

People's struggles in Latin Asia - II - Philippines, protest during the US era

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The French original had to be much shortened because of editorial constraints (thus, some few corrections have been introduced here). An even longer version is now under preparation and will be posted online in French... as soon as possible.

For the other parts of this essay, go to:

[People's struggles in Latin Asia - I - Philippines, colonial protests during the Spanish era](#)

[People's struggles in Latin Asia - III - Philippine Huk Rebellion, 1946-1954](#)

[People's struggles in Latin Asia - IV - Philippines, protests, 1950s-1972](#)

[People's struggles in Latin Asia - V - Philippines, protests, 1972-present](#)

Contents

- [The Emergence of New Popular](#)
- [Labor Unions](#)
- [Birth of the Communist Movemen](#)
- [World War II](#)
- [The Birth of the Huks](#)
- [Aftermath of the War](#)

The United States ruled the Philippines for nearly 50 years from 1898 to 1946, one of the few American colonies. At the inception of the colonial era, for the US as for Spain, control of the Philippines was geographically and strategically linked to access to China and to the maritime commercial routes in the Pacific and Indian oceans. As the colonial status of the Philippine archipelago developed importance, the US government found itself in the contradictory position of responding to domestic economic interests seeking to open the region for capital investment and other domestic economic sectors seeking protection from global markets [1]. To consolidate control over the Philippines, the US engaged in military suppression of popular resistance, co-optation of social elites, and upon independence, providing ideological legitimacy for the new regime.

The US goal never sought to build a classical colonial empire but to create a new form of imperialism through modern economic and geopolitical domination. To ensure maintenance of the system, reformist elites in the Philippines and US found common ground for an orderly transition to independence instead of autonomy driven through national liberation. In December 1935, the US granted the Philippines commonwealth status, creating an institutional framework for granting full independence 11 years later in 1946: a process that radically influenced the course of national and social struggle in the archipelago.

Lasting less than 50 years, the American colonial period was a fraction of the more than 330 years of Spanish imperial control from 1565 to 1898, but it left a particularly profound and durable stigma on the Philippines.

The early twentieth century was dramatically different than the Spanish conquest, as American colonization was already confronted with a society of entrenched class inequality and class domination that it could subordinate to its political and economic needs. The US colonial government co-opted the traditional elites in the Philippines, even at the cost of perpetuating pre-capitalist, “feudal” forms of overexploitation of the popular majority. Concomitantly, the US opened the Philippines to the capitalist world market through modernizing the agricultural sectors on the southern island group of Mindanao for agribusiness and cash crops, radically transforming the status of much of the peasantry, even if rural structures remained very complex. [2]

Under American control, the Philippines economy was restructured through replacing Spanish-European firms with their own corporations, creating a system of severe economic dependency on the US. As the plantation of cash crops expanded, the new “Manila-Americans” gained greater domination over agriculture and trade with the US, though not in manufacturing. In 1934, the US accounted for 65 percent of imports and 80 percent of exports. The Philippines became a major source of sugar, tobacco, hemp, coconut oil, and other agricultural goods and natural resources. Restrictions and quotas were imposed on Philippines commodities to protect American producers, but local production became dependent on the import of US manufactured goods and marginalized local production.

Under Spanish rule, the Catholic Church had been the principal factor in the pacification of Filipino society. Under US rule, the public school served as the most influential force in Americanizing the population, especially through English-language instruction. Spoken in public and official discourse, English eventually emerged as the primary language, facilitating the penetration of the new US colonial culture and displacing the memory of the Spanish past. Since English became the medium in education, business, and institutions, mastery of the language was necessary to advance in society. In 1911, English was adopted as the official language in courts of law.

Within the revolutionary and protest movements, the linguistic split was not easy to overcome between progressive intellectuals and the popular stratum.

Under American colonization, the separation of church and state became official and Protestantism penetrated the Philippines. However, Catholicism remained dominant, comprising 84 percent of all religious adherents in the early twentieth century, followed by other Protestant, Anglican, or independent Christian churches at 10 percent, Muslims at 5 percent, and animists at 1 percent.

To preserve itself from revolution, the Philippines Catholic Church actively intervened in support of the US conquest of the archipelago and in opposition to independence. In the 1930s, its most conservative sectors contributed to the foundation of the fascist movement of the *Phalanges*, composed mainly of Spaniards, Spanish *mestizos*, and members of the religious orders. Despite the official separation of church from state, religious institutions retained important political influence

in Filipino society.

