

The Crisis of the Philippine Progressive Movement: A Preliminary Investigation*

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Allow me to address the question of why I am doing an investigation of the state of the progressive movement in the Philippines for the Forum. Probably the most important reason is that we here in the United States have been getting all sorts of conflicting reports on the state of the movement that it is time we ourselves actively clarified the issue by doing our own investigation. But also important is my own quest to salvage some meaning for my own activism in the progressive movement over the last two decades. Like many of you, I would hate to see those 20 years go to waste because the movement refused to take the first step necessary for it to again become a major player in Philippine politics: recognition of the fact that it is in crisis.

This is a revised version of a talk given at a briefing on recent developments in the Philippines sponsored by the Forum for Philippine Alternatives in San Francisco on July 29, 1992. The views I will be expressing here are strictly my own and do not necessarily reflect those of the Forum for Philippine Alternatives. This article was first published in *Philippine Alternatives* (August-September 1992), a US-based publication.

Does the movement, in fact, recognize that it is in crisis? And if it does, to what factors does it attribute the crisis?

To answer these questions, I carried out in-depth two-to-three hour interviews while in the Philippines in April and May of this year. I talked with twenty people, nineteen of whom are or have been intimately connected to the National Democratic Front (NDF) and the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) - This was the first phase of a study that will eventually also tap the opinions of other sectors of the left like the Bukluran sa

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Ikaunlad ng Sosyalistang Isip at Gawa (BISIG, Alliance for the Advancement of Socialist Thought and Action), left-wing Social Democrats, and the Movement for Popular Democracy (MPD). Since almost everybody, including those belonging to other tendencies, acknowledged the centrality of the NEW and the CPP, I thought it was natural to begin with these forces, reserving for later the interviews with representatives of the other trends.

Among the twenty I interviewed were officials or ex-officials at the CPP national commission level, the CPP regional commission or regional committee level, the New People's Army (NPA) General Command, and the NOF national leadership. Most of those I interviewed who were associated with the NDE or CPP were in 'good standing'; and only two or three could possibly be regarded as "disgruntled," though two of them did not know their current party status. I felt it was important to begin with people in good standing so that it could not be said that the study was methodically skewed to reflect the opinions of disgruntled elements. I will also interview disgruntled elements and plan to interview people in the Central Committee and individuals reputed to be in the leadership of the movement and who are currently in jail.

In this connection, I would like to emphasize that this is a report on a research in progress and it is not meant to be definitive. Some of the interpretations based on this first set of interviews could very well be revised in the light of future interviews.

In any event, everybody I interviewed was willing to talk so long as their names remained confidential. And everybody spoke very candidly in spite of my declaration that the interviews would provide material for a Forum study that would be publicly available.

Was the movement 'in crisis'? Most said yes it was in crisis, though they differed in their assessment of the degree to which it was in crisis. Only two did not say it was in crisis – one giving his answer after thinking aloud for about two minutes, the other offering a vague reply.

As an indicator of the crisis, several respondents came up with a set of figures: forty percent decline in organized forces" and a similar forty percent reduction in territories controlled by the NPA in the last few years. Some qualified this figure by saying that in the last two years, there has been some recovery, especially in Mindanao, while others said that

recently recovered territories were canceled out by new territories lost to the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). But among those who gave figures, most agreed the number of organized forces still remains significantly below the 1985 figure.

But was the movement “marginalized”? To this there was a more equitable division, with about half-saying yes and the other half responding in the negative.

What were the reasons given for the crisis? There were different factors emphasized by different people. But let me discuss in sonic detail the principal reasons pointed out.

One key factor cited was effective AFP counter-guerilla operations. After Aquino came to power in 1986, the AFP was able to form three extra divisions or about thirty battalions, a move made possible by releasing units which, before 1986, had been forced to remain in Manila by the necessity of guarding the dictator. This enabled the military to saturate a target area with troops and keep them there for an extended period even if the NPA turned up in the heat in another guerilla front to relieve pressure on the first front. This time there were reserve troops that could be dispatched to deal with guerrilla activity in the second front.

