

# **Renewing the Struggle: Obstacles and Opportunities for Progressive Intervention**

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This paper is divided into two parts. The first part is a look – at how we in Bukluran sa Ikaunlad ng Sosyalistang Isip at Gawa (BISIG) look at and assess the state of the progressive movement in the country. The second part dwells on what we see as the possible directions, arenas for struggle, and pressure points for political intervention for BISIG in particular and for the mass movement in general. It outlines the processes that the progressive movement should take in order to maximize its strengths and minimize its weaknesses. Although this part will deal mostly on such a process, it does not prescribe ready-made strategies and tactics for the whole left movement. We feel that what is important is to have a process for an honest in-depth assessment of the crisis of the left, an accounting of the strengths and weaknesses of not only the individual organizations and coalitions but also of the progressive movement as a whole.

## **The Philippine Progressive Movement: A Critical Assessment**

The Left movement is in a quandary. A host of changes, both national and international, have taken place within the past decade and these have not been all favorable to the cause of the mass movement. It is important, therefore, that we identify the roots of this crisis.

*The Lack of a Collective Assessment.* The first problem of the progressive movement is the lack of a collective assessment of the struggle of the movement in the past three decades. We do not have a collective summation of our experiences, of our strengths and weaknesses, of our victories as well as of our defeats. Such a summation is imperative so that we can really look at ourselves through the years.

*The Withering of the Mass Movement.* One of the most fruitful phases of coalition efforts of the mass movement was between 1983-1989 where broad political formations were able to intervene significantly in the political landscape as broad pluralist formations of either sectoral, territorial, or national organizations. The majority of these formations have,

at this point, disappeared from the scene. The remaining coalitions survive not so much because of the strength of their political impact or the dynamism of their political composition but because of their resources. Formations formed between 1983 and 1989 are gone. All that are left are but shells of their original organizational frame. We have to find out what really happened to these formations.

*The Relative Organizational Weaknesses of Ideological Organizations, People's Organizations, Sectoral Coalitions, and Issue-Based Coalition.* This problem is indeed far-reaching: from the labor movement that cannot even unite on wage issues, has not expanded, or has even constricted its membership in the two decades that it has existed, to the peasant movement that cannot even get enough signatures to support its alternative agrarian reform program. The organizational weaknesses of the movement, both qualitative and quantitative, were most evident during the last elections.

This is aggravated by our tendency to believe in our own propaganda. This sickness ails the whole mass movement. We should not try to veil hard facts with so much propaganda. For instance, Mr. Bobit Librojo of the Philippine Democratic Socialist Party claims that 50% of the winning margin of President Ramos in the 1992 Presidential Elections came from the NGOs connected with the Social Democratic and Christian Democratic forces of the country. That is propaganda. We all know what Christian Democrats are in the country. We should have a real assessment of our strengths and weaknesses before we can overcome such a problem. If we continue with such a practice we will not be able to escape the quicksand of our own weaknesses.

*The Lack of Creativity.* Hand in hand with the organizational weaknesses is the problem of lack of creativity. We had a few bright moments in our mass campaigns, especially after the assassination of Ninoy Aquino and the EDSA uprising. We have had significant initiatives that were very creative and have helped us go beyond our subjective forces and reach out to the unorganized sector. We feel that these are the activities that can measure our potential and actual capabilities for organizing the unorganized.

The problem is that we are unable to sustain such initiatives. We always tend to go back to the traditional forms of mobilizations and organizing. On the sectoral level, for example, our strategy for organizing

trade unions is basically patterned after the analysis that a great portion of the labor force is composed of industrial workers. Their number, however, is steadily on the decline. Now it is only about 9% of the total labor force. There are a greater number of service workers, self-employed, unemployed, and those working in their homes whose labor is traditionally not considered productive labor, who remain untapped because we have not been able to come up with new creative strategies to address their needs.

Often, when we organize mobilizations and campaigns we only address our own forces – those who are already organized and aware. Rarely are we able to reach out to the unorganized, those who need direct political intervention. Nevertheless, there have been situations where we overcame that. An example would be the anti-U.S. Bases Treaty campaign where we were able to launch two very successful campaigns without the flamboyant speeches and the demonstration-type barricades. We simply had a fiesta in the streets. We had fun and we won our cause in the process. Maybe next time we need a *welgang bayan* (people's strike) that is in the form of a fiesta instead of a barricade. Maybe we could get more people to participate and at the same time paralyze the metropolis.

