

Book Review

The Communist Party of the Philippines: The Troubled Journey

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Abinales, Patricio, *Fellow Traveller: Essays on Filipino Communism*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2001. 288 pp.

On December 26, 1968 the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) was founded through the initiative of Jose Maria Sison a.k.a Amado Guerrero. The birth of the CPP signaled the resurgence of Philippine radicalism that experienced a decline after the collapse of the Huk rebellion. CPP experienced the apex of its popularity in the 1970s, it however experienced a decline after the 1986 EDSA revolution due to organizational problems. Attendant to this decline is the split of members of the Party into two camps — the “re-affirmist” and “rejectionist” groups. The division likewise resulted in the expulsion of several high ranking

cadres from the CPP through the machinations of the “re-affirmist” or pro-Sison camp.

The book *Fellow Traveler: Essays on Filipino Communism* by Patricio N. Abinales examines the history and travails of the CPP and Filipino communism. The essays in the book are organized along areas in Filipino communism that according to the author interested him. The book is divided into three parts, namely, “Leaders and Histories,” “Sectors, Tactics and Regional Dynamics,” and “Perspectives and Prospects.”

Part I of the book examines the two leading figures in the communist movement — Jose Ma. Sison and Joel Rocamora. Abinales juxtaposed the personal histories of the two leaders against that of the CPP and the larger Philippine society. The opening essay “Jose Ma. Sison and the Philippine Revolution: A Critique of an Interface” examines the life of Jose Ma. Sison based on the manuscript “Jose Ma. Sison and the Philippine Revolution: An Interface with Dr. Rainer Werning.” Evident here is

Abinales' dislike for Sison. Abinales criticized the manuscript for the great length it devoted to Sison's claim of achievement in the revolutionary movement. He added that the account showing Sison single-handedly directing the revolutionary movement is "unbelievable." Abinales commented that Sison's tendency to focus on his feats is strange in view of the fact that it is rare among Marxist revolutionaries (as in the case of Ho Chi Minh and Kumander Dante, a former high-ranking CPP cadre) to take pride in one's own achievements. Added to this is the CPP's regard for de-emphasizing the role of individuals in favor of portraying the revolution as movement of people. Abinales likewise noted that the timing of the publication of the *Interface* in 1989 aims to de-legitimize stories of other CPP cadres detailing problems encountered in the movement.

After Sison, Abinales went on to write about Joel Rocamora, a former high ranking-CPP cadre who was expelled from the Party in 1992 by the Maoist faction led by Sison. The essay "Antinomies of Petit-Bourgeois Radicalism: A Review of *Breaking Through: The Struggle within the Communist Party of the Philippines*" is a critique of the book *Breaking Through* written by Rocamora. Abinales wrote that the book is important not only because it is the second published self-evaluation by a CPP cadre since the party split in 1992 after Jose Ma. Sison's "Inside the Philippine Revolution: The Leader's View" but also because it gives the readers a glimpse into views of the leaders in the "rejectionist" camp where Rocamora belongs. Abinales however noted a number of elisions in Rocamora's simplified narration of the development of a complex revolutionary movement. Rocamora did not mention anything on the CPP's international solidarity work where he played a major role since 1975. There is also nothing on the 1974-78 debates between the CPP Manila-Rizal Regional Committee and the Party leadership despite the availability of many documents and literature on the debate. Likewise, the book failed to mention the impact of religious radicalism on the CPP. Despite its lapses, Abinales nonetheless concluded that the book remains an informative piece for the novice observers of the CPP and a good guidebook for cadres who want to write their life stories.

Part II of the book deals with the student sector in the CPP, the issue of coalition politics in the Left, and the bloody operation *Kahos* in Mindanao. One reads in this section Abinales' criticisms of the strategies and tactics taken by the CPP to advance the movement. In the essay "The Left and the Philippine Student Movement: Random Historical Notes on Party Politics and Sectoral Struggles," Abinales outlined the manner in which the Philippine student movement came to occupy a central role in the Communist Party of the Philippines-Marxist-Leninist's (CPP-ML)

military arm, the New People Army (NPA). He contended that the CPP's decision to include the studentry in its organizational framework contributed to the significant growth of the Party. But it had also "stunted the development of the student sector and thereby limited its contributions to the general struggle for social change." The CPP-ML's commitment to armed struggle in the countryside limited the options of the student movement to other struggles in Philippine society. One arena that was left out in the struggle was the academe where "daily ideological justification of the social order" was (and still is) being shared to a large portion of the Filipino youth. Abinales added that the "uncritical portrayal of the university as the 'bulwark of the semi-colonial and semi-feudal society' became an advocacy for the abandonment of the academe and the narrowing of options open to students desirous of actively participating in the struggle for social change."

