

The Fate of the Left

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What has become of the Filipino Left in the aftermath of the February Revolution?

To suitably respond to this question, this paper shall have to review developments in the progressive bloc prior to the uprising and assess the role played by that bloc in the confluence of forces producing the political break of February 1986. In order to better appreciate the reconstitution of the various Left forces over the last few years, the paper shall have to look at the individual movements/tendencies within the framework of a broad progressive stream. This stream is defined, in the most general way, by a self-conscious effort to compose a counter-hegemony to the one pertaining and achieve a basic reform of the social structure by conscious political means.

Given the limitations, the analysis in this paper shall have to be done in broad strokes. It shall hopefully provide sufficient provocation for more refined and extended discussion.

The February Revolution

Every political upheaval necessarily represents the sum of the successes as well as failures of the various social and political forces engaged with each other in the preceding political conjuncture. The outcome of every political upheaval necessarily represents not only the comparative individual strengths of the various forces but also their position in relation to the others and the adeptness of their tactics at crucial moments of confrontation and transition.

Although a few national democratic comrades almost reflexibly attributed the upheaval of February entirely to imperialist design, objective analytical measures tell us that an authentic political revolution indeed occurred. The high level of popular spontaneity and the fact that the self-appointed

revolutionary vanguard was absent at the moment of rising do not diminish the revolutionary character of the event. Revolutions never fully replicate preconceptions of them — and to deny revolutionary validity to a clear political break because actuality does not conform to standard theory can only be an act of extreme dogmatism.

The success of the popular uprising saw the scuttling of the authoritarian state form that projected the interests of a single definable political faction. In its place a liberal democratic political arrangement has now been consolidated. It must be pointed out that this new liberal democratic state form is distinguished from the political order existing before overt dictatorship in that: a) it was brought about by mass insurrectionary activity; b) it has distinct populist features and clear anti-fascist characteristics; and, c) it occurred at a time when the elite and conservative forces have lost political monopoly and the masses have developed the organizational means to effectively intervene in the state process. These are crucial particularities. The democratic space produced by the February Revolution is therefore not a passive condition deriving from the graciousness of the ruling classes. It signifies a dynamic condition created by popular political self-activity that holds great potential for developing into a popular democratic condition.

From the perspective of popular democrats, the February Revolution accomplished an important step forward in securing better conditions for progressive popular empowerment. The full revolutionary potential of the break of February was, of course, not realized. The abstentionism of the national democrats during the crucial insurrectionary moment weakened the progressive flank of the anti-dictatorship coalition. This helped immensely in determining the specific configuration of forces ascending in the aftermath of the political



break from dictatorship. Ironically, those who abstained from the moment of rising now most loudly condemn the shortfalling post-Marcos arrangement as "reactionary".

The February Revolution produced a new political conjuncture. This new conjuncture represents new conditions of struggle that demand the reappraisal of standard strategy and tactics adopted by the progressive movements.

Hegemony to Pluralism

The relative weakness of the progressive bloc during the uprising and in its immediate aftermath is due to several factors: a) the failure of the progressive movements to arrive at a united front arrangement that would have magnified their collective influence in the anti-dictatorship coalition; b) the preservation of main conservative institutions, such as the big business associations, the church hierarchy and the military, and their pronounced presence in the insurrectionary process; and, c) the discreditation of the main segment of the progressive bloc due to the unpopular positions it took both during the period of anti-dictatorship struggle and in the aftermath of the uprising.

During the earlier phases of the anti-dictatorship struggle, the national democrats enjoyed near-hegemony over the popular resistance. Shortly after the imposition of martial rule, the old Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas abdicated on its revolutionary responsibilities by entering into a lopsided political settlement with the Marcos regime. The various social democratic political formations were ill-prepared to wage broad yet clandestine resistance to the dictatorship. The in-

dependent revolutionary Marxist formations were small by comparison and tended to generally follow the political initiative of the national democrats. Leadership over the field of popular resistance during the early stages was held nearly uncontested by the national democrats.

