

The Challenge to Philippine Socialists of the Aquino II regime

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I call it the Aquino II regime not only because of its name and kinship ties to Aquino I but more so because of the basic continuity in terms of class, ideology and politics from Aquino I to Aquino II. Of course, there are differences between the two given the distances of time and context but I assert that in those three terms there is more of continuity than breaks.

This fundamental similarity is easily established by three indicators : 1) the dominant forces which brought them to power, 2) the configuration of their Cabinet which in our presidential system is the alter ego of the leader of the government and State, and 3) the strategic and policy declarations of these regimes and their leader.

Aquino I and Aquino II are thrust to State power by an elite alliance that I prefer to call EDSA elites in combination with popular support. This elite alliance includes powerful sections of the big bourgeoisie and big landowning-agribusiness blocs, and leaders or blocs whose influence are critical in the military and police establishments and key ideo-cultural and political institutions of the State like the Catholic Church, the media, the major academes, and the important professions. Popular support is provided by a broad base among the middle class and a large mass of the working people, urban and rural.

The key Cabinet positions under Aquino II, like foreign affairs, defense, finance, trade, economic planning, and interior and local government, are occupied by persons whose ideological, political and personal ties date back to Aquino I and who belong to or are closely identified with big bourgeois circles and the United States. In this sense, the Cabinet of Aquino II is closest to that of Aquino I in 1988 when liberal democrats, hardened by the anti-fascist struggles and popular mobilizations, were removed under pressure of Rightwing coups and the United States.

Aquino I and Aquino II both profess strong commitment to democracy which in class, ideological and political terms is clearly bourgeois democracy. Unlike what developed in the West, the Philippine variant

shares power with semifeudal lords and is suffused by rentier and patronage, and now patrimonial relations with the State. Our version of bourgeois democracy gives formal constitutional liberal freedoms to all, including the middle class and the urban and rural proletariat, but restricts them in practice through a myriad of political, economic, socio-cultural, ethnic and gender barriers and mechanisms. This reality and ideological construct, I believe, are both well understood and accepted, though in varying dimensions, by both Aquino I and Aquino II.

As I said earlier, there are differences, of course, between Aquino I and Aquino II. Their contexts vary which differentiates their positioning and roles in relation to strengthening bourgeois State rule and its opposite, the development of proletarian and popular power.

Aquino I rose to power on the crest of a popular uprising and a military revolt, an extra-constitutional mode. This explains why most of the regime's will and energy was directed towards stabilizing its rule and the institutions it built. Aquino I had to do it on two fronts. First, by overcoming the coup threats from Rightist rivals and coopting them by pushing aside the liberal democrats. The second, by countering the challenge of the revolutionary Left and containing the potentials for proletarian and popular power offered by the popular uprising.

In contrast, Aquino II is brought to Malacanang via an election that is widely accepted as credible and where his major rivals, Estrada and Villar, conceded to his victory. In addition, he gained the support during the electoral campaign of a significant ruling class faction, a consistent opponent of Aquino I, that of Danding Cojuangco. This plus the huge electoral vote Aquino II garnered should enable him to do much better than Ramos and Estrada, and much much more than Macapagal-Arroyo in consolidating bourgeois State rule and even widening the base of bourgeois democracy.

Let me explain further. It has long been in the agenda for the Philippines of the United States and its capitalist allies like the European and Japanese governments as well as global multilateral agencies like the IMF and World Bank to modernize the Philippine State and make it a stable apparatus for global capital operations and still a front-line base against the enemies of the United States and its allies. This agenda has been expressed in such language as fighting corruption, economic reforms and governance reforms. To push this agenda, political pressures, loan conditionalities, development aid and counter-insurgency are used.

In the course of time, domestic forces and elements like the Makati Business Club, technocratic circles associated with the IMF-WB and global business networks, a number of intellectuals, and social democrats and social liberals have gravitated towards this agenda. Defensive about the continuing failure of the neo-liberalism espoused by successive regimes from Aquino I to Ramos to Estrada to Macapagal-Arroyo to solve the poverty of the majority, they came up with anti-poverty programs which put premium on State delivery of social services rather than on redistribution of sources of wealth and the political empowerment of

the poor majority. Once again, we can expect them to increase the gargantuan foreign and domestic debt only to finance these programs and resort to socio-cultural engineering to whip up a mantra of success with the aid of media moguls.

This alliance of global and domestic forces has started to form under Ramos, was disrupted by Estrada (not by a sustained populist drive but by taking in other sections of the elite - the taipans and rent-seeking rivals of the EDSA elites who are not so welded to this agenda), restored by GMA but who blew it later when her big-time fraudulence and corruption divided the ranks of the EDSA elites. Now this alliance has once more jelled under Aquino II and this time, with Danding Cojuangco.

Aquino II has forces behind him which can effect the modernization of the Philippine state though within the allowable perimeter of capitalist globalization and US strategic interests in this part of the world. This modernization will consist of an efficient state, instituting transparency and accountability through bureaucratic means, a professional and constitutionalist AFP and PNP, a decisive shift to agribusiness from redistributive land reform, and an approach to the Mindanao peace problem that will reconcile elements of MOA-AD with the claims of big business and the Filipino majority within the unsullied constitutional integrity of the Philippine State.

This modernization is stripped of such essentials of classical modernization like industrialization and a redistributive land reform and agricultural modernization which the Philippines needs to lift the large majority from poverty and provide a decisive component for sustained prosperity. Even by the standards of the refashioned modernization of globalist and domestic neo-liberals, breaking up political dynasties, semifeudal warlord enclaves, private armies and rentier practices are imperatives. They will have to deal with Kamag-anak Inc. and Danding Cojuangco and the political dynasties, warlords and rent-seekers who joined the Noynoy campaign; the turncoats from the GMA and Villar and Estrada camps; and those who will remain oppositionist like what will remain of the GMA bloc and the Marcoses. Are they serious about this task? And can they hack it?

