

# Coalition Politics in the Philippines: Akbayan gives in to Liberal Party framework

Sunday 20 July 2014, by [CAY Darlene](#), [NONATO Vince](#) (Date first published: 13 July 2014).

**Akbayan Citizens' Action Party today is a far cry from what it was four years ago before it entered into an alliance with President Aquino and the Liberal Party (LP).**

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Once a vocal member of the opposition against past administrations, the party-list group earned the distinction of being the only group to get the President's endorsement. This despite criticisms that he has continued the same policies the group used to oppose.

After being in Congress for 16 years, Akbayan expanded well beyond the legislative arena when Mr. Aquino appointed several of its key members to high government positions following his coalition's victory in the 2010 elections.

## Appointees

Among those appointed were two of the party-list group's former representatives: Loretta Ann Rosales, named chair of the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) in 2010 and Mario Aguja, appointed board member of the Government Service Insurance System in 2013.

Akbayan members have also been tasked with heading two commissions they deem valuable when it comes to their advocacies. Founding member Joel Rocamora now heads the National Anti-Poverty Commission (NAPC), while two of the National Youth Commission's five commissioners are party members—former party chair Percival Cendaña and Gio Tingson.

Other key members were appointed to similarly high government positions. In 2011, Ronald Llamas became the presidential adviser on political affairs. Akbayan Rep. Ibarra Gutierrez III served as undersecretary of the Office of the Presidential Adviser on Political Affairs until he resigned after being nominated for the 2013 congressional elections.

Underscoring Mr. Aquino's liking for the party, he replaced Gutierrez with another party member, Tomasito Villarín. Another appointee was Angelina Ludovice-Katoh, who held office at the Presidential Commission for the Urban Poor.

Akbayan's entry into a number of government agencies is just one of the several gains that the party made from its alliance with the ruling party.

### **Reform platform**

Capitalizing on sentiments against former President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, Akbayan announced its support for LP—which, like the party-list group, was part of the opposition then—and its standard-bearer, Benigno Aquino III, in 2009.

Members of the party believed Akbayan could advance its agenda in accordance with his reform platform, mostly revolving around the country's endemic corruption.

The political appointments have been important to the party-list group because it gained more avenues to push forward its agenda, said its chair, former Rep. Risa Hontiveros.

This, however, came with a price. Akbayan had to compromise certain principles and stances on certain issues.

### **Differences**

Although the President said that he and Akbayan "think alike," vast differences exist between the two parties' priorities and policies. Akbayan Rep. Walden Bello identified major differences in economic framework, agrarian reform and foreign policy.

For one, Gibby Gorres of Akbayan Youth described the government's economic strategy as "heavily reliant on public-private partnerships and foreign debt."

Mr. Aquino did not address agrarian reform, workers' rights and the urban poor in his 2010 platform "A Social Contract with the Filipino People." Akbayan has been zealously pushing for these issues, which are mostly part of the concerns of the social movement's members.

### **Contractualization**

While the President kept job generation in mind, he did not address labor issues, such as contractualization, one of the policies Akbayan has been staunchly opposing.

Another sticking point was his silence on agrarian reform. Akbayan advocated the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (which the group acknowledged was prone to loopholes).

Mr. Aquino belongs to the clan that owned the sprawling Hacienda Luisita in Tarlac, where he

claimed to own “only” 1 percent of the estate.

## **Flip-flopping**

The formation of the alliance despite these differences led to criticisms that Akbayan has been flip-flopping on key issues. After all, the decision to align itself with other political entities meant that the parties had to make concessions.

“In terms of engaging the administration ... we used to have no access when we were solely in the streets,” said Hontiveros. “Now that we are both outside and inside the government, sometimes, we have been making adjustments, because we’re not just attacking from outside.”

## **FOI, CCT**

Some clear instances of these are its stand on the freedom of information bill (FOI), Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program, Cybercrime Prevention Act and the conditional cash transfer (CCT) program.

At first, Bello vehemently opposed the CCT, the government’s multibillion-peso flagship antipoverty measure, which gives the poorest families a monthly stipend of P1,500 in exchange for minimum attendance in schools and visits to health-care centers (Akbayan says the root of poverty is unemployment and “wide inequalities in wealth.”)

However, within the first few months of the Aquino administration, Bello changed his tune.

“Initially, Walden did not like it but after a few conversations, he accepted the CCT,” said Rocamora.

Even during the first few months of the Aquino administration, he attacked the poverty alleviation measure in privilege speeches in the House of Representatives.

