

Imagining the Transition: Towards Restoration or Transformation?

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The era of post-authoritarian transition in the Philippines marks a period of searching as the end of the Cold War and the apparent demise of state socialism necessitate a "paradigm shift" and an alternative social order. An assessment of the new roles various actors in the broad mass movement play in the democratization process is, therefore, in order, as these so-called change-agents continue to shape the kind of democratic transition taking place in the midst of a de-ideologizing political arena. In recognition of the need to redefine roles and redirect progressive efforts, the grassroots movements need to attend to queries of paramount importance: (1) the role of class politics in the context of the current realities; (2) the extent to which the democratic space may be utilized without having to compromise the popular movements' commitment to the popular struggle; and (3) the current notions regarding the state, that is, whether or not state power should be seized. To reflect on these issues is to shed light on two fundamental issues confronting popular movements in the changed political condition: whether to join the mainstream for the eventual creation of a new political and economic order, or to formulate a new framework for carrying out radical structural change.

Introduction

"Democratization" first became a buzzword in the late 1980s, when powerful surges of collective people's action overthrew authoritarian regimes or compelled them to open up the political sphere to forces that advocated regime-change and even contested state power. Most, if not all, of these regimes had owed their longevity and survival principally to massive American military and economic aid, as a reward for having been sturdy ramparts of anti-communism. At the same time, many authoritarian regimes adhered to a debt-driven, export-oriented economic program that resulted in the marginalization of a vast segment of the population. Domestic resistance was thus galvanized not only on account of the regimes' oppressive character, a resistance that also acquired an anti-imperialist character where the populace saw that these regimes' survival partially stemmed from American support, but also for the massive poverty that resulted from skewed economic policies. As a succession of dictators fell from Argentina to South Korea, "democratization" meant a resounding rejection of authoritarianism as an instrument for generating

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political stability and economic development — though not necessarily as a tool for perpetuating American geopolitical interests.

Given the diversity of political and economic forces unleashed on the heels of authoritarianism's collapse, defining the "post-authoritarian transition" was necessarily accompanied by a cacophony of voices articulating discrete and often conflicting interests. To the disenfranchised sections of the elite, the

problem was how to restore economic and political privileges. To the military, the imperative was how to avert a situation where it would be forced to own up to its repressive past, even as it sought to regain legitimacy as protector of freedom and constitutional democracy. To the people's movements that fought the longest and the hardest against authoritarianism, only the implementation of exhaustive reforms that rectify economic and political inequality would make for an acceptable transition period.²

In another part of the world, democratization was slowly being introduced in Stalinist socialist states, beginning with the Soviet Union under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev. His policies of *glasnost* ("openness") and *perestroika* ("reconstruction") signaled formal, party-led attempts at loosening state control of Soviet political and economic life. This is not to say that the need for democratization in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe was recognized solely by the likes of Gorbachev or by his ideological foes; on the contrary, many left-wing intellectuals and activists from within and without had been calling for greater democracy within these states.

However, the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellite-countries and the fall from grace of hitherto popular revolutionary movements like in Nicaragua on the one hand, and the institutionalization of market reforms in China and Vietnam on the other, lent a different color to "democratization." Alongside jubilant cries over "the end of history" that met the demise of state socialism, the clamor for a "paradigm shift" — associated with the conviction that old dualities as capitalism/socialism,

elite-domination/popular democracy and the like are dead — reverberated in many parts of the world. The calls became increasingly widespread and terms like "globalization" and "new world order" became the principal elements of post-Cold War discourse.

In the Philippines as elsewhere, the "crisis of the paradigm shift" wrought havoc on the internal cohesion of left-wing ideologies and programs that before were unquestioned. Similar to the former socialist states in Eastern Europe, calls for in-depth discussion and debate over revolutionary framework and strategy as well as demands for internal (Communist Party) democracy actually predated the end of the Cold War. However, the prolonged retreat of revolutionary politics seems to have shaken deeply whatever faith remained in the validity of left-wing alternatives, if not in vision then in political practice.

What is perhaps more disturbing is the fact that as neoliberal concepts of economic and political relationships enjoy unchallenged supremacy in global discourse, left-wing or anti-capitalist theorizing of alternative relationships seems to have retreated even further. These left-wing advocates increasingly speak the same language and have gradually lost the characteristic elements that had sharply distinguished them from defenders of the dominant order.

