

Re-Imagining Philippine Revolution

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This paper is a response to the persistent, demand from us, popular democratic (PD) revolutionaries, to be more explicit about our position regarding the fundamentals of revolution which we still consider ourselves a part of.

Definition is necessary, but at times very tricky. We need first to draw the line to begin an honest dialogue and debate. When demarcating ourselves, we cannot ignore conventional categories even as we introduce new ones. We have done both with some success, but confusion never ceased to dog us. Friends and detractors, for their own reasons, have not quite understood us, but it is worse when we ourselves start to get confused.

This problem has been with us since 1986 when we emerged as a distinct group trying to carve a niche in political discourse and social activism here and abroad. We have been identified with such key advocacy concepts as political pluralism, people empowerment, and accountable governance, among others. All these are commonplace by now and would hardly suffice to distinguish us from others.

More basic is defining what makes us revolutionary. It is rather easy for those of us who still belong to the Party or other revolutionary organizations. But as one group, we do not quite fit into the norm.

In any case, we owe it mainly to ourselves, and secondarily, to our friends to be more definite about where we stand. And here, its in the past, we shall maintain an open and critical attitude toward any question.

On the Crisis of Socialism

Socialism continues to be a valid alternative to capitalism despite its collapse in Eastern Europe and Russia. We, therefore, lament its demise as we commit ourselves to search for the underlying causes of the general crisis it now faces.

From this broad perspective, we declare our respect for the socialist among us. Equally, we expect our socialist comrades to apply the same attitude toward non-socialists in our ranks. At any rate, socialism is not the cutting edge of revolution.

Socialism is a target of our criticism for two reasons. Firstly, it is the only established, well articulated, and comprehensive alternative to capitalism. Secondly, most of us have kept our sympathies intact, or continued to subscribe to this ideology and remained committed to address its shortcomings.

We do not buy the simplistic argument that points to modern revisionism as the main culprit. Socialism cannot win the battle against capitalism if it does not undergo continuous rethinking and revision demanded by changing realities. Merciless critique of everything existing is a basic Marxist proposition, to begin with. Such critique should not spare socialism itself.

The lines of our search are varied and complex. They span the whole range of theory and practice. The roots of deformations will have to be brought out with rigor and clarity. We hope to be able to contribute to this exercise.

One key area we should look into is the modernization paradigm of socialism. This is specially significant because of the current debate on development and environment. What clearly sets socialism apart is its stress on equity and its social mode of appropriation of wealth and resources. But its growth-oriented trajectory of organizing the economy does not fundamentally differ from that of capitalism, thus, it suffers from the same technological fixation that harms nature.

Democracy is another. Under this category, we will have to rethink the basic propositions about class, class struggle, dictatorship of the proletariat, state and civil society, party and social movements, revolutionary violence and peace, socialist ethics, justice and legality, and human rights.

A core hypothesis worth pursuing is that the socialist promise of greater democracy failed due to totalitarian tendencies which may be attributed to some of these concepts, or are inherent in the theory itself. We sincerely hope that socialism can stand the test of rigorous criticism and continue to be a source of inspiration.

Shape of Future Society

It is an open field from here on. There can only be a level of certainty about what we do not want—which means neither capitalism nor the type of socialism we have seen thus far. The future is probably a mix of the best of both worlds with a definite bias toward an egalitarian order that seriously takes environment into account.

Our opposition to capitalism directs us to challenge the Newly Industrialized Country (NIC) model of the Ramos government. We oppose the NIC model from the social and ecological perspective

The broad masses have little future in the NIC model. The elite will remain firmly in control of resources and decisions and will continue to dictate the agenda and tempo of development all the way to the promised future. The expected benefits for the poor millions would be a mere consequence of the anticipated general prosperity scenario. As in the past, the equity issue, which is central to sustainability, remains marginal in this modernization vision.

There is very limited ecological space under the NIC model. It can only be realized and sustained at a great cost to our environment which has already reached crisis proportions. The rapid and qualitative transformation of land resources even at this early stage of the NIC strategy implementation is warning enough about what is in store for the Philippines in this kind of development model.

But what is the alternative? If not NIC, then what? How do we want the 21st century Philippines to look like? Is our dream possible and realizable given the present state of the development and environment crisis? Will the nation rally around such an alternative?