In 1916, the US replaced the Philippine Assembly with an American-style House of Representatives and Senate, elected through limited suffrage. While the democratic electoral tradition in the Philippines is deeply rooted, the system operates on the basis of clientilism, under elite control [3], dominated by leading family clans. Far from reflecting genuine programmatic differences, party alliances and affiliations shift on the basis of power relationships and popular participation.

The American occupation forces opened the way to a triple process of colonization in the Muslim south: political and cultural subordination, appropriation of local agriculture and natural resources, and mass migration of Christian peasants from the northern and central island groups of the archipelago. With support from the US and the Philippine regime, Mindanao became an “internal” colony of settlement. The government used emigration to Mindanao as a means to reduce the agrarian economic crises in Luzon (northern) or the Visayas (central), making the Moro Muslim population a minority in their own region, outnumbered by Christian settlers and their descendants. The indigenous Lumad population now comprised a small minority of the population concentrated in the mountainous region of southern Mindanao. In the US colonial era, the conquerors and upper classes created a situation in which each of the three communities were forced to compete for control of territories and economic resources, creating the conditions of the conflict in the 1970s that culminated in mass bloodshed in the south of the archipelago.

The Emergence of New Popular Movements

No strong popular movements formed following the end of the Philippine-American War [4] from 1899 to 1902 until the emergence of a diverse opposition in the 1920s. The movements of the 1920s revealed themselves through mystic secret societies and more open peasant associations and labor unions. While the desire for independence continued, the overriding mobilization emerged through efforts to improve conditions of life and work. Social movements directed their opposition against exploiters in peasant communities or industry, typically Filipino, rather than against US imperialism more generally. Through the formation of new left political parties, a link was established between social emancipation and national liberation.

In 1938, an estimated 3.5 million of approximately 4 million people were employed in the agricultural sector. Subsistence agriculture continued to decline and rice production fell, while sugar cane, coconut products, tobacco, abaca, and other export sectors grew dramatically. The process of land concentration continued in favor of haciendas and absentee landlords. In a growing number of plantations, paternalist forms of protection by landlords were less capable of mitigating relations of exploitation. Even independent peasants became sharecroppers or agricultural laborers, trends that continued into the 1940s and 1950s, but which as early as the 1920s provoked a new wave of struggle in rural areas.

In many provinces, among the urban and rural poor, secret *Colorum* religious organizations influenced by syncretism, unifying Catholicism and local superstitious beliefs, became powerful forces of radical protest. For example, the *Colorum* revived the cult of José Rizal and Apo Ipe Salvador. Revolts broke out in 1923–4 at Surigao, Samar, Leyte, Agusan, Nueva Ecija, and elsewhere, and again in 1927 revolts spread to the Visayas. As many as 10,000 to 25,000 protesters joined the religious uprisings, but due to violent repression most movements did not survive the arrest or death of their charismatic leaders.

Protest movements were most politicized in Central Luzon, where the rate of tenancy was exceptionally high and proximity to Manila permitted numerous contacts with urban workers.

Mutual aid societies were created but, because of the influence of political clientelism, peasant movements frequently split among supporters of the Nacionalista and Democrata parties.

The first Tenant Congress was held in the capital in 1922, marking the foundation of the National Confederation of Tenants and Farm Laborers of the Philippines (Katipunan ng mga Manggagawa sa Pilipinas). The second Tenant Congress, held in 1924, issued a call to the American progressive forces to assist the independence struggle. Jacinto Manahan was its president and Juan Felco vice-president. Manahan met Chinese communist leaders in Shanghai in 1927. A year later, the organization took the name of the National Confederation of Peasants of the Philippines (Katipunan Pambansa ng mga Magbubukid ng Pilipinas, KPMP), affiliated with the Christentern or Peasant International. However, in 1930 the main organization remained the National Peasants' Union (Pambansang Kaisahan ng mga Magbubukid, PKM). The PKM assisted members in obtaining bank credits to purchase plantation land to sell back plots at low prices to tenants. This organization sought to "humanize" the relationships between owners and tenants of the land.

Labor Unions

The first non-religious labor unions were founded by the *ilustrados* to pursue the nationalist propaganda or [5] reforming capital-labor relationships, promoting mutual assistance, and fulfilling tasks of civic education. In 1902 Isabelo de los Reyes created a trade union which soon changed its name to Union Obrera Democratica (UOD), then Union del Trabajo de Filipinas, influenced by European socialist and anarchist currents, before pursuing a course of class accommodation and dissolving in 1907. [6]

The class character of militant unions strengthened progressively in the early twentieth century. In 1906 the Union of Impresores de Filipinas (a split-off from the UOD) adopted the slogan: "The emancipation of the workers shall be realized by the workers themselves." Felipe Mendoza was president and Cristo Evangelista secretary general. In 1907 the unions prohibited employers from being members. But independence did not yet assume a political nature, and union leaders continued to support one of the major large Filipino clientelist parties.