Having committed itself from the onset to armed revolutionary struggle, the CPP-NPA-NDF emerged as the pole of militant anti-fascist resistance. Emerging popular organizations, democratic forces and progressive institutions gravitated around the national democratic main force during the most difficult years of struggle against the Marcos dictatorship. The national democrats provided the organization, agenda and vocabulary of revolutionary resistance.

The rapid widening of popular anti-fascist resistance during the first half of the 80s, and particularly after the Aquino assassination, brought entirely new forces into militant engagement with the dictatorship. These new forces strengthened the smaller groups and tendencies within the progressive bloc that enjoyed organizational flexibility and ideological dispositions better attuned to the newly-activated sectors of protest activity. This gave the smaller groups and tendencies greater confidence in experimenting with new modes of engagement and in launching independent political initiatives against the dictatorship.

The development of non-NDF groups and forces outstripped the expansion of the NDF itself during the post-assassination period. This eroded the monopoly the NDF earlier enjoyed over the field of mass democratic resistance. A new condition of vibrant pluralism within the broad progressive bloc developed.

Unfortunately, the NDF did not quickly realize or could not quickly adjust to the new condition of pluralism, possibly encumbered by its internal bureaucracy and the weight of established orthodoxy. Instead of adjusting to a situation characterized by a plurality of progressive forces, the NDF, again almost reflexibly, sought to subordinate the other forces and impose on them its own vision of the revolutionary process as well as its protracted timetable of struggle. This was particularly evident in the post-assassination period and resulted in sectarian tensions that brought failure to a sequence of united front experiments beginning with JAJA, the Nationalist Alliance, KOMPIL, CORD and finally the forgettable BAYAN founding congress of May 1985.

By vainly asserting its vanguard role over the independent movements and ideological tendencies, the national democrats fostered sectarian tensions between themselves and the other forces. In 1984, the national democrats managed to work with other progressive groups in the boycott campaign against the Batasan elections. In the snap presidential elections of 1986, the national democrats by themselves adopted a boycott position while the other sections of the anti-dictatorship movement marched merrily into insurrection.

Having played central roles in the political break, the smaller groups and movements were able to improve their political positions in the general configuration of forces. This heightened the pluralism characterizing the broad Left all the more.

The national democrats compounded the error of the 1986 boycott by adopting a "No" position during the last plebiscite. By so doing, they put themselves against the current of popular sentiment and emphasized the lines of differentiation existing between them and the other progressive groups. The chasm dividing the progressive bloc since the collapse of the post-assassination united front experiments widened even more during the first year of the post-Marcos transition.

The most critical question dividing the progressive bloc involves the strategic attitude to be adopted towards the liberal democratic political arrangement now existing.

On one side of the question are those progressive groups and movements who see the new liberal democratic arrangement as a historically valid, politically sustainable and promising conjuncture. Its populist characteristic and the great popularity it enjoys makes the present arrangement a medium-term political given on the basis of which strategy is to be derived. For radical activists sharing this position, the cardinal strategic principle is that which calls for the development of the broadest popular unity against the narrowest sections of the backward class and political forces,

On the other side of the question are those who begin from the premise that the February Revolution was a historically superfluous phenomenon. The political outcome of that "event" is therefore nothing more than a "recycled form of old elite rule". Exponents of this general position have often tended towards the metaphysical exercise of deriving the



A Leftist firebrand addressing an urban poor rally.



"Sectarian tensions . . . brought failure to a sequence of united front experiments . . ."

"final nature" of a fluid political condition. They tend to be less concerned with investigating the objective alignment and trajectory of social and political forces. They tend to be consumed, instead, with defining the "essential character" of the Aquino government, neglecting that this can only be the expression of a given political configuration. Sheer polemical practice has, of course, guided them to the conclusion that the Aquino government is "reactionary" in character.

The extremist tendency has veered dangerously towards becoming what Mao aptly described as "left in word, right in deed." The boycott position in 1986 objectively aligned sections of the progressive bloc with the general effort to preserve the dictatorship. The "No" campaign of 1987, at least on the level of majority perception, aligned sections of the militant movement with the unwholesome remnants of the deposed dictatorship.

Popular Democracy

Among the progressive groups and movements positively disposed towards the new liberal democratic arrangement, there are two distinct tendencies.

