

# Philippines' Bernie Sanders: A Conversation with Walden Bello

Thursday 5 May 2016, by [BELLO Walden](#), [HEYDARIAN Richard Javad](#) (Date first published: 8 March 2016).

**“In struggles for democracy and equality there have always been setbacks, but the important thing to keep in mind is: there is always what French philosopher Alain Badiou calls the “Event” on the horizon, which renders present setbacks as transient. Here in the Philippines, things are very fluid, and new forces of reform can emerge. Ultimately, it is up to us, in the Left, to swing with those forces (for change) to push our goals for genuine democracy. Because if we don’t then the other, nefarious forces will do so. Nature abhors a vacuum, and so we can’t allow dangerous forces to exploit it. We live in an epochal era, and as Rosa Luxemburg aptly put it the: the choice confronting us is “either socialism or barbarism.” If the Left doesn’t step up to the plate, then fundamentalism – whether religious or nativist – will fill in the vacuum.”**

In a country known for its capitalist excesses and broadly center-right values, a self-professed “democratic socialist” is now the most favorably-perceived presidential candidate [1]. And if nominated by his party, he is expected to rout any of the likely nominees of the opposing party. Bernie Sanders, according to the CNN/ORC Poll, will beat Donald Trump by a staggering 12 percent. Down the road, such head-to-head polls may ultimately prove as unreliable, but clearly Sanders is far from a marginal political force. He is as mainstream and as relevant to today’s zeitgeist as you can get, for he stands for a vision of a more democratic and egalitarian America.

Without a doubt, Sanders has captured the imagination of people, especially the millennials, around the world. His relentless assault on financial capitalism, and audacious call for a ‘political revolution’ [2], reflects a wholesale rejection of American oligarchy. In many ways, he represents not only an opposition to mainstream American politics, including Hillary Clinton, but, more dramatically, stands as an anti-thesis to Donald Trump’s fear mongering demagoguery [3], which is undermining American image across the world. In many ways, history is on Sanders’ side.

An influential study by two leading political scientists, Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page [4], from Princeton University provides an irrefutable account of how American democracy has morphed into a 21<sup>st</sup> century oligarchy, where predatory elites and overbearing interest groups have rendered the average citizen as completely non-consequential in shaping public institutions and day-to-day governance of America.

America is no longer, if it ever were, a land *of, for, and by* the people. No wonder then, leading intellectuals such as Francis Fukuyama, in *Political Order and Political Decay*, have warned about the frightening decline of democratic institutions in America, while Thomas Piketty, in *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, has warned about the impending return of the Gilded Age. Of course, Sanders’ ability to overcome the ‘Hillary machine’ is increasingly in doubt, especially given the strength of the latter among minority groups, who have thrown their lot with whom they believe is the more viable candidate in the main race for the White House.

But the very fact that a little-known, formerly independent politician from the state of Vermont has managed to come this far reflects the sheer yearning for principled politics based on progressive values. More than anything, Bernie Sanders is a phenomenon, inspiring many likeminded progressives around the world to enter the stormy world of politics in order to push back against the disturbing rise of quasi-fascism, demagoguery, and elite democracy. In the Philippines, a former American colony with an even more troubled democracy, one person comes to mind: Walden Bello.

Author of more than 14 books and winner of a myriad of prestigious international awards, the Princeton-trained political economist is widely considered as among Asia's most prolific thinkers. Without a doubt, he is the Philippines' most celebrated intellectual. But instead of confining himself to the comforts of cutting-edge academic life, he has spent most of his life first and foremost as an activist, beginning in the Vietnam War era and entering its zenith during the years of Marcos dictatorship.

In recent years, he took a quantum leap by jumping directly into the snake pit of Philippine politics as a member of the House of Representatives — among the most oligarchic institutions on earth. Sandwiched among political dynasties, corporate lobbyists, and traditional politicians, he effortlessly pushed for important legislations to nudge his native country, the Philippines, one step closer to genuine democracy.

And he has rarely, if ever, wavered in taking on powerful figures and forces along the way, including the Philippine President Benigno Aquino (a former ally) as well as Filipino boxing sensation, Manny Pacquiao.

Despite all the odds — that is to say, lacking machinery and funds, especially when compared to that of a myriad of celebrities, re-electionists, and members of established political dynasties joining the race — the world-renowned scholar decided to take on the Sisyphean task of running for the Senate. Running as a “no bullshit” candidate, he aims to carry out a robust anti-corruption platform if elected as senator. You may not agree with some of his ideas, or be flabbergasted by his seeming obstinacy on certain issues, but hardly anyone can question Dr. Bello's commitment to his principles. Curious about his fateful decision, and even more curious about his political plans, I recently sat down with him for an interview. Below are the excerpts of our exchanges.

