

# The Viability of Social Democracy as a Political Ideology in the Philippines

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In dealing with this question of the viability of social democracy in the Philippines, I will not be treating social democracy as if it were a complete, self-contained ideological system of universal principles, and the question of viability a problem of applicability to the Philippine situation. Rather, I will be talking here of a particular understanding and interpretation of this political ideology as practised by political groups in the country that profess a commitment to it. In other words, I will be speaking here of a *Filipino* Social Democracy as defined and articulated by those groups that have appropriated it in their political rhetoric, theory, and practice.

## Filipino Social Democracy

I would like first to give a brief history of the Social Democratic movement in the Philippines as a way of partly explaining the process of ideological formation that the movement underwent as a result of its political experience.

The Social Democratic movement in the Philippines is a relatively young movement beginning sometime in the late 1960s. Its forerunners were initially activist-reformists who worked in such organizations as the Federation of Free Farmers, the Federation of Free Workers, the Christian Social Movement, Hasik Kalayaan, Kilusan ng mga Anak ng Kalayaan and Lakasdiwa.

Realizing the apparent futility of their reformist efforts amidst the worsening social and economic conditions of the masses, the failure of the Constitutional Convention of 1971 to enact the expected nationalist and social reforms being strongly advocated by the militant sectors at the time, and the continued domination of the state machinery by the land-owning and capitalist oligarchy, the reformists began to shift

to a new form of struggle in the early 70s. This decision was more firmly established with the imposition of martial law in 1972. The new form of struggle was to be defined as socialist and revolutionary.

Under the repressive rule of Marcos, these groups operated as underground cadre formations, doing organizing and politicizing work among the people. Foremost of these were the Partido Demokratiko Sosyalista ng Pilipinas (PDSP) and the Kapulungan ng mga Sandigan ng Pilipino (KASAPI). Through the years these groups have evolved their own political praxis in the field of electoral, extra-parliamentary, and armed struggles. KASAPI has tried all three venues of action, while PDSP has concentrated mainly on mass organizing and education with some limited attempts at building an armed guerilla unit. Today, many new organizations revolve around these two major formations and many new, independent ones have also taken over from their early initiatives. The social democrats have rapidly expanded their mass organizations especially during the political upheaval of the last three years.

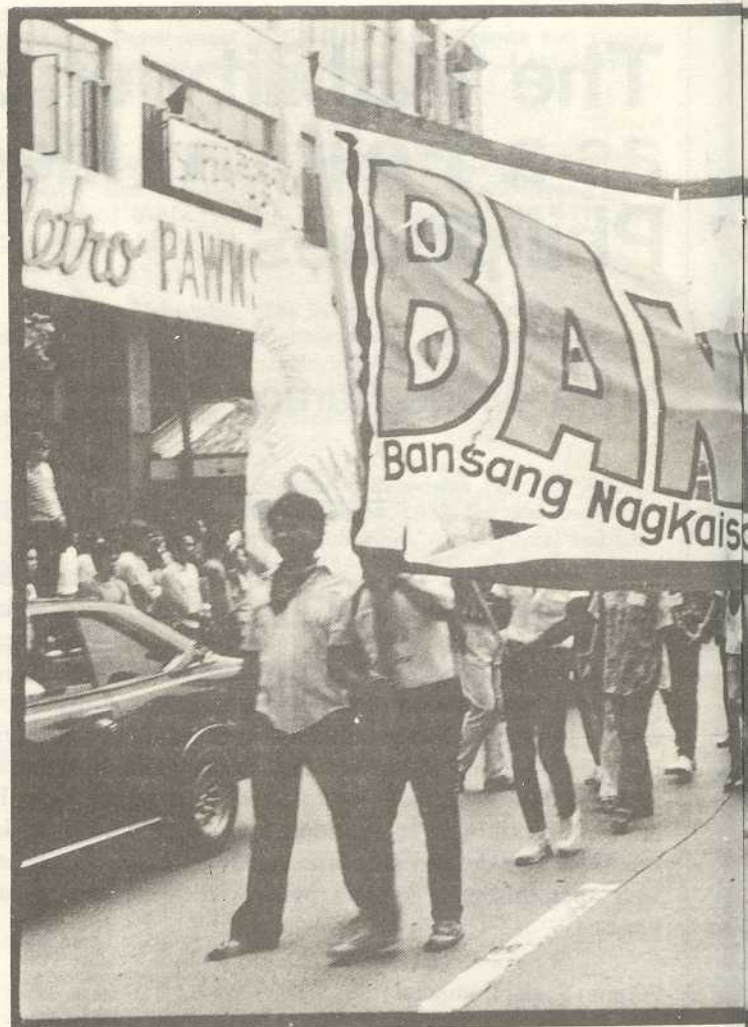
Now, what is Filipino Social Democracy? Obviously, the key operative concept here is *democracy*. By democracy we normally understand a system which guarantees equal rights to all. And so democracies have characteristically practised universal suffrage, parliamentary representation, due process of law as the institutional expressions of equality of rights. But more essential to democracy than equality of rights, I think, is real equality of power. Equal rights are guaranteed to ensure equality of power. This shift in understanding democracy from one defined in terms of *equal rights* to one seen in terms of *equal power* may appear trivial. But I think it makes a difference to begin to understand democracy in terms of equal power rather than equal rights.

The ideal social democratic state has conventionally been typified as the welfare state. It is a society where all people are generally assured of the satisfaction of their basic human needs of food, clothing, shelter, transportation, recreation; most people have jobs, social insurance; the state sees to the provision of social and economic security. It is a society where citizenship rights have been expanded to include the right to the satisfaction of all human and social needs as can be met by society's resources and the right to enjoy an equitable share in the fruits of society's collective production. Social Democracy understood in this way in terms of the welfare concept of expanded citizenship rights is not what Filipino Social Democracy is all about.

While many of these welfare and redistributive features can also be found in the Filipino Social Democratic program, Filipino Social Democracy is primarily about the equalization of power in Philippine society rather than the extension of citizenship rights. It is a political ideology that focuses its principal attack on the basic inequalities of power that characterize all social relationships, primarily economic and political, in our society. It is directed, first, toward dismantling the structural bases of these inequalities of power, and secondly, toward building and strengthening democratic institutions in all areas of social life. The principle of equality of power across all social divisions (e.g. class, ethnic, gender, religious, partisan) but especially among social classes, is the cornerstone of social democracy. It is the equality of power made possible in a democracy which gives equality of rights a real social impact and significance.

Filipino Social Democracy, therefore, does not aspire for the establishment of a welfare state. Nor is it to be seen as an attempt to appropriate the Revisionist ideology that made an impact on the socialist movement in Europe at the turn of the century into the ideology of the Left in the Philippines. The European, specifically the German, revisionists saw in their time some positive signs in the development of monopoly capitalism (such as the non-disappearance of the middle class, improvements in the standards of living of the working class, the growing centralization of capital, the advantages of the monopoly structure of economic organization) which led them to believe that a gradualist, reformist approach was the more effective way to bring about socialism. Filipino Social Democracy proceeds from an entirely different reading of the realities of capitalism in the Philippines and of global monopoly capitalism today.

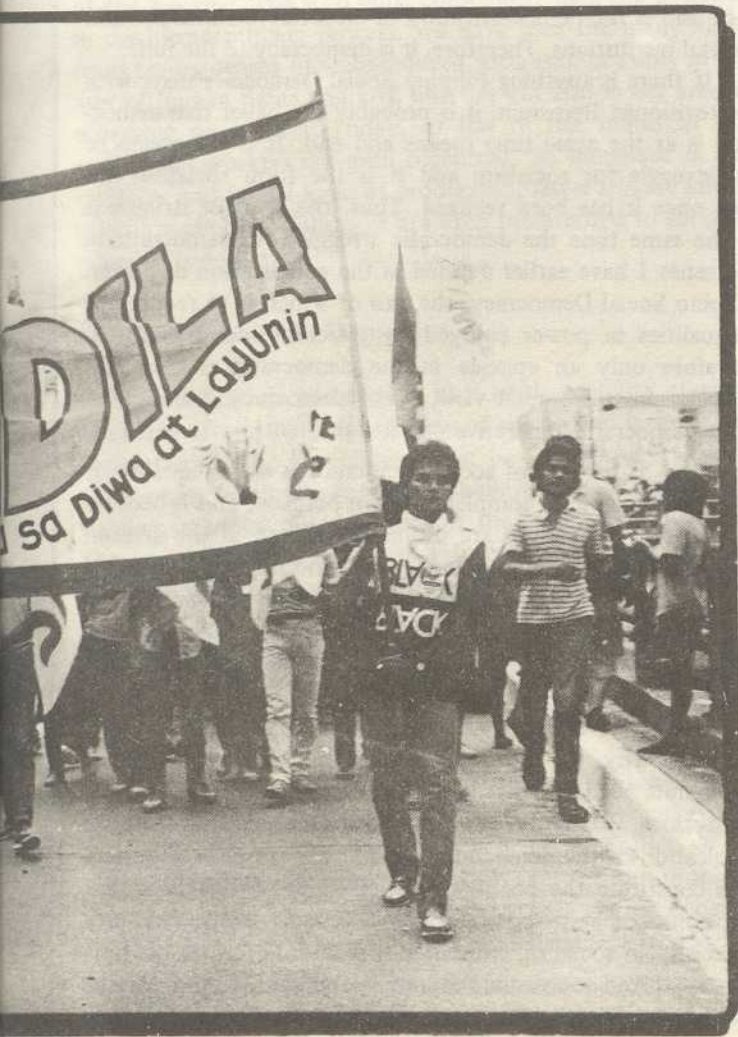
How do the social democrats view the present Philippine social formation? Social Democrats believe that the form of domestic capitalism in the Philippines, with its internally disarticulated structure and heavy dependence on foreign capital has been the product of both our colonial history and the continued political domination of a local bourgeoisie that understands only the logic of profit-making and private, not



