

## *Searching for the Philippine Eden in the Post-Bases Era*

IGNORING THE RITUALISM THAT ACCOMPANIES THE JUNE 12 celebration and focussing ourselves on the substance of the event, the question that any nationalist confronts is this: how does one celebrate June 12 when one of the consistent targets of the quest for real independence has waned in importance to our lives?

One thing that the withdrawal of the US bases had done is to considerably alter the nationalist question. For even if imperialism is still a *salot sa lipunan* (bane to society), how do we imagine its "salot-ness" in the post-bases era?

The United States has definitely ceased to be an all-powerful presence in the country. Its vast security-intelligence apparatus has folded up with the forced retirement of Subic, circumscribed military spending, and the considerable waning of the Cold War. The ubiquitous US Information Service is cutting down personnel and even closing down regional offices like the one in Davao; the same has happened to personnel at the stately US embassy-by-murky-Manila bay.

Meanwhile, an American recession and Philippine political instability have spawned a declining interest of American capital in the country. In the wake of depreciating American economic interest has entered investments from the capital-rich East Asian NICs and Japan with their capitalists who are more daring in terms of deciding where to put their money. *Pace* some over-eager nationalists, the US is not the principal economic looter of the land anymore.

What then to make of the national question's original focus of attack? Must nationalists now engage in a never-ending qualification of what imperialism to attack? Is there a need to re-set the nationalist lens and shift the critique towards, say, Japanese, South Korean, or Taiwanese "sub-imperialisms"? But then, why the seeming timidity to such re-focussing? Perhaps there is a subtle hesitance to attack fellow Asians?<sup>1</sup>

These are but some of the questions that nationalists have to confront, undoubtedly highlighted by a distinct June 12, 1992. This essay does not claim any exhaustive explanation to this issue. It merely wishes to bring in a different twist to the question in the hope of pleasantly provoking a meaningful debate and discussion on the post-bases nationalism.

I would like to posit that part of the dilemma lies in Third World nationalists' imagining imperialism in strictly national lines, rather than perceiving "it" the way it really is -- a global phenomenon of capital turned monopolistic and transcending national boundaries (i.e., becoming, as it were, multi-national or trans-national). In short, while nationalism animates the quest for real independence, the complementary anti-colonial (or anti-neocolonial) critique of the present has also been fashioned along "national" lines. Against the national movement in search of the Philippine Eden, the imperialist United States.

While this nuanced perception originated from firm indigenous historical roots<sup>2</sup> and shared the same pilgrimage as other neocolonies<sup>3</sup>, what is particularly odd about it is its remarkable resilience.

### **The Complexity of the "Nation"**

Universal ideologies like Christianity, liberalism, and Marxism have fallen prey to the cunning disposition of the "nation." Marxists, arguing for a world revolution, have yet to fully explicate the notion of a "national bourgeoisie" while Christians advocate a world religion but had to do with "national" divisions which, at times, carry strong racist undertones in them (An Asian pope?). For all their philosophical and epistemological sophistication, these world views have fallen aside when confronted by an amorphous, difficult-to-define ideology of nationalism.

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1. The exceptions being R. Constantino and the Zamboangueno E.C. Tadem.

2. Filipino-American War, U.S. colonialism, July 4, 1946, parity rights, the Marcos dictatorship, etc.

3. "Indonesian" nationalism vs. "Dutch" colonialism; Malaysia and England; Vietnam and France, then later the U.S.; Mexico, Bolivia, Peru and Spain.

What complicates matters is that the "nation-as-model" -- growing out of the official reconsiderations of the 19th century dynasts as well as the struggles for independence by creoles and colonials in the 20th century -- is such an easily piratable copy that any group, especially ethnic and linguistic, that seeks "independence" do so under the rubric of the nation.<sup>4</sup> Thus, the Serbs out of Yugoslavia, the different "republics" born out of the defunct USSR, the Tibetans' attempt to break from China, and how about our very own Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF)? None of the contemporary movements has ever defined itself along class lines, religious affiliations or ideological preferences.<sup>5</sup>

Nationalism, no matter how inspiring, has thus become the *bete noire* of all other ideologies, constricting universalist notions into the narrow confines of a national map, and obstructing whatever aspirations for a united humanity.<sup>6</sup>

### The Philippine Particular

Where then to situate the Philippines in this generalized perplexity? A number of factors must be taken into consideration when it comes to dealing with the Philippine particular.

The Philippines is distinct from other "Third World" societies for a number of things. First is its colonial experience. The archipelago came under three colonial powers -- 300 years with the Spaniards, four or so decades under the Americans, and half a decade under the Japanese. This colonial *long duree* had the debilitating effect of suppressing potentials for nationalist outbreak and, likewise, delayed the evolution of nationalist stirrings.