What were our largest mobilizations? They are not demonstrations but funerals. Why? Because it's culturally natural for Filipinos to participate in funerals. An example would be last All Saint's Day where a group of 50 activists marched to the North Cemetery to remind all the mourners of those who died as victims of the oppressive system like Lean Alejandro and Maricris Sioson. They asked people to offer flowers and candles to their symbolic casket as a remembrance to these people. Hundreds of people participated in the ritual. It was an alternative celebration of All Saint's Day. This shows that creative forms of action appeal to the larger part of our population, especially to the unorganized sector. Maybe we should study this more seriously. We are not saying that we trash all the traditional forms of struggle. The point is that we should add new and more creative ones to the list. Maybe we could have a body that would focus solely on studying creative forms of struggle that consider the people's own language and culture.

*The Inability to Adjust to the Changing Political Landscape.* The progressive movement has so far been unable to adjust quickly to the constantly changing political landscape. Ironically, it is the bourgeoisie who

are more adept at adapting to situations like this. An example is President Ramos. This is the first time that we have had a president with so small a mandate. Despite of that he was able to form and maintain a rainbow coalition composed of almost all the bourgeois political parties while at the same time projecting his own political agenda. That is what we have to do. Our failure to unite on a strategic level is the reason why we are finding it difficult to intervene in political processes. We are always left on the defensive. We are luckier because we have a weak state compared to other Association of Southeast Asian Nations states. It is ironic, however, that we are not able to exploit this weakness; we are too caught up in our own weaknesses to do so.

*Theoretical Underdevelopment.* Nearly all the ideological and political organizations in our country still rely on outdated materials from the 1960s to the 1970s. Their analysis of the state, social classes, and social relations are basically still patterned after the analysis in past decades. In a world, and indeed a country, where change is constant and rapid, our analyses, strategies, and tactics are relatively slow to adjust. One reason for this is the lack of individual as well as organizational theoretical discussion and debate. There are a lot of phenomena, like the millenarians and religious cults that are able to mobilize hundreds of thousands of people, that we cannot fully comprehend. We need this kind of intervention and reaching out to the unorganized. Even if we in the Left argue and disagree, it is important that we have venues for discussion, debate, assessment, and proposing alternatives. These are seriously lacking especially on the grassroots level. The few opportunities for these types of interactions are often limited to the leadership of the ideological and political organizations. It is important that these interactions happen also at the grassroots.

*The Issues of Reform and Revolution.* There is a tendency in the progressive movement to dichotomize between reform and revolution; to look down condescendingly upon those who advocate structural systemic changes in society as being far-sighted and unable to see the opportunities for change and organizing in the short- and medium-terms. Perhaps that is part and parcel of the problem of the ideological forces — the tendency to focus too much on strategic directions and long term transformations. This is one of the weaknesses of the movement, especially at this time when it is not as easy to organize by merely pointing at a common enemy

like in the time of Marcos. What we need are concrete alternatives and agenda for the short- and medium-term.

Looking at reforms condescendingly as escapist is one of our shortcomings. Reforms are important building blocks toward revolutionary, structural, anti-systemic directions. The issue of reform is important for our long-term revolutionary goals. Reforms should now include the electoral and Non-Governmental Organization(NGO) strategies. There are many organizations that are afraid of strategic directions or have abandoned the structural anti-systemic goals altogether and are merely focusing on the immediate concerns of their respective constituencies. Many of them have been coopted by the system or have given in to opportunism — a reformism wherein reforms are the end goal of the struggle and compromise and pragmatic considerations are the name of the game. Many within the liberal Democratic and part of the Social Democratic tendencies have given way to such opportunism and compromise-making. They have completely forgotten their ideological principles and roots and their long-term trajectories, if they had any from the start. On the other hand, focusing only on long-term revolutionary goals and condescendingly looking at reforms as short-sighted, is a form of sectarianism that will eventually lead to a marginalization of the forces advocating such. Reformism as ends, reformism with compromises and pragmatism as the name of the game, almost always gives in to opportunism and cooptation. It is important that the concepts of reform and revolution be linked.

