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Francisco “Dodong” Nemenzo Jr.: 1935-2024

Philippines: The uncommon life and struggles of Francisco ‘Dodong’ Nemenzo

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Once in an era an uncommon person comes along whose life bears the stamp of profound influence on the actions of others and on society. Such was the life of Francisco “Dodong” Alfafara Nemenzo who passed away at the age of 89 last Dec. 19. An unorthodox Marxist scholar of politics, an inspiring socialist leader-activist of movements for social change, and a well-loved and highly respected academic mentor and professor, he stood head and shoulders above others in his time.

Yet, but for his contrarian disposition and his inborn disdain for the ordinary and the conventional, his life could have taken a different turn. Encouraged by his conservative parents, he entered the seminary after grade school at the age of 12. He could only stand a year of religious ideas and dogmas, and left abruptly.

At the University of the Philippines, Dodong started voraciously reading Karl Marx and Frederick Engels while vainly trying to get the UP Student Catholic Action (UPSCA) to be more open to progressive ideas. But he did meet the campus beauty and UPSCA leader Ana Maria “Princess” Ronquillo. They were also both with the University Student Council. True to his conviction that the personal and political go together, Dodong began his courtship of Princess by gifting her a copy of Engels’ “Socialism: Utopian and Scientific” with the dedication: “That we may be of one heart and mind.” They got married soon after Dodong started teaching at the UP College of Public Administration. By then he had also turned into a thoroughly convinced atheist.

Dodong’s decision to be initially in “public administration” rather than “political science” unveiled his innate sense of propriety. His father, the eminent zoologist Francisco Nemenzo Sr., was then the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences where political science was taught. To avoid any conflict of interest or talk of favoritism, Dodong opted not to work under his father. When the time was right, he moved to the UP Political Science Department.

After earning his master’s degree in public administration at UP with a thesis on “The Land for the Landless Program of the Philippines,” Dodong secured a scholarship to do a PhD at the University of Manchester in the United Kingdom. In London, he first got involved with radical activists who were Trotskyists and anarchists but eventually gravitated towards the Communist Party of Great Britain.

Comrades

At the same time, he started corresponding with the former UP firebrand Jose Ma. “Joma” Sison who was already a top cadre of the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP). The PKP was then undergoing a revival and revitalization to overcome the decimations from the failed Huk rebellion of the late 1940s and early 1950s. At Manchester, Dodong secured his PhD with a dissertation on “Revolution

and Counter-Revolution in Burma and Malaya.” When Dodong returned to the Philippines in February 1965, Joma recruited him into the PKP.

Thereafter a close friendship and comradeship flourished between them, with both being elevated as the youngest members of the PKP’s provisional central committee and, later, the Politburo. Their families bonded together and Dodong and Joma would have joint birthday celebrations, their natal days being a day apart. Princess also stood as godmother (*ninang*) to the Sisons’ second daughter while Joma was *ninong* to the Nemenzos’ second son.

In 1967, however, the two friends parted ways when Joma left the PKP to form a rival communist party. Dodong chose to stay on at the PKP, a decision he would later regret. As the new Maoist-oriented Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) swiftly expanded and attracted militant youth cadres, the PKP stagnated and fell behind, its Huk-era leaders adopting an overly cautious strategy, fearful of repeating the mistakes of the past and inviting reprisals from the state. Expectedly, conflicts, some turning violent, arose between the two communist parties.

Dodong headed the PKP Education Department and recruited young student activists as his staff. They revived the party’s propaganda arm by publishing two newspapers in a party-acquired printing press and outing out regular position papers on national and international issues. Intensive education seminars and cadre training programs were also initiated.

Martial law

When President Ferdinand Marcos Sr. declared martial law in September 1972, the PKP leadership argued that the new situation boded well for it as the main target of Marcos was the Maoