

Philippines: 'We need system change', says military rebel

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February 19, 2009 — Major Jason Aquino is one of the 28 officers of the Armed Forces of the Philippines charged with allegedly attempting a mutiny in February 2006. Aquino was detained on February 22 that year and held incommunicado in a windowless cell for five months.

I met Major Aquino and several other detained rebel officers in Camp Aguinaldo in early February 2009. They were all outspoken against the grossly corrupt government of Philippines President Gloria Arroyo, and their years of incarceration (as yet without being convicted of a single crime) have only deepened their politicisation. But Major Aquino — who has studied the speeches and writings of Fidel Castro and read everything he can get his hands on about the revolution in Venezuela led by Hugo Chavez — wanted to make it clear that he was “not a reformist”.

“In the present Philippine political context, the solution to our overall problem is not merely a regime change — be it through a democratic process or not — but most importantly, a systemic change.

“The primary role of the military is to protect the people. When the people become oppressed, abused and disenfranchised by a regime they elected and entrusted, it is not just a role but a moral obligation of the military to intervene together with or on behalf of the people in overthrowing a tyrannical and oppressive government and replace it with a pro-people government.”

Conversion in the field

Major Aquino is an army special operations specialist and his last post was with the Scout Rangers — a group usually seen in the field in T-shirts and headbands rather than uniforms.

“I was trained to hunt down guerrillas. I was assigned to most hotspots and remote areas in the country. While in the combat areas, most of my time was spent mediating land dispute problems, anti-illegal logging operations, dealing with petty crimes, which local officials could not or would not handle.

“I became a teacher, a doctor, a judge, a counsellor, an event organiser and even acted as a police enforcer. I had spent my time attending to concerns which were outside my sphere of expertise — things I was not trained to do — but had to do it for the people.

“Even the most basic services have failed to reach the ordinary citizen... I did my best but I just couldn't do much. It was very frustrating to see the reality on the ground and the sorry state of the people because of governmental neglect of its responsibilities.”

Views changed radically

Major Aquino and many of the other rebel officers have been thrown into the frontline of the unending wars against leftist guerrilla movements, other left and civil society organisations and also the national liberation movements of the Moro people in the south of the country. His view of these

“enemies” changed radically with experience.

“I learned about the enemy (real and perceived) in the classrooms. While in the field, I continued to study and analyse the history, psyche, motivation, organisation and operations of the so-called ‘enemies of the state’ vis a vis my actual experience with them. My exposure in the field changed my views about the enemy whom I knew in the classrooms.

“The New Peoples Army, for example, was tagged as communist terrorists’ by the government. As a ground operator in the field, I have had actual close encounters with this group and have captured some of its members. I had talked to them and found out that most of them were victims of social injustice and economic deprivation. Generally, their issues were the same as the rest of the society. “I view the left and civil society organisations as legitimate cause-oriented groups. I respect the individual person’s ideological, political and religious preferences. I believe in responsible democracy. Airing freely one’s opinion, grievances and even dissension is politically and socially healthy. The issues being raised by these cause-oriented groups are the same issues we have in the military but we just cannot openly articulate it. “I have been in Mindanao and the grievances there are the same as the rest of the country. Moro secessionist movements thrived because of loss of faith and confidence in the government for its inability and failure to address the basic communal problems. Hence, military action on the Mindanao problem is not the solution. “At the outset, the evolution of different armed groups was a consequence of the overall misgovernance of past and present regimes and not because of the emergence of a parallel or competing ideology.” {{For the country’

It is easy to see why these ideas put forward by Aquino (a son of a non-commissioned officer in the army) strike a chord with many other soldiers. While successive generations of traditional politicians (trapos as they are popularly derided) were setting world records in shameless corruption and ubervenity, the working poor, ordinary soldiers and even some junior officers struggled to get their children through schooling.

When he was a lieutenant in 2004, Aquino began to popularise the slogan Para sa bayan (“For the country”) among the troops and circulated a paper on his thoughts of the role and responsibility of the military towards the people. Other young officers began wearing T-shirts with the slogan. Not surprisingly, in July 2005 Aquino was temporarily relieved of his post for “entertaining political thoughts”.

Years of detention have only firmed up Aquino’s radical political views and he is encouraged by the strong support he and other rebel soldiers receive from other soldiers – sometimes even from prison guards.

“For the first five months of detention, I was placed inside a seven-foot by 12-foot concrete room with a steel door. I was not interrogated and I was not physically tortured [though some other rebel officers were].

“I had no sunning privilege. The guards were prohibited to converse with me. They gave my meals through a small opening in the steel door. Reading materials, glasses, personal paraphernalia for hygiene were all banned inside the cell. I had no slippers, no medicines, and no lawyers were allowed to see me for the five months.

"But my life inside was uplifted by the guards themselves, though not all of them. Some broke the rules. They talked me. They shared with me their sentiments and with what they read and heard of my advocacy defending the wellbeing of the ordinary soldiers. They knew how I fought the generals for their welfare in the army.

"After a month, they smuggled newspapers, books, soft drink, cigarettes, cold mineral water and they even made my meals palatable. Every morning, they would prepare a cup of coffee, cigarettes and a newspaper. In order to get away with inspections, they would meet my wife and friends outside the camp and brought in everything they sent.

"At first, I thought it was a scheme but two incidents proved to me that these soldiers were sincere: first, one of them was reported for talking to me and was jailed for a month. Second, they brought inside the jail my pistol for personal defence if ever something bad was to happen. I was also eventually able to send and receive untampered letters through the guards...

"The senior military officers wanted to maltreat me but the juniors and the ordinary soldiers did not follow their orders."

Call to resistance

Aquino repeated the message broadcast by military rebels to other soldiers in September 2007: "Let us not allow ourselves to be instruments of corruption, intimidation, fear, hurt and oppression against the people that we truly serve. Let us bear in our minds and hearts that public service and the military service is for the country, not for Malacañang."

This call to resistance was published in almost all print media and was also featured on national television.

Like another celebrated rebel military officer, Brigadier-General Danilo Lim (incarcerated in nearby Camp Crame, run by the Philippines National Police), Major Aquino welcomes the formation of the Partido Lakas ng Masa (PLM — Power of the Masses Party) on January 30, 2009.

"I believe that the political, social and economic direction of any democratic state towards the realisation of its people's common aspirations can only be attained by a strong people's political party with a viable pro-people platform.

"I think the PLM has correctly recognised, addressed and responded to the enduring deficiency in Philippines politics for decades: the absence of a genuine revolutionary party which is capable of uniting the common aspirations of the masses, committed to the overthrow of elite rule and establishing an egalitarian and humane society."

The rebel movement within the Philippines armed forces is deep going and has now a long history. While some rebel officers have moved to the right others have moved to the left, explains Sonny Melencio, chairperson of the PLM. Leading military rebels are the most popular symbols of resistance to the corrupt and increasingly repressive Arroyo regime.

P.S.

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<http://links.org.au/node/914>

* Peter Boyle is national secretary of the Democratic Socialist Perspective and attended the

February 2009 PLM congress as an international observer. For more background read Sonny Melencio, [The February "Coup d'etat" and the Left's alliance with the Military](#)