The question of why the Leftist movement in the Philippines failed to integrate other forces which share a common aspiration with its revolutionary project during the Marcos era is discussed by Abinales in the essay "The Left and Other Forces: The Nature and Dynamics of Pre-1986 Coalition Politics." He noted that although the National Democratic Front is in place, the united front is still led by CPP cadres and that no non-CPP organization — underground or above-ground — is formally a part of the NDF. Abinales points to the CPP cadres' tendency to dominate as the cause of the failure of the coalition-building. This tendency is rooted in its founder's (Amado Guerrero) idea that the national united front is the "basic alliance of the working class and the peasantry under the leadership of the working class and the Communist Party of the Philippines." In view of the Left's failure in coalition politics, Abinales raised questions on the validity of the categories developed by Left theoreticians like Amado Guerrero on the types of organization that could become part of the coalition and "how to dialectically approach the problems of the relationship between a comprehensive united front program and programs based on tactical alliance."

The next essay deals with one of the most infamous chapters in the history of the CPP. The essay "When the Revolution Devours Its Children Before Victory: Operasyong Kampanyang Ahas and the Tragedy of Mindanao Communism" details the operation staged by the CPP Mindanao Commission codenamed *Operasyong Kampanyang Ahas (Kahos)* to weed out alleged military agents who infiltrated the New People's Army and the National Democratic Front. The operation that started as a systematic investigation in Mindanao turned out to be a bloody affair to ferret out and eliminate suspected and real spies. Abinales wrote that the killings cost the CPP dearly. Instead of eliminating military spies, the

victims of *Kahos* were loyal cadres, guerrillas, and activists who disagree with Party policies. Within a six month period, 950 cadres, guerrillas and activists were executed. News about the executions resulted in the loss of over 50 percent of its mass base nationwide due to resignation, surrender or absence without official leave (AWOL).

Part III of the book starts with the essay "Filipino Marxism and the National Question'." In the essay, Abinales explained that the marginalization of the CPP in the last moment of the anti-US bases debate was due not only to its organizational problem but also because of the "contradictions between the Party's communism and the framing of a substantial part of its politics in national terms." Abinales is referring here to the CPP's inability to resolve the enigma of the "national question." Early in its history, the Party was able to put the proletarian twist on nationalism but was not able to sustain this ideological formulation. One reason for this is the failure of the CPP to transcend its bourgeois nationalist progenitors. The first generation of Party leaders were politicized by the nationalist opposition in the 1950s and early 1960s led by politicians and local capitalists. Thus the national question was framed by bourgeois nationalists like Claro Recto and not by radicals.

Abinales closes his book with the essay *Filipino Communism and the Spectre of the Communist Manifesto*, Abinales wrote that although the CPP claims to be faithful to the Communist Manifesto's proletarian internationalism, it has however since the 1970s dedicated its efforts to mostly domestic affairs. But while it focuses on local conditions, the CPP was less prepared to handle the changing political economy and Filipino class structure, and adjust to various changes including the emergence of migrant labor as the new Filipino proletariat. If CPP wishes to survive and regain the reputation it has in the 1970s, it should confront the problems addressed by the Communist Manifesto, namely the dominance of capitalism and its regressive social and political consequences, which it has set aside in the name of revolutionary contingency.

In his introduction in the book, Abinales already anticipated one possible critique that may be thrown at his work, that is, its non-inclusion of essays on other movements and groups like the workers and peasants, the New Peoples Army, the Christian for National Liberation, the social democrats or the non-Left. Indeed, a more comprehensive analysis on Filipino communism would have to factor in these sectors. In spite of this, however, the book is an important addition to the literature on the Left and an interesting read. Evident in the book is Abinales' adeptness as a scholar on the movement. His critical evaluation of the movement is a welcome alternative to writings toeing the line of Sison et.al. ❁