This paper looks at the "post-authoritarian transition" in the Philippines as a process whereby popular or grassroots-based movements influence the outcome towards the eventual creation of an alternative order. Thus, its interest lies in inquiring into the direction of political struggle in the light of radicalism's retreat. Specifically, the paper will attempt to examine, albeit cursorily, popular or grassroots movement-based efforts at defining the "democratic transition" and the dilemmas confronting such efforts in the context of an increasingly "de-ideologized" political arena. At the base of

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the discussion is the assumption that, notwithstanding changed political conditions and the retreat of anti-capitalist radicalism, a theory of social transformation (which some call "empowerment" and others "liberation") must govern political struggles under the "transition period" if the grassroots movements are to continue playing the role of *change-agents* advocating a more desirable social order rather than *reformers* of an essentially inequitable one. To recast Lenin's oft-repeated assertion, without any theory of transformation, there can be no politics of transformation.

New Roles for Old Actors: The Popular Movement Redefines Itself

In the 10 years since the fall of the Marcos dictatorship, much effort has been invested into analyzing the post-authoritarian order and identifying the critical elements of a "democratic transition" in the Philippines. Immediately after the EDSA revolution, some left-wing groups readily discussed alternative ideologies and programs in fleshing out prospective directions of the post-Marcos transition.² But such faith in the viability of these alternatives gradually waned as the progressive marginalization of radical, especially anti-capitalist, rhetoric and doctrine cast a cloud of doubt over the legitimacy of these left-wing groups' existence. Not a few activists have agonized over how to rationalize their continued advocacy of socialism in the post-Cold War era. Others, by contrast, prefer not to discuss socialism at all.

Different analyses have been advanced to account for the retreat of the progressive movement, and proposals raised as to the kind of political intervention that may be taken by the Philippine Left, particularly to re(insinuate) itself into the mainstream of Philippine society. Within the Left itself, various sectors have called for "multi-pronged strategies" that would suit different levels of struggle. Outside strictly left-wing formations, tacit assumptions about the need to "de-ideologize" the popular struggle

appear to be shared by principal actors and observers, albeit no attempt to debate the question has been made thus far.³

A section of the Left increasingly sounds like other actors in the broad people's movement — largely composed of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and people's organizations (POs) — when speaking of "sustainable development," "gender equality," "good governance," "social reforms" and "safety nets" as essential components of genuine democratization of the economic, political and social spheres. This may be a positive development in that, on the one hand, departure from a doctrinaire stance enables the Left to appreciate different levels of engagement, even as other actors broaden the concerns of popular struggle and consequently develop new forms of political mobilization. On the other hand, the situation also begs the question of where all such struggles are leading in terms of a cohesive framework for radical change. While some left-wing formations have taken tentative steps towards defining the longer-term direction of their struggles and advocacy, efforts seem to be motivated by pragmatic considerations more than anything else.

While it may be argued that the period of "transition" is also a period of searching for and (hopefully) developing new narratives of social transformation based on changed conditions of society, there appears to be no sustained attempt at examining such conditions towards developing a new framework for understanding reality and, more important, defining a social and political agenda that transcends orthodoxy and still addresses fundamental problems in society.

Ironically, while most movement actors concede that the reorganization of economic and political institutions through deregulation, decentralization and other factors is definitely redefining the arena of engagement,⁴ the responses to unfamiliar conditions swing from one end of the pendulum to another.

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A broad section comprising NGOs, POs and certain sectoral formations (e.g., environmentalist and women's groups) is pushing the limits of "democratized" spaces to influence executive and legislative agenda towards the adoption of progressive policies. That these groups have made headway in varying degrees of success on issues of social and political reform as well as specific sectoral concerns is undeniable; the capability to strongly articulate interests through people's action within or outside state mechanisms has made them a significant political actor relative to other grassroots movements.⁵ Especially for NGOs, one source of strength in articulation and advocacy of specific interests lies in community-level experiments in alternative political and socio-economic relationships. These experiments not only provide first-hand knowledge of the needs and sentiments of constituencies but, more important, allow proponents and advocates to conceptualize concrete, immediate alternatives to specific social problems. However, the question still remains as to the extent of these groups' capacity to link specific problems and interests to larger issues of structural change and democratization of power relationships in all spheres, and to the need for a long-term vision that would guide current practice.⁶

For its part, the movement's left-wing section (known as the "ideological blocs") is mounting a bid to break into the political mainstream. Cognizant of the increased

