

Between Glory and Ignominy

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Abinales, Patricio N. (ed.), *The Revolution Falters: The Left in Philippine Politics After 1986* (Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program Publications, 1996). The book brings together academics of various nationalities with diverse areas of specialization but united by a common interest in Philippine Left politics. To arrive at a more nuanced examination of the causes of the current crisis, each author analyzes particular aspects of the phenomenon from the viewpoint of his/her area focus. The collection challenges the reader to seek a deeper and far-reaching understanding of the different aspects of Left politics and the communist movement that, hopefully, would not merely satisfy academic curiosity but, more important, inform and guide praxis.

Any revolutionary project that falls short of its goals will always invite scrutiny and contending analyses as to how and why failure came about. When such project was mounted by a movement that had displayed tenacity and endurance for much of its history, as the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and the New People's Army (NPA) had done, one should not all the more be surprised at the plethora of publications coming in the aftermath of its break-up. Many documents, written by various Party members, are aimed at clarifying positions and answering accusations hurled by erstwhile comrades; others, written both by "outsiders" and CPP sympathizers relatively removed from the controversies spawned by the split, seek to enlighten both actors and observers as to the underlying causes of the current crisis.

To the latter category belongs a recently published collection of essays titled *The Revolution Falters*. The book brings together academics of different nationalities with diverse areas of specialization but united by a common interest in Philippine Left politics. In order to provide, in the editor's words, "a more nuanced examination of...the causes of the current crisis," each author analyzes particular aspects of the phenomenon from the viewpoint of his/her respective area focus. Indeed, the varied themes and perspectives taken up in the collection challenges the reader to seek a deeper and far-reaching understanding of different aspects of Left politics in general, and the communist movement in particular — an

understanding that, hopefully, will not only satisfy academic curiosity but, more important, inform and guide praxis.

Benedict Kerkvliet opens the collection by situating contemporary Philippine Left politics in history. Arguing that the issues ripping apart the CPP-NPA have been recurrent not only throughout the movement's history but even in earlier revolutionary struggles in the Philippines (particularly the Huk rebellion in the 1950s), the author cites parallel situations where debate and disagreement over strategy, tactics and revolutionary objectives, the rural-versus-urban question and internal party democracy eventually led to factionalism and break-up. While specific reasons for the current split are as varied as the many analyses presented by numerous actors and observers, Kerkvliet reiterates that the impact of changes in the political environment, particularly in affecting the subjective conditions of revolutionary cadres, cannot be discounted in assessing the Party's situation. Going one step further, Kerkvliet posits that one major problem of the Philippine Left is the long-term viability of "communism" itself, defined by him in terms of articulated programs and political practices long criticized by opponents of Stalinism. While the sympathetic reader may seek to qualify what "genuine communism" really is, the author does open up one area of debate that should concern not only the CPP but various left movements that present alternative visions and strategic programs for a radical overhaul of Philippine society.

Kerkvliet ends his essay by optimistically reminding the reader that the Left's debilitating problems are not new, and that the movement has always managed to bounce back "with even more vigor and vitality" notwithstanding the severity of adversity. The author likewise reminds everyone that only a section of the Philippine Left (albeit the biggest) is in crisis, that other groups and organizations remain consistent in pushing 'Left issues.' While such groups are as varied in nature as in the specific roles they play, and regardless of the limitations of their respective progressive agenda, they are bound by a common understanding of what is wrong with Philippine capitalism and elite democracy. If only for this, as Kerkvliet implies, one must acknowledge, if grudgingly, that Left politics broadly defined remains vibrant in the country.

In the second essay in the collection, Kathleen Weekly examines the "theoretical roots" of the CPP's crisis. Taking issue with the commonly

presented argument that the CPP would have been able to better influence post-Marcos politics had it not been for the 1986 boycott, Weekly argues that a contrary decision "was never an easy possibility for the Party" given that its history, culture and situation at the time militated against any significant change in strategy.

