

Philippines: A challenge to the left in the Aquino government

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July 21, 2011 — The election of President Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino III brought with it increased mass expectations. The president’s campaign slogan of ridding the country of corruption and the wanton displays of greed and abuses of power was welcomed with cheers and hope by a population sick and tired of the graft-ridden regime of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo (GMA).

With the entry of the [parts of the] left into to government — the ascent of the Akbayan party list as a coalition partner of the Noynoy government — the expectations of some sections of the left were also heightened. Akbayan sees the strategy of working with the presidency as an alliance with a “reforming section” of the bourgeoisie, and through such an alliance it expected a number of reforms to be put in place.

What standards?

But we should also ask ourselves, what standards should the left set for a reform agenda, especially when left political parties are in a coalition government? Surely, it should not be to merely hope for a better presidency than that of GMA, the most unpopular presidency since the Marcos dictatorship, which had no reforming agenda or ethical standards. Instead the standards set for the new government should consist of implementing some genuine reforms addressing the basic issues of the masses. These are the issues that the mass movement has been campaigning for decades now, such as:

- debt moratorium to finance social welfare projects
- scrapping of the value-added tax
- repeal of the oil deregulation law
- termination of the Visiting Forces Agreement [with the US military]
- genuine land reform program
- a living wage for workers
- passage of a reproductive health bill supporting women’s rights.

We had no illusions that the Noynoy government would adopt a program ala-TRG (transitional revolutionary government) that the left put forward during the campaign to oust GMA. But there was some expectation of meaningful reforms if the left held power and influence in a coalition government with the bourgeoisie.

With the left in government, we must set the bar much higher when assessing the progress made within the last year. How far have we gone in the “reforms” undertaken by the government?

The campaign against graft and corruption has made a good start but it keeps getting blocked in various deadends: even the aim to cleanse the graft-ridden Armed Forces of the Philippines has now been contained to a few retired generals. Only the minor bureaucrats feel the sting of the anti-corruption investigation and the big ones, including GMA and her family, or even the big-time crooks such as the Marcoses, are not really threatened by it.

Aside from the high-profile investigation of graft and corruption, not even minimal reforms have been implemented by the present regime. By even a minimalist standard, this government cannot be judged as one implementing a reform agenda. To this extent, the left strategy of working within the government had proved to be ineffectual and sadly wanting.

On the contrary, the neoliberal program continues to be implemented in all of its fundamentals and even in the details. On none of the issues that the mass movement has been campaigning for over the past few decades, especially against neoliberal policies, has there been any meaningful progress. At best the tactics of the left have been one of containment — of defending and protecting the president from the mistakes and blunders of the governing team and helping maintain the illusions of a reforming presidency. Ultimately, this also means defending the neoliberal government program of the president. If this course continues, the left could face dire consequences in the period ahead.

How to move forward

How do we move forward on the basic agenda of the masses is still the key question. The left being in government under the Aquino presidency has not achieved any positive momentum in this regards. So how do we continue in the period ahead?

There is no other way but to rebuild and renew the independent mass movement and the independent mobilisation of the *masa* [masses], drawing new generations and new layers in to struggle. This means that the movement must be politically independent of the government and the governing parties. Only by protecting its political independence in this way will the movement be able to fight uncompromisingly for the demands of the *masa* — not as “pressure groups” (or as others would say, “watchdogs”) of the government, but even in direct opposition to it.

The left being in government could compromise the development of such a movement, with potentially disastrous consequences. A president that has no political will, and a government that is not committed to meaningful reforms, will take the easy route (*ang matuwid na daan*) of continuing down the anti-people path of neoliberalism.

We conclude with a warning: as the illusions and expectations of the *masa* in the Noynoy government recedes, as is the current trend, the political crisis that will inevitably unfold could easily break out such as to give the right-wing forces the initiative and advantage. Such a risk is even greater if the left is tarnished and compromised by its participation in a government that does not represent the interests of the *masa*. The left must demonstrate its political independence from this government and put itself forward as an independent alternative that the masses can identify with and rally around.

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