This was the case in Central Luzon (CL) in the late eighties, according to a former member of the CL regional leadership. Under sustained military pressure, the guerrillas had to abandon and could not return to long established base areas. Deprived of guerilla protection, revolutionary mass organizations in these areas could be maintained only with great difficulty, leading to a marked reduction in political activity and revolutionary morale.

Another reason cited by some respondents was related to intense militarization. This was war-weariness in the peasant base. According to one former high-ranking officer of the NPA, “Peasants are shrewd. You cannot expect them to keep fighting indefinitely if they cannot taste the fruit of their struggle – their own land – except in the distant future. They weigh the costs exacted by their revolutionary participation – which might include children who were recruited into the NPA – against this promise, and you can understand why many might scale down their commitment”

While not discounting the impact of militarization, some respondents put more emphasis on internal failings, particularly on what they regarded as the “militarization” of the left’s strategy. They said that up until 1990, the left’s strategy for coming to power was heavily oriented toward a military seizure of power. Assuming that there was a “revolutionary flow” in the late 1980s, the CPP focused the movement’s energies on expanding the NPA, upgrading the size of its units to battalion level in preparation for mobile warfare, and acquiring heavy weaponry, like mortars, that would be decisive during a period that would be marked by what the leadership called the “strategic counteroffensive.”

This emphasis on military work resulted in serious neglect of the mass movement of the peasantry in the rural areas, relatively minor emphasis given to united front work in the urban areas, and little energy devoted to figuring out new creative forms of intervention in the legal and electoral arenas. The notion of the strategic counteroffensive, these respondents noted, was dropped only two years ago, in 1990.

Others saw the overemphasis on military work as a manifestation of a deeper problem which they traced to the inability of the movement’s leadership to devise a strategy appropriate to the new period inaugurated by the Aquino assassination in 1983 and the EDSA Uprising of 1986 which would take into account several key developments, including:

- 1) the shifting of much political life and political debate from underground to above ground as the dictator’s capacity for control eroded;

- 2) the key role played by the politicized middle class or middle forces in the anti-dictatorship movement which necessitated careful united front tactics and new sophisticated ways of popularizing the NDF program to appeal to these forces;

- 3) the continuing vitality of the tradition of formal democratic electoral politics as a source of political legitimacy not only among the middle class but also the peasantry and workers.

Related to this last point, some respondents felt that the orthodox CPP analysis is too economic or reductionist and does not pay enough attention to culture, consciousness, and values. As one of them puts it, just because the economic indicators show that things are going from bad to

worse does not mean that people interpret the totality of the situation as going from bad to worse. Traditional political attitudes remain strong, even among the organized masses. As one person in the NDF leadership pointed out, a number of NPA-controlled areas in Isabela and Cagayan went for Eduardo Cojuangco and Imelda Marcos in the recent elections. A reductionist analysis would not be able to explain this phenomenon, he said, but one sensitive to the continuing strength of traditional values would be able to understand that even politicized peasants have what he called a “split-level consciousness.” He also lamented the fact that Antonio Gramsci, whom he regarded as the Marxist thinker with the most profound insights on the role of culture in revolution, still has to make the CPP’s reading list of indispensable readings.

Among other factors precipitating the crisis, a few mentioned the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. However, most of these respondents were quick to qualify that the impact of socialism’s break-up was felt not so much within the rank and file of the party and the NDF but mainly among middle and upper-level cadres. One person who has talked to a number of middle-level cadres about the crisis of socialism said that it has had a profound impact on them. Their attitude, he said, could be summed up thus: “Why would we keep fighting for socialism if in the end people might just throw us out?” A combination of internal crisis and the international crisis of socialism, he suspected, was behind the dropping out of organized underground life of many middle-ranking CPP cadres.

A final reason for the crisis of the left was what some characterized as self-inflicted wounds.” They were referring to the “Anti-DPA (“deep penetration agents”) Campaigns” in Mindanao from September 1985 to March 1986 and in Southern Tagalog in 1988. Whereas in 1988 and 1989, the CPP leadership still saw the two campaigns as justified while lamenting their “excesses,” by 1990, the two campaigns were characterized as “madness” that swept the ranks, with no redeeming value. This characterization is more than justified, for in Mindanao several hundred cadres were reported to have been executed in these efforts to ferret out APP agents that were feared to have infiltrated the NDF-NPA-CPP structure. The high estimate for those killed in Mindanao is 900, the low estimate 600. Since several reports place the number of those executed in Southern Tagalog at less than 100, I will provisionally use 700 as the figure for total casualties.

