movements. The electoral exercises held since the displacements of the dictatorship have seen the marginalization — or, in some cases, the cooptation — of the politicized popular organizations. The last municipal elections allowed local elites to recapture power at the expense of the grassroots organizations.

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Organized for pressure politics and popular protest, the cause-oriented groups and mass movements were not prepared — or were not too inclined — to prevent the reconsolidation of the old patronage-based electoral networks. In the Congressional elections of May 1987, the Alliance for New Politics and the *Partido ng Bayan* — both composed of militant groups and grassroots movements — fared miserably. In the municipal elections of January 1986, old political clans bounced back to power across the country even as the more prominent ones who were closely associated with the deposed regime fared badly.

The sharp division among the mass-based groups over the question of strategic posture vis-a-vis the Aquino government initially fostered much antagonism and distrust. There was little cooperative work to speak of between the various strands of the progressive movement during the crucial first year of the new government when the general fluidity of the political

situation could have allowed the progressive movements to more definitely influence the course of political developments. The "moderate" bloc accused the revolutionary Left with abetting the military adventures of the extreme right by simultaneously attacking the liberal "center." The revolutionary Left on the other hand accused the "moderates" of abandoning the legitimate demands of the people and siding with the consolidation of a "reactionary" regime.

The first effective opening for collaboration across a broad progressive spectrum occurred when the new government allowed oil price increases in August 1987. Emboldened by widespread distress over the oil price increases, the more militant Left movements called for mass protest actions nationwide culminating in a *welgang bayan* (People's Strike) in the Metropolitan Manila area — the first ever ventured in this population center. The *welgang bayan* successfully closed down the metropolis through a combination of transport and factory strikes and street mobilization. The ground appeared set for increasing the scope and tempo of popular protests in order to force the new government to contend with the popular movements. But fate would have otherwise. On the 28th of August, rebellious military forces led by Col. Gregorio Honasan mounted a coup d'état. The rightwing rebels overran the General Headquarters in Quezon City along with a number of television stations.

Although the rebellion was crushed, it sent political shockwaves that affected the disposition of the other political forces. The military purge following the rebellion strengthened the position of the Ramos faction. A wave of popular sympathy swept to the side of the seemingly beleaguered Aquino presidency. The more moderate mass movements lost their enthusiasm for continuing the build-up pressure from the streets. A partial roll-back of oil prices undercut support for the strike movement. The revolutionary Left was perceived by many liberal supporters of the Aquino government to be indirectly encouraging rightist adventures in order to keep the situation fluid in the hope of forcing a revolutionary situation.

The strike movement declined and with it the ability of the revolutionary Left to define the political agenda. The decision of the New People's Army to field urban guerrillas in the metropolis is widely interpreted as a last-ditch effort to maintain a political presence in the main urban center.

The moderate movements that reaffirmed their "critical support" for the Aquino government found themselves with very little space for political maneuver. A number aligned themselves with traditional political parties. Others sought to intervene in the policy-making process through legislative lobbying or by occupy-

ing "combat positions" in the bureaucracy. On the whole, it appears they have significantly lost their ability for mass mobilization and pressure politics.

Over the last year, a number of experiments in broad coalition work has been initiated. The most significant of these is the Congress for a People's Agrarian Reform (CPAR) that brought

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together groups from all the major progressive political tendencies. The CPAR, however, was principally oriented towards influencing the deliberations in the legislature concerning a Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program even as it occasionally gathered large numbers for street protests. The final version of the CARP fell far short of what the CPAR demanded.

Recently, the same breadth of representation materialized for the Freedom from Debt Coalition. This coalition initiative brought together legislators, consumer associations and all the major political tendencies on the Left. Like the CPAR, however, this coalition is organized principally for intervention in the policy-making process and has yet to demonstrate a capacity for massive street pressure.

The current review of the agreement covering the use of military facilities here by the US has encouraged an extensive campaign calling for the ouster of the bases. A broad nationalist movement has emerged, including members of the legislature and progressive mass organizations.

The manner by which the popular organizations are able to influence the formulation of national policy on the bases shall be a good indicator of the extent to which the sectoral and grassroots movements are able to maintain their political influence and consolidate their constituencies.

The consolidation of grassroots and sectoral constituencies appears to be the main concern now of the popular movements. There seems to be little means at the moment for the popular movements to gain a broad initiative approximating the situation during the last years of the Marcos dictatorship. Broad support for the institutional leadership and a greater hopefulness in the performance of the economy have combined to create an ebb in the arena of mass mobilization and radical politics.