

# THE LEFT AND THE PHILIPPINE STUDENT MOVEMENT: RANDOM HISTORICAL NOTES ON PARTY POLITICS AND SECTORAL STRUGGLES\*

P.N. Abinales

## Introduction

Contemporary writings on Philippine radical politics tend to focus mainly on the activities of the Communist Party of the Philippines' (CPP-ML) military arm, the New People's Army (NPA), while acknowledging only a mere Party presence in the urban mass movements against the Marcos regime. This is but natural as the Party itself regards its revolutionary project as essentially revolving around the development of a Philippine variant of the Maoist countryside protracted guerilla war. Yet the rural resistance's principal importance in the CPP-ML's revolutionary strategy must not delude observers to the mistaken notion that the Party has assigned virtually no importance to the sectors and classes based in the urban areas. On the contrary, the CPP-ML's organizational efforts under martial law also consisted of assigning its top cadres in the cities and towns to conduct organizing work and prepare the foundations for an "urban mass movement" that shall supplement the countryside resistance (Nemenzo, 1982).

Among the urban-based sectors where Party presence predominates, two are most outstanding: the working class and the studentry. Since 1972, these two sectors have received more than enough attention from the CPP-ML which has devoted its time and effort in painstakingly organizing, recruiting and "mobilizing" them. These efforts had yielded positive results for the Party such that in the present protest movement after the August 21, 1983 assassination of opposition figure Benigno Aquino, Jr., CPP-ML student and worker mass organizations have consistently stood in the forefront.

The aim of this paper is to outline a broad critique on the manner in which the so-called Philippine student movement has come to occupy a central role in the CPP-ML's politics. While, in the present context, the "new politics" developing in the Philippines has notably involved non-Party organizations, we cannot deny the presence of student mass organizations that clearly align themselves with the goals and

programme of the CPP-ML. In trying to present such a critique, this paper shall seek to determine the historical impact of Party politics on a sector which has the possibilities of generating a movement that shall embody the "new politics" of contemporary Philippine society. It is the contention of this paper that the inclusion of the studentry into the organizational framework of the CPP-ML had allowed a 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 Filipino Student: A Brief Profile

Filipino students carry traits that are not entirely different from students of other countries. Their existence is an uneasy balance between contending values inculcated and being developed in educational institutions. On the one hand, there is the strong instrumentalist view of education, i.e., looking at formal education as a means towards upward social mobility after their student years (David, 1982). On the other hand, exposure to ideas contrary to the dominant social thought creates radicals and progressives among them — articulate, creative and brimming with idealism and defiance.

Yet there are traits unique to the Filipino student — the foremost being his excessive colonial consciousness manifested in the strong identification towards everything western, particularly American. One of the most enduring legacies of direct American colonial rule was the destruction of an incipient national consciousness through the mechanism of education and media cogently depicted by Filipino historian Renato Constantino (Constantino, 1966).

Colonial mentality notwithstanding, education in the Philippines, especially higher education which has pretensions towards liberalism, has allowed the introduction of ideas critical of the status quo. Students who are also exposed to ideas which tend to idealize the social order also become critical as what they learn do not always reflect social reality. These allow criticisms to develop which at most times lead to students taking political positions on certain issues in Philippine society. These criticisms vary — from the radical position which posits that society is exploitative and thus needs structural transformation to the so-called "reformist" trend which

---

\*An early draft of this paper was presented at the seminar on "People's Responses to Political and Economic Changes", sponsored by the Institute for Social, Economic Research, Education and Information (LP3ES) of Jakarta, 12-16 October 1984, Kaliurang, Central Java, Indonesia.

sees society as basically just but hampered by excesses of men and institutions.

Student involvement in politics has, therefore, been characterized by duality and vacillation: on the one hand, supportive of the social order, unconsciously through the instrumentalist view of education or consciously through reformist pressure; on the other, repudiating both the educational and social systems and seeking an alternative which negates the present. Philippine history is replete with instances of students articulating and advocating these various positions.

### **Radical Politics and the Filipino Student**

It was not the communist movement that initially saw the political import of the studentry. In fact, when the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP) was founded in 1930, its leadership viewed the student sector with extreme suspicion, believing that as members of the "petite-bourgeoisie", it was objectively in opposition to the proletariat and cannot be relied on by the revolution. Although it included in its programme a plan to organize Party cells in universities and schools, the PKP never seriously implemented this strategy. There were, however, small underground cells in some schools but those recruited played support roles to the more important and bigger Party cells in the factories and among the peasantry, acting as librarians in charge of Party documents and researchers for Party educational guides. The students who became leaders of the PKP did so only after their student days.

