

# *Why the Philippine Left Must Take the Parliamentary Road'*

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SINCE THE OVERTHROW OF THE FASCIST dictatorship, the Philippine left's main contingent, the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), the force that set the pace for the country's broad progressive movement in the Marcos era, has had serious difficulties. The party and its organizations -- the National Democratic Front (NDF), the New People's Army (NPA), and various mass formations -- have visibly lost political momentum and initiative. By all indications, the CPP is in the midst of a leadership crisis rooted in unresolved theoretical issues. The malaise reflects itself in increasing fragmentation, cadre attrition, and the undeniable erosion of considerable influence and prestige among the masses, particularly among the so-called middle sectors.

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1. Paper delivered at the BISIG (Bukluran sa Ikaunlad ng Sosyalistang Isip at Gawa: Alliance for the Advancement of Socialist Thought and Practice) Netherland forum, "The 1992 Elections and Beyond," held on February 7, 1992, at the Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, Netherlands.

Certainly, the setbacks of international communism have contributed to the difficulties of Filipino Marxists. But the beginning of the CPP's crisis predates the collapse of Soviet socialism. For the sake of the broad progressive movement and for its own survival, the CPP must face the fact that since its founding in 1968 so many things have changed in the Philippines and in the world. It must step back, reflect, and heed the message of the concrete conditions: *It is time to set aside "people's war" and adopt a strategy more fitting to the times, that of a protracted legal and parliamentary struggle for genuine national sovereignty, democratic reforms, and political power.*

In shorthand, this controversial alternative shall be called "the parliamentary road" or parliamentarism. It retains the left's current extraparliamentary style of patient organizing among the people in the struggle for their immediate needs, consistent mobilization of coalitions around burning economic and political issues, and active contention with the ruling elite and its representatives for political and ideological influence among the people. But instead of being reserves of armed struggle, these endeavors would now serve left efforts to win reforms and attain political power through parliamentary means.

For smaller currents on the left, such as the Bukluran sa Ikauunlad ng Sosyalistang Isip at Gawa (BISIG: Alliance for the Advancement of Socialist Thought and Practice) and a number of social democratic formations, this proposition provokes no big controversy or vacillation. They have less to lose than the CPP. Most had limited investments in armed struggle even during the period of clandestinity. It is understandably hard for the CPP to reevaluate its current strategy. The party's leaders and cadres have been trained almost exclusively on Mao-inspired people's war, a "universal" strategy that upholds the primacy of military struggle in the revolutionary process.<sup>2</sup> They have been weaned on the assumption that the people's war strategy, while hospitable to tactical alterations, shall remain fundamentally unchanged until victory.

It is even harder for the CPP to accept a shift to a non-armed strategy that recognizes the centrality of parliamentary struggle. To begin with, one does not have to be a communist to be revolted by the carnivals that have customarily passed for Philippine elections, by the lack of programmatic or ideological distinctions among the political parties, and by the horsetrading that has profoundly demeaned parliamentary activity. For the left in general and the CPP in particular, the lack of experience reinforces a spontaneous aversion to the parliamentary arena. The Philippine left has no long and deeply rooted tradition of parliamentarism that can neutralize activists' prejudices against this form of struggle. Due to the state's virtually unbroken

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2. Omar Tupaz, "Toward a Revolutionary Strategy of the 90s," *Debate*, Issue No. 1, Sept. 1991, p. 18.

record of repression, communism in the Philippines has been principally an underground movement. The legacy most pronounced among Filipino Marxists is that of extralegal and extraparliamentary struggle.

### **Brushes with Parliamentarism**

Not that the founders of Philippine communism outrightly rejected the parliamentary road. Crisanto Evangelista, the party's first chairman, and Cirilo Bognot were active in the Nacionalista Party before they left it to form the Partido Obrero de Filipinas (Worker's Party of the Philippines) in 1924.<sup>3</sup> When the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP: Communist Party of the Philippines) was founded on Nov. 7, 1930 by labor militants, its first impulse was to field candidates for insular, provincial, and municipal posts in the 1931 elections under its own name. But the US colonial authorities refused to allow the communists to run and vowed to bar them from their seats should they win.<sup>4</sup> The government then unleashed a campaign of repression, arresting party leaders, illegalizing the PKP, and forcing it into clandestinity.