Proceeding from the assumption that the very elements of CPP theory and practice that have contributed to its success — ideological simplicity and clarity, organizational discipline — became crucial elements in its decline, Weekly notes that organizational gains in the 1970s and early 1980s, Party hegemony within the broad Left and the lack of rigorous theoretical debate among cadres combined, among other factors, to create a political culture within the CPP that was marked by a "tendency towards unity and away from discord, which resulted at times in a lack of initiative (especially in theoretical matters) and a kind of institutional inertia." Citing various instances in Party history to illustrate her point, the author asserts that notwithstanding the strategy debates that recurred prior to the split, divergences from Party doctrine rarely reached the level of questioning the fundamental soundness of the official analysis and strategy. Instead, reinterpretations of the Party line were simply "thought of and offered as 'adjustments' or complements," and it was only when the Party's political fortunes diminished that a polarization of positions came about. In the end, the combination of hierarchical leadership structures and the culture of self-censorship proved fatal in disabling the Party from addressing internal problems without having to face a major organizational fallout.

Looking into the broader political terrain, Vincent Boudreau explores the patterns of mobilization in the post-Marcos era and examines the effects of institutional changes (within fluid political conditions) on the organizations that formed the broad anti-dictatorship movement.

In the first instance, Boudreau echoed the observation made by many activists at the time that the emergence of the middle class as an important and highly visible component of the anti-Marcos coalition inevitably influenced the kind of issues that would be taken up in the early years of the Aquino presidency. On the surface, this appears most evident in what Boudreau calls "discontinuities between movement form and substance," where overt symbols of radical protest (e.g., the protest outfit that includes the ubiquitous *tubao*) continued to be used in rallies

peopled by groups whose objectives were far from being radical, and where an expanded repertoire of protest technology (e.g., handheld radios, airconditioned mini-vans that literally transported the rallyists towards their destination) could not but signify a radical change in the broad movement's class orientation. Beneath the surface, though, lay the more disturbing trend towards the substitution of elite-defined "interest articulation" as the legitimate measure of public opinion.

Alongside the emergent hegemony of elite activism was the gradual decline in protest mobilization by grassroots-based organizations. While euphoria over the overthrow of the dictatorship may partially account for the retreat in grassroots mass action, especially of the relatively spontaneous kind, the restoration of elite democracy — with the 'democratic space' initially provided for policy reforms on the one hand, and Left disunity over the political utility of such space on the other — arguably dictated a change in political discourse insofar as state-movement relations are concerned. The perceived need to protect and expand the democratic space necessitated the lending of legitimacy not only to the Aquino administration but also to the political institutions of elite democracy; the avenues opened for political participation, notwithstanding limitations, redirected much energy into parliamentary struggle. More important, the consolidation of political institutions meant, in the eyes of activists used to combating a monolithic entity, the dispersal of the "enemy": suddenly, there were the 'executive' and the 'legislative', and shooting the right target, so to speak, did not come easy. At the same time, in the face of "protest fatigue," leaders outside the national democratic movement found themselves confronted with members' demand for reforms and material improvement.

Boudreau identifies two major developments representing the Left's response to the twin problems of demobilization and dwindling resources: the creation of issue-specific coalitions that would advocate specific reforms on the one hand; and the establishment of NGO-managed programs that would directly address mass members' concern for immediate economic relief on the other. Discussing subsequent developments in the political relationship between sectoral coalitions and NGOs on the one hand, and the more ideological groups on the other, the author cites the divergence in patterns of interest-articulation and mobilization as an increasingly contentious issue that may polarize among the different members of the broad popular movement. The

points raised in this part of the essay open up new areas for discussion and deserve a separate article altogether, especially in the light of growing differences within the broad Left as to, for instance, the role of NGOs in any strategic political project and, as a corollary, the "balance of power" that must define relations between NGOs and ideological blocs.

The fourth essay in the collection, by Eva-Lotta Hedman, discusses the problems of Left participation in Philippine elections in the post-Marcos era. The author identified four "external and internal factors" that decisively influenced the nature and direction of the Left's electoral initiatives in 1987 and 1992: (1) the degree of anti-communist mobilization that reached near-hysterical levels in the period immediately following Aquino's assumption to the presidency; (2) the "entrenchment of Philippine electoralism" that hastened the consolidation of elite democracy; (3) the CPP-NPA's predisposition towards upholding the primacy of armed struggle and asserting the Party's vanguard role; and (4) the Left's lack of experience in electoral involvement.