social, capital accumulation. A domestic elite, through the patronage-based politics that have always characterized Philippine politics, has managed to keep a lasting hold on power in our political decision-making machinery.

The economic base of this power elite used to be the feudal land-owning system where landlords often figured as political warlords as well. With the expansion of capitalist commerce and production in the country, the economic base of this political elite rapidly became domestic capitalism itself, according to this analysis.

With the ousting of Marcos last February, the long enduring class structure where a privileged few enjoyed virtual monopoly of ownership and control of vital means of produc-



tion remains intact; the economic base of the bourgeois power elite remains intact; their hold on the bureaucratic and military machineries of the government remains secure; the collusion between international and domestic capital against the interests of the working classes is today even tighter under a period of severe financial crisis.

Proceeding from this analysis, social democrats believe that the economic base of bourgeois political domination has to be destroyed, or at least substantially weakened, for genuine political democracy to be possible. The Social Democratic program, with its emphasis on economic democracy (concretized in such measures as nationalist industrialization, workers' participation, agrarian reform, and rural development) is aimed precisely at reducing economic inequalities in-

sofar as these constitute the fundamental source of poverty and social inequality as well as of political elitism. But if our present political system is so heavily elite-dominated and if it is this elite-dominated political structure which secures the economic base of this same elite, how do social democrats hope to break this vicious cycle of economic and political elitism?

Social democrats believe that the fight against elite domination of our economy and politics can be fought on several fronts. It has to be fought inside and outside the formal structures of power, by which I mean the power structure as organized by the political system and embodied in state institutions and the bureaucracy. It has to be fought in factories, in schools, in local communities, in the urban slums, in the media, in the churches, everywhere where elitist and authoritarian social patterns prevail.

Social democracy provides an ideological framework for the political praxis of many different types of organizations operating in different political "spaces." In a previous article, I have written of the concept of "democratized spaces."<sup>1</sup> These political spaces overlap with each other but have their own specific realms and dynamics.

Social democracy could serve as a framework for the platform of a political party in the realm of electoral politics. It could also guide the political praxis of mass organizations and movements that are the vital organizational forms that can maintain the balance of power between the government and the people. Earlier, I spoke of democracy as the progressive equalization of power. In a representative democracy, there is always a disjunction between the government, as formally constituted, and the people. The power of government has to be constantly balanced with the power of an organized citizenry. Lastly, institution-based organizations are important venues for political education and the practice of democratic and cooperative forms of production, management, and decision-making. These different organizational forms may operate independently and are subject to different constraints and dynamics. But they can work towards the same goal of social democracy which, in the immediate term, is to secure political democracy by reducing economic inequalities, strengthening the institutional bases of political democracy and forming a broad, popular base for this political democracy through politicized people's organizations.

Thus, unlike Revisionist Social Democracy, the gradualism of Filipino Social Democracy is not premised on the proverbial "progressiveness of capitalism" but on the commitment to the primacy of democracy as the means to socialism and the awareness of the dynamics of power involved in the present struggle for socialism, given our class structure, political culture, and level of economic development. I will return to this point later when I go to the question of social democracy's viability.