The political value of students was recognized more by the Americans who realized that students were adept as publicity (propaganda) and pressure groups for government reforms and against the PKP-led Huk rebellion of the 1950s. The Americans knew well its former colony's history, especially when the intellectuals of the Filipino bourgeoisie initiated a reform and propaganda movement against the Spanish colonial autocracy.

It was only in the 1960s, when self-taught Marxists spearheaded an anti-clerical and nationalist campaign at the University of the Philippines (UP) that the PKP gave due importance to the studentry. The Party, which decided to leave its self-imposed political limbo after the Huk debacle, could not ignore the growing influence of these university-based radicals who apparently were able to revive nationalist sentiments in the UP and even drew national attention to their anti-obscurantist resistance in the halls of Philippine legislative bodies through such organizations as the Student Cultural Association of UP (SCAUP). The radicals who were eventually brought into the Party's fold were charged with the task of forming the Party's student mass organization. On November 30, 1964, the Kabataang Makabayan (KM) was formed by these radicals.

### **The Communist Split and the New Party**

No sooner had the Party prepared for its formal re-establishment when a generational conflict, rooted in variant perceptions of how to conduct Party politics, ensued between the senior cadres and their youthful recruits. The latter were obviously "more daring and innovative" and influenced by the military revolutionism of the Chinese and Vietnamese experiences. The senior cadres were the exact opposite: conser-

vative and overly cautious due to their inability to transcend the hangover of the Huk debacle. The conflict initially centered on the draft document that evaluated and assessed the Party's history since 1930 which was prepared by the head of the PKP Youth Section. The document was very critical of the leadership of the senior cadres, especially the Lava brothers, who were at the helm of the PKP hierarchy during the 1950s and the years when the Party went into oblivion (Nemenzo, 1982).

The tension became a full-blown conflict when, on the eve of the formalization of the Party's programme and organizational structures, the KM was accused of "extremism" and "petit bourgeois radicalism". These charges were prompted by the overzealous proselytization of KM activists who had then recently come back from China and immediately spread the ideas of revolutionary militance among the peasants of Central Luzon. These actions made the PKP Peasant Section very apprehensive as these would invite government reprisals. The peasant mass organization's leadership, initially sympathetic to the draft document prepared by the younger cadres, shifted their loyalty to the Lavas. Moves were also made to replace the KM leadership (Amado Guerrero, then the PKP Youth Section's head, was re-assigned) and place the youth organization under the direct control of one of the Lavas. The younger cadres resisted the orders and were consequently expelled from the PKP. The expulsion, however, did not deter them from asserting their views (Nemenzo, 1982).

On December 26, 1968, the expelled faction met and formally announced the "re-establishment" of a new communist party in the Philippines. In one of their documents, they argued that since the Huk debacle, no vanguard party had assumed leadership of the Philippine revolutionary movement (the PKP practically ceased to exist when it decided to stop all its activities in the 1950s). The PKP, according to the new party's leadership, cannot be considered as the vanguard as it had degenerated into a "revisionist" organization led by the Lava "black bourgeois gang". The draft document which was supposed to be part of the PKP's basic documents of formal resurrection in the mid-'60s became one of the ideological guides of the new party. Two succeeding documents were also written; one on a general history of Philippine society and another on the "correct strategy" for the Philippine revolution (Guerrero, 1969).

The new party identified three basic problems of Philippine society: that of "imperialism, feudalism and bureaucrat capitalism". It prescribed a "national democratic revolution of the new type" led by the Party and the working class. This revolution was to be conducted through a protracted people's war based in the countryside (Guerrero, 1969).

To set it apart from the PKP, the new party called itself the Communist Party of the Philippines - Marxist-Leninist and at times would append Mao Tse-tung Thought to its name. The Party borrowed heavily from Maoism (including a near-replication of Maoist analytical categories which it tried to fit into Philippine particularities). Maoism was, after all, the most active exponent of armed resistance during the '60s, the first to defy Soviet hegemony and most importantly, the only communist party which seriously went through a "revolution within the revolution" through the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution. A good number of the CPP-ML's leadership also received much of their training and ideological education from the Chinese. The Chinese party's split with the Soviet Union

became an added ideological justification for the militant acceptance of the Chinese line by the CPP-ML. Party documents defined Maoism as "the acme of Marxism-Leninism in the era where imperialism is in the decline and socialism is in advance" ("Rectify Errors and Rebuild the Party", 1969).

