

The Philippine Left and Cory Aquino

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THE Philippine left's reaction to the death of Cory Aquino has been intriguing.

The CPP did a complete about-turn, literary recanting their previous position of Cory Aquino being a representative of the reactionary classes. The NDF statement laid the blame for the massacre of unarmed peasants at Mendiola under the Aquino administration – one of the most tragic episodes in the history of the left in the Philippines – at the feet of the “military and police [who] caused the termination of the ceasefire agreement between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the NDFP when they indiscriminately fired on the peasants and their urban supporters marching for land reform on January 22, 1987.”

Thus a massacre became an “indiscriminate firing” and the Aquino administration was devolved of all responsibility in a stunningly hypocritical rewriting of history.

As for Cory Aquino's active support to keep the US bases in the Philippines and against moves by the senate then to remove the bases, the NDF statement has only this to say: “She was openly critical of the long running support of the US for the Marcos dictatorship in exchange for the aggrandizement of US economic interests and the continuance of the US military bases.” Not a word on her pro-US bases stance after she came to power.

Even those of us now well-accustomed to the CPP's unashamed pragmatism swallowed hard while reading the NDF statement signed by top CPP leaders including Joma Sison. However, this is not the first time that history has been rewritten, especially by the CPP, to suit the various twists and turns in its political line.

Partido Lakas ng Masa, on the other hand, issued a statement outlining its assessment of the main characteristics of the Cory regime. It read, in part, “Cory Aquino was the icon of the revival of pre-dictatorial ‘elite democracy’ in the country. She was the symbol of a ‘people power revolution’ which deposed the dictator Marcos but failed to institute a people's power government. The governmental alliance that she established under her ‘revolutionary government’ quickly transformed into a government headed by elite groups previously persecuted by the Marcos dictatorship.”

Most importantly, the PLM statement issued by Sonny Melencio, its chairperson, implied that what was really posed was the possibility of the left leading the anti-dictatorship movement and taking political power. “While Aquino was seen as leading the downfall of the much-hated Marcos dictatorship, it is classes and not individuals that make history. There were various factors and players at work who made the ouster of Marcos a reality. Edsa 1 itself was a confluence of a military mutiny and a people's uprising. The build-up to Edsa 1 was a series of protests, sacrifices, and small-scale rebellion led by the Left and other progressive forces. It is unfortunate, however, that the Left which has sacrificed the most during the period of the dictatorship, ended up ‘politically isolated’

due to errors related to its strategy and tactics.”

It concluded by arguing that the current crisis facing the people under the rotting carcass of the GMA regime is in fact a part of Cory’s legacy: “In a sense, Gloria Macapagal’s rise to power was a product of the limited and distorted character of Cory’s ‘revolution’”.

Akbayan did not release a formal statement, but some of its individual leaders attempted to expose the real record of the Cory administration, such as its active opposition to the removal of US bases and the burdensome legacy of debt left to the future generations to carry, enshrined in what became known as the Cory constitution, which made the annual repayment of the Philippine debt mandatory.

Some leaders of Akbayan argued that the problem was the bad advisors who surrounded Cory Aquino. Others, such as Emmanuel Hizon, argued that despite this anti-people record, the Cory administration was still seen by the people as a representative of the ideal of freedom and democracy.

“Who could forget the Aquino government’s pro-US military bases stance? Who could not recall her government’s US-backed low intensity conflict and total war policy against “insurgents” which in truth harmed the masses more than its perceived enemies?”

The article then went on to explain the mass support for Cory: “[T]his woman despite her regime’s numerous social and economic transgressions is so loved and cherished by a people representing three generations of Edsas. It’s not so much because she is religious, a mother-like figure to many, a glorified widow or simply a martyr; beyond the labels, our ideological flexing and the comfortable branding of pundits, Cory has been duly recognized by the people as an icon in their transition from despotism to rule of law, their struggle from tyranny towards a sense of freedom and democracy. Cory is first and foremost the representation of that ideal, of that difficult journey towards democratization, of that collective national experience.”

And it continued, “She will also be remembered as a defender of that particular form of democracy, flawed and wanting it may be in so many ways, not measuring up to our Marxist concept of a democratic archetype. From people power 2 which removed an incompetent and corrupt regime up to her participation in the fight to throw out the illegitimate Arroyo regime and its sinister plan to amend the constitution, Cory will be remembered and respected as a person who despite her privileged status joined the people in their most trying and important political junctures.”

No Lessons Reviewed

What struck me most about the left analysis of Cory and the Cory years, however, was the lack of any serious assessment of the lessons that this critical period in history holds for left strategy today. In this sense the analysis has been a-historical. In most cases it hasn’t gone beyond the role of Cory as an individual or the reviewing of some facts of her administration’s record, instead of analysing and attempting to understand the lessons they hold for left strategy today. Does this mean that the left has nothing to learn from the EDSA revolution that overthrew Marcos and stabilised the system of pre-Marcos elite rule? Or is this a form of denial, a refusal to collectively look at the period head on and draw the relevant lessons for today?