### Social Democracy and Socialism

Before I address the problem of the viability of social democracy, let me point out that there are two layers of understanding and articulation of Filipino Social Democracy. The first layer sees social democracy as a specific program, providing a certain framework for social reforms designed to reduce economic, political, and social inequalities largely through redistributive measures. Seen as a framework for reforms, it provides the institutional environment where various competing ideologies can pursue their own agenda through the democratic process. It is in this sense that Social Democracy is sometimes referred to as a Minimum Program, which can serve as a basis for strategic alliances among groups that may be adhering to different political ideologies.

The second layer of understanding of Filipino Social Democracy looks at it as a framework for establishing the material and institutional conditions for the transition to socialism. In this view, social democracy proceeds from a definite commitment to socialism, which is primary, and social democracy is advocated as a strategic, therefore secondary, means. The socialist imperative and the commitment to the primacy of political democracy define the need for a social democratic transition.

Socialism must first be understood and then be desired by the majority of the people before it can be undertaken. Socialism is the product of the conscious and united

action of the working class. And democracy is of a central value here. In a sense, it is seen to be the soul of Socialism. Socialism is the democratization of all social relationships and societal institutions. Therefore, it is democracy to the full.

If there is anything Filipino Social Democrats share with the revisionist Bernstein, it is probably the belief that democracy is at the same time means and end. It is the means of the struggle for socialism and it is the form socialism will take once it has been realized. Thus, the socialist struggle is at the same time the democratic struggle; but democratic in the sense I have earlier defined as the equalization of power. Filipino Social Democracy, the aim of which is to reduce the inequalities in power enjoyed by different social classes, is therefore only an episode in the democratic and socialist struggle. In this second view, social democracy is a socialist and a democratic imperative.

Even as the aim of social democracy is social equality, it is by itself unable to complete its own purpose. This is because most social inequalities are ultimately rooted in the division between labor on the one hand, and ownership and control of the means of production, on the other, a division which is a defining characteristic of capitalist production and which is basically retained in social democracy. Democracy must therefore find its completion in socialism.

If Filipino Social Democracy is unable to fully attain its purpose, why the need for it in the first place? Social Democrats believe that the establishment of democratic institutions, primarily but not only political, and the firm inculcation of the democratic ethic in our people's consciousness constitute the people's most effective protection against the abuse of state power which is a very strong tendency especially in socialism when it is imposed on the people by a minority. And socialists today are definitely a minority in the Philippines. Social democracy is a necessity arising from the dynamics of power inherent in a democratic system where socialists have still to gain political ascendancy in the democratic struggle.

When Filipino Social Democrats say that "there is no socialism without democracy and there is no democracy without socialism," they take this statement very seriously. Again, the conviction is unmistakable that socialism can only be achieved through democracy. To a social democrat, nothing can be more unsocialist than to try to impose socialism on a people that is neither ready nor willing to socialize the means of production and exchange (if we take this to be the basic structural change in socialist transformation). Under pain of being branded as "bourgeois reformists in socialist disguise," social democrats must continue to assert this democratic commitment in unmistakable terms.

I think that truly, one of the dilemmas of socialism is the democratic question. It is one that has been seriously overlooked in many revolutionary socialist experiments.

The building of socialism depends on the unity of action of the working class who must consciously take the initiative in this democratizing process. We have seen the many disastrous consequences of state-induced socialism, not only in the area of human rights and civil liberties but also in the area of economic production. Today, so few of our industrial and agricultural workers are even organized. So immersed in the capitalist and feudal logic of production, fewer still are knowledgeable about socialism or are even predisposed to socialist values of cooperation.

### The Viability of Social Democracy

I would like to address the issue of the viability of social democracy from the point of view of the second layer of the Social Democratic articulation, that is, as a strategic, transitional phase leading to socialism. I believe that the question of viability must be raised as part of the socialist problematic. The question of viability is therefore not only a question of how well social democracy can survive the social and political struggles that are now taking place and how practicable its program is, but also a question of how successfully it can move Philippine society closer to socialism. The question we could then be asking is how viable is social democracy as a *socialist* political ideology.

The neo-colonial structure of Philippine society and economy and the heritage of authoritarianism, particularly the expanded role of the military in the political conflicts of the last twenty years up to the present, pose very serious problems for the viability of social democracy. There are a number of variables on which this viability would depend.

