

[OPINION]

Overview: The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) as thought police

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'A reign of terror is about to be imposed on the university by idiots whose main criterion for red-tagging you is that if you sound subversive or you are critical of the president and the military, then you must be a rotten subversive'

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In every society, there is an institution that plays the main role of policing ideas so that they do not subvert the established order. In the history of every country, there has taken place this struggle between a thought police and the forces of intellectual liberation. What is peculiar to contemporary Philippines is that the role of the thought police is being performed by the Armed Forces (AFP).

How did the AFP assume a role that in other societies is played by civilian agencies of the state, political parties, or religious authorities? A brief excursion into our history might be useful to help us understand this anomalous development.

The thought police in Philippine history

During the Spanish colonial period, it was the Catholic Church that played the role of thought police, and indeed the Church was far stronger than the colonial government. It was the powerful religious orders that determined what ideas were acceptable and who were those filibusteros that deserved incarceration or death. Even governor generals had to watch what they said or they would find themselves unceremoniously shipped back to Madrid on grounds of being "liberals."

Along with a new colonial regime, liberalism was imposed from above during the American period. Liberalism, with its assault on clerical rule, was initially a positive force, with its paraphernalia of national sovereignty, political rights, elections, representation, and separation of powers. But there were limits to the free play of ideas and liberal tolerance. Questioning private property and the unequal distribution of economic and political power it created put socialists and communists outside the pale, subject to arrest and persecution by the civilian authorities.

The Cold War, missionary democracy, and counterinsurgency

With the advent of the Cold War, the Philippines dutifully set up the same system of ideological

repression of progressive thought created in the US that came to be known as McCarthyism. Communism was proscribed, Marxist reading material was considered dangerous, and even progressive nationalists such as Senator Claro M. Recto and the former Jesuit priest Hilario Lim were suspect and subject to close surveillance by intelligence agencies.

The Cold War was not to be won, however, only through repression of progressive ideas and incarceration of their bearers. To people who came to be known as “Cold War liberals,” it was primarily a war of ideas, and here the Communist threat was to be countered with the vision of American-style democracy.

The emergence of this ideology of missionary democracy was described thus by the author Frances Fitzgerald: “The idea that the mission of the United States was to build democracy around the world had become a convention of American politics in the 1950’s,” so that “among certain circles it was more or less assumed that democracy, that is, electoral democracy combined with private ownership and civil liberties, was what the United States had to offer the Third World.”

Translated into competition on the ground with communists and progressive nationalists, missionary democracy took the form of the doctrine “counterinsurgency.” Counterinsurgency, known mainly for its application in Vietnam in the late sixties, was actually pioneered in the Philippines, a point then US Undersecretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz stated in 1985: “The Philippine Armed Forces do not need any lectures from us [on counterinsurgency]. In fact, one could say that they wrote the book on how to fight insurgency successfully against the Huks in the 1950’s.”

True, the AFP “wrote the book on counterinsurgency,” but it was under the close guidance of the storied CIA officer operating under US Air Force cover, Colonel Edward Lansdale. Lansdale’s key insight was that since revolution was primarily an ideological and political process, counterrevolution strategy also had to have politics and ideology in command.

Looking back at his experience in the Philippines, Lansdale wrote that in the struggle against the communist Hukalahap in the late 1940’s and early 1950’s, “the most urgent need was to construct a political base for supporting the fight. Without it, the Philippine Armed Forces would be model examples of applied military doctrine, but would go on losing.” Once this was done, the government could “use this political base to mount a bold, imaginative, and popular campaign against the Communist guerrillas.”

The key innovation in the AFP’s approach to internal warfare pioneered by Lansdale was called “civic action.” Taking a leaf from Mao’s celebrated instructions to the Chinese People’s Liberation Army on how to relate to peasants, Lansdale wanted to “civilianize” the army’s image in this battle for hearts and minds by having them perform “benign” non-military duties. Not only were army units required to respect civilians and their property, but some were tasked to perform emergency relief duties, provide medical aid to villages, and undertake rural construction projects. The most effective civic action initiative promoted by Lansdale and his protege, Defense Secretary and later President, Ramon Magsaysay, was the EDCOR program, the military-managed land resettlement scheme for Huk surrenderees in Mindanao.