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importance of parliamentary struggle, the democratic socialists, social democrats, popular democrats and a segment of the "rethinking"⁷ national democrats have banded together and set up a mass party as a concrete step towards contesting state power through formal institutions. However, the lack of a thoroughgoing assessment, not just of strategy and tactics, but of social and political changes obtaining presently, and the absence of a theoretical framework that would guide political practice under radically different conditions beg the question of whether this is another short-lived, one-shot political experiment that does not really fit into the ideological blocs' grand schema. That individual actors

in the party have not resolved for themselves basic ideological issues that would necessarily affect their conduct in this new form of struggle is symptomatic of the larger ideological debility.⁸

At the same time, questions related to experiences of other left-wing parties abroad have yet to be threshed out. For one, to what extent will the AKSYON Party aspire to be a "catch-all" mass party which, while attracting constituencies outside special interest groups, will not fall into the trap of blurring its electoral agenda to the point of being unable to distinguish itself from other political parties (besides rejecting "traditional" politics, at any rate)? What role will organized constituencies — NGOs, POs and different mass movement components — take in the conduct of the party? Are these other actors limited to incorporating their respective interests into the party platform, or will they be taking a proactive stance in the leadership, organizing constituencies for the party as well as raising funds for it? Will the organized constituencies determine the direction of the party, or will these be important only in hauling in the resources and the votes? What characteristics does the AKSYON party imagine itself to be acquiring eventually, in terms of currently existing models (e.g., the British Labor Party, the Northern European social-democratic party, the Southern European social democratic party, the social movement-turned-mass party such as the different Greens parties, the US Democratic Party)⁹?

The mass movement is still groping for a way out of the "expose-and-oppose" tradition towards a more effective intervention, even as it remains caught up in old modes of thinking insofar as developing strategies for influencing state policies is concerned. A good example is the labor movement, which has not gone beyond predictability in maintaining legislated wage increases as its basic advocacy and seasonal political call (i.e., every May 1st). No attempt has been made to examine the deepening reorganization of production towards non-factory-based and/or relatively specialized, capital-intensive arrangements, assess the impact of such reorganization on production relations, and contribute to

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the formulation of modes of struggle suited to changes taking place within the economy and especially the labor market.²⁰ Instead, most leaders have contented themselves with state-centered modes of struggle that alternately appear anachronistic in form and parochial in interest. In the light of privatization and deregulation of vital industries, and the restructuring of broader economic arrangements, organized labor is reduced to insignificance even in its limited goal of protecting workers in a "formal" sector that is increasingly appropriating "informal" characteristics.

In all these efforts at finding new roles to play, the different movement actors rarely interact with one another to weave disparate concerns into a cohesive and mutually enhancing social and political agenda. Part of the problem lies in conflicting views of how the broad movement's internal relationships must be forged. For example, the debate over autonomy of NGOs, POs and the women's movement from the ideological blocs remains to be resolved in a manner acceptable to all parties concerned. As it happens, disagreements over how specific issues should be addressed are seldom discussed without degenerating into a spectacular display of political immaturity, thereby aggravating disunity within the ranks. Conflicting perspectives on levels and parameters of engagement with the state, and the concomitant divergence in

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practice, have created an internal dichotomy between movement actors who are close to — or within — the mainstream of public discourse, and those in the margins. Such dichotomy is aided in no small way by the unwillingness of movement actors to transcend their circle of like-minded ideologues and personalities, and enter into a healthy debate with others across the broad people's movement.²¹

Defining the "Transition": To Join the Mainstream or To Replace It?

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possesses legitimacy and capability to carry out modernizing programs based on its own vision of development. While a perusal of its programs reveals nothing much that is radically different from previous regimes' developmental objectives, the current administration enjoys the advantage of undertaking its mission at a time when no force in society can convincingly challenge its vision and present a credible alternative.

In addition, the Ramos administration also possesses the flexibility to accommodate popular demands even to the extent of postponing major decisions if only to minimize, if not avoid popular outrage.¹² Its propensity towards "consultation and summit politics" lends an image of prudence and sensitivity to people's interests, which deflects scrutiny of policy impact on long-term interests and welfare of the majority. State recognition of "civil society" as a partner in development, co-optation of a language originally borne out of grassroots struggle against the state and all that it represented, and an accommodating attitude towards "people's participation" in state bodies, tend to blur the distinction between state and non-state agenda of democratization and empowerment.