Some of the issues raised here had been discussed by commentators and political actors themselves at the time of the actual electoral exercise. What is perhaps a refreshing change from the usual discussion of Left participation in elections is the author's examination of various efforts by smaller Left and Left-of-Center organizations in 1992 to mount a credible electoral campaign, be it in the advocacy for electoral reforms, the articulation of important policy issues, or in the actual fielding of candidates. The author notes these groups' greater flexibility and pragmatism in formulating electoral strategies and tactics. Even political organizations associated with the national democratic movement appear to have learned from their electoral debacle in 1987 and are now putting in more effort in winning electoral seats rather than simply 'educating the masses.'

A point raised by the author with regard to the Left's increased participation in future elections echoes the dilemma raised by Boudreau: "[R]ather than posing a counter-hegemonic challenge to...elite democracy, the Left's participation in elections may end up simply conferring legitimacy upon the existing political order." While this concern is validated by experiences of cooptation among some activists and erstwhile leaders of a few Left groups, much of the broad Left does not have much choice at the moment. In a political environment where

competing poles of interest-representation (see Boudreau's essay) pose ever-increasing challenges to the Left's efficacy at aggregating and representing broad popular interests, participation in the one political arena where majority of Filipinos take part unquestioningly appears to be one of the few viable options available in the short term. Unless political conditions dramatically change, to do otherwise may mean perpetual marginalization.

Rosanne Rutten, for her part, cites the experience of Hacienda Milagros in Negros Occidental in explaining the reasons behind the support for, and the subsequent withdrawal of such support from, the CPP-NPA. The author tries to debunk the commonly held notion that "the Philippine rural poor were pushed into the arms of the NPA" on account of increased desperation over their conditions. She points, instead, that local support for a revolutionary movement is generated through a complex interplay of "incentives and sanctions." To uncover this complexity, Rutten examines the sequence of actions taken by the CPP-NPA in organizing Hacienda Milagros, the motivational sources of local support, and the factors that led to the growth, and eventual decline, of mobilization.

Of significant interest in Rutten's essay is the illustration of the dynamics in political relations between the revolutionaries and the "organized masses," from which was gleaned how and why hitherto loyal mass bases eventually turned their backs on the revolutionary project. On the surface, one is confronted with what Kerkvliet noted earlier as a wide gap between revolutionary leaders' strategic goals and the masses' basic objectives for supporting guerrilla struggles. This gap is worsened by a resilient fear of communism which, at times, ultimately determined the degree to which ordinary people stood by a revolutionary cause in the face of adversity. Rutten's deeper look into the issue, however, yielded valuable insights on the complexity of political organizing, and the crucial role played by the cadre in maintaining organized support for the revolutionary project.

In the last piece, Patricio Abinales attempts to explain the factors behind the occurrence of *Kampanyang Ahos* (*Kahos*) in Mindanao — the internal purges that led to the death and torture of loyal comrades accused of being government agents. Existing interpretations look at the phenomenon as the result of bitter internal struggles over revolutionary

strategy, or as a tragic product of paranoia that beset Leninist parties in crisis. For his part, Abinales situated *Kahos* within the "structural and historical frames that helped to shape it." The author argued that while developments in Mindanao — swift demographic changes, state intervention and social dislocation resulting partly from the secessionist war and partly from the encroachment of the national state — proved conducive to revolutionary expansion, the same processes gave birth to conditions that made such expansion "unsteady and quite brittle." Precisely because of the same rapid changes, the CPP hardly had the opportunity to consolidate the areas under its influence.

The vast pool of potential recruits tempted leaders in Mindanao to loosen up on the criteria for recruitment, causing the decline in the quality of cadres in terms of political education and ideological training. A greater propensity among cadres and guerrillas towards militarist behavior was another consequence. Compounding the problem was the ever-increasing number of recruits "with a lumpen background," many of whom eventually took up important roles in mass and military campaigns. Whatever attempts made by the Party to arrest this unwelcome development was precluded by the escalation of confrontation with the dictatorship on the one hand, and the eventual upheaval that was *Kahos*. Thus, "[a] condition existed wherein the speed of people's attachment to the revolution was equaled by the speed of their subsequent abandonment." ●