CHALLENGE TO SOCIALISTS

These are challenging and interesting times for socialists. But the first and foremost challenge should be addressed to ourselves. And by ourselves, I mean not only those who stick to or join socialist organizations who openly espouse socialism. I include those in the social movements and political blocs and independent advocates who consider themselves part of what is called the Left community.

I submit that in the face of this challenge, we all have to shape up or pack up, as a saying goes. And shape up ideologically, politically, organizationally and may I add, ethically.

I can understand those among us who will point to the economic crisis

and the other internal contradictions of the new regime as an assurance that the winds of fortune will blow in our direction, possibly sooner than we expect. Indeed, they are conditions that can ignite a resurgence of the proletarian movement. But lest we forget, the many severe manifestations of the economic crisis have been with us for years and years. The previous regime which lasted for more than nine years had never relished a real period of relief from political crisis. But has the socialist movement or the Left grown stronger?

My address this afternoon cannot provide a sufficient answer that can do justice to this question. I can only present a number of assertions that can help our Left community in our soul-search and deep study for solutions to our predicament.

I submit that a mounting influence of pragmatism is eating away our ideological, political and organizational capacities to challenge the bourgeois regimes and the State. Our struggle against dogmatism during the great split of the Left in the early nineties has invited pragmatism to enter our ranks in droves and infect us seriously.

Through the years, our agitations and propaganda on issues have loosened up on systems critique of capitalism and bourgeois democracy and their accommodation of the semifeudal, and imperialism. We can hardly hear socialism being said and advocated openly. We stop at calls for regime change and we satisfy ourselves with united front regime alternatives. Rarely do we openly assert the socialist standpoint of our critique and our alternatives. A serious lag in the study of philosophy, political economy, State and revolution and socialism is most evident.

I am quite sure that among our ranks the two-stage theory of the past is no longer the culprit; this applies only to CPP-led forces. Rather, defensiveness about the collapse of the socialist camp and the weakening of the revolutionary Left has led many of us to exaggerate the need to be more acceptable to the thinking in vogue, to be more "concrete" in its empiricist meaning, or to be more doable and palpable in NGO language. Before we become fully aware of it, our reform struggles have lost their strategic moorings.

Many have become so obsessed with tactics, even tactics to serve tactics ("tactics as process") without seriously cultivating a strategic perspective. Obviously, this has led to political opportunism of various stripes, shameful even.

Of course, we must have tactics. We must make good in our struggle for reforms. But we must go beyond the "engagements" of the NGO movement. Our NGOs have been of much help in research work and going into the knitty gritty of issues and concrete alternatives. Our duty is to incorporate these into a larger frame which will show how proletarian or popular power is built step by step to make sure the desired changes are sustained and develop in the direction of radical alternatives. For example, our fight to make public utilities like power and water accessible and affordable to all must clearly take the stand for nationalization or

community ownership at the local levels but with mechanisms that will build accountability to the public instead of State or any other form of bureaucratization.

Most if not all socialists have taken up the electoral struggle as a significant arena for the socialist struggles. Here, the sway of pragmatism is most visible. Probably because of the long string of electoral defeats of the Left, many tend to substitute the principled socialist position of education, mobilization and organization of the working people and other popular sectors with strong notions of “there is no substitute to victory” and “winnability.” There is no debate about the objective of winning but not to the point of unprincipled and indiscriminate forging of alliances, “nuancing” and massaging of messages to cater to *trapo* (traditional politicians) and bourgeois media-fed crap, and worse, tactics or what is called dual, or triple or hydra-headed tactics which only accentuate before the public eye a craving for power and money. Winning only makes sense if the votes are clearly an endorsement of our positions and confidence in our parties and leaders. Votes other than this are just bubbles.

To a regime whose key Cabinet portfolios are entrusted to those loyal to global capitalist institutions like the IMF-WB and to US strategic interests, socialists must unmistakably take a position of strategic and basic opposition. We must always take to heart our insurrectional direction. Socialists must carry the fight to all arenas, from the streets, communities and workplaces to parliament, media, and academic and public intellectual debates. The struggle for reforms must be guided by the orientation of people before profits and the step by step establishment of public power. Socialists must challenge the regime’s anti-corruption drive to go beyond weeding out the notoriously corrupt to that of establishing rules and mechanisms where popular power gets to be more and more expressed and sustained.

In times like this where bourgeois power heads towards consolidation and manages to get popular consent, the aforementioned tasks are not going to be easy. The election of 2010 has saved the legitimacy of the EDSA regime from the abyss to which Macapagal-Arroyo has brought it. We can expect the ideo-cultural, political and military institutions of bourgeois power - domestic and its global patrons, to roll into action and further consolidate itself.

We are not lacking in sources of strength to face this challenge. The organized forces of socialism, of the Left, may be small at the moment but the Left has deep roots in our popular culture and our historical imagination as a people. We are to be found in many day to day and major battles to defend and promote the rights of the working people. Just open up a conversation in many *umpukan* (gathering) and *tambayan* (watering hole) in our working class and middle class areas and they will tell you of the proud images of activists they have known before and until now - principled, men and women of sacrifice, intelligent and studious, always of help to their problems and complaints, and brave, always for the oppressed, the masses, the country.

After the great splits and the crisis of socialism worldwide, we went through a very trying period of survival. I believe this period is over. We have the lessons of the past and new learnings, new organizations and a new generation of leaders combined with experienced and steadfast seniors. And we have Latin America and the global justice movement as inspiring beacons and powerful support. Let us keep the faith.

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