During World War I, as industrial production advanced, unions gained a degree of power. In 1913, the Congreso Obrero de Filipina (COF) was established and May 1 was officially celebrated for the first time. COF demanded legislation for the eight-hour workday, protection of women and children, and employers' liability for injuries. In 1917, the union was split again over support for Nationalists or Democrats.

While the broader labor movement was divided, tethered to the major parties and often corrupt, a left tendency nevertheless asserted itself. Cristo Evangelista, a unionist since 1906, founder of COF, and a middle-ranking cadre in the Nacionalista Party, was radicalized after a trip to Washington, DC in 1919 on the occasion of an independence mission. In 1924, Evangelista created the Workers' Party of the Philippines (Partido Obrero de Filipinas) with Cirilo Bognot. In 1927 COF affiliated with the Red International of Labor Unions in Moscow. During the return trip, Evangelista and Bognot met the Chinese communist leader Zhou Enlai in Shanghai.

In 1929, Evangelista split with COF, founding the Congreso Obrero de Filipinas (Proletariat), known also as KAP (Katipunan ng mga Anak-Pawis ng Filipinas). Under Evangelista as first executive secretary and Jacinto Manahan as vice-president, KAP sought to unify urban and rural workers, advance social progress, national independence, internationalism, and a government of the people, and establish a Soviet system in the Philippines.

Birth of the Communist Movement and Social Struggles

The communist movement of the Philippines was not an artificial creation, although it was not widespread in the country. Communists were rooted in the authentic radicalization of popular forces. By 1924, Marxist influences were already prominent in the Workers' Party of the Philippines, a precursor of the Communist Party of the Philippines (PKP). The PKP was officially proclaimed on November 7, 1930. Most officers of the KAP became central committee members. KAP quickly faced repression, especially following a wave of strikes in Negros Occidental and Iloilo. One of the leaders, Antonio Ora, died in a car accident after being arrested in dubious circumstances. More than 10,000 people demonstrated in protest on January 25, 1931. In February the members of KAP were victimized by a new wave of arrests and condemnations for sedition, and subsequently the party was declared illegal. The majority of communist leaders were liberated in December 1936 and PKP began again to function legally in October 1937, running two candidates for election.

The Socialist Party (PS) was also founded in 1929 by Pedro Abad Santos, son of a landowner from Central Luzon. Santos participated in the resistance against the American conquest, was arrested, and was liberated in 1902. In 1917 Santos was elected to the Philippine Assembly. Santos was quite popular in the peasantry through his blend of radical and realist traditions. In 1938, when the Socialist Party merged with PKP, Santos became vice-chairman. At the end of 1940, he led or influenced around 40 militant workers and peasant organizations, including the General Workers' Union (AMT), Philippine Confederation of Peasants (KPMP), and KAP, totaling no fewer than 200,000 members. Rooted essentially in Central Luzon and the capital, it was still far from reaching a national scale. On an organizational level, the merger between PS and PKP allied two very different traditions.

Other progressive political currents had a larger influence in the 1930s than the communists, in particular the Sakdalistes of Benigno Ramos, with a radical anti-colonial program that was critical of the educational system and opposed to US military bases and US control of the Philippines economy. Sakdalistes won important electoral victories, politicizing popular peasant and working-class sentiment. But Ramos eventually broke with his radical base and the movement was short-lived. However, the PKP is historically the most significant revolutionary movement of the 1930s.

Popular struggles developed during the years that followed the world economic crisis of 1929. On May 1, 1935, 30,000 workers demonstrated for the Republic of Soviets. However, these struggles were often led by semi-religious and messianic movements, or otherwise led on a purely economic program. The crushing of strikes could provoke cases of armed resistance, with urban cadres having to flee into the mountains, as Teodoro Asedillo had done; he was killed in 1935. Growing sectors of the peasantry were demanding the distribution of land, and the organization of agricultural workers spread in the plantations.