After all the Aquino years were a ‘traumatic’ period for the revolutionary left, having to come to terms with its own failure in losing the leadership of the political revolution, as well as having to suffer ongoing repression with the massacre of farmers in Mendiola, as well as the assassination of leaders of the movement, Rolando Olalia and Lean Alejandro.

The EDSA revolution was a double-edged sword for the revolutionary left: a partial victory in building a mass movement that overthrew the dictatorship, but also a defeat of its strategy. Most importantly, today, we continue to live with the legacy of all this.

I think that the left has only made a partial assessment of the EDSA revolution and its aftermath. I have always believed that a more comprehensive assessment is necessary, because it is of the utmost importance that we learn the lessons for today.

As historical materialists our starting point should be that classes make history and not 'great leaders' (and not even political parties, which are the tools used by the working class in the struggle). As the PLM statement correctly points out, "While Aquino was seen as leading the downfall of the much-hated Marcos dictatorship, it is classes and not individuals that make history."

We should also internalise that Napoleonic dictum that 'Defeated armies learn well'. This is something that the Cuban revolutionaries managed to do in the aftermath of the defeat of the Moncada rebellion on July 26, 1953 (celebrated a few days ago) and then went on, a few years later, to lead a successful insurrection resulting in the Cuban revolution in 1959.

I think that the Philippine left is still grappling with this and is an army that has not, as yet, learned its lessons well.

Some lessons and more questions

Admittedly some lessons have been drawn by sections of the left and it's important that these are summarised. While these positions are differently nuanced amongst the various political parties or blocs, the main lessons can be identified as follows:

- (i) The importance of the left intervening in the electoral arena, and
- (ii) The rejection or questioning of the Maoist strategy of protracted peoples war.

Others have also pointed to the important role that the military plays in an insurrection or political revolution. The transitional demand for a Transitional Revolutionary Government put forward by Laban ng Masa during the height of the struggle to oust the GMA regime, was also partially referenced by the government of Cory Aquino which was then referred to as a 'revolutionary government'.

A key lesson of the 1986 EDSA revolution is the importance of the electoral tactic in the mobilisation of the masses and the capture of government and political power. The CPP's ultra-left, electoral boycott tactic was a fatal error leading to the isolation of the left and the victory of the elite over the anti-dictatorship upsurge. If the CPP had fully participated in the election campaign and used the electoral tactic to the fullest extent possible, to mobilise the masses, the outcome of the EDSA revolution would have been different. Cory and the elite forces' victory in February could have been followed by a revolutionary October, as the CPP Chair Jose Maria Sison, then promised. This never came to pass and instead we experienced a period of decline of the revolutionary movement.

The left learned this lesson hard and through the 1990s started to run its own candidates and participate in the electoral arena. However, the overall character of the left electoral intervention has been to play the electoral card in an extremely conventional way, within the boundaries set by traditional bourgeois politics, that it has become impossible to differentiate the left's electoral campaigns from those of the *trapo* candidates. 'We have to play the game' was the justification

given. And the left certainly did 'play the game'. So much so, that the CPP's electoral organisations were the de facto party list of choice of the GMA regime in the 2001 and 2004 elections (an assessment, quite rightly made, in the *Inquirer* editorial of July 27). The mobilisation of the masses is not the aim, but the winning of seats is, and by any means necessary.

The revolutionary movement in Latin America has once again placed the electoral tactic on the agenda. In Venezuela and Bolivia the revolutionary movement used the electoral tactic to capture government and then proceeded to extend and consolidate a revolutionary political and state power. This lesson and experience is now being extended to Nicaragua , El Salvador , Uruguay and Ecuador.

The lesson for us in the Philippines is that the electoral tactic, under certain conditions, such as during an extreme crisis of elite rule and a sharp rise in the class struggle (as was the case in the period leading to the collapse of the Marcos dictatorship) can be used to mobilise the masses on a massive scale to create a major breach in the system of elite/bourgeois rule. This is a key lesson of the EDSA revolution and a lesson from the advances made by the revolutionary movements in Latin America today. However, as long as we use the electoral tactic purely within the boundaries set by *trapo* politicians, our political gains will be extremely limited and our movement will suffer the problems of opportunism, that so marks the left's electoral interventions today.

We also need to start by asking ourselves the right questions in the process of trying to draw useful lessons. Why is it that sections of the elite have time and again been able to use populist rhetoric, to mobilise and lead the *masa* to serve their own interests, including in winning the leadership from the left? For me this is a key question, or maybe even *the* key question, that needs to be posed over and over again, especially during periods of crisis such as the one we face in the Philippines today.