*The Issue of Models.* This problem is related to the problem of theoretical underdevelopment vis-a-vis changes in world models. Strategies, up to now are still based on fiscalizing, that of criticizing the status quo or the governing state. This was the dominant practice especially during the time of Marcos. Fiscalizing is applicable in particular situations, but at this point in time, although the substance of the present regime, government, and dominant social class have not changed, they have changed in form. We should, therefore, renew the focus of our strategy of *expose* and *oppose*. Ideological blocks, from the oldest to the newest that advocate the Albanian model, are experiencing a crisis because of the seeming inefficacy of the models they prescribe. This has greatly stunted their growth. We should not take this crisis lightly because it is very real.

Many of our constituencies are looking for concrete alternatives and proposals. We need the right mix, the right balance of these kinds of

strategies. It is also imperative that we re-evaluate our ideological models either of social democratic statism or communist statism where the center of development is the state bureaucracy. We need to reassess models not only because of global changes but also because of the changes in our country.

*Disunity and Division.* The divisions we talk of here are not only the divisions of political-ideological forces but also of social movements that since the early 1980s have multiplied considerably. Some of these social movements are the environment groups, the women's movements, political parties, civic organizations, and NGOs. There is no significant fundamental convergence among these initiatives. Lets us take for example the NGOs; the majority of the coalitions of NGOs are coalitions of convenience, coalitions based on general principles, and general frameworks and specific needs for fund accessing. There are very few NGOs that unite on specific programs and projects. The majority of cooperatives and NGOs in our country are involved in alternative trading and marketing. However, there is no national center for trading and marketing that may be able to challenge the traditional traders and millers in our country. Many of our cooperatives and NGOs are simultaneously involved in alternative rural financing but there is no national rural financing center that may be able to help our people's organizations and rural organizations.

The NGOs also have their shortcomings. The period between 1978-1988 saw the rise of numerous ideological forces and tendencies. The atmosphere was one of sectarianism. This was because of the newly formed ideological forces that were trying to assert their identity while the dominant ideological forces from 1968-1978 were trying to resist them. But that era of sectarianism is past. There is a genuine need for the ideological forces to converge at certain levels.

These are our observations and analyses of the crisis of the mass movement. There are bright spots and small victories. But there is a very real crisis in terms of political intervention, quantitative and qualitative organizing, and education. We will not be able to overcome this crisis if we cannot accept the reality of the crisis in the first place.

## **New Arenas for a Renewed Struggle**

In the light of the present crisis it is imperative that we not be swallowed up by the seeming immensity of the task that lies ahead - of renewing the fervor of the progressive struggle.

Let us outline the areas and levels where organized groups may intervene in the political landscape.

*The Electoral Arena.* Whether we like it or not, the majority of our countrymen, young and old alike, vote. It is important that the progressive movement give them concrete alternatives by proposing concrete progressive candidates, parties, and electoral coalitions. Perhaps it is difficult to converge on this issue at this time but we should take seriously the political trajectory of a coalition of progressive political organizations and a progressive platform, either as a progressive political party or a progressive electoral coalition. It must be a trajectory even if it is not readily realizable within the immediate future. We have to seriously take into consideration the rich possibilities and vast opportunities of the electoral terrain.

We are not saying that we should exhaust all our resources in the pursuit of this endeavor. We still believe that the largest part of the struggle must be focused on organizing autonomous people's organizations on the grassroots. Eventually, this will be the basis of any political intervention in the political landscape. This will be the measure of our intervention on the political and in other levels. This is where we are needed.

Organizational and political maturity of people's organizations, independent and open political activity, mobilizations and organizing an intensive mass base of support remain the socialist's strategic tools in changing the popular consciousness and bringing about short-term and long-term social change. However, while self-organization and autonomous bases of collective strength are empowering, they do not constitute the gaining of state power which is the power to determine the nation's course and society's character and the power to mobilize the country's resources to that end. Indeed, movements, organizations, and coalitions commit anarcho-sindicalist errors in believing that organizing the majority of the people into a union, into a federation of people's organizations is enough to achieve revolutionary change. The struggle in the grassroots is highly important.