Despite the crackdown, party leaders who were out on bail kept attempting to interact with mainstream politics. But sectarian tendencies, reinforced by the policies of the Communist International (Comintern), foreclosed any real gains in forging alliances with non-communists. A better opportunity came when the Comintern corrected its sectarian and ultra-left line and called for a popular front against international fascism in 1935. The PKP quickly formed the Popular Front Party, a broad electoral alliance. (But while PKP leaders regurgitated the slogans of the Comintern's 7th World Congress, they built the Popular Front in the Philippines much too broadly. The anti-fascist coalition included such questionable allies as Emilio Aguinaldo's National Socialist Party and the Nucleo Totalitario!<sup>5</sup>)

The PKP's legalization in October 1937, negotiated with the Philippine Commonwealth President Manuel Quezon with the help of Communist Party USA cadre Sol Auerbach, brought even better conditions for participation in the electoral arena. The unwieldy Popular Front Party did poorly in the 1937 polls. But the Socialist Party, a Popular Front member whose alliance with the PKP was growing, won municipal council majorities in San Fernando and Mexico, Pampanga. The Socialist Party which would merge

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3. Renato Constantino, *A History of the Philippines* (New York & London, Monthly Review Press, 1975), p. 360.

4. Renze L. Hoeksema "Communism in the Philippines" (Ph.D. thesis, Department of Government, Harvard University), p. 102.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 168-174.

with the PKP in October 1938 had a curious tradition of anarchistic rural terrorism combined with electoral struggle.

At last, the troubled Popular Front Party split into right and left wings before the 1940 elections. In these elections, the left wing, the merged PKP/Socialist Party, scored impressive victories, electing eight mayors and a provincial board member in Pampanga province, and a number of mayors or councilors in four Tarlac towns and in one town in Nueva Ecija province. PKP vice-chairperson Pedro Abad Santos, who ran for Pampanga governor trailed his Nacionalista Party opponent by merely 7,000 votes (he garnered 33,000 while his rival won 40,000 votes).<sup>6</sup> Unfortunately, World War II prevented any further successes in electoral work. The war drove the PKP underground once again and into armed struggle against the Japanese occupation.

Upon the defeat of the Japanese and the return of American military forces, the PKP returned to parliamentary struggle. The party forged another electoral popular front, the Democratic Alliance, a coalition with politicians and intellectuals on the basis of nationalism and opposition to pro-Japanese collaborators whom the Americans were now grooming for post-war roles. The Democratic Alliance won seven seats in Congress, but the Roxas government, upon the urging of US authorities, barred them from their seats in order to ensure the victory of the notorious parity amendment to the Constitution which gave Americans equal economic access in the Philippines. This blatant maneuver, hand-in-hand with intensifying anti-communist repression in Central Luzon, drove the PKP once again into armed struggle. In an ill-conceived attempt to seize power in two years by force of arms, the first and second generations of Filipino communists suffered total defeat. Such was Philippine communism's experience with the American-sponsored "democratic" state.

### Rebirth Defect

It is not surprising then that rejection of the parliamentary road became the birthmark of the new revolutionary movement that emerged in the '60s. Inspired by the advances of national liberation movements and frustrated by the inertia of the defeated PKP, young militants looked to Maoism and the Chinese Cultural Revolution for an alternative orientation. The impact of international youth rebellion that began in Paris in 1968, the worsening economic conditions in the country, and heightened agitation by the new revolutionaries ignited the historic youth and student movement that became known as the First Quarter Storm. On the eve of this massive upheaval, a

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6. *A History of the Philippines*, p. 382.

new generation of Filipino Marxists "reestablished" the CPP as a Mao Tse Tung Thought party, on the basis of a "critique of modern revisionism."

Maoism gave the new movement a dazzling sense of self-sacrifice and daring. Revolutionary fervor spread like wildfire among youth and students creating a momentum that would be key to the new party's survival when repression came down full force in 1972. Unfortunately, Maoism also popularized a subjective view of Soviet socialism as "restored capitalism" and, in effect, alienated the new movement at birth from the political traditions and complex experiences of their "revisionist" counterparts in Europe and the Americas. It imparted a one-sidedness in orientation that would eventually lead to an unsteady grasp of the dialectical relationship between reform and revolution, between armed and unarmed forms of struggle, and between politics and warfare.

