

THE OTHER VIEW

## The future of the Philippine Left

Saturday 13 September 2008, by [ORDONEZ Elmer A.](#) (Date first published: 17 May 2008).

**Elmer Ordonez's commentary on Roland Simbulan Departmental U.P. Centennial Lecture, "The Future of the Philippine Left", which was delivered during the Feb. 6, 2008 Social Science Week at U.P.**

The unthinkable seemed to have happened in Nepal. Reports have it that the Maoists have won a clear majority in parliament and are set to abolish the anachronistic monarchy.

People must be wondering about something like this happening in the Philippines, which has long been seen as a neo-colony of the U.S. run by surrogates from the oligarchy. The question is: will the Philippine Left be able to "seize" state power through multi-party elections?

Instructive is the lecture "The Future of the Philippine Left" given by Prof. Roland Simbulan on the occasion of the U.P. centenary. Simbulan is included, says the American Civil Liberties Union, among those "distinguished scholars who because of their ideas critical of US foreign policy, have been banned by the US government from visiting the United States."

The professor was head of the Nuclear-Free Philippines Coalition and political adviser of Sen. Wigberto Tanada who led in the Senate rejection of the US bases treaty in 1991.

The nationalist origins of the Philippine Left may be traced historically to events leading to the 1896 Revolution, and the entry of socialist ideas in the writings of Isabelo de los Reyes, Lope Santos, Crisanto Evangelista and later proletarian writers involved in people's struggles earlier in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The sixties saw the resurgence of militant groups.

Simbulan sees the revitalization of the Philippine Left "thirty nine years ago." That would be 1968, with the founding of the "reestablished" Communist Party of the Philippines, which "began to challenge the long entrenched oligarchy in a nation long considered the United States' political and military stronghold in the Asia-Pacific." Both armed and political struggles have marked the decades that followed. Severe repression has been the answer of successive administrations.

That the Philippine Left "has survived the Marcos dictatorship, the vigilantes, the end of the Cold War, the deep penetration agents, the crises and splits, and the death squads of OPLAN Bantay Laya I and II" attests to its resiliency. Simbulan says, having "survived these most terrible repressions has made the Left into a formidable social movement" that may be the "only alternative to the multi-party elites."

Simbulan notes: "The Left's presence in our national life and politics continues not only to be felt today, but is related to the struggles of our people for social justice, human rights and consistent defense of our national sovereignty."

Organized sectorally in 90 percent of the provinces, the Left mass movement is at the front line

among the peoples' struggles on "practically all issues affecting the people's livelihood, foiling attempts to institutionalize tyranny and neo-liberal globalization" as well as on issues that "impinge on the patrimony and dignity of our nation such as the onerous Visiting Forces Agreement and the Japan-Philippine Economic Partnership Agreement." Simbulan describes the Left's engagement with the State today as that of "fiscalizer, protagonist, and symbiotic partner in grassroots programs that share largesse with the poor."

This role is partly seen in the progressive party-list representation in Congress—one of the features of the 1987 Constitution that the ruling elites would like to see removed. The Constitution also institutionalizes participation of people's organizations "at all levels of social, political and economic decision-making," with the State obliged to facilitate setting up of "adequate consultation mechanisms." Simbulan says this "precious space" was the result of sacrifices made by those who died fighting the Marcos dictatorship and those who persevered despite detention and torture.

While it became risky during martial law to openly espouse Left issues, activists thought of raising consumerist issues involving pharmaceutical drugs, oil companies, sale of soft drinks, safety of toys, etc. through the Citizens' Alliance for Consumer Protection (CACP).

The Nuclear-Free Philippines Coalition started out as a desk in the CACP, and became a nationwide campaign on the issue of nuclear energy unwittingly raised by Marcos himself who warned of power shortage and had the Bataan nuclear plant built. Corruption and safety issues marked the project and thus was born nationwide resistance to it.