The Philippine president, Manuel Quezon, responded to social agitation by adopting a Social Justice Program, with reference to the American New Deal of Roosevelt, leading to greater freedom of association for labor unions. Otherwise, as in the past, the powerful provincial families blocked the implementation of progressive laws. The landlords had independent private armies and links within the police and judiciary. Conflicts led sometimes, as in 1940 in Central Luzon, to triangular tension between the socialist-communist left, political forces favorable to Quezon, and the hard-line right-wing sectors of the church, Phalanges, and wealthy members of the dominant classes.

World War II

During World War II, Philippine progressive organizations tested the limits of the diverse national liberation movement for independence. Although incapable of protecting the archipelago, the prestige of the US, and in particular General Douglas MacArthur, was enhanced by Japanese occupation. In the Philippine national movement as a whole, the position of those passively waiting for independence to be granted (in 1946) was strengthened. The communist movement was forced to respond to the radicalism of the social struggles in its Central Luzon strongholds while it simultaneously sought to implement a United Front policy as ordered by Moscow. [7]

The Philippine pre-war government was allied to the US, but after the defeat at the hands of Japan, many dignitaries of the Commonwealth and members of the elite sided with the Japanese administration for tactical or more complicated reasons. The Catholic Church did not oppose Tokyo, with whom the Vatican was on friendly terms, while the Protestant churches of American origin were suppressed. Japan was thus positioned to rapidly create a Philippine Executive Commission and proclaim the Republic in October 1943. Japan favored the development of Tagalog literature and secondary education.

Even before the Pacific War broke out, the Spanish embassy played the role of agent for the Axis forces, in liaison with Philippine Phalangists. Thus the extreme right, including its (semi-)fascist wing, had roots in the archipelago, and as in other Asian countries, some nationalists turned to Tokyo. However, as a whole, the population rejected Japanese occupation and its violence, repression, exploitation, and cultural shock. Most Filipinos sympathized more with the US, considering themselves superior to the Japanese, and resisted the Pan-Asian nationalist ideologies.

The Japanese invasion of December 1941, the Battle of Bataan, and the Death March that followed provoked a strong emotional identification of Filipinos with Americans. In many Asian countries, the western defeats against the Japanese (since 1905) weakened the prestige of the imperialist metropolis, reinforcing revolutionary nationalisms. Despite strong nationalist sentiment in the Philippines, World War II refocused attention away from restoration of a radical national conscience.

In 1941, the merged Communist and Socialist parties (PKP-SP) formed a popular front with trade unions and left peasant organizations, the Aglipayan Church (independent Catholics), and professionals. Moscow was then allied with the US. Consequently, the PKP projected a policy of a larger anti-fascist front. In December 1941, it issued a declaration claiming its loyalty toward the Commonwealth and Washington in the name of anti-Japanese national union. But simultaneously it announced the will to organize its own guerilla forces and its liberated zones.

In fact, the policy of anti-Japanese national union could never become concrete. The American command, which had the upper hand against the Philippine resistance, never considered the Communist Party and its networks as allies. No other significant guerilla force cooperated politically with those of the PKP.

The Birth of the Huks

The main leaders of the merged party, Evangelista and Abad Santos, were arrested by the Japanese in January 1942. The former was executed and the latter died in a guerilla zone in 1943, soon after his liberation. That did not stop the creation of the People's Anti-Japanese Army in Central Luzon, the Hukbo ng bayan Laban sa Hapon, better known under the acronym Hukbalahap or Huks for short. The Huks were officially formed on March 29, 1942 from armed groups operating in the

provinces of Pampanga, Bulacan, and Nueva Ecija. Its military committee was composed of Luis Taruc (chairman), Casto Alejandro (vice-chairman), Felipa Culala (Dayang-Dayang), Bernado Poblete (Banal) as members, with Mateo del Catillo as political advisor.

Two main documents were embraced: "The Fundamental Spirit" (guiding principles) and "The Iron Discipline" (duties and privileges of a Huk soldier). Equality between officers and soldiers was proclaimed, and the link with and respect of the population were considered absolutely compulsory. The implementation of such principles was not automatic – Felipa Culala (Dayang-Dayang) was executed for corruption and robbery, and recruitment was sometimes too rapid to assure the quality of members. The Huks published a clandestine weekly called *Katubusan ng Bayan* (Redemption of the People), and theatrical groups helped build political consciousness. Self-defense units, local government bodies (in the villages, the town, and up to the provincial level), and a judiciary system were established. The Chinese Communist Party was a model for the Huks (one of their military units was composed of Chinese living in the Philippines).