The label of “madness” is apt for another reason: whereas in other revolutionary movements, similar purges on such a scale took place after the seizure of power, in the Philippines it occurred before the seizure of power, something which is rare in revolutionary history. It almost seemed as if the movement was intent in eliminating itself, for not only were precious lives squandered but hundreds of trained cadres, on whose development the party had spent a lot of resources and time, were eliminated. The people killed were indispensable parts of the backbone of the revolutionary movement, and it is hardly a cause for surprise that the national democratic movement in Mindanao suffered such serious reversals in 1986 and thereafter.

Why did such massive purges take place?

The respondents gave a variety of explanations, the most important of which are the following:

1) Those carrying out the internal security campaigns exceeded or abused their authority.

2) The movement was ill prepared to carry out an internal security campaign since the method for dispensing justice had not been institutionalized. The party groups that carried out the investigation of suspected infiltration were the same groups that arrested the suspects, interrogated them, judged them, and executed them. This violated the judicial principle that these different tasks must be carried out by different people to assure impartiality,

3) According to some respondents, the above explanations are incomplete and the real cause lies deeper, that is. in the militarization of strategy. According to this analysis, the desire for quick military victories created tremendous frustrations when NPA plans were foiled by the AFP. Reports that some NPA officials were shot in the back during firefights then provided the spark that turned these frustrations into a feverish search for saboteurs in the ranks that ran out of control. The “insurrectionary line” as the basic cause of the purges is a line of explanation endorsed by a very influential CPP leader who implies that they would not have occurred had the movement continued the emphasis on careful political organizing entailed by the classical strategy of “protracted people’s war.” The problem with this analysis is that while the movement in Mindanao could be

characterized as having followed the insurrectionary line, the same cannot be said of the movement in Southern Tagalog, which, if anything, was marked by an adherence to the classical protracted people's war strategy. Yet the same paranoid dynamics of the Mindanao *ahos* (garlic) campaign marked the Southern Tagalog anti-DPA campaign.

4) Probably a key part of the explanation is a phenomenon that was described by a number of respondents: collective paranoia. I tended to discount this until I began hearing the very graphic descriptions of people who had participated either as victims or as executioners in the purges.

Paranoia, it seemed, took on a momentum of its own in Mindanao after reports of some suspicious cases of death in battle of NPA commanders. Given the momentum of paranoia, it is difficult to fault solely the CPP leadership since there were times that the leadership itself seemed to be carried by the momentum of paranoia sweeping the ranks. Of course, the regional leadership bodies in both Southern Tagalog and Mindanao must bear a great deal of the responsibility, not only for initiating the campaign but for failing decisively to stop it once it appeared to be getting out of hand. But to underline the complexity of the situation, one respondent said that had individuals within the national or regional leadership stepped forward to object at the height of the campaign in Southern Tagalog, there was a good chance that they might be arrested by the campaign committees and thrown into a stockade, if not worse. Indeed, a leading personality of the NEW said that he could not intervene largely for fear of being tagged a DPA and possibly losing his life. In such a situation, he said, his status and prestige would not count for much.

To give you a sense of the momentum of paranoia, let me recount the story of Teresa (not her real name), a young activist who was involved in the anti-DPA campaign committee in one of the regions of Mindanao. At first, she was recruited mainly to be one of the recording secretaries. Then, step by step, she became a judge as the head of the committee began to regularly consult her on the guilt or innocence of the people being arrested, most of whom she knew. At this point she said that she gave a guilty verdict not only because she felt they were guilty but also because she felt that the campaign committee head wanted her to say they were guilty, and she could not afford not to do so for fear of her own security. Soon she was being asked to participate in torturing people during interrogation, and she felt compelled to hit the victims for fear that had she refused the finger of

accusation would be on her. Paranoia became normal, the number of victims mounted, and she became resigned to eventually becoming a victim herself.