We are in search of a better model, or maybe, the way ahead may not be limited to just one model. In either case, our search shall be guided by the norms we stand by. Our bias is for a socialist green future.

There is no blueprint as yet, only preferred principles. Socialist here means greater democracy than what both capitalism and socialism have offered so far. The stress is more on society rather than the state. We favor the strengthening of the people's sovereignty over resources and decisions. The lower the decision center is in the power ladder, the better; we have no illusion about the centralized and top-down nature of both the state and corporate institutions. We are set to build accountability safeguards from the social side of the power equation. This task extends to disempowering and bringing down unaccountable institutions.

The green dimension of our vision goes beyond what the word green suggests. It has something to do with the concept of carrying capacity or ecological space. Human activity, whether socialist- or capitalist-inspired, has hitherto ignored the finite capacity of the natural environment to provide inputs and absorb wastes. The growth obsession of both models has been pushing ecological space closer to the edge. To reverse the trend, a fundamental shift in development paradigm is needed.

A word on models. Visions of future society suggest only relative permanence and not absolutes. Models come and go, and there is no last word on it, specially now that existing models are breaking down, or are being thrown out of the window.

We can take this kind of attitude toward the NIC model. Just as we are willing to appropriate the best achievements of capitalism, we can also do the same about the NIC's positive features, like land and asset reform and the equalizing, interventionist role played by government at certain points.

In any case, visioning depends a lot on one's perspective. The NIC future is logical and desirable from an elite-looking class. As PD revolutionaries, we come from a different, perspective. That is why ours is a radically different dream.

Means to the Desired Future

The classical basis of revolutions is social inequity and the limited possibility of redress in a peaceful, evolutionary way. The original stimulus is a negative rationale, but that, in itself, is enough reason to justify revolution.

Revolution is also creation. It is a most dynamic, and radical process of organizing a new society. The strategic goal is relatively unchanging, but the means to achieve it come in many variations and combinations. Nearly nothing about means or strategies can be taken as absolute.

There is an arsenal of means from tradition. The revolutionary process builds on them and creates new ones. It would be hard to predict the diversity of means that could be devised. Recent examples, like the EDSA uprising and the citizens' revolutions in Eastern Europe and Russia, illustrate this point well enough.

The ongoing people's democratic revolution, initiated in 1968 and led since then by the new Communist Party, speaks of standard and tested means. It uses class analysis to come out with a social description, strategy, and program formulation. It talks of three magic weapons for ensuring success: party, army, and united front. As to forms of struggle, it speaks of the armed and the legal, defining the former as principal. The path is from the countryside to the cities, passing through three strategic phases indicating progression in the consolidation of political power, from guerrilla zone to base area and eventually, to nationwide victory.

This is a perfectly logical framework for a revolutionary strategy—strategy, here, being a summation of means. If this is the framework for defining who is revolutionary and who is not, then very few would be included and many more would be excluded.

At one point, the party included the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and other small armed groups into the category of revolutionary, though obviously, none of them would strictly fit the mold. What this suggests is that armed struggle is the central defining criterion.

In contrast, the military rebels of the Young Officers Union (YOU), Reform the Armed Forces Movement (RAM), and Soldiers of the Filipino People (SFP) variety are excluded. According to the Party, they are not a revolutionary force and therefore, defining them from a revolutionary perspective makes no sense.

These two contrasting cases illustrate exclusive interpretations and applications of revolutionary standards.

Revolution in the Philippines began long before the Filipinos first saw a communist. The reason for stating this truism is simply to remind ourselves that our country has a long and revolutionary tradition to draw lessons from. If we have to go back in time, we need not be limited to 1968 or 1930, two milestones in communist-inspired revolution in the Philippines.

To their credit, Filipino communists themselves look farther back. The usual reference point is 1896, and for a specific reason. The year 1896 is chosen to counterpose a revolution against reform. This probably explains why Bonifacio, the symbol of the former, has always been excessively idolized by Filipino radicals and communists, as compared to Rizal who typified the latter.

From hindsight, we now realize what is wrong with this view of our revolutionary history. The bias of interpretation is that armed struggle is the litmus test of being revolutionary. This bias has been carried over in the polemics of the 1960s between the new Maoist party and the first communist party that was born in 1930.

