



**A Changed Terrain  
for  
Popular Struggles\***

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**P**opular and democratic struggles assume their distinct forms and consolidate their gains on the basis of the historical characteristics of the political terrain. Those historical characteristics define the constituencies of movements, dictate the political possibilities, and decide the fates of even the most theoretically elaborate political organizations.

Philosophical deduction or mere inference from dogmatically accepted propositions will not suffice to provide adequate basis for a viable strategy and a suitable program of action. Political movements are often seduced into expending their organizational energies at refining internal definitions of political correctness. But unless they are able to consistently influence political outcomes that shape the political terrain, they become increasingly irrelevant to it.

Throughout the world today, the political Left, whose ideological and political identity was basically formed in the early decades of this century, has lost much of its attractiveness as a credible and viable program for the future. Anchored on industrialism, statism, and centralism, the political Left in its traditional form seems an anachronism in a world radically transformed by new technologies, propelled by new social forces, and motivated by new utopias. We confront today a world where technological flexibility has replaced the ethic of industrialism, devolution of power has become more desirable than statism, and decentralization has become the more efficacious path than social engineering by means of centralized political power.

The collapse of existing socialist regimes in Eastern Europe is not the first domino that starts off a chain of radical rethinking. It is rather the most convincing confirmation of what has long been suspected - that the traditionally defined 'alternative' has become obsolete.

The popular revolutions in Eastern Europe (and related 'setbacks' for socialism: capitalism with authoritarian features in China and Vietnam, 'chacha socialism' in Cuba, the electoral defeat of the Sandinistas, the shift to a strategy of negotiations by Salvadoran and South African communists) jar only the most orthodox left-wing political formations elsewhere in the Third World. Grassroots groups, political movements, and progressive parties have, over the last two decades, simply off-loaded traditional doctrinal fetishism and explored new forms of engagements, unencumbered by teleological assumptions. Guided by a degree of pragmatism and political flexibility that disturbs the guardians of traditional Left orthodoxy, they have gained more ground for democratization than the more doctrinaire parties.

Southeast Asia today is perhaps the most economically dynamic region in the world. Dramatic social changes have occurred and shall continue to occur in the countries of this region. There is much rethinking in the

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mainstream and much re-invention taking place at the margins. There will continue to be much discontinuity in this region as the pace of social reorganization takes its toll on the existing structures, institutions, and political cultures. The Southeast Asian popular movements must increasingly come to terms with changes that have occurred in their societies in order that they may effectively intervene on the side of democratization.

Rural-based Left-wing social revolutionary movements once proliferated in the region. A revolutionary movement in the most classical mode triumphed in Vietnam. But the model of development that animated the struggle for liberation proved to be disastrous as the same model arrived at tragic consequences elsewhere. Other revolutionary movements in the same classical mold have declined dramatically in other parts of the world.

The peasant-based social revolution has long ceased to be the organizing principle for a broad range of popular initiatives at reorganizing social and productive forms in the communities. As the traditional revolutionary parties declined in significance, non-government organizations (NGOs) and broad political campaigns sharply focused on conjunctural issues took their place.

It is worthy to note that both the February 1986 Uprising in Manila and the 'Black May' demonstrations in Bangkok last year involved social sectors that were quite distinct from those cultivated by the more orthodox Left-wing formations. Both political breaks involved largely urban and middle-class participants challenging authoritarian political establishments that have become anachronistic. Both were largely spontaneous movements responding to an opening for democratization allowed by the confluence of conjunctural factors. Both were largely successful in breaking open a new condition for political pluralism, state withdrawal, and decentralization. The demographic characteristics of the participants in the 'EDSA Uprising' and the 'Black May' demonstrations have a high degree of similarity. Both 'movements' were not fundamentally opposed to the general drift of economic developments in the region and elsewhere.

The simultaneous decline of traditionally-constituted Left-wing political formations and the rise of new forms of political mobilization addressing new social demands pose a number of questions that progressive and democratic movements in the region must eventually attempt to resolve and elevate to explicit theory. This paper shall not even attempt at a resolution of the disturbing questions that the progressive popular movements in the region must collectively deal with. At best, the effort here is limited to posing the questions more adequately.