Simbulan cites many instances of how the Left has developed a broader "civil society" (of NGOs and people's organizations) that seeks to "integrate previously excluded groups and issues into local or national politics." Even as these groups are opposed to government, the socio-economic elite, and its self-serving politics, they recognize government's capacity to redress grievances and bestow rights.

With Bayan Muna and allied groups consistently leading in party-list polls, the party-list system, if not restricted by the state, plus electoral reforms may provide an answer to the question raised above.

Against the caricature of the Philippine Left as a terrorist group is the reputation among the international NGO community, in the words of Prof. Roland Simbulan, of the Philippines as "a superpower when it comes to social movements because of the painstaking political work of the Left."

In his paper, "The Future of the Philippine Left," Simbulan believes that "the true parent of people power is the Philippine Left." He chronicles how the Left has developed people's movements and NGOs which are "playing a role in the human development discourse—both locally and internationally—and in social transformations that are taking place in economically and politically empowered communities."

These people's movements and NGOs have challenged neo-liberal globalization policies and helped build international solidarity alliances to counter "unbridled corporate power." Simbulan also cites the work of international peace missions in reporting events in militarized local areas and making them known to the public, here and abroad.

The Palace and the US-trained military leadership, however, think that the Left "insurgency" would be crushed by 2010. But Chief Justice Reynato Puno believes otherwise. As reported by Leila Salaveria of the Philippine Daily Inquirer, Puno says that this preoccupation of President Arroyo "with wiping out the decades old communist insurgency by the end of her term in 2010 could fuel

human rights violations.”

From the start of her regime, some 850 reported cases of extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances have been documented by the human rights group Karapatan and given credence in various reports like those of Amnesty International, the Melo Commission and UN rapporteur Philip Alston.

Puno shares the common knowledge that the left insurgency has “deep social, political and economic roots and therefore should be holistically solved not only by the military and police but all agencies of government, as well as by the NGOs with advocacies relevant to this problem.”

The suspended peace talks between the GRP and the National Democratic Front, if resumed, would have tackled socio-economic and political reforms, a permanent ceasefire and the disposition of armed forces. But the Arroyo government continues with the failed policy of a military solution.

A useful side reading here would be the book *Oligarchic Politics* published by the Center for People Empowerment and Governance focusing on the new politics or politics of change of the progressive party-list groups and how the regime tries to hobble this counter-hegemonic bloc. As it is, the Constitution and its enabling act limit party-list representation to 20 per cent of Congress and allocation of members from leading groups like Bayan Muna. Progressive party-list representatives have been harassed anew with trumped-up criminal charges and threats of assassination.

Most of the victims of human rights violations in the present regime are members of progressive party-list groups and people’s organizations included in the military “order of battle”—reminiscent of the US-created Phoenix project to eliminate through death squads leaders of the Vietnamese resistance. OPLAN Bantay Laya I and II are local examples of this anti-Left project. The Visiting Forces Agreement has facilitated the entry of Phoenix-type operators in the “war on terror” in this country.

As Simbulan puts it, “the organized power of the Left especially of farmers and workers are most vulnerable to the coercive forces of the State and the oligarchy’s private armies to decimate these organizations.”

Hence, the Left’s need for a self-defense force like a people’s army in deterring “the violence of private armies, goons, and the armed forces of the state.” The suspended peace talks are intended to put an end to armed conflict brought about by State attempts to suppress the people’s desire for social justice, democracy, and national sovereignty.

The professor says the Left’s emphasis has always been on political struggle towards empowering the people. He believes that “for as long as oppression and exploitation exists, the Left will persist—in various forms of struggle—to challenge the oppressors and to continue to touch our conscience.”

He looks forward to all Left forces gathering to “unite around a national development agenda for the people’s welfare and overcome sectarianism” so they can “strategically share or even gain power like their counterparts in Latin America, Japan and Europe.” Add Nepal to this list.

If the State is sincere in achieving peace through negotiations it should resume the talks and adhere to already agreed upon protocols like those on human rights and safety guarantees for negotiators and resource persons. But will the ruling elites, the US and local cold warriors allow this?

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**P.S.**

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