With the Marcos coup d'etat of 1972, the Philippine left, once again, settled in for a long period of armed struggle. After initial hardships that tested its resolve, the CPP made important breakthroughs in underground work, rural and urban organizing, and guerilla warfare. Because armed struggle was the form appropriate to the concrete conditions obtaining under the fascist dictatorship, and the CPP used it creatively, the party's influence, prestige, organized base, and armed strength grew tremendously. By the early 1980s, the party, although clandestine, was a formidable force in the broad democratic opposition to fascism and was rising as a key player in the politics of the nation. But it would soon pay for the "original sin" that attended its birth.<sup>7</sup>

With characteristic boldness, the CPP aggressively intervened in the rapid flow of spontaneous, anti-Marcos mass activities unleashed by the Aquino assassination. But it did so for mainly tactical considerations – to harvest thousands of activists, new allies, and bountiful resources for the armed struggle. Locked in a principally military strategy, with an orientation fixed on the stage-by-stage development of "people's war," the party failed to see that this spontaneous upheaval, featuring the emboldened participation of disenfranchised liberal politicians, had strategic potential in its own right. Indeed, when Marcos was forced to call for an election in the midst of a revolutionary situation, the CPP "as a matter of principle" refused to

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7. Even before the Aquino assassination unleashed a flow of mass protests, some CPP leaders and cadres already sensed some of the limitations of a strategy modeled after China's people's war. The first major internal controversy regarding parliamentary struggle came when the central leadership repudiated the Manila-Rizal regional committee's decision to forge an electoral coalition with anti-Marcos liberals in 1978 (See Temario Rivera, "The Dilemma of Armed and Electoral Politics," *Conjuncture*, IPD, Vol. IV, No. 11, Nov. 1991). Later, lessons from Central America as well as advanced experiences in Mindanao prompted suggestions that insurrections be given a more decisive role in the strategy (See Tupaz, "Toward a Revolutionary Strategy of the 90s").

coalesce with the liberal opposition in taking advantage of the parliamentary opening.

Thus when the dictatorship thwarted "reformist," peaceful parliamentarism which then flowed into another form of struggle -- that of an extralegal, extraparliamentary mass uprising that forcibly removed the Marcoses -- the liberal oppositionists, not the revolutionaries, were in the van of the victorious popular undertaking. After some hesitation, the CPP publicly criticized itself for the "major tactical blunder." Unfortunately, the party has seen only a tactical significance, albeit a major one, in its mistake. Meaning, it has yet to draw the strategic lesson from it, i.e., when conditions change rapidly, revolutionary strategy must change accordingly or it will lose all utility. To paraphrase Lenin, life is far more unpredictable, multiform, ingenious, and complicated than can be anticipated by the best-laid plans of the most imaginative vanguards. Strategies are not to be worshipped. They are made to be refined and changed along with changes in the concrete conditions, to be junked altogether and replaced if the conditions change drastically.

### **Why Left Strategy Must Change Now**

Indeed, there have been dramatic changes -- irresistible domestic and international factors -- that demand, at the very least, a reevaluation of the CPP "people's war" strategy. The most drastic change that has taken place in the Philippines, as surely everyone must have noticed, is that the form of government has changed. Fascist dictatorship by the most retrograde and violent (and ridiculous) section of the ruling class has been replaced by elite democracy; not just a warmed over version of the American-style elite democracy of the pre-martial law era, but one whose juridical foundations formally give populist concessions to the memory of the movement that installed it. To insist, as the CPP leadership currently does, that "nothing has changed" and that fascism's defeat only meant that one set of crooks replaced another is a violation of objectivity.

The ideological impact of the restoration of formal democratic processes cannot be underestimated. The autocracy is gone. In the perception of the people, the restoration of the freedoms of speech, the press, and assembly has, on the whole, reopened the avenues to peaceful dissent. Furthermore, the rules of the political game have also changed overnight. Under the new dispensation, the contention for political power can again take place in a relatively peaceful<sup>8</sup> manner, and the electoral arena is its only legitimate site.

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8. Peaceful relative to revolution or coup d'etat, as Philippine elections have always featured some amount of violence.

No matter how flawed or limited the restored democratic system turns out to be, it is not easy to propose its overthrow through armed revolution or to build a broad multiclass coalition around such a proposal. The restored democratic processes act as a buffer for the social order. As experience has shown, popular consciousness does not automatically blame the new constitutional order for the persistence of deep economic and social problems of the country. It has tended to blame the current government primarily.

It is quite unreasonable, therefore, to ask the people to risk injury, imprisonment, or death to get rid of the incumbent leadership ("overthrow the US-Aquino regime") by force of arms when all they need to do is wait to vote it out of office in the next elections. In Aquino's case, she is not even running. Unless any of her successors revert to the arbitrary and undemocratic ways of the ousted dictatorship, free elections will serve to channel popular discontent away from systemic targets. It will certainly take *much more* than the revolutionaries' "principled" rejection of bourgeois elections to convince the public of their obsolescence.<sup>9</sup>

The legitimacy of the post-Marcos constitutional order also rests on an important psychological bedrock. In the eyes of millions of Filipinos, this political system was not simply legislated by a handful of politicians in a smoke-filled room or granted by a foreign power. As far as millions of Filipinos are concerned, they, the ordinary people, had a direct hand in the system's heroic installation. The yearly commemoration of this event has even acquired the qualities of a religious festival.