## The Philippine Terrain

**T**he 1986 uprising in the Philippines should have forced, much earlier, a fundamental reassessment of the changed condition and its implications for political strategies. But the smaller popular democratic groups were reluctant to directly challenge the political orthodoxy of the major left-wing formation – preferring, instead, the development of broad-based but single issue coalitions that politely ignored ideological differences and left bankrupt doctrines largely uncriticized. The dominant formation, on the other hand, was reluctant to review its own orthodoxy, fearful that such a review would result in political weakness during a period characterized by a precarious ebb in support. The ‘internal debates’ that have only recently broken out in open factional struggle actually occur within a narrow ideological range, signalling (however, these ‘internal debates’ are resolved) no substantial departure from a political posture. This can only lead to superfluous influence on daily political outcomes and increasing marginalization.

Ideological deadlock on the part of the political movements has left the various grassroots groups and sectoral organizations without clear political bearings. In the Philippines, as in Thailand and Indonesia, there are thousands of NGOs engaged in transforming production and social relations at the community level. But these NGOs have become ideologically disarticulated, disabling them from exercising political influence commensurate to their number. In spite of a very high level of popular organization (a process that is, in fact, encouraged by the 1987 Constitution), the progressive movements have failed miserably in their recent electoral experiments.

The task of rethinking the role and visions of the popular movements in the Philippines should begin from an accounting of the changed characteristics of society.

Much has changed in Philippine society over the last two decades of turbulence. The economy is no longer principally dependent on agriculture. The feudal relations that provided the social basis for past peasant radicalism and rural-based insurgency movements are no longer significant proportions of the whole. Agro-industries, manufacturing, and a rapidly expanding service sector account for both the bulk of the national product and the population.

Traditional cash crop exports have declined as a major source of productivity and income, forcing rural populations to make unlikely choices between rural poverty and the uncertainties of urban migration. Electronic components and light manufactures now account for our most important exports, however, they do not open enough sources of livelihood for the vast number of Filipinos displaced by rural poverty. There are no clear solutions



to this problem. Population pressure has made land scarce and the subdivision of existing farmland to direct cultivators has actually contributed to the forcing out of more people from the rural areas. There is simply not enough land to redistribute. Redistribution is often not the most feasible option in many agricultural sectors. The desirability of land reform rests more and more on its by-product – the breaking up of the landed oligarchy that has been politically dominant – rather than on its ability to absorb more people in worthwhile economic production.

Because of the discrepancies of an economy that is increasingly reliant on trade and yet unable to compete feasibly in the world market, the Philippines endures a growing balance-of-trade deficit but enjoys a comfortable balance-of-payments surplus. The difference is made up for by repatriated earnings of hundreds of thousands of Filipino workers abroad.

The scale of the migrant labor phenomenon – both external as well as domestic (millions of Filipinos originating from the rural areas work as domestic helpers in the urban areas, aside from those working abroad as such, thereby constituting an invisible working population at home) – has had dramatic effects on the political economy of rural Filipino society. Most of the household incomes in the agricultural communities are increasingly dependent on wages and savings of workers in the metropolitan economy. In many rural households, incomes from agricultural production has increasingly become a secondary source.

An increasingly large part of agricultural incomes are derived from linkages with agro-corporations either directly, in the form of wages, or indirectly, in such forms as contract-growing. Very few – and largely marginal – communities may be described as self-contained and subsistent in nature. The old dualism between the urban and rural economies is a thing of the past. It can no longer be assumed as an operative basis for a strategy of radical social restructuring.

## Altered Demography and Political Action

**T**he substantially altered characteristics of the economy is reflected in the country's demographic features.

The 1990 census shows that more than half of the population live in highly urbanized areas. The figures are actually more significant. The census figures can only say so much about the massive horizontal movements of the population, the 'invisible' urban population of domestic helpers and urban poor communities, the impact of the electronic media in homogenizing attitudes, and the political and economic implications of a large migrant labor population working abroad and who send their incomes to rural families. Roughly one out of every five Filipinos live in the Metropolitan Manila area and the densely populated contiguous provinces of Bulacan, Cavite, Rizal,

and Laguna. This is the decisive center not only of economic power, but of political and cultural power as well.

Declining rural productivity and incomes abet migration. The larger proportion of the Metropolitan Manila population is classified as belonging to the urban poor category – those with only occasional or seasonal employment, without permanent housing, and trapped in poverty. This large urban poor mass is under-represented, not only in government development planning, but also in the 'alternative' programs offered by the radical political groups. This urban poor population is interested mainly in acquiring employment opportunities in the metropolitan economy rather than in agrarian reform. Politically, they have not been attracted to the nationalist/autarkic economic programs characteristic of the mainstream Left. The urban poor are disposed towards programs that welcome foreign investments since they promise immediate economic opportunities.