This is not to disparage the efforts of grassroots movements, especially the NGOs, without which government will not be pressured into addressing certain issues of social reform and political democracy. However, within the context of a "crisis over paradigms" amid the consolidation of a neoliberal economic and political order, what is "progressive" is increasingly defined in "user-friendly" terms (e.g., "sustainable development") whose ideological vacuity makes it easy for various interest groups to appropriate in pursuit of their own designs. At best, the situation may lead to the dilution of a definitive people's agenda that poses an alternative to the existing order. At worst, it may result in acceptance of the view perpetuated by some quarters that a state-capital-civil society¹³ *menage a trois* is the most effective means of

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pushing social reform and development agenda within the prevailing system.

On the part of the ideological blocs, the paramount issue appears to be that of maintaining political relevance. The decision to veer away from a purely class-based politics, by setting up a mass party, is less a sign of flexibility than a manifestation of the extent to which it has been consigned to the margins. The subject of electoral struggle has been a part of left-wing discourse since the fall of the Marcos, within the context of assessing the utility of the "democratic space" in furthering a progressive agenda. More than a decade hence, the shift to electoral struggle is no longer simply one of the many choices open to the Left, but appears to be the *sole* alternative. This, not only because of different political conditions, but especially on account of confusion as to what role is left to play by ideological blocs when other elements of the broad movement are building their own niches — no matter how limited — in so far as democratizing society and influencing the contours of social development are concerned.

At the bottom of all these concerns that movement actors must face in varying degrees is the problematique of *articulating issues* that have acquired different forms under changed conditions, *advocating alternative responses* that take into account objective trends in the field, and *linking* the concrete problems of the here-and-now to a more abstract vision of society. Weaving all this into a relatively cohesive framework is a task that has yet to begin.

Conclusion

To many movement actors, the ideological crisis has provided an excuse for avoiding a hard-nosed assessment of where they wish to take their struggles, given that the search for a new paradigm remains unfulfilled. To some, it has encouraged new political practices without the benefit of clarifying the objectives of such practices, short of an implicit assumption that all this would somehow lead to a more desirable, alternative order. In a few cases, the impasse has provided an unmistakable conclusion that no radical alternative can ever be posed to capitalism, and that the more urgent task is to lay the ground for the integration of the majority through social and political reforms.

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how is this to be played out in a panorama dotted by the proliferation of non-class-based struggles? To what extent can democratization of economic and political relationships be deepened, without defining an alternative framework for social transformation? As a corollary, to what extent can the grassroots movements push their respective agendas within existing institutions, without legitimizing the overall system that they had committed to oppose? More pointedly, what notions of "state power" can be applied to changed political conditions; how can it be seized and for what purpose; or should it be seized at all?

While the answers to these questions may be long in coming, the broad people's movement will nonetheless have to face these eventually. Sweeping these issues under the rug and taking consolation in the thought that "at least, we are doing something concrete" do not help at all in clarifying "what we are here for." Confronting these questions may lead to the formulation of a new framework for radical change, or the refinement of the dominant framework for ordering political and economic relationships. Either way, intellectual and political honesty about where one stands is better for the purpose of redefining positions and directions. This, instead of assuming that all movement actors commonly possess alternative visions of social order or share essentially the same "progressive" agenda, and practicing politics in a listless drift that leads to nowhere. ●

Notes

- 1 This situation, as applied to the Philippines and most of Central America, were reviewed, respectively, by Randolph S. David, "Re-democratization in the Wake of the 1986 People Power Revolution: Errors and Dilemmas," and Carlos M. Vilas, "Prospects for Democratization in a Post-Revolutionary Setting: Central America" in *Kasarinlan*, Vol. 11 Nos. 3 & 4 (1st & 2nd Quarter 1996).
- 2 For example, see Anna Marie Karaos, "The Viability of Social Democracy as a Political Ideology in the Philippines" and the Bukluran sa Ikaunlad ng Sosyalistang Isip at Gawa document "The Socialist Vision," in *Kasarinlan*, Vol. 2 No. 3 (1st Quarter 1987).
- 3 For a broader analysis of the progressive movement's difficulties and modes of adaptation after the EDSA revolution, see Vincent G. Boudreau, "Of Motorcades and Masses: Mobilization and Innovation in Philippine Protest" in Abinales, Patricio N. (ed.), *The Revolution Falter: The Left in Philippine Politics After 1986* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1996). As to prospective arenas for "renewed left struggle," see Ronald Uamas, "Renewing the Struggle" and J. Clark Soriano, "Weaving Together a Tapestry of Generative Themes" in *Kasarinlan*, Vol. 8 No.2 (Fourth Quarter 1992). Regarding an example of non-left-wing formations, see Karina Constantino-David, "The Caucus of Development NGO Networks: The Philippine Experience in Scaling-Up NGO Impact" in *CSWCD Development Journal*, Vol. 1 No. 1 (1st Quarter, 1996), p. 11.
- 4 For a cursory review of these changes, see Alexander R. Magno, "A Changed Terrain for Popular Struggles" in *Kasarinlan*, Vol. 8 No.3 (First Quarter 1993), pp. 9-18.