**Question: Why did you decide to run for a national office? Didn't you have enough of Philippine politics?**

Walden Bello: First of all, I had a “mixed experience” back in the Philippine Congress, where I represented Akbayan [party-list]. During my term [2009-2015], we were able to get some important legislation through, namely the Reproductive Health law [Republic Act No. 10354], CAR [Comprehensive Agrarian Reform] extension law [Republic Act No. 9700] as well as the Marcos compensation act [Republic Act No. 10368]. However, there were a lot of heartbreaks along the way, including our inability to pass the Freedom of Information (FOI) bill, of which I was one of the principal authors. I was formerly an ally of the administration, but when its good governance policies became, in my view, hypocritical, and, especially, when the president [Aquino] refused to take responsibility for the botched Mamasapano operation, I decided to resign, especially since my party [Akbayan] decided to stay in the coalition with the ruling [Liberal] party.

At that point, I thought that was it — the end of my political career after six years in congress. So I resumed my academic life, heading to Wisconsin, New York and Kyoto over the succeeding months, with focus on the ongoing crisis in the global economy, especially the Chinese economy. But towards the end of the year, I got drafted [to run for national office] around August 2015, and I told people (a fairly broad coalition) who were drafting me, why you want to send me back to the snake pit? After all, I said no to power when I could not trust those who were in power. Eventually, however, I took

the proposal for me to run for [higher] office seriously, having been satisfied that they wanted to work hard to make sure I will make it to the Senate.

Question: Do you see similarities between your platform/advocacies and those of Senator Sanders of Vermont? Do you think “socialism”, or whatever political system that pertains to, still has a place in a 21<sup>st</sup> century electoral democracy, whether in America or the Philippines?

Bello: I see a lot of parallelism; Bernie and I both began as academics, and he was very much influential with anti-war movement circles during the Vietnam War. It was the same thing for me. I became progressive-socialist at the same time as he did. I did also spend much of my political life in the United States as exile [from the Marcos dictatorship], but always maintained my focus and advocacies on the Philippines. The difference being: Unlike me, he never became a Marxist-Leninist. Although I eventually left, after 14 years, the Communist Party of the Philippines, around the late-1980s - a decision mainly born out of my deep concern with democracy and human rights. I have, however, retained my progressive-socialist perspective. I can see myself as a democratic socialist, or progressive socialist. I advocate popular democracy.

Frankly, I don't think the label matters, but what matters is popular, people-centered control over the economy. The first time I saw Bernie was in 1998, when he asked me to testify at a congressional hearing vis-à-vis International Monetary Fund's role in bringing about the Asian Financial Crisis [in 1997]. And he did a great job [in the US Congress]. He has read my books. The last time I saw him was in December 2015, in Iowa, and we had a good, brief discussion. The main thing I told him was that I was glad that he is running [for White House] and that many people around the world are rooting for him, since what happens in the United States will affect the whole world.

**Richard Javad Heydarian: Let's get real. Do you think either of you two have a chance in the upcoming elections?**

Walden Bello: I think that we do have a chance, but it is going to be a steep uphill struggle. But one thing about politics is that it always carries surprises in its bosom. And the big surprise that has propelled Bernie forward is this outpouring of disgust and anger at Wall Street and speculative capitalism, especially among young voters. These are people who grew up after Cold War so they don't buy the red scare and anti-communist biases being thrown against Bernie [by his opponents]. Similar thing here in the Philippines, where many voters are from the post-Cold War era and have been equally disgusted by the shortcomings of the post-EDSA [people power uprising] elite democracy. Just like in the United States, there are also sectors that are open to Trump-like autocratic/strongman figures. So the current crisis has reinvigorated both the right and the left in United States as well as in the Philippines. The oligarchy is now under assault by a reinvigorated right and left. I think we in the left have the responsibility to make sure the authoritarian darkness of the past will not return.

One thing I am pushing for is an end to traditional politics and the agents of corruption in the Philippines. The whole society in Philippines is angry at and so sick and tired of corruption. I think that every progressive candidate has to have a strong stance on corruption along with other egalitarian positions such as agrarian reform, security of tenure, and socialized housing as well as a developmental program that brings about balanced growth and proper distribution of wealth. I think corruption in the Philippines is the symbol of the rottenness of the system. But what is more important than platform is character — how a candidate is embodying his/her advocacies. I felt it is my duty to show that there are people who are willing to fight traditional politics. The important thing is to show that you can stand up for your principles even at the point of giving up power, as I did last year. I am not sure if this is enough to make me win, but it is important that I help mobilize a popular push against corruption.