The problem remained how to reconcile class struggles in Central Luzon's countryside and the policy of a united front against Japan. According to the official line, it meant attacking landlords collaborating with Japan while proposing an alliance with the others. Likewise, the Huks renounced the creation of a central popular government, but preserved their independence of action in the regions under their control. The pressure of a radical trend was felt in Central Luzon's strongholds, where peasants and local military units often refused to renounce their social objectives in the name of national union. However, the situation remained much less tense in most other regions. As long as the occupation persisted, the leadership of PKP and the Huks kept these contradictions under control. However, it did not prepare itself politically for the new conflicts that emerged after victory, and which were in fact already shaping in early 1945: clashes became frequent between the Huks and the guerilla units linked to the command of MacArthur, which wanted to take control right away of "communist" territories.

Aftermath of the War

The Hukbalahap movement was an exception as a protest movement in the archipelago and Filipino resistance to Japanese occupation was mostly passive. Except for rare cases, the other guerilla groups linked to MacArthur's command entered effectively into action only at the time of the American reconquest: the US forces landed on the island of Leyte in October 1944 and triumphantly entered Manila on February 3, 1945, in an atmosphere of exaltation and rejoicing, even in Central Luzon.

It seems that then the PKP leadership really hoped that the Hukbalahap and the party would be integrated into the political life of the country. It adopted a program that was radically anti-fascist and anti-collaborationist, but otherwise moderate. It presented itself as a popular pressure group. To manifest its goodwill, it handed over to the US command a list of guerilla members. Faced with the intransigence of MacArthur, it placed its hopes on Roosevelt. Nothing happened. In the name of the "communist danger," a huge bloc of established interests opposed the PKP, including the American military services, the upper classes of Luzon, the police constabulary and guerilla forces, former collaborators, and the elites that Washington wanted to spare to prepare independence.

In January 1945, Huk units, having accepted disarmament after the arrival of Americans in their region, were massacred. National leaders like Luis Taruc were arrested and detained several times. The PKP retorted by organizing mass demonstrations, then by creating a Democratic Alliance with other small groups. But the repression in Central Luzon intensified, and civil war erupted in 1946.

Independence

While the US administration refused any compromise with the Hukbalahap and the PKP, it was quick to support Filipino elites who collaborated with Japan. Thus MacArthur chose Manuel Roxas, a former minister in Salvador Laurel's pro-Japan government, as first president of an independent Philippines. Washington preferred restoration to revolution and primarily sought an indefectible ally to negotiate conditions of independence. The Bell Trade Act guaranteed the maintenance of quotas protecting the agricultural sector in the US, fixed a favorable exchange rate between the peso and the dollar, and granted US citizens and firms equal rights as Filipinos in the exploitation of natural resources. The Military Base Agreement gave the US the freedom to use 23 sites for its military for 99 years.

With the support of MacArthur, Roxas won the legislative elections of April 28, 1946 and became president, with the proclamation of independence on July 4. He knew how to show his gratitude. In a speech at the American National Congress he declared that Filipinos were not "from the East apart from geography. We belong to the Western World by reason of culture, of religion, of ideology, and of economy. Although the color of our skin is brown, the temperament of our spirit and hearts are nearly identical to yours.... You have within us a partner of your political and economic system - a radio station broadcasting Americanism."

Is it possible to imagine a Thai prime minister or an Indonesian general making a declaration so degrading for the national identity? This speaks volumes for the degree of "Americanization" of the Philippine elites.

Pierre Rousset

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* On the International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest, see on ESSF:

[The International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest – 1500 to the Present](#)

[A presentation of the "International Encyclopedia of Revolution and Protest: 1500 to the Present"](#)

Footnotes

[1] Correction from the printed version other economic sectors within the colony seeking protection from global markets".

[2] Correction from the printed version: the process was more complex than directly transforming most of the peasantry "into a rural working class".

[3] Correction from the printed version: not "on the basis of formalisms that limit electoral participation to the elite".

[4] Correction from the printed version: the word "strong" was missing.

[5] Correction from the printed version: "or" instead of "of".

[6] Correction from the too "condensed" printed version which stated: "In 1902 Isabelo de los Reyes, which soon changed its name to Union Obrera Democratica (UOD), then Union del Trabajo de Filipina, pursued a course of class accommodation before dissolving in 1907, making way for organizations that were influenced by European socialist and anarchist currents." But it was Isabelo de los Reyes who initially brought in socialist and anarchist influences.

[7] Correction of the printed version, stating: "as it simultaneously sought to implement a United

Front policy with Moscow.”