The campaign had ran out of everyone's control while everyone felt compelled at the same time to fuel it, and it was not surprising that it ended, like the French Revolution's Reign of Terror, with the party member most responsible for the executions – the head of the campaign committee – being himself executed.

The Reign of Terror, in fact, continually leaped to mind when she and others were recounting the events in Mindanao and Southern Tagalog. Just as in Mindanao, paranoia reigned, as the Revolution consumed first Danton, then St. Just, then Robespierre himself. The parallel is important because, contrary to conservative propaganda, it is not only Marxist mass movements that are susceptible to such self-inflicted bloodletting but probably all mass movements, be they Marxist, nationalist, bourgeois, or fascist. What it means for progressive movements, though, is that they must not only institutionalize guidelines for the dispensation of justice but also equally important guidelines for the scientific investigation and assessment of political phenomena. *And above all, guidelines for the preservation of common sense – common sense which would tell you that it would be endowing the AFP with superhuman powers to think that over a number of years it could infiltrate hundreds of people within a revolutionary movement who would not reveal themselves but behave day-to-day as earnest revolutionaries, who were so good that they fooled their wives, children, and closest friends!*

Such guidelines are especially important given the results of the two Anti-DPA campaigns: in Mindanao, only about five people were proven to be likely enemy agents and of these five, only three were guilty beyond any shadow of doubt. In other words, to net five AFT agents, some 700 lives were sacrificed. Not only was this criminal and tragic, it was also shockingly senseless. Surely, this was one of the worst internal security campaigns carried out in the history of the revolutionary movements internationally! Having said that, one must also point out that except possibly for Manila-Rizal (where extensive arrests and interrogations occurred, though with few executions carried out) the anti-DPA campaign did not gain momentum in other regions. And in many cases, as in Central Luzon, this was because the regional leadership intervened decisively early on to prevent paranoia

from spreading by lashing discussion and debate to the mast of common sense.

The paranoia explanation does not, however, satisfy other respondents. One person, a prominent leader of the NDF, speculated that the ultimate cause might be the Marxist concept of “class justice.” According to him, Marxism does not have a developed concept of individual rights; individuals have rights, in other words, only by virtue of their membership in the right classes or, failing that in their holding the right politics. Thus, if an individual is suspected or judged to be a class enemy, he or she has no innate right to life, liberty, and respect and what happens to him depends purely on the tactical needs of the movement. Thus, one may be releasing APP prisoners for propaganda points while executing CPP cadres who were judged as DPAs. And indeed, this seemingly paradoxical event occurred in Southern Tagalog during the 1988 purge.

I have gone back and forth on this explanation, thinking initially that it was the root cause of the Mindanao and Southern Tagalog events. Currently, I think that while it was principally the absence of an institutionalized system of justice and scientific assessment that allowed paranoia to spread unchecked, a tactical view of individuals – a tendency to evaluate their worth mainly on whether or not they advance or obstruct the lefts class-determined political objectives – also played a role. An instrumental view of people is a tendency that affects particularly activists in the Marxist-Leninist tradition, making them vulnerable during moments of paranoia at the height of the revolutionary struggle to expedient solutions involving the physical elimination of real or imagined enemies. In normal times, the combination of a tactical view of people, ideological fervor, youth, and the gun already carries a threat potential. Touched off by social paranoia, it can easily become an uncontrollable force, as it did in Mindanao and Southern Tagalog.

Thus, while not placing the principal emphasis on the class view of justice in explaining the purges. I fully agree with this particular NDF leader’s recommendation that CPP and NDF activists must internalize the fact that individuals have innate rights to life, freedom, respect, and other valued conditions that come with their being human, that individual rights do not derive from class membership or political ideology. This particular respondent incidentally, felt extremely guilty that he did not intervene to stop the process for fear of his own life. His intervention might have saved

lives, he said, but he failed to take what would have been the most glorious move in his life for fear of the consequences of defying the “power of the collective consensus.”