The Philippines also has a very young population. The vast majority of the population falls under the age of 30. The age profile of the population translates into a political constituency that is for rapid expansion of economic opportunities in the near term. The young unemployed population will tend to have a short political horizon that is not easily drawn to abstract economic utopias coming long into the future. Examples elsewhere demonstrate that a young unemployed population tends to be politically conservative. They may occasionally be drawn into transient movements of rage but they rarely constitute a stable social base for social revolutionary movements. The age profile of the population should constitute a significant element of not only state-planning but also of popular organizing. Under great economic pressure, the young unemployed mass will not likely be attracted to 'protracted' struggles in pursuit of esoteric economic utopias. The traditional constituency for such struggles have been peasants and middle-class radicals.

Given the population distribution, both the armed revolutionary movement and the grassroots-oriented NGOs are crowded in the pockets of economically and numerically marginal rural communities. These marginal communities cannot provide a sufficient base for intervention in the larger trends and outcomes of the national society. The demographic concentration of both the armed revolutionary movements and the NGO organizers partly explain why the organized progressive movements played disproportionately minor roles in major political upheavals or in electoral outcomes. They are far from being the main currents.

As the process of economic integration advances, both the armed radical movement and the development-oriented NGOs face the prospect of a diminishing social base and, therefore, declining political significance. Even as their social base erodes, the radical revolutionary movement and the development-oriented NGOs pursue what are, in the final analysis, divergent political-economic trajectories. The marginal communities organized by the insurgent movement tend towards consolidating subsistence forms of



production. This results in relatively stagnant incomes and continuing marginalization while in attendance of some final revolutionary triumph. The relative stagnation in productivity and incomes in these communities does not function well in retaining their populations.

On the other hand, the communities organized by development-oriented NGOs – involved in developing cooperatives and mobilizing savings for investment and the establishment of small industries – necessarily tend towards opening up increasing linkages with the mainstream economy in order to raise productivity and incomes at the quickest possible rate. The development-oriented NGOs must either deliver instant economic gratification or be judged to have failed. The success of NGO-initiated organizing in the marginal communities is measured in terms of raising the value-added to community labor. This can be achieved only by forging more linkages with the national/international market and, therefore, abetting the process of economic integration.

In a very real sense, the revolutionary movement and the NGOs are rivals for determining the life-activities of people in the marginalized communities. As the NGOs become more successful in raising incomes through increased economic integration of the marginal communities, the armed revolutionary movement will lose the peasant base it needs for political sustainability.

## The Missing Proletariat

**L**ess than one out every ten wage workers in the Philippines belongs to a functioning union. Most of the unionized workers belong to what may be described as the labor aristocracy – better paid, more secure workers in what were formerly heavily protected national industries or in transnational or joint-venture corporations.

Under pressure from the private sector, government has given up the power to set minimum wages by legislative fiat. This has removed government as a unifying target for organized labor pressing for wage adjustments. At the same time, an elaborate mechanism for collective bargaining agreements has been put in place in order to diminish the necessity for strikes. These conditions, along with growing anxiety over the viability of enterprises in a new climate of liberalization and high unemployment rate, explain the reduced incidence of strikes by organized labor. Increasingly, the trade unions are adjusting to more modern interpretations of labor-management relations that depart from the traditional view that emphasizes an antagonistic and confrontational posture on the part of the union.

Over the last few years, radical organizations have increasingly relied on the associated jeepney and bus drivers' groups to mount strike-based mass struggles in the urban areas. The last few general strikes called in the

Manila area were participated in by a declining number of transport workers and saw only marginal participation by industrial unions. In order to enforce the goal of paralyzing transport in the urban areas, the revolutionary organizations sent in squads of urban guerillas to destroy buses that continued to ply their routes. These tactics produced a political backlash from the urban population.

The general thrust of economic reforms in the Philippines is towards economic liberalization - the withdrawal of protectionist barriers and the privatization of state enterprises. These economic reforms are beginning to exhibit themselves in changes in shopfloor attitudes and, thus, the disposition of organized labor.