The first tendency sees occupation of the state structure as the immediate political task and as a means for altering the social balance of power in favor of the progressive bloc. This tendency tends to put greater emphasis on the terrain of the parliamentary struggle. The sociological characteristics of the groups within this tendency closely link them with the electoral political formations of liberal democrats and traditional politicians.

The second tendency puts greater emphasis on the positive conditions offered by the new liberal democratic arrangement for direct popular empowerment. This tendency directs its efforts at consolidating the popular movements and enlarging the sphere of extra-parliamentary and pressure politics.

Both tendencies are unified by the general vision of consolidating the substance of popular democracy within the formal liberal democratic framework produced by popular uprising. Both tendencies have their respective political validity within the present conjuncture. Political efficacy creates its own dynamic and validation. The question of which political line to adopt is internal to the individual organizations, movements and coalitions. It is not a matter to be imposed on allies within the progressive bloc under pain of polemical abuse.

The CPP: Internal Debate

The national democratic political formation is significant because of its independent organizational strength, major political setbacks notwithstanding. It merits being considered separately from the smaller groups and movements composing the progressive bloc.

Given the Maoist beginnings of the NDF forces and the training of most of its cadres under the extreme conditions

imposed by dictatorship, they have tended to take absolutist, inflexible and often simplistic positions on matters of strategy as well as tactics, often preferring to call on reserves of voluntarism rather than plot precise moves in specific instances. These tendencies have made it difficult for other progressive groups to work on a continuing basis with the national democrats.

The Maoist hang-over has tempted a significant section of the NDF to *ahistorically* affirm armed struggle as the "superior" form of struggle under any condition. This dogmatic assertion has limited the range of strategy and tactics the NDF allows itself. It has also constrained the NDF towards a convoluted analysis of the present conjuncture in order to affirm what it has naively taken to be an inviolable principle: armed struggle is constantly the principal form of struggle.

The NDF's obsession with affirming the principality of armed struggle in its view of the revolutionary process contradicts Lenin's advice that:

In the first place, Marxism differs from all primitive forms of socialism by not binding the movement to any one particular form of struggle. It recognizes the most varied forms... Marxism, therefore, positively does not reject any form of struggle... In the second place, Marxism demands an absolutely *historical* examination of the question of forms of struggle.

Since the post-assassination period, when the development of new forces created pressure on NDF organizers to be more flexible on matters of political tactics, ideological and organizational debates began brewing within the NDF. On several instances, the higher organs of the NDF found it necessary to restrict debate by issuing detailed elaborations of the standard political line or even by relocating cadres who have developed an aptitude for independent theorizing.

In the aftermath of the boycott fiasco, debate within the CPP-NPA-NDF exploded full-scale as various organs and individual cadres produced voluminous discussion papers re-examining not only strategic and tactical issues but ideological ones as well. The ceasefire negotiations concretized the question of appropriate strategy in the present conjuncture. The debacle of the "No" campaign during the last plebiscite raised the urgency of theoretical reexamination and organizational self-criticism.

Given that the national democratic formation has lost much of the political momentum it enjoyed during the period of fascism, the "struggle between two lines" is likely to persist within. The development of non-NDF groups and movements along with the consolidation of a new liberal democratic arrangement shall spur the internal debates even more. Depending on the outcome of internal struggles, the national democratic formation may rebound from its political setbacks

and strengthen the progressive bloc or it could recede to the purgatory of fringe politics, a behemoth trapped within a historically transcended image of the revolutionary project.

At the moment, two documents sufficiently illustrate the two lines involved in struggle within the main national democratic formation.

The first document, the *Ang Bayan* issue of January 1987, articulates the standard political line. Its editorial, titled "Oppose the US-Aquino Scheme to Stabilize the Reactionary Ruling Order!", reveals the continued preference for essentialist analysis among some national democrats. Concentrating on the "essence" of the government rather than on the configuration of social and political forces in the present conjuncture, it calls the new governing arrangement "a regime that is profoundly pro-imperialist and reactionary, even as it puts

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Whence Ecumenism?

up a centrist or reformist image". Nowhere in the *Ang Bayan* analysis is there a notation on the historical meaning of the February Revolution. Nor does the *Ang Bayan* analysis even attempt to distinguish as distinct conjunctures the pre- and post-February political arrangements.