In a speech on Aug. 2, 2010, he said that “we deal with poverty. I do not think we can just have band-aid solutions like pantawid pamilya.”

The Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (the start of the CCT) was initiated by Arroyo in 2008. Years later, Mr. Aquino touted the CCT program as the administration’s main poverty alleviation measure despite promising “opportunity for the poor” as opposed to the previous administration’s “antipoverty programs that instill a dole-out mentality.”

## **Unaware**

In an interview, Bello said he was critical of the program because he was not aware of its success in countries, such as Mexico and Brazil. He said that it was a knee-jerk reaction given that he was a World Bank critic, adding that he eventually came to realize that CCT worked in other countries.

“When I looked more into it ... because some people called me up, ‘this is different,’” he said.

However, in his privilege speech on Sept. 28, 2010, he said that there was a lack of “solid empirical evidence” of its success in poverty reduction.

“The evidence from Brazil is definitely not there. Our NGOs (nongovernment organizations), our partners in Brazil have, in fact, told us that the CCT program in Brazil is a major failure,” he said.

Not a month passed after this speech that Bello and fellow Akbayan Rep. Arlene “Kaka” Bag-ao authored House Resolution No. 529, along with Bagong Henerasyon Rep. Bernadette Herrera Dy.

The resolution urged the House to create a special committee to oversee the implementation of the CCT, saying that the program, after all, is “one innovative practice to achieve social protection and inclusion for the poor.”

### **Effective tool**

“The CCT is a viable and effective tool to reach the poorest of the poor provided that it is properly enforced,” it concluded.

Immediately, allegations surfaced regarding his stand on the issue, to which Bello replied in a statement two weeks later that, in the first place, he never signed the manifesto opposing CCT, which was circulated in the House by the militant Makabayan bloc.

“If one has five years left to fulfill the Millennium Development Goal of halving the poverty rate and all Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo’s administration left us was massively increased poverty, then I would not be unwilling to try out conditional cash transfers as a poverty containment strategy so long as there are strict controls and criteria for disbursement and compliance,” Bello said in the statement, which was posted on his Facebook page.

He was quick to say, however, that he was not pressured into changing his mind. “In terms of was it pressure, you know, that changed my mind, that is not,” he said.

Akbayan lawmakers seem to have reacted in the same way when it comes to another of its priority issue. In the case of the FOI bill, Gutierrez said that since Malacañang, with the backing of the ruling majority in Congress, had already presented its version of the bill, his party might as well support it so that what have been an arduous process could proceed faster.

“We should go with the one that will get the biggest consensus as quickly as possible. I want it to pass right away,” said Gutierrez.

He added that there would be less chance of it getting vetoed. Mr. Aquino, after all, was the first president he’d seen vetoing a lot of bills.

### **For coalition’s sake**

Although Akbayan members have gained more clout in pushing for their agenda, they admit that they have to bend over at times for the sake of their advocacies and the coalition itself.

Yet, the party-list group’s principles “remain the same,” Hontiveros said.

She added that Akbayan had to make adjustments in its manner of asserting its position to preserve a “minimum decorum as a coalition partner” and “to try to be effective, to try to preserve our space within.”

Hontiveros recalled that when she was a senatorial candidate with Mr. Aquino as an ally, the party-list group couldn't even "criticize Team P-Noy that much, because some of the members of the [administration senatorial] slate are also young dynasts."

## **Compromise**

Members of the party appear to have accepted this as an inevitability and live with it in exchange for the political gains they made.

"If you are a political party, you have to compromise. However, you don't compromise your principles—you compromise certain stances, you compromise certain issues, so that you will be able to win another set of issues," said Gorres, who was appointed the youth sector representative to NAPC. "I think, in terms of timing and strategizing, compromises did occur."

The CCT and FOI, however, drew criticisms that Akbayan seemed to have compromised on its reform agenda. Even if the party claims that it gained something through the alliance, whether or not it produced results is a subject of debate.

## **Vetoed**

Ramon Casiple, executive director of the Institute for Political and Electoral Reform, said that being allied with a popular president, backed by a majority of legislators, would bring the party a windfall in terms of legislative support. But even he would admit that this supposed benefit was not guaranteed within a coalition.

An analysis of its legislative performance shows that Akbayan was not necessarily on a roll compared with its years before joining the coalition. In fact, it was only under Mr. Aquino's term that an Akbayan-authored bill—the Rights for Internally Displaced Persons Act of 2011—was vetoed.