In a way, it may be argued that the period of militant trade union activity and the existence of an economic regime characterized by protectionism were not unrelated factors. In a regulated economic regime, the state exercised power over the determination of minimum wages. This elevated the wage issue into a political question. Within the framework of protectionism, it is possible for domestic industries to absorb wage increases by passing off the costs to consumers in a captive market. The dismantling of the protectionist regime and extensive deregulation of the economy now forces industries to be more efficient and competitive. Such a condition, as we have seen elsewhere and as is becoming increasingly perceptible in the Philippines, encourages labor-management collaboration and increases acceptance by workers of wage freezes and cuts in order to maintain competitiveness. In an open market, the enterprises cannot pass on costs to consumers. Otherwise, they will be wiped out by the competition.

This is, arguably, a harsh condition for the working class. But it occurs within a general context where higher productivity, rather than organized militancy, brings more positive outcomes. Pragmatism has replaced ideological conviction, particularly in the face of the declining credibility of protectionism, extensive regulation and, on the far end, central planning. In the foreseeable future, the proletariat, as it was imagined a century ago by orthodox radical theory, will simply be not available for a revolutionary project.

This changing condition is abetted by the fact that the changing skills and technological profile of the wage-workers shall make concentrated shopfloor industrial workers a declining minority. Small, highly specialized manufacturing units employing better skilled workers, service industries that require varied and increasingly technological skills, and independent entrepreneurial companies shall engage the services of a larger section of wage labor. The sociological assumptions made about the proletariat a century ago do not anymore apply. Further, the expansion of white-collar workers with higher social mobility has made the shopfloor unions, that were assumed to be the basis of a new social order, an extremely small portion of the total.



The changing character of the working class has doomed orthodox radical parties and movements elsewhere. In Europe, the so-called 'labor vote' has become a historical item, forcing into extinction political parties that invested their fates in the expansion of the working class. There is no reason why Philippine society will be exempt from this trend. The pace of change of the demographic features of the working class in the Philippines, regardless of the momentarily poor performance of the national economy, will certainly outstrip the pace of a protracted people's war. It is an unwinnable race.

Filipino left-wing intellectuals and movement theoreticians have, for too long, been obsessed with refining the debate between 'capitalism' and 'semi-feudalism.' Reality has overtaken the fundamental terms of that fetishistic debate. It is a debate that does not take into proportional account neither the millions of seasonally employed urban poor nor the millions who have rotated abroad as migrant workers and whose incomes have altered the political economy of the country in a way that is often understated in traditional 'radical' theory.

The most significant factor on the economic horizon is the ASEAN Free Trade Area (AFTA). Modelled after the European common market and occurring within the framework of rapid state withdrawal from the economy, AFTA aspires for greater integration of production and a larger market for the most efficient regional industries over the next decade. Technologies, standards of productive efficiency, and markets will be shared to a very high degree. In a few years' time, regional economic integration will make traditional nationalist demands for a 'self-reliant, self-directed' national economy superfluous. The economic agenda of the radical Left movements - that involve forms of quasi-delinking, a strong centralizing state role, and a protected national industrial sector - shall lose both its constituency and its practicability given the more extensive regional linkages that may be in place later in this decade. Any 'alternative' agenda cannot, in the near future, be conceived in strictly national terms given the present realities.

## Changing Structures of Governance

**A**longside the substantial changes in the economic terrain, the institutions of governance have also been transforming rapidly. These changes, whether radical theoreticians choose to recognize them or engage in essentialist reductionism, profoundly alter the terrain of popular struggles.

From the colonial period to the Marcos dictatorship, the institutions of governance followed a consistent pattern of centralization and expansion. During the Marcos dictatorship, the Philippine state form achieved its most extensive regulative and centralized form. This state form was later burdened

with the rising costs of state maintenance, increasing economic inefficiency given the new norms of production and trade and, eventually, the inability to attract investments in a condition made unpredictable precisely by the capacity of the state to intervene in the economy for politically-dictated ends. The latter characteristic is most significant on a comparative level; the extremely regulative state forms throughout the region have all retreated in the face of the necessary institutional predictability demanded by free-moving investments. This undermines the viability of authoritarian state forms and enhances the processes of democratization that we are now witnesses to.

The Marcos regime, in its last phases, worked with apparatuses of governance that did not anymore cohere with new trends in international trade and investment. More than its propensity for plunder, the obsolete mode of governance that the dictatorship represented undermined its viability. That obsolescence, reflected in a severe economic crisis brought about by the constriction of production, resulted from the apparatuses of protectionism itself. The popular rejection of the dictatorship eventually translated into a rejection of the state form upon which the dictatorial regime was founded.