Second, the post-colonial period continued to feel the effects of a fairly successful American colonial experience. The US came out of the colonial game smelling much better than, say, the French in Vietnam or the Dutch in Indonesia. The "promise" to grant Philippine independence at the very start of colonial rule, public education, the Commonwealth as dress rehearsal for the day Filipinos would take over the state, World War II and Japan, and close ties with Filipino caciques were but some of the reasons for this unusual achievement.

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4. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso Press, 1983), pp.17-49.

5. Recall Marx's qualification that workers - a universal class - have to win their revolutions along, alas, national lines. So too must Catholics seek Heaven via the mechanics of their "national" prelatures.

6. Again, the now-ancient USSR, the expected failure of the EEC, and even the illusions of an ASEAN.

Philippine cacique democracy, with proper toilet training from the colonials and manned by landed elites with strong ties with America, nurtured "special relations" with the former colonizer after 1946. But it was not only elite domination that ensured the post-colonial sweet fetor of America. We have to admit that, to paraphrase Bulosan, America was close to the Filipinos' heart.<sup>7</sup> Americanization was such a powerful mechanism that an "independent" people remains loyal to a former colonial oppressor. Syncretic it may have been, the national culture had, nevertheless, as powerful a colonial streak in it.

The seekers of a true Philippine nation, thus, could have not found a much powerful, ideologically-sophisticated adversary.

### **The Rocky Road of Philippine Nationalism**

In the transition between Spanish and American colonialism, a latent nationalism was nipped in the bud, thanks to colonial firepower, cacique collaboration, and a politically unconsolidated archipelago.<sup>8</sup> Eden -- even if set in the imaginations of the brilliant Rizal, the eloquent Sakay, or the thuggish Aguinaldo -- never found a reality, despite Malolos.

Instead, early nationalism was reconfigured by the new colonial state, taking out the incipient revolutionary impulses and putting in its stead an evolutionary scheme that promised a "granting of independence" once Filipinos (i.e., the caciques) pass their toilet training. Public education, pop culture, and a pliant cacique leadership ensured that this new "national" design would permeate into all levels of society. Ironically, World War II further cemented this gradualist evolution of nationhood in spite of the Huks and Claro M. Recto.<sup>9</sup>

We also cannot ignore the fact that underneath the umbrella of a powerful colonial culture, nationalism was "prevented" from resurrecting itself and uniting strategic segments of society by the sheer diversity of the country, regionalism, and its corollary regionalism. An archipelagic geography, ethnic hostilities, and linguistic diversity have kept Filipinos

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7. Recall the Statehood Movement; also the long lines at the US Embassy.

8. The Muslims and the Cordillera people never recognized Aguinaldo; while Negros, Davao and Agusan elites thought of themselves as separate.

9. An honest appraisal of the geography of these two nationalist instances will show how limited their reach were: The Huks, Central Luzon; Recto, Manila and the dwindling Spanish-appreciating segments of the metropolis, later to be succeeded by English-speaking UP and Lyceum students.

apart from each other while English and a largely Westernized school system unified them culturally.

It was not until the late 60s that nationalism in the Bonifacio-Mabini mold would once more resurrect itself. The activism of the 1960s brought back the issues raised in 1896, albeit in a slightly modern form. Yet, even the student revolt that gave birth to, among others, the CPP-NPA and the more miniscule social democrats would experience a repeat of its predecessor's bad luck. Martial law this time aborted a nationalist rekindling even while the ensuing "New Society" appropriated some of the revolution's themes to invent an authoritarian version of "official nationalism."

Not for long, the dictatorship engendered resistance. The communist movement grew largely because of militarization and technocratic developmentalism. United State support for Marcos steadily eroded the erstwhile popular acceptance of neo-colonial presence in the country and, slowly, anti-dictatorship rhetoric was accompanied by an anti-imperialist, pro-nationalist discourse. In the latter case, the authoritarian setting made the likes of Jose W. Diokno and Lorenzo Tanada more forceful and popular nationalist spokesmen than Recto. A left-centered anti-dictatorship movement gave the two the necessary mass base that the Batangas senator never had.

Thus, it can be said the 1896 and 1969 anti-imperialisms reflowered under authoritarianism. Given the open support by America of Marcos, this nationalism had a concrete target as represented by imperialist America. EDSA, however, in a strange way obstructed -- once more! -- this reflowering by putting in power a relatively popular regime which immediately used its fame to reformat a nationalist agenda. Yet, nationalist resurrection was potent enough that it could never be extinguished in the same way as in the past. In 1991, its vitality was proven by the bases treaty rejection.

But here came the irony. In the defeat of the treaty, nationalist forces have proven that they have established their niche in society. But they also "lost" the main national target of their struggle. It was a nationalist victory, yet it also opened up problems as to where nationalism must lead itself in the absence of the United States. Where must the focus be set now?

It is in assuming that imperialism can take a national form that a dilemma to post-bases Filipino nationalism has been posed. Nationalism's relative success, however, could make the process of solving this dilemma a more interesting endeavor in the days to come.