Akbayan has more or less accepted that differences will arise, especially on the issue of economic framework, something it said it made clear to LP.

"We'll stay with our party stance—agree-disagree *na lang tayo* (we'll just agree or disagree). But we can work on other issues," said Gutierrez.

Such compromises are just but a natural part of being in a coalition. "It is important to make clear why you are in a coalition," said Casiple. "You should be prepared to pay the price. The coalition will have demands."

Julio Teehankee, a member of an LP think tank, said that while coalition politics was acceptable in mature democracies, the problem lay with the dynamics of traditional politics in the country.

## **Better despite setbacks**

Still, Bello said the party found itself in a better place, despite setbacks in its legislative agenda. "We could have chosen to remain on the sidelines but I don't think that if we have remained on the sidelines some of those bills would have made it," he said.

He was referring to such victories as the much-contested reproductive health and Marcos human

rights victims compensation laws, as well as the Human Trafficking Act and Kasambahay Law.

“Coalition work is not a case of getting everything you want all the time, isn’t it? It’s a case of actually being able to get to a position where you are in a better position to push for some of your items on your agenda. And I think that happened,” Gutierrez said.

Still, Akbayan and LP’s differences in ideology cause tensions even bigger than the disagreements they had on certain legislation. For instance, they differ on what should be done with the territorial dispute between China and the Philippines.

Bello said the party was supportive of the push of the administration to get backing for the country’s claims against China.

However, he said Akbayan did not agree with the administration’s decision to enlist the support of the United States because it would subject the conflict to “superpower dynamics.”

“In this area the President told us that we cannot fight two people at one time, the US and China,” he said. “But, it’s not a question of fighting two people at the same time. It’s maintaining an independent form and politics.”

Since it was an issue that the party-list group feels very strongly about, Bello said that “we really have to reassess our position” on the coalition.

## **Edca**

In April, US President Barack Obama visited the country to sign the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (Edca) that would allow increased US military presence in the Philippines.

Members of Akbayan Youth joined protests, sporting President Xi Jinping and Obama masks while sitting in a coffee shop. The party also released a statement expressing its “extreme disappointment” and calling Edca “cheap and lopsided.”

“The Aquino administration missed a golden opportunity to secure our country’s sovereignty and national interest from the superpower games between the United States and the People’s Republic of China,” it said.

The statement, however, did not say what the party was planning when it came to its alliance with the President. Though, if the alliance is to be seen through the lens of later events, it’s as if it’s still going strong.

Although Akbayan was among the groups that called for the abolition of the Priority Development Assistance Fund, a pork barrel, to “institute reforms in the legislation,” Bello recently supported the President’s Disbursement Acceleration Program after the Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional.

“The SC’s ruling is not retroactive, but covers actions from the time of the ruling,” he said on July 1.

## **Test in 2016**

While the parties’ conflict in ideologies serves as a test for the coalition, observers anticipate what

the 2016 national elections would mean for a party-list group that was considered to have swiftly become a “party in power.”

The 2016 elections would serve as a benchmark to see if Akbayan really gained what it takes to be a national party, outside the party-list system.

For now, one thing holds: There are duties that Akbayan has to fulfill as LP’s coalition partner.

“I believe that the ethics of being a coalition partner states that we are obliged to support the would-be [presidential candidate]... of the Liberal-led coalition,” Hontiveros said.

She added, however, that the candidate should also be reform-oriented.

## Dilemma

These are the effects that Akbayan must contend with now that it has entered traditional politics. Teehankee quoted the late Popoy Lagman of Sanlakas (unaffiliated with either Akbayan or Makabayan) as saying that those who enter the “pigpen” should be prepared to get just as dirty as “pigs.”

For Teehankee, there is always the dilemma of balancing principle and power, especially when the party is in power, as in the case of LP and Akbayan.

“If you’re a party of principle, and yet you do not have power, then you will not be able to realize your principles. But if you focus too much on power, you might end up losing your principles,” he said.

### **Darlene Cay and Vince Nonato**

*(This article is based on this year’s best thesis in journalism, “Sino’ng Inaakbayan?: An Investigation on How Political Entities Give Rise to Conflict of Interest Within the Policy-making Decisions of Akbayan Citizens’ Action Party.” The study also won the Chit Estella Journalism Award and the People’s Choice Award after placing first in the Philippine Journalism Research Conference in March. Darlene Cay and Vince Nonato are journalism graduates, magna cum laude and cum laude, respectively, of the College of Mass Communication, UP Diliman.)*

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### **P.S.**

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