Our difference with our Maoist friends is not about the necessity of armed struggle. We believe in the essential role of the gun in opposing ruling class violence, in building the people's capacity to fight back and exercise their rights, including the right to bring down tyrannical and unaccountable governments. We continue to salute the birth and perseverance of the New People's Army (NPA) from this perspective.

What we refuse to buy is dogma. If even a relatively fixed vision is sometimes subject to change, how much more the means for realizing it. To elevate armed resolution of social conflicts to the plane of absolutes is a type of mystification we cannot share. Practice itself debunks armed struggle determinism. We do not believe in absolute non-violence either, not so much to favor violence itself as to reject another form of absolutism. Revolutionary violence is a legitimate and rational response to the institutionalized ruling class violence.

The inequality situation at both, national and international levels, wherein more than half of global resources and wealth are monopolized by only 20 percent of the total world population, cannot be preserved without violence against so many people and the environment. Such situation cannot be changed fundamentally by mere recourse to institutional and legal means and to popular pressure.

However, we are committed to pursue the strategic goal of demilitarizing Philippine politics. We hope our friends in the NPA share the same vision.

As a deliberate choice, we locate ourselves in the legal arena. In doing so, we do not intend to set ourselves up against, our friends who have the dominant fetishism toward armed struggle among many revolutionaries.

The strategy of people's war is heavily slanted toward armed struggle. We assert the reverse: armed struggle should serve the empowerment of unarmed millions who are involved in a whole range of revolutionary activities besides taking up arms, and it would be even better if such an empowerment process could render arms irrelevant

over time. Reform and revolution feed on each other and form part of a continuum of empowerment of people and communities. They are not necessarily contradictory. 'Reformism' and 'revolutionism' are different problems altogether. They are two types of extremism that, do injustice to revolution. The former is fixated on incremental changes, while the latter inclines toward futile and mad adventures.

The communist book proclaims outright the futility of legal struggle. It is probably hitting at a straw target, reformism, which legal struggle is not. On the contrary, legal struggle offers a wider scope for popular participation and empowerment. It is up to us to optimize all possibilities this arena could possibly offer. At the end of the line, the limits of legal struggle itself will provide armed struggle the full legitimacy it deserves.

The lobby for reforms led by Rizal helped prepare the grounds for the 1896 revolution. The La Liga Filipina was no less revolutionary than the Katipunan. The two formations represented necessary phases of the same revolutionary process.

The relativity of means could probably accommodate the possibility of a party-less revolution. We beg to disagree with the book which says in absolute terms that revolution is not possible without a revolutionary party. This is perhaps one of the roots of such diseases as vanguardism, power monopoly, and one-party system.

A revolutionary movement, is necessary, and this is just to state the obvious. A party is only one of the many organizations forming a movement. We prefer a multilateral set-up with regard to participation, leadership, and governance, now and hereafter.

We challenge the notion that tends to reduce revolution to capture of state power. We are not anarchists, but we believe strongly in social empowerment. It is possible that revolutionaries could come to power without completely capturing or smashing the state machinery. In such a scenario, society would be stronger than the state which, to us, is more desirable.

We reject the monopoly power substitution that happened in nearly all communist-led revolutions. We are for dispersing power across the social spectrum. Even the communists themselves stand to gain more in strengthening, rather than undermining, civil society.

The CPP formula for a successful revolution—party, people's army, and united front—is statist through and through. Under such a scheme, popular organizations are mere transmission belts of policies and decisions that emanate from the top circles of these vertical structures. We stand for the integrity of every revolutionary organization, whether party or mass.

We recognize the integrative demand and direction of a political revolution. For it to succeed in capturing state power, it is necessary to concentrate the activities of a million souls into an iron political will. But we have learned our negative lessons from the victorious political revolutions led by communists themselves. Civil society has been sacrificed many times over in the altar of state power.

We cannot, wait for the natural withering away of the state. We are committed to create the basis for such a process here and now. That is why the bias of our activity is toward social empowerment. We throw the challenge to those who are more inclined toward political revolution to provide guarantees for the empowerment of ordinary citizens now and in the future.

The principle of diversity is an article of faith for us. It applies to both society and nature. We will oppose any tendency to homogenize and monopolize. It is tragic that socialism did not do better than capitalism in this respect, probably because they both basically share the same modernization model toward human progress.

Our continuing faith in the creative potential of revolution tells us that it is not too late to change course.

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