- 5 See, among others, Jorge V. Tigno "Democratization through Non-Governmental and People's Organizations" in *Kasarinlan*, *ibid.* For an NGO perspective on the same theme, see Karina Constantino-David, "Development, NGOs and Civil Society" in Lars Rudebeck and Olle Törnquist with Virgilio Rojas (eds.), *Democratization in the Third World: Concrete Cases in Comparative and Theoretical Perspective* (Uppsala: Seminar for Development Studies, 1996). For a preliminary assessment of NGO intervention and interaction with other interest groups, see Alegre, Alan G. (ed.), *Trends and Traditions, Challenges and Choices: A Strategic Study of Philippine NGOs* (Quezon City: Ateneo CSP/PA and PC-HRD, 1996).
- 6 For a brief survey of the issues confronting advocates of "community empowerment," see Marjorie Mayo and Gary Craig, "Community Participation and Empowerment: The Human Face of Structural Adjustment or Tool for Democratic Transition?" in Gary Craig and Marjorie Mayo (eds.), *Community Empowerment: A Reader in Participation and Development* (London: Zed Books, 1995).
- 7 This adjective is used for lack of a better term other than the trite "Rejectionists," and for the purpose of giving credit to current though still tentative efforts at grappling with new realities.
- 8 For a preliminary assessment of the ideological blocs' experience thus far at party-building, see "Building an Alternative Party: An Interview with AKSYON Secretary General Ronald Uamas," *Conjuncture*, Vol. 9 No.1 (February 1997).
- 9 For an explication of the differences among these models, as well as the dilemmas of left-wing parties in Europe, see Perry Anderson, "The Light of Europe" in *English Questions* (London and New York: Verso, 1991).
- 10 Recent data published by the National Statistics Office on job trends between January 1996-97 show, for instance, increased employment in the social/personal as well as financial services, with the construction industry posting the third largest growth in employment. Overall, underemployed workers constitute 21.1 percent of the labor force of January 1997, a slight increase over the 21 percent registered in January 1996. What the data do not show are the structure of labor relations within the different industries, where the casualization of labor that is shored up by the increased predominance of "labor-only" contracting arrangements — among others — contribute to further difficulty in organizing wage workers into unions. Recently, another survey showed that total union membership in the country has decreased to less than 10 percent. See *Manila Times*, Section B, p. 24 (March 31, 1996).
- 11 That these conflicting perspectives are basically informed by ideological and sectarian baggages of a recent past precludes an atmosphere of intelligent debate within the movement, towards clarification of strategies in parliamentary struggle among others, and instead throws back the movement to the all-too-familiar situation of name-calling that exacerbated rivalries and disunity during the anti-dictatorship struggle. The most recent example of political reprise relates to the APEC Summit hosted by the country in November 1996, where acrimonious repartee among movement actors advocating different approaches was lapped up by the local media.
- 12 Review the events related to oil price hike of 1993, for example, and the subsequent developments leading to the deregulation of the oil industry and its aftermath.
- 13 While there are a lot of debates on the meaning of "civil society," the term here is restricted to NGOs, POs and other grassroots movements that carries a definite agenda for social change but lies outside the public sphere — in contrast to political parties and, indirectly, the ideological blocs — as well as the private sphere where business groups locate themselves. For an inquiry into the nature of "civil societies," and their role both in the democratization process and in political change particularly, see Peter Gibbon, "Some Reflections on 'Civil Society' and Political Change" in Rudebeck and Törnquist with Rojas, *op. cit.* For an explication of the implications arising from increasing institutionalization of NGOs, NGO approaches and language even in the international mainstream, see Mayo and Craig, *op. cit.*