From the Aquino period to the present, the centralizing pattern of the past was effectively reversed. The substance of policy and organizational reforms over the last few years have been characterized by the decentralization and devolution of governmental powers. While much attention has been devoted to the strengths and weaknesses of pluralist politics, the significant changes have been in the structure of governance itself.

The most significant turning point, in this respect, has been the enactment in 1991 of the New Local Government Code (LGC). This large piece of legislation is an authentic political breakthrough achieved by a broad convergence of many forces, including pressure from regional, ethno-linguistic, political forces to progressive forces desiring to provide substance to the idea of popular empowerment through decentralization of policy-making. The LGC strengthens the power of local governments, enhances the autonomy of the subnational political units, institutionalizes representation by popular organizations in the decision-making organs of local governance and, most importantly, irreversibly diminishes the role of the national executive office in governance.

The emergence of local government units as policy-making loci influences the terrain of popular struggles and should deserve careful analysis by the popular forces.

In the past, the Presidency was the locus of all policy-making and, thus, the central site of political struggles. The decentralization of executive power to the local government units decentralizes the loci of popular struggles as well. The decentralization of power is magnified by the fact that, given the context of deregulation, the national executive likewise sheds off much of its



interventionist capacity. Decentralization and deregulation, in turn, are amplified by the increasing independence of the bureaucracy and constitutionally-mandated state agencies. Such independence is given substance by the conscious national policy of devolution of power and transparency in the operations of state. Both are essential principles of the post-1986 political culture.

Neither the Presidency nor the Congress, for instance, may dictate on the Securities and Exchange Commission or the Commission on Audit. Any effort at undermining the autonomy of the independent state institutions that assure continuity and predictability in civil society will invite harsh and immediate responses from the business community, the free media, and the general public. Public rejection will immediately register in economic performance and the flow of investments.

The professional military organization, too, after long years of deep factionalization and political partisanship, has evolved fairly well-developed procedures that guarantee institutional autonomy. Any attempt by the Presidency, for instance, to play politics with the army will likely meet sharp rebuke from the officer corps now intensely jealous of its professionalism and wary of a return to the condition of politicization that disturbed the organization in the past. The tumults of the latter half of the eighties convinced the soldiers of the transience of political entanglements. It is the corporate interest of the military organization to maintain political distance from all factions in a pluralist political setting and cultivate its institutional integrity. The public has responded to the changes in the military organization by granting it approval ratings that exceeded those of other major institutions of governance, including the Supreme Court.

It is significant to mention, at this point, that President Fidel Ramos is the first Filipino president to emerge from a career in the civil service. Prior Philippine presidents either came from major landed families or were professional politicians who wove alliances together with major economic blocs to build their political bases. Ramos, more than his predecessors, understands that the strength and continuity of the political order depends on the improvement of the institutional autonomy and professionalism of the civil service. That essential political code has reflected not only in his style of governance but also in the increasing confidence of state agencies in insulating the policy-making process from dictation by partisan and vested interests.

The increasing independence of the policy-making agencies and the devolution of executive power in a regime of de-regulation substantiates the formal separation of powers between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. Although the Philippine Congress continues to be caricatured as a bastion of landed elite power, a closer inquiry of its composition, the backgrounds of its members, and the nature of legislation will reveal a different reality. Both the Speaker of the House of Representatives and the Senate President come from corporate backgrounds and reflect the

cosmopolitan, forward-looking, and productivity-centered agenda of the urban business elites. The political influence of the old landed elite has declined in proportion to the decline in real economic significance of land-based production. Leaders of the legislative branch are keenly aware of the dramatic changes that have occurred in the dynamics and character of electoral politics and thus, look to new emerging constituencies for political support.

## Changes in the Electoral Terrain

**T**he general elections held last May 1992 revealed new trends and factors that defy traditional characterizations of this dimension of Filipino politics.

In the past, national political parties depended on the voter-mobilization capabilities and the financial contributions of largely landed provincial elites. When large masses of the population were trapped in production systems controlled by large landowners and when much of national production came from plantations and large subsistence crop landholdings, this pattern was understandable. But with the changes that have occurred in the national economy – as reflected in broad demographic changes – the nature of electoral politics has also changed.