First, social democracy in the Philippines presently thrives on the active advocacy of its program by mass-based people's organizations. Like any other movement of this nature, its viability is very dependent on the continued and united action of organized groups, which in turn is dependent on the democratic space allowed by the political system. One of the most critical dilemmas confronting Social Democracy in the country today is how to develop the appropriate organizational forms and linkages that could functionally connect its parliamentary and extra-parliamentary strategies with the flexibility to adjust to changing political conditions. Groups involved in primarily extra-parliamentary activity realize that they have to devise creative ways of relating to political parties if indeed the goal is to institutionalize a broader-based popular democracy to replace the traditional elite-centered, patron-based democracy.

A second factor, and related to the first, is the development of an appropriate party form that can mobilize mass support for social democracy and carry the struggle through to socialism. On the one hand, there is a need for a tight and



disciplined party, imbued with a clear understanding of its ideology and committed to its socialist vision. On the other hand, because of the necessity to engage in electoral contest, there is also a need for a democratic mass party. But the fate of a democratic mass party is always disastrous for ideological orthodoxy. The demands of parliamentary activity, especially the need to maximize votes, inevitably require compromises in doctrine and platform in exchange for parliamentary victory. And soon the logic of vote-getting supersedes all other considerations. It is at this point where the road to socialism is most critically obstructed. Socialist orthodoxy gives way to parliamentarism. It is therefore important for a social democratic party to moderate these mass-party tendencies. The problem is again how to develop the appropriate organizational form that will allow the party sufficient autonomy to enable it to make substantive advances in its socialist agenda.

A third issue has to do with understanding the role and the relative strength of the bourgeoisie and the middle classes. The February events perhaps showed us how the weight of the bourgeois and middle classes could easily tilt the balance of power even under very repressive conditions, and more so in a democratic regime. It is these classes, together with foreign capital, who constitute the strongest potential opposition to social democracy.

A commitment to parliamentary processes restricts the resultant actions of government, even assuming substantial

control of it by a socialist or social democratic party, because of the need to accommodate the diverse class interests in society within the framework of a broad political consensus which is a fundamental dynamic of parliamentary democracy. This tends to moderate and slow down reforms toward a significant redistribution of economic power away from the dominant capitalist classes who may likely still retain their power bases in the parliamentary and bureaucratic structures. The tragic examples of Chile's Allende and Jamaica's Michael Manley might warn us against relying too much on parliamentary victory. In both cases, the socialist government was unable to break the power of big business, which was heavily foreign capital, and the socialist gains achieved by these governments were easily and immediately reversed by succeeding governments.

Clearly, parliamentary victory does not assure complete state control which is important for destroying the power bases of the oligarchy. In dealing with this problem, two things are important. The first is the extent to which stable coalitions with socialist or liberal forces can be worked out and maintained. Coalition politics play a crucial role not only for winning elections but also for enacting reform legislations.

The second important consideration is economic performance. Reform policies designed to weaken the economic base of the oligarchy must not sacrifice the economic well-being of the population, especially of the poor. Redistributive reforms must not cause serious economic dislocations that would jeopardize economic security, production and employment. Reform policies also have to be perceived as economically viable, especially by the popular sectors, and they have to be carefully finetuned to discriminate between the class

interests of the big bourgeoisie and of the middle classes. The support of the middle classes and the labor sector is particularly important in the initial phases of social reform. Their disenchantment can easily swing electoral votes, if not invite more drastic military intervention.

Finally, there is the question of the internal unity of social democracy. Social democracy, if it is to develop into a lasting political tradition, has to cultivate an internal unity between its theory and practice. People have to see in it a new orthodoxy, internally coherent in substance and in policy, and distinguishable from liberal democracy and other socialist, even social democratic, orthodoxies. To do this, the various social democratic groups have to forge a tighter unity among themselves.

Today, social democrats are firmly committed to giving democracy and competitive politics a chance in this country. They want to do all that is possible to secure this democracy, however incomplete, to nurture it through continuous education, organization and politicization and the forging of viable coalitions and to work within this democratic framework for meaningful social reforms. **K**

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> An article by this author entitled "Focusing on the Transition" which appeared in *Business Day*, May 8-9, 1986 issues, uses the concept of 'democratized spaces' as originally developed by Latin American political scientist Guillermo O'Donnell.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Gay, *The Dilemma of Democratic Socialism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1962, quoting Eduard Bernstein in *Evolutionary Socialism*, 1920.