But fear and trembling, to pirate a phrase from Kierkegaard, was not the only story. There are also profiles in courage, like the Central Committee member who insisted from the very beginning that the Southern Tagalog executions were wrong and persisted in his conviction even when the finger of accusation threatened to close in on him. And, of course, there were the cadres who accepted their fate but still proclaimed their loyalty to the Philippine Revolution even as they were being executed.

But, you ask, why do I dwell on this shameful episode of the Philippine revolutionary movement?

First, because it contributed significantly to setting back the movement. Certainly in Mindanao, the main factor reversing the revolution in the mid- and late eighties was the anti-DPA campaign. Not only because of the loss of personnel but also because practically all political work in both the city and the countryside was suspended for months as the movement turned on itself during the critical period from September 1985 to March 1986, when the Marcos regime fell and the Aquino administration consolidated itself.

Second, for the sake of shedding light on tumultuous events that had such a crippling impact on the morale of hundreds if not thousands of people in the movement and that directly or indirectly contributed to their leaving or lying low. Ignorance, confusion, and rumor continue to surround not only the general public’s perception of these events but also that of the ordinary national democratic activists. Making public the truth about Mindanao and Southern Tagalog would not only be an important step in the CPP’s leadership. It is also the best weapon against the distortion flat the Aft and the right have spread regarding the purges, a lot of which were picked up by such reactionary papers as the *Wall Street Journal*.

Third, because by carefully analyzing what happened, we can make sure it never, never happens again. These were lives snuffed out in their prime, and nobody can bring them back. This was, let us admit, a crime against humanity. But it is a crime that must be placed in the context of a civil war in which the other side – the Armed Forces of the Philippines –

was guilty of even graver violations, including the indiscriminate shooting of non-combatants as in the Lupao and Mendiola massacres.

And finally, I dwell on this episode because the CPP's willingness to confront its responsibility for it and acknowledge its guilt should give us all hope that it has a future in the Philippine progressive movement. It must also be said in this connection that the CPP has made an effort to indemnify the relatives of the victims, and that the whole Mindanao Commission has offered to resign and be subjected to disciplinary action. While these actions can never make up for the lives lost, they are nevertheless not insignificant.

Another development that gives me hope is the openness with which many CPP and NEW officials received our Forum's initiatives. A leader in one of the party's national commissions, in fact, asked if the Forum's activities could be more organically fled to the process of renovation within the party. I had to say, however, that the Forum was a pluralistic endeavor that was concerned with the whole progressive movement not just with one sector.

Having said that, let me just emphasize that the renovation of the party is important not only for the national democratic movement but for the progressive movement as a whole because of the CPP's centrality. Indeed, at this time it is not so much competition that marks the current attitude of most other sectors of the movements towards the CPP as concern for its future. As one leader of BISIG puts it, "We have a stake in the CPP and the national democratic movement not disintegrating because this would weaken all of us. Whatever our differences, we have a stake in the renewal of the national democratic movement."

But before concluding, let me just address an opposite view advanced by some other people. We should not worry too much about the future of the CPP and the NDF, they argue, because they have already performed their historical function. For one, the CPP and NDF have produced the scores of politically conscious activists who are now the mainstays of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and people's organizations (POs) whether or not they remain part of the national democratic movement. These NGOs and POs, in this view, are now supplanting the traditional political organizations of the left as the backbone of the "new movement"

I disagree with this perspective. I think that although they are very vibrant, NGOs and POs cannot step effectively into the role played by the parties of the left, which is to articulate sectoral and community needs, not serve as a thousand and one spontaneous substitutes for a comprehensive movement such as the national democratic movement. NGOs and political parties are complementary, and if either tried to perform the role of the other, this would most likely lead to a decline in the effectiveness of both.

In conclusion, let me just say that although the CPP and the NDP are in crisis, the problems of our people are so great that come what may, a powerful progressive movement will again emerge as a powerful player in Philippine politics. Will the CPP and the NDF be key elements of this movement? Or will they be marginal to it? The answer lies in the CPP and NDF's willingness to confront the extent of their current crisis and to courageously take the necessary steps to renew themselves. Now. ❁