I hope, these coming elections, we have enough people with progressive leanings elected into office so that we can form a critical mass for reform, which has been absent so far. Surveys [suggesting reactionary candidates in the lead], so far, are not very inspiring at this time, but who knows what is going to happen in coming weeks. The political system, could, as Sanders' campaign shows, especially in the initial stages, break out and open. To paraphrase Lenin, with whom I have substantial points of difference, "We want to make sure that 2016 will be a year when the ruling class cannot rule in the same way" - a point on which I agree with him.

Socialism of Eastern Europe was a failure. But if socialism means people have a say in the running of their country — embodied in terms of cooperatives, workers council, democratic management of the country, in terms of participatory democracy, in terms of building what some people call mixed-economies, where there is democratic control on all levels of decision-making — I think that is an imperative in our age. Economics is not a science for the few but a legitimate arena for popular participation. We have to demystify economics. We are facing such a systemic crisis — both in terms of finance as well as climate change — that it beckons us to be open to radical alternatives, and without a doubt democratic socialism is the way to go forward.

In politics, first of all, we have to hope because there is no other choice. Second, the situation is extremely fluid, so there is definitely a room for genuine change. As has been shown in recent history, what seems to be impregnable — from Marcos dictatorship to Communists regimes towards the end of Cold War — could melt into thin air. Even finance capitalism that seemed riding high not long ago came to a sudden collapse during the 2007-08 Great Recession. In struggles for democracy and equality there have always been setbacks, but the important thing to keep in mind is: there is always what French philosopher Alain Badiou calls the "Event" on the horizon, which renders present setbacks as transient. Here in the Philippines, things are very fluid, and new forces of reform can emerge. Ultimately, it is up to us, in the Left, to swing with those forces (for change) to push our goals for genuine democracy. Because if we don't then the other, nefarious forces will do so. Nature abhors a vacuum, and so we can't allow dangerous forces to exploit it. We live in an epochal era, and as Rosa Luxemburg aptly put it the: the choice confronting us is "either socialism or barbarism." If the Left doesn't step up to the plate, then fundamentalism — whether religious or nativist — will fill in the vacuum.

**Question: How do you see the role of social media? Doesn't recent experience show its utility not only to forces of reform but, increasingly it seems, the reactionary forces?**

Bello: I am very worried, the lesson of the 2011 Arab uprisings was that democratic forces can use social media [to topple autocratic regimes] initially, but over the years the initiative was usurped by the ISIS. So there is this ambivalence there that we must confront. In the Philippines, I think that progressives should have the capacity to use the social media for the good cause. I think the Left is yet to exploit it to its maximum capacity, especially when compared to the reactionary forces.

Nonetheless, I still think that image-building through social media has its limits; you can't oversell a bad product, especially when there is a large gap between substance and image. The Left should step up in the realm of social media, but we should make sure that we are honest and truthful in projecting our programs, policies, and advocacies. I made sure that this is and will remain to be the case in my own campaign. We must reconcile image and substance, and we progressives have a lot of catch up to do. We have to be, using Gramscian parlance, hegemonic in the social media.

**Question: What do you think is the role of public intellectuals in democratic politics? Do they still matter?**

I think public intellectuals will always matter. Their appeal, historically, has been confined to

selected groups. Public intellectuals should not expect popularity à la celebrities, because once they do, they are no longer public intellectuals. Their role is to throw seeds out there and see them grow. Personally, I am not going to fall for advises [from pundits] that I should supposedly reduce my works to soundbites [for political purposes]. My most enduring works continue to be those that I invested so much work and energy in, which were bereft of soundbites. These were not easy books, they were not soundbite books.

Should public intellectuals participate in politics? I am flexible on that question.

If you feel that you have the capability to become a politician — to push your ideas directly — then I respect that. There are those who prefer to be safe in the ivory tower and can't stomach usual politics — shaking hands with all sorts of people and courting popular support. I felt that in my own career, I was able to, not only through writings but also through direct contact and participation in politics, push for my advocacies. I don't enjoy politics. But it is necessary to engage in it and, I believe, it is my duty to engage in it.

**Richard Javad Heydarian**

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\* From Hufftington Post, March 8, 2-16:

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com/richard-javad-heydarian/philippines-bernie-sander\\_b\\_9406166.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/richard-javad-heydarian/philippines-bernie-sander_b_9406166.html)

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## **Footnotes**

[1] <http://edition.cnn.com/2016/03/01/politics/donald-trump-hillary-clinton-bernie-sanders-poll/>

[2] <http://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2015/jul/18/bernie-sanders-calls-for-political-revolution-at-democratic-fundraiser>

[3] <http://www.vox.com/2016/3/1/11127424/trump-authoritarianism>

[4] [https://scholar.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/mgilens/files/gilens\\_and\\_page\\_2014\\_testing\\_theories\\_of\\_american\\_politics.doc.pdf](https://scholar.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/mgilens/files/gilens_and_page_2014_testing_theories_of_american_politics.doc.pdf)