The political aspects of counterinsurgency were emphasized but not to the detriment of its military side. Accompanying civic action were aggressive small unit patrols taking the fight to the enemy; replacement of corrupt officers with younger, idealistic commanders like Captain Rafael Ileto, one of the founders of the Scout Rangers; detailed intelligence work; and aggressive recruitment of informers and planting of agents in the Communist Party and Huk chains of command. These tactics were carried over later to the struggle against the re-founded Communist Party and the New People’s Army.

More than any other army in the world today, the AFP is guided by the doctrine of counterinsurgency, even as the latter has been discredited in its country of origin, the United States, owing to its failure in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is not an army built for conventional war against a foreign invader but for a non-conventional war against elements of its own people, in particular the so-called “communist threat” that encompasses a large and varied range of people, including liberals and “dupes” and “enablers” of the Communist Party and New People’s Army.

The institutionalization of counterinsurgency in the Philippine military has contrasted with the extremely weak development of a counterrevolutionary ideology on the part of the civilian authorities beyond a knee-jerk anti-communism. Not unexpectedly, into this vacuum stepped the AFP and its institutionalized doctrine of anti-communist counterinsurgency to do battle with the challenge of Philippine radicalism.

Counterinsurgency at UP

This is the social and historical context of the AFP’s unilateral tearing up of the 1989 UP-DND accord. Yet the anti-radical approach it brings to its assault on the university is one that has departed far from its original inspiration.

The “idealistic” side of counterinsurgency, the promotion of political and economic reform to counter the ideas of the Left, is now completely gone. Lansdale’s key idea of the priority of ideas in the battle for hearts and minds has now been completely junked by the current generation of counterinsurgency specialists like Gen. Antonio Parlade, chief of the AFP’s Southern Luzon Command. There is no counter to the ideas of revolutionary transformation of Philippine society offered by the different forces on the Left.

Unlike Lansdale and Magsaysay in the fifties, all the AFP’s current ideologues have to offer is a purely negative strategy of scaring people with the image of the CPP-NPA as viruses that “infect” the minds of students and professors, young and old, and “gullible” celebrities like Catriona Gray, Liza Sembrano, and Angel Locsin. All the AFP-Duterte alliance can brandish is the iron hand that will allegedly stamp out the ideas of the Left in the same manner that it is supposedly stamping out the coronavirus.

To be sure, this ideological poverty is not entirely the fault of the AFP since the whole Philippine ideological establishment has long run out of attractive counterrevolutionary or conservative ideas to oppose to the radical critique. Marcos’ “constitutional authoritarianism” never got off the ground. And post-Marcos, the civilian intellectual establishment has had nothing on sale except a neoliberal ideology that has economically bankrupted the country, and a system of elite-controlled “democracy” that few would dare defend as democratic.

What the UP community can expect from the AFP are not attractive counterrevolutionary ideas but penetration of classes and organizations by intelligence agents, intimidation of both students and professors who fear being blacklisted on account of what they say in class, and watchful military simpletons who can’t tell the difference between Karl Marx and Groucho Marx. A reign of terror is about to be imposed on the university by idiots whose main criterion for red-tagging you is that if you sound subversive or you are critical of the president and the military, then you must be a rotten subversive.

The AFP’s ideological inspiration, Colonel Lansdale, were he alive today, would probably tell Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana that the way he is acting is the best way “to lose the war,” as he put it to Lorenzana’s predecessors in the 1950’s. Fortunately for UP, it doesn’t have to deal with Lansdale

but with fools like Lorenzana and Parlade, who exemplify the truth in Groucho Marx's assertion that "military intelligence is a contradiction in terms."

Unfortunately for the whole country, however, many inquisitive and curious young minds will suffer, many of them arrested and imprisoned, before the AFP thought police realize that instead of suffocating them, their incredibly short-sighted, stupid approach will end up multiplying the ranks of partisans of the cause of justice and truth.

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- <https://www.rappler.com/voices/thought-leaders/opinion-afp-as-thought-police>

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