Again, it will take much more than direct exhortation or constant propaganda to build a popular consensus for the overthrow of the new constitutional order through armed struggle. Insistence on this approach to power at this time will only result in isolating the CPP and totally depriving it of legitimacy. The deterioration of economic conditions alone do not lead to revolutionary situations. As in all political upheavals, it is principally the accumulation of direct experiences with a system's inflexibility, unresponsiveness, and arbitrariness that leads masses of people to radical action.

Thus, in order for the CPP to influence popular consciousness and successfully channel mass political activity to a progressively more revolutionary trajectory, it must situate itself as a legitimate force in the midst

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9. Observers often note that free elections in the Philippines, even if these have become caricatures of suffrage, are deeply rooted in the political culture. The phenomenon springs not from any unique pre-Hispanic tribal traditions and certainly not from 400 years of Spanish colonization. It is testimony to the effectiveness of only 45 years of US colonial rule. The introduction of suffrage (limited at first) ranks with public education and public sanitation as an irresistible lure in the seduction of the elite arbiters of the nation's politics and culture. Be that as it may, in the popular mind the Philippines is "democratic" once again because free elections have been re-instituted.

of popular efforts to secure elite democracy's fundamental promises of democratic reforms, pluralism, a more equitable distribution of wealth, etc. But constitutional democracy cannot be effectively challenged and tested by a force that has no legitimacy because it chooses to operate from the shadows of extraconstitutionality. Under the current circumstances, the CPP has no real option but to wage an open and legal struggle in the mainstream or risk a marginal political existence.

### **The International Factor**

The new international situation should be an additional cause for the reexamination of left strategy. The collapse of Soviet socialism, contrary to the assessment of the CPP leadership, has a profound impact on the Philippine revolutionary project. For one, the theoretical dilemmas triggered by the sudden absence of any successful models for socialist construction and the new doubts about the viability of long-held transition programs (national democracy, mixed economy) could be enough to unsettle any Marxist's strategic outlook. But in particular to the CPP's strategy of people's war, the consequences of existing socialism's collapse are not remote and theoretical, but immediate and practical.

The erstwhile socialist bloc's material and political support had been critical to the success of victorious national liberation movements and to their ability to defend and consolidate state power against (mainly US-sponsored) counterrevolution. After years of hesitation, the CPP in the mid-'80s finally admitted the importance of obtaining this support in order to bring its military struggle from the strategic defensive to higher stages. Quietly, the CPP dropped its Maoist criticism of the Soviet bloc as "restored capitalist" and "social imperialist" states, and vigorously lobbied for party-to-party relations.<sup>10</sup>

Now that recent events have nullified any progress in developing such relations, the CPP must seriously examine whether its people's war can really advance to higher stages, and succeed, without a powerful "rear base" of material support and a protective diplomatic umbrella – the Soviet bloc's previous role in the international revolutionary process. The disintegration of Soviet and Eastern European socialism has had dramatic repercussions in Nicaragua and Cuba and obviously figured in the Salvadoran and South African revolutionary movements' decisive shift to more complex and primarily parliamentary paths. It is doubtful that "self-reliance" alone will enable the CPP to defeat a better armed, larger, and better trained

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10. "Protracted Struggle," *Peacewatch Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 2, No. 4, July-Aug. 1991, p. 9.



Philippine armed forces in a protracted war of attrition even if the US military disengagement from the archipelago should prove substantial.

The nineties is not a period of revolutionary offensives. Rather, it is a time when Marxism is all-sidedly on the defensive. The worldwide revolutionary flow which began at the close of World War II and accelerated into the late '60s has slowed down measurably. International capitalism led by the US has recovered its footing after a seemingly unstoppable series of military and political defeats. Furthermore, the so-called scientific and technological revolution has evidently given capitalism a second wind. Deepening economic difficulties in the United States notwithstanding, this is not "the era of imperialism's collapse and socialism's final triumph." For Marxists, including those in the Philippines, the next several years should be a time for "digging in," for rigorous theoretical inquiry and experimentation with new methods of work, and for the accumulation of small or partial victories until the next revolutionary flow.