Simultaneously, we need political intervention to seize and transform power relations in the local as well as the national levels. One important arena is the electoral arena. Autonomous popular strength has to be translated into political strength capable of determining state policies and programs that bring about social change. In fact, the question of political power almost immediately emerges in the dynamics of day-to-day mass organizing where the masses themselves come to the conclusion that greater representation in the government, if not direct access to state power, would be necessary in changing their conditions. The socialist's fight for democratic reforms and their long-range goals of transforming society make the bourgeoisie parliamentary arena a strategic site of revolutionary struggle.

We do not recognize any primary or secondary forms of struggle. We believe that the electoral struggle is an important form and that we should invest in it. The bottom line is that our investment in the electoral struggle is basically determined by our victories in the grassroots level. The two are complimentary. We must learn to use elective and appointive positions in achieving reforms, improving the conditions for the mass democratic struggles, and exposing the shortcomings of the ruling system. Included here is the mastery of the forms of parliamentary struggle in-between electoral exercises. This includes lobbying, the use of hearings, and the ability to use to our advantage the power of the mass media and other institutions.

In this light, the summation of the past experiences of past progressives is as important as acquiring new ones. A consolidated strategy for electoral participation is highly imperative. We in BISIG cannot achieve this alone; we need a convergence with other progressives. No single political organization can intervene significantly in the electoral terrain as an individual political force. We need to learn from our experiences in the last elections where on the grassroots, as well as on the national level, the progressive movement was totally divided—from participation to non-participation, from partisanship to non-partisanship, from Danding Cojuangco, to Miriam Defensor-Santiago, to Jovito Salonga, to Fidel Ramos. In the following decade, in future elections, this inability to exploit the vast possibilities and opportunities of the electoral arena could be fatal for the mass movement.



*The NGO Struggle.* The NGO movement is especially strong not only because it has concrete projects and constituencies, but because it has permanent and employed cadres. It has concrete programs of activities, both immediate and medium-term, which the strategic political-ideological formations lack. The initiatives of the NGOs will be for naught, however, if it will not go into a collective, progressive, strategic convergence of transforming relations within the state. They must also have a strategic direction. The ideological-political forces must learn from the NGOs in terms of immediate, medium-term, micro-programs. On the other hand, the NGOs must adopt strategic trajectories, long-term structural, anti-systemic targets. If such is not adopted either their initiatives will be coopted or their micro-alternatives will come out as failures.

*Social Movements.* Strategic organizations like BISIG should learn the spontaneity of the social movements. On the other hand, the social movements should also have a certain degree of consolidation to have a greater political impact. It is difficult for a social movement to achieve a high degree of consolidation; some even contend that they are a contradiction in terms. Nevertheless, it is highly imperative to have a minimum theoretical ideological development. Individually, as political forces, this has to be enhanced internally in each individual. Collectively, there has to be opportunities for collective ideological-political development, even if this starts from debates and polemics. What is important is that we are reviewing and re-assessing our ideological formulations in the light of a very swiftly changing political landscape.

In spite of the crisis in the mass movement, we feel that there are still many opportunities waiting to be maximized. The crisis can either polarize us further, make us more cynical, insecure, and paranoid of each other and therefore create greater sectarianism; or it can be a humbling experience for us to open doors traditionally closed for each other. The crisis can provide more opportunities for more open discussion, assessment, and formulation of new strategies. We now see the possibility of a more in-depth and honest discussion between the political-ideological forces because most of them accept that with the crisis, perhaps there is no single political aggrupation that carries the correct line, that perhaps the correct line can be found in a real dialogue, in a real convergence of different political forces.

More than ever, we need a convergence to discuss and to really assess our own collective crisis, as well as our individual shortcomings and weaknesses before we can even think of surpassing them. We must have a process that starts at a clear and honest assessment of our progressive tradition in order to not only bash ourselves but really pinpoint possibilities and opportunities for political intervention. We need to identify our weaknesses before we can collectively overcome them. I feel that we will not be able to overcome these individually as political-ideological aggrupations; we need a collective effort now, more than ever.

Lastly, while we are going through that process we need to intervene in the political landscape creatively. We must not be passive and just wait for attacks from the state. We need to take a more assertive stance. There are many pressure points, many issues that we can unite on while we are in the process of forging our strategic unity. ✿