The major political parties that participated in last year's elections relied on urban – mainly mercantile, industrial, and corporate – supporters to finance their campaign organizations. The local elites, in turn, depended on logistical support from the national party organizations, reversing the traditional pattern of dependence by national candidates on the funding and voter-mobilization support of plantation owners. The center of gravity of electoral politics has decisively shifted from rural landowners to urban holders of capital.

The changes in political party organization and electoral financing were matched by changes in voter composition, distribution, and attitudes. The traditional vote-rich rural bailiwicks, upon which the landed aristocracy relied to influence the composition of the national political elite, were eroded by massive urbanization and out-migration. The diversification of occupations and economic linkages in the rural areas further contributed to that erosion. Freed from their economic links to the traditional landowners – who have also been decimated by economic diversification and land reform – the bulk of rural voters made electoral choices independent of the traditional provincial political leaders.

This trend towards increased voter independence has been heightened by the shift of the population from rural to urban, by the increasing youth and educational profile of voters, and by widening access to the mass media. The dramatically altered electoral terrain explains why the presidential candidacies



of Ramon Mitra and Eduardo Cojuangco – both dependent on the voter mobilization capabilities of their provincial political allies – floundered while the candidacies of Fidel Ramos and Miriam Santiago attracted a large constituency.

The increasing homogenization of the political culture, brought about by rapid technological advancement in communication, is another point that deserves closer treatment. More than eighty percent of Filipino households have regular access to radio. A third of households own television sets, although half the population has access to information conveyed via television. Through the electronic media, there is both immediate and intensive awareness of issues and events in the nation and around the world. As an illustration, the nearly successful presidential candidacy of Miriam Santiago – who had no political organization to speak off – relied nearly exclusively on the media channels in evolving an electoral base.

The media establishments, freed from political control since the dismantling of the dictatorship, have become important channels of power. They function as mechanisms for popular feedback as much as they are effective instruments for building consensus on policies. They shape public opinion more decisively than any of the political factions and economic blocs. The rapidly increasing facility of mass communications and the reproducibility of information through electronic modes shall continue to play major roles in the equation of democratization in the Philippines.

### Rethinking Popular Struggles

In the light of all the points brought out above, it would appear extremely naive to consider the future of popular struggles for wider democratization merely in terms of the constricting choice between armed struggle and electoral contestation. Neither of the two options may be viable components of a new politics of broader popular involvement in policy making if democratization is understood as the expansion of the public sphere and wider accessibility to the policy-making process through decentralization of governmental processes. State power is never a metaphysical entity that the masses either possess or don't. It is a complex entity shaped by daily political struggles and the institutional arrangements constituting the mode of governance.

There is a wide region between the two forms of involvement and engagement that has been effectively opened up by popular and democratic forces. These include broad coalitions espousing sharply focused policy concerns such as the Congress for a People's Agrarian Reform, the Freedom from Debt Coalition, and the Green Forum. The concerns and involvements of organized progressive activists have also broadened to include – apart from the protection of vulnerable social groups such as tribal minorities, small fisherfolk, and upland farmers – groups working with alternative

grassroots financing networks, feminist organizations, and organizations of migrant workers. Inevitably, the progressive movements must resemble the actual demographics of the population.

Involvement by progressive groups in electoral politics has not produced spectacular results in the last few years. The failure has been due to the absence of a realistic electoral agenda, an obsolete understanding of the constituencies that now compose Philippine society, and a doctrinaire approach to electoral alliance-building. Given the irreversible diversification of interest groups in a more complex society and the pluralism of opinion in a condition of open media access, it is not possible to master the electoral terrain by addressing minority concerns. Nor is it possible by way of continued cultivation of an ideological identity that has lost the ability to capture the imagination (and aspirations) of the largest number.

At the same time, the political conditions and social bases that, two decades ago, allowed armed insurgent movements to gain support and sustenance against the most severe repressive campaigns have either dissipated or eroded. With depleted rural populations, the extinction of the traditional peasantry with the expansion of mixed household incomes, the incorporation of larger and larger economic sections into an increasingly regionalized mainstream, and the advent of new technologies of war, the strategy of armed struggle to seize 'state power' does not seem sustainable. The village cannot hope to wage war against the city and expect to subordinate it.

The problem of sustainability is compounded by organizational and logistical problems within the main insurgent movement. These are problems made irresolvable by current national and global trends. Beyond the internal organizational and logistical problems are profound changes in the political expectations of the masses, the new realities of governance, the collapsing credibility of orthodox Left 'alternatives' to the problems of contemporary society, and a growing popular consensus for peace as a precondition for national prosperity.