By eliminating the factor of historical particularity, the school of thought represented by this issue of *Ang Bayan* attempts to revalidate the old programme of revolution and pursue the same in the new situation.

The second document is a discussion paper circulated clandestinely. It is datelined 17 January 1987 and written under the pseudonym "Pepe Manalo". Competently written and powerfully argued within a Marxist-Leninist framework, the Manalo Paper is by far the most cogent internal critique of the view dominant in the national democratic formation.

Written as a contribution to the review of strategy in the context of the peace negotiations, the Manalo Paper proposes to use compromise as a powerful revolutionary weapon. It calls attention to the specifics of a qualitatively changed political condition and takes the national democratic movement to task for failing to build an effective popular front during the period of struggle against the dictatorship. This particular failure prevented the national democratic movement from leading the anti-dictatorship movement, thereby abdicating to the liberal democrats.

Underscoring specific contradictions between the liberal democrats and the fascist remnants, and between imperialism and a popularly installed government, it calls for a strategy of "unifying what can be unified" against imperialism and fascism. It criticizes the strategy of delivering the main blow against the liberal democratic regime rather than against the neo-fascists and pro-imperialists. It proposes that the revolutionary movement, at the present conjuncture, is constrained to make a choice between fascism and bourgeois democracy. It attacks the tendency of some national democrats to adopt the view "the worst, the better". Such a view "belittles the suffering of the masses under fascism and promotes an infantile and mechanical view of the revolutionary process".

Finally, the Manalo Paper argues:

Compromise (is) the necessary glue for such a front where the revolutionary forces could take the interest of the non-revolutionary class forces to heart without sacrificing strategic goals and only for the price of a necessary detour or zigzag in the revolutionary process. *History necessitated* that the struggle against fascism and for a popular democratic government be pursued as a *substage* in the national democratic struggle — a *transition form* that gave the worker-peasant alliance the best opportunity to use the broadest reserves against fascism and imperialist intervention and the best condition to struggle — through democratic and

generally peaceful means — for eventual political dominance which, in turn, is the basis to proceed step-by-step to socialist transformation.

The nature of the debate between old-line Maoists and radical popular democrats within the national democratic formation assures that it shall not be immune from the processes of reconstitution that are now underway in the general political condition and within the broad progressive bloc itself.

Towards Ecumenism

In the immediate term, the situation of the progressive bloc shall be at best fluid and at worst turbulent.

As the various forces of the Left seek to reconcile with the new historical conjuncture and devise strategies appropriate to their organizational and ideological particularities, there are urgent and immediate tasks that confront the progressive bloc.

Given the immediacy of past failures at building a popular democratic front and considering the high degree of organizational, ideological and political variance characterizing the various progressive forces, it might be premature to expect the development of an operational political mechanism articulating the unified positions of the progressive bloc.

In place of an operational united front mechanism, the progressive forces in the interim might learn much from the manner the various Christian sects have managed to foster a sense of community while retaining their organizational and doctrinal differences. A secular counterpart to the spirit of ecumenism ought to be cultivated by the progressive forces. Even as the progressive movements cannot now unite in a comprehensive manner, a sense of community and common vision must at least be maintained. The various progressive groups and movements must have a positive interest in the development of others within the progressive bloc. Relations of mutual respect, non-antagonistic criticism and elaboration of points of disagreement in a politically mature manner shall help in averting the development of a self-destructive dynamic that once in the past managed to cripple the collective effectiveness of the forces of the Left.

To achieve such "ecumenism" on the Left, the progressive groups and movements must maintain lines of dialogue and restrain vanguardist and sectarian impulses. These infantile impulses inhibit the progressive bloc from cooperative relations in areas where there is unanimity in understanding and action.

A sharp sense of community among the progressive groups and movements is preconditional to the development of a popular democratic united front in the future. That common political expression of the progressive bloc must be kept on the agenda. The errors and failures of the past must never be allowed to repeat themselves. **K**