

## Old/New Social Movements

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**N**ew connotes many things — freshness, of more recent occurrence, different or novel, or simply fashionable. Old, on the other hand, is associated with being hackneyed, stereotypical, unreformed, irrelevant, outmoded, *pinaglipasan ng panahon*.

New social movements (NSMs) are supposed to have emerged in post-industrial societies. In contrast to class ideologies, they recognize multiple sources of oppression. Politics and power relations in the private sphere do not escape their scrutiny. Others characterize NSMs as having shifted focus from economic security to more aesthetic and intellectual issues. They adopt holistic frameworks that emphasize non-materialist and so-called post-industrialist values. They dislike centralized and bureaucratic organizational methods, and flourish through grassroots initiatives, spontaneity, informality and egalitarianism.

NSMs grew with the weakening of statist movements, particularly in the West where the democratic state format is fairly settled. Part of this losing steam of huge, confrontational, anti-state mobilizations may have to do with the amorphousness of bourgeois democratic rule. Bourgeois democracy is open enough to accommodate conflicting demands even as it pursues the advancement of capital. It has no qualms acknowledging the universality of human rights, and allows for the free expression of ideas. Its diffused harshness has blunted the ire of the working class. Besides, the bigger economic pie made from industrialization has increased the share of all even though, in fact, the servings are grossly unequal. In lieu of national centers for, say, the civil rights movements and the bureaucratized trade union federations, smaller centers grew articulating not really new but previously less-articulated issues relating to gender, the environment, culture, identity and peace. This global rise in groups and campaigns on indigenous peoples, peace, gender and

environmental issues, notably since the 1980s, have given birth to the phenomenon called "new social movements."

Interestingly, the successful bout with totalitarian/authoritarian regimes in the Third World and Eastern Europe has also dissipated the centripetal force of statist politics. New initiatives have created a centrifugal energy comfortable with diversification, decentralization, devolution, the small scale and the grassroots.

Even more interesting is that in countries where authoritarian states prevail, these new movements are likewise gaining ground. A case in point is the growth of women's and environmental groups in Indonesia. Indeed if the regime is too strong to battle and confrontational politics is too dangerous, a roundabout way of changing society has been to build small power centers in the periphery while the outcome of the unsettled regime question unfolds.

Where does this new wave leave the "old" social movements? After all, the state agenda remains as crucial. The class divide remains pronounced. In the Philippines, we are witness to old social movements redefining themselves. We see this redefining in Oscar Francisco's ballroom dancing metaphor for community organizing in this issue of *Kasarinlan*. In the articles on cooperatives and trade unions, we see the attempt to generate new forms and approaches to remain relevant. Even the Basic Ecclesiastical Communities in the barrios inspired by liberation theology are repackaging themselves as sustainable development models.

In this way, some old social movements and groups — those that are re-inventing themselves — can qualify as new.

And because the NSMs are not really devoid of state and class agenda, the old social movements' networks actually provide today's disparate centers and efforts with mechanisms for coordinated action when needed to confront the state headlong in key moments. Collusion through tactical alliances and coalitions have kept Philippine advocacy groups visible in national policy-making. Despite the micro-focus, nationally coordinated activities to influence macro-policies have been possible. The passage of the anti-rape bill, mainstreaming of sustainable development in the Executive agenda, and the consolidation of a Social

Reform Agenda of the state as a recognized precondition for a lasting peace are examples of the capacity of Philippine activist and civic groups to get their acts together and implant their visions on the state.

The reality, though, is that in many more instances, these social movement groups have made little impact on policy outcomes — on the GATT and the tax and electoral reform lawmaking process, to cite a few. Many reasons can account for this default.

One, intervention at the macro-level exhausts and unduly pulls resources away from the more basic work at the grassroots, causing groups to be wary of macro mobilizations.

Second, coalitions by nature are susceptible to fall-outs, poor coordination, disagreements, differing degrees of commitment, and uneven distribution of responsibility. Usually, they do not have full time staff who see through the development of the issue since they rely mainly on voluntary contributions. Unlike centrally commanded organizations, they do not speak with only one voice.

In addition, in so many of these movement organizations, the old diseases seem to afflict their leaders and members. Intolerance, poor internationalization of pluralism, sectarianism, dogmatism, manipulative and underhanded practices, false sense of vanguardism, clique-ism, and unrepentant machismo are just some of these old diseases that have wrecked social movements in the past. Today, they continue to bring about the stagnation or fall of even NSM groups and coalitions.

Unless these old ways are changed, new social movements will be, like fashion, new only in labels and forms, but not in essence. ●