The large mass movements that once provided a core political base for the armed insurgency have evaporated. These mass movements, hindsight tells us, were animated by democratically-inspired opposition to dictatorship. The dismantling of the dictatorship removed the animating factor and redirected popular concerns to immediately increasing productivity and incomes. The less doctrinally-inclined grassroots movements have quickly shifted to adjust to new popular expectations.

Guardians of traditional left-wing orthodoxy interpret declining popular support for their movements as a momentary ebb that is bound to correct itself. They have called for the reaffirmation rather than a reassessment of traditional revolutionary doctrine in attendance of 'better' times when the masses shall again plunge into new depths of poverty and rediscover armed struggle as the only means to national salvation. The wait could be endless.



## Quest for a New Agenda

**T**here are numerous debates over appropriate strategy now going on among the increasingly marginalized movements of the Filipino Left. The combined effects of political insignificance and deep internal disagreements are expressed in the increasing parochialization of left-wing discourse. Much passion has been invested in fine doctrinal disagreements without addressing the contours of the larger reality – the huge structural, demographic, technological, and institutional changes sweeping the field of radical politics itself.

As left-wing forces become more preoccupied with disagreeing with each other, they lose touch of the larger constituencies and the broad social forces emerging in Philippine society today. The present discourse and political disposition of the major left-wing groups and movements suggest the image of dinosaurs stubbornly marching toward extinction.

More than the matter of strategy that preoccupies many Left-wing activists in the Philippines today, the crucial matter that ought to be addressed concerns the articulation of a progressive, credible social agenda for the future.

Despite the vaunted insularity of Filipinos, the Leftists included, the impact of the dramatic collapse of existing socialist regimes in Europe and the fossilization of nationalist-protectionist regimes elsewhere in the Third World cannot be discounted. The Left-wing community in the Philippines – beyond their respective doctrinal fetishes – must confront the questions that a new reality poses:

1.) Given the irresistible momentum towards the internationalization of production and consumption, is the advocacy of a principally nationalist, state-initiated and -protected economic program still politically viable?

2.) Given the demands for the devolution of governance to subnational units posed by new production technologies and linkages, is the re-centralization and the re-absorption of the economy into the state a credible, futuristic, and 'progressive social project?' Concretely, should the popular movements support or oppose the processes of devolution, deregulation, and decentralization now in motion? These are immediate tactical questions that require more developed strategic premises.

3.) Given the increasing homogeneity of political cultures brought about by technological revolutions in communications, is authoritarianism still a viable method of governance even if it is pursued in the name of improving social equity? Further, is not authoritarianism and democracy not only a debate over political program but also a debate on the organizational composition of the popular movements as well? More pointedly, is not democratization a substantive concern not (in an abstract way) only in the

way civil society is organized but also in the way the movements are internally organized? Can movements that are not themselves organized in a democratic way credibly espouse democratization in the larger society?

4.) Is the nation-state still the viable framework within which a radical political agenda is to be constructed? In the context of internationalized production relationships and the diminishing regulative role of the national state, what is the role of ethno-nationalism in the ideological perspectives of the popular movements?

5.) In the face of changes in the institutional arrangements, what is the substantive meaning of 'state power'? How is it to be 'seized'? By whom? For what purpose? These are essential definitions that bear on the understanding of the parameters of political struggle.

Unless the broad community of Left-wing groups directly addresses the problem of social agenda to the satisfaction of the largest number caught in poverty and expectant of opportunity, the 'progressive' movements in the Philippines will be doomed to a political purgatory.

In posing these questions, I do not mean to imply that the grand popular struggles of the past ended in failure. On the contrary, they have successfully contributed to the onset of a new condition that now challenges the political imagination that animates mass movements.

No single group and no definable doctrine completely masterminded the unfolding. And today, no single doctrinal camp may claim exclusive mastery of the vision of the future.

There are no easy answers to the questions that haunt the progressive movements in the Philippines today and form the core of what may accurately be described as an ideological crisis. The complexity and depth of the changes that have happened must be explored with a certain degree of intellectual humility such as that that possessed the revolutionary Lenin when he observed: "History, especially the history of revolution, was always richer in content, more complex, more dynamic, subtler than the most effective parties, the most class-conscious vanguard of the most progressive classes ever imagined."