### **From Reform to Revolution**

Even though parliamentarism is principally a response to the times, it is not a purely defensive option. Certain conditions currently exist that could work to the left's advantage in the long-run if properly utilized.

First of all, elite democracy distinguishes itself from fascism and secures the support of the ruled majority by granting the citizenry a body of rights and liberties. In the immediate term, some of these concessions are rather auspicious, thanks mainly to the broadness and massiveness of the anti-fascist resistance that overthrew the Marcos regime. For example, the new polity gives concessions to the ideals of nationalism, pluralism, and social justice that would have been rejected by pre-martial law "American-style" democracy. Aside from the trademark freedoms of speech, the press, and assembly, it has instituted constitutional safeguards against the return of autocracy and promises greater protection for civil liberties. Of course, the actualization of these mandates is another matter.

Be that as it may, elite democracy's current vulnerability is that it sits on top of deteriorating economic and social conditions that push citizens to avail of the very rights it has promised to guarantee. This situation provides the left greater room for maneuver and valuable spaces for the open initiation of large-scale mass struggles for immediate reforms and social transformation. Elite democracy risks exposure should it consistently prove intractable and respond by constricting democratic spaces instead of acceding to ever-increasing demands for social change.

Parliamentary struggle also would take advantage of constitutional openings to challenge the elite's monopoly on power and to test the political system's integrity. The left's ruling adversaries could choose to respect its electoral and parliamentary gains, allowing it greater access to governmental power. They could also refuse to honor them and thereby risk precipitating volatile conjunctures wherein extralegal means of obtaining power rapidly acquire popular support. The 1986 presidential elections-turned-popular uprising was a graphic example of this dynamic. For the left therefore, the parliamentary road could prove to be a non-violent path to power or it could prove to be the key link in the transformation of the legal struggle for reform into revolutionary insurrection.

The immediate conditions for entering the parliamentary arena are propitious. While elite democracy still enjoys wide support, as evidenced by the failure of rightwing coup attempts to win popular backing, the traditional politicians that dominate its arenas have steadily lost credibility. Ideologically indistinct and bereft of political vision, they have created a vacuum in political leadership. Unfortunately, this leaves the door dangerously ajar for rightwing demagogues and recidivists from the Marcos era. But the door is also open for "new politics" and popular styles of leadership that seasoned leftists and progressives can provide.

The long struggle against the dictatorship also created important reserves for the left. Potential allies politicized by the struggle are waiting to be tapped in the state bureaucracy, the legislature, local governments, the media, and non-governmental institutions. Nationalism has gained wider adherence, thanks to the US role in propping up fascism. Also, the expected post-Cold War adjustment in US presence in the region and in the Philippines bears watching for the possible spaces it might create for progressive initiatives.

By no means would shifting to the parliamentary road be easy for a party that has been underground for more than two decades. The internal preparations alone -- debates, reorientation, organizational transformations, etc. -- would be monumental for a nationwide organization that has been geared mainly for illegal and semi-legal operations and war. The party would certainly incur losses in the difficult process of consensus-building. In addition, while the party could initiate a change in strategy unilaterally, the actual transition to legality would require a tacit agreement with the state.

Thus, the CPP would need to call for a negotiated settlement with the incumbent administration. Here the CPP must objectively take stock of the actual balance of power. Despite a spectacular record of military victories, it has not actually reached a stalemate with the government. Add to this the loss of high moral ground due to subsequent political errors that exacerbated the fallout from its major blunder in 1986. To demand power-sharing or a

coalition government as the basis of a negotiated settlement would be impolitic at this time. The most the CPP could probably bargain for is a guarantee of protection for its transition into the mainstream. The potential gains, however, outweigh the prospects of continued loss of ground resulting from a strategy that has outlived its usefulness.

Risks abound on the road to parliamentary struggle. Dangers of military reprisals require the party to negotiate issues of security and self-defense with the government. The developments in South Africa and especially in El Salvador where revolutionaries are treading the tortuous transition to parliamentarism must be closely observed for valuable lessons. Beyond the transition lies the greater challenge of mastering a completely new terrain of struggle, one completely dominated by conservatism and its traditional weapons of "goons and gold," and where the left must overcome a backward political culture and establish new and enlightened traditions.

It is a tall order, but then the road of armed struggle was not easily chartered either. Breakthroughs needed to be made, at great cost, to open trails out of an initial period of extreme difficulty. The left would need to achieve equivalent breakthroughs in the new terrain. Given the present realities, it really has no luxury of choice in the matter of strategy. Even if in the end, power must be violently wrested from the elite that monopolizes it, the Philippine left must first resort to non-violence in order to succeed.