The PKP's resurrection was premised on its conducting a parliamentary road to struggle. The CPP-ML, in order to distinguish itself from the old Party and maintain it, had the moral and political authority to lead the revolution, and opted for armed struggle through the application of Maoist guerilla stratagem. It also ascribed to itself the task of building a "united front" to supplement the guerilla "sword" by acting as the "shield" of the revolutionary forces against their enemies.

The CPP-ML's most immediate concern, however, was cadre recruitment and training. The Party realized that one of its basic weaknesses in its formative stage was the dearth of experienced and committed members, especially from the so-called "basic masses". The Party membership was practically composed of urban intellectuals and students (being the PKP's former youth section) who lacked revolutionary experience but made up for it with their militance, vigor and idealism. Its only solid mass organization was the KM which in 1967 also suffered an internal split when 25 of its members challenged the policies and leadership of KM chairman, Jose Ma. Sison. This group was subsequently expelled; later they formed their own student organization, the rival Samahan ng mga Demokratikong Kabataan (SDK). It was under this organizational context that the CPP-ML, apart from sending its initial cadres to the countrysides and factories to establish bases of support among the masses, also set its attention to tapping the "revolutionary potential" of the youth and student sector to increase its membership.

### The Role of Students According to the CPP-ML

The fact that the PKP's youth section was primarily composed of self-taught radicals who owed no ideological or educational guidance from the senior cadres, allowed the former a high degree of autonomy in terms of formulating the policies and programs for the student and youth sector. The ideas they developed and spawned in the KM were solely theirs. These leaders did not only expound the concept of "national democracy" to situate KM's political thrusts, they also were the first to conceptualize the role of students and the youth in the revolutionary process. The most prolific among these young leaders — Sison — became the KM's first chairman.

As early as 1964, KM already had a general notion of the role of the students and youth. It advocated the position that given their unique characteristic, the students' principal responsibility to the revolution was that of education and propaganda. In one of his writings, Sison (1971) argued,

It is the task of the Filipino youth to study carefully the large confrontation of forces between US imperialism and feudalism on one side and national democracy on the other side. To know the nature of this confrontation of forces, to know the dynamism and internal motion of our semi-colonial and semi-feudal society.

On the eve of the split, the KM was already expanding this educational role of the youth by calling on them to spearhead a "second propaganda movement" (patterned after the First Propaganda Movement waged by the *ilustrados* during the Spanish colonial period) against the social ills of society and propagate the national democratic revolution. Propaganda was essential in order for the Filipino people to complete the "unfinished revolution of 1896".

The propaganda movement was not to be waged solely in the academe. On the contrary, KM believed that student participation in the struggle would only achieve meaning if they "integrate with the masses of workers and peasants" and there conduct their propaganda. It meant transcending the narrow confines of academic life which was, after all, considered to be bastions of colonialism and commercialism. KM also implied that the academic struggle's fitting contribution to national democracy was for students to become cadres for the factories and countrysides. Formal intellectual knowledge, i.e., the knowledge from classrooms, was incomplete and distorted. Real knowledge only emanated from society experiencing a state of flux; not from the universities which were slow in reacting to constantly changing social conditions. Thus, the necessity of transcendence.

This political formulation provided one of the original contributions of the KM to attempts at revolutionary theorizing in the Philippine context. In fact, the formulation that (a) students are propagandists; and (b) if desirous of meaningful transformation, they should integrate with the masses, was to become one of the main keystones from which the CPP-ML sought to establish its presence as a new radical force in society. The PKP, wary of the petit bourgeois nature of the studentry, never gave serious reflection to this issue. It maintained its suspicion in spite of its recruitment of student radicals in the early '60s. It is to the credit of KM that the student and youth sector became one of the pillars of the Philippine revolutionary movement in the '60s.

With the birth of the CPP-ML, this formulation became all the more important. While the new party did not alter the original KM formulation, it strove to broaden it by emphasizing the necessity of mass integration for students. The CPP-ML even introduced a new twist to the issue of integration by prescribing that the student movement's goal is to cease to exist as a movement. As a movement particular of a sector, there is a tendency towards narrowing certain options for student activists. But by ceasing to be a student movement and striving to become an organic part of the larger revolutionary movement, the prospects for students become larger. After the massive demonstrations of 1970 (referred to in student history as the **First Quarter Storm**), the CPP-ML even openly called on the students to become full-time guerillas and cadres of the party.

In the context of the need to recruit cadres, this call for integration fitted well into the CPP-ML's schema of things. Where there were no worker-cadres, the Party shall send students to become surrogate proletarians. Such would also be the case among the peasantry. The advantage of intellect (which we may assume to lead to a much deeper ideological comprehension) and the vigor and enthusiasm of student activists would be relied upon.

## The Reconceptualization of the Cultural Struggle

With this newly ascribed role given by the CPP-ML to the students, the struggle for a counter-culture assumed a new meaning as mass integration meant, “discovering” the real essence of a national democratic Filipino culture among the masses. Radical culture and counter-consciousness were to be less the product of critical social reflection and even abstraction (two practices which students were most privileged to indulge in, and more the result of a direct “learning from the masses”. The substantial inroads of radicalism in the academe – which was precisely the result of critical thinking and confrontation with reactionary ideas – were replaced by an outright rejection of the academe in favor of an empiricist concept of “learning from the masses”.



Jobart Bartolome

These exhortations were ideologically validated by Maoist teachings which carried a strong tendency towards populism. The studentry ceased to become a potential source of a radical intellectual movement and was instead looked upon as a sector whose general consciousness was relatively inadequate, if not outright reactionary (their being products of the bastions of a “semi-colonial, semi-feudal society”). To destroy this “reactionary consciousness”, all the student needed to do was to “learn from the masses”.

As a result of this reconceptualization of the cultural struggle, the academe ceased to become an arena of resistance for the revolution. It had instead turned into a way station for cadre formation. The CPP-ML assertion that the real national democratic culture could only be discovered through the masses led to ideas and political prescriptions for activists and militants that categorically rejected the academe. A deviant of this rejectionist position was the degeneration of the student movement from an intellectual force to a mere propaganda one, content with mouthing the general political positions of the revolutionary movement, especially that of the CPP-ML. Radicalism was measured by the ability to memorize and interpret Maoist precepts, and intellectualism was accused of

being a backward practice. Activists, to combat intellectualism, contraposed the now-familiar Maoist slogan “Oppose Book Worship!” which was not opposed by the ideological leaders of the CPP-ML. Radical theorizing was severely affected as ideological development and correctness were being determined solely by Mao’s “Little Red Book”.

## The Narrowing of Arenas of Struggle

Moreover, CPP-ML cadres failed to see that even as the students’ view of education smacked of opportunism, this perspective could be turned towards the revolution’s political advantage. Students, after their stint in the academe, generally enter the professional fields – both in private and government sectors. A powerful and radicalized “middle class” could be developed from the ranks of these professionals as fitting complement to the burgeoning worker and peasant movements. But the CPP-ML chose not to and within its own logic it was correct: the early stage of growth demanded more manpower among the peasants (to help build the guerilla army) and the workers (to introduce, perhaps, socialist consciousness in the tradition of Lenin or to “proletarianize” a predominantly petit bourgeois corp of cadres).

The CPP-ML’s stress on rural resistance also revised the Party’s program for the urban areas. At a time when the NPA was still weak, the Party looked upon the student movement to spearhead the creation of urban-based “revolutionary storms” through massive demonstrations. These “storms” assumed a dual function: propaganda and agitational activities against the issues raised by the Party and its mass organizations, and political pressure against the State to ease military pressure on the infant guerilla army. As a minor consideration, the Party also took the view that the escalation of the urban movement was a fitting chance to draw in more recruits into its fold as a result of ensuing confrontation between the organizations and the State forces. An escalation of the urban movement did not, however, mean giving the cities the primal political attention. CPP-ML propaganda would constantly remind its readers of the cities’ secondary importance and their mere supportive role to the more strategic and more decisive rural resistance.

Given this political perception and analysis by the CPP-ML, the successes of the student movement were likewise accompanied by problems internal to it. An urban-based movement cannot define future stages of growth outside its context. In short, not all student militants active in the movement could become peasant fighters nor industrial workers. A neo-colonial economy could not objectively absorb such a huge potential labor source. Moreover, to limit general activities to propaganda and agitation could not sustain the development of a movement. Apart from the so-called “higher stages of struggle”, there ought to be defined other avenues by which student activists could further develop their politics and radical consciousness. Moreover, these activities merely enhanced the adventurous sentiments of the sector, a manifestation of impetuosity and idealism inherent among students and youth. These avenues may not be necessarily “proletarian” or “mass-based”, but taken in the totality of the revolutionary process, they definitely played as important a role as the guerilla force or the factory committees.

At the height of the First Quarter Storm (FQS) of 1970, the vaunted high point of student activism in the Philippines

and the parameter for every student upsurge during the martial law period, cracks within the movement's wall were beginning to show. The FQS was immediately followed by a "stagnation" period when the radical student organizations saw their influence decline in the schools. The student Left was experiencing electoral defeats in contests for official student bodies. While some cadres did serious rethinking to determine the sources of this decline, no serious assessment of this phenomenon was ever conducted by the student Left as national political events affective of the student movement diverted its attention and temporarily revived the fever of protest (Abinales, 1985).

The CPP-ML's prescriptions for the student movement and the consequent transformation of the latter from a radical intellectual and cultural movement to a sloganeering adjunct of the "more basic struggles" took a turn for the worse as the Philippines entered the '70s and the State began to deal with student activism with more open repression and the threat of martial law. The CPP-ML apparently met this challenge by the State head-on by calling for more revolutionary militance through a "people's war". The Party's position was soon to be openly articulated by the mass organizations in the cities, a clear violation of the distinction between legal and urban-based protest movements and the underground nature of the Party. The mass organizations merely opened themselves to unnecessary political risk, and at the same time, provided the State with the convenient proof in its propaganda war against the revolutionary movement.

At a time when the intense anti-communist hysteria of the Filipino people (which was borne out of years of colonial and neo-colonial indoctrination) remained fairly strong, the open and tacit support given by open mass organizations to the Party's revolutionary project only served to alienate them from the urban populace. An open support to "people's war" also served to highlight one more issue: the de-intellectualization of the student movement and its degeneration into a simplistic and even uncritical appendage of the total revolutionary effort. "People's war" had its validity, but only to those prepared to wage the revolutionary war in the countryside. It was still an uninviting proposition to the majority of the student activists whose political depth might be put to serious question.

The illusion of the popularity of the "people's war" option (perhaps as manifested in huge demonstrations against martial law) was shattered on 21 September 1972 when martial law was declared. In the midst of massive state repression, student radical organizations faced almost complete disintegration. The years that would follow would see the

studentry in the image of a quiet, obedient, book- and career-oriented lot — a far cry from the radical personality they assumed in the early '70s.

## General Conclusions

These random analyses serve not to discredit the CPP-ML's successes in the student movement since 1969. It cannot be denied that the Party showed considerable foresight in tapping the student sector as one of its leading movements. The most able recruits from the KM and other student organizations aligned to the Party became effective worker and peasant organizers, if not exemplary guerilla commanders. Great sacrifices were demanded and given by those who wholeheartedly accepted the option of armed struggle. But for the Party to categorically limit the options open to the student movement was a strategy that did not maximize to the fullest the student movement's radical potential. Even when the working classes were developing their own set of leaders and ideologues, the ascribed role for students remained. The necessity to reassess the formulations of the '60s became blatantly clear when martial law was declared.

The CPP-ML's commitment to armed struggle in the countryside had stunted the growth of the resistance in other arenas of the struggle in Philippine society. One such arena was the academe where daily ideological justification of the social order was (and still is) being imparted to a great bulk of the Filipino youth. Uncritical portrayal of the university as a "bulwark of the semi-colonial and semi-feudal society" had led to an advocacy for the abandonment of the academe and the narrowing of options open for students desirous of actively participating in the struggle for social change. This had also given rise to an attitude of ideological and intellectual mendicancy and indolence among cadres, militants and activists and an empiricist notion that radical praxis was proven only in the ability to transform oneself into a proletarian or a peasant.

Like the old Party, the CPP-ML fell into the dogmatic trap of viewing student aspirations as essentially bourgeois and hence must be transcended in favor of a "mass consciousness" that could be derived only in the factories and the countryside. The student movement may continue to exert a profound presence in Philippine society. But given these limitations, there is the need to reexamine fundamental premises. The full contribution of the student movement to the overall struggle would most surely remain undeveloped should no serious rethinking be conducted and a much broader area of growth defined.

## SOURCES:

P.N. Abinales. *The Philippine Student Movement: Creating the Parliament of the Streets*, (Hongkong: Plough Publications), 1985. (forthcoming)

Renato Constantino. "The Miseducation of the Filipino", *Weekly Graphic*, June 8, 1966.

Randolf S. David. "The Social Context of Philippine Education", Dependency Paper No. 43, Third World Studies Center, University of the Philippines.

Amado Guerrero. *Philippine Society and Revolution*. (Manila:

Pulang Tala Publications), 1970.

Francisco Nemenzo. "The Rectification Process of the Philippine Communist Movement", paper presented at the conference on Armed Communist Movements in Southeast Asia, Singapore, 1982.

Jose Ma. Sison. *Struggle for National Democracy*, (Manila: Progressive Publications), 1971.

"Rectify Errors and Rebuild the Party", reprinted in *What the People Should Know*, Armed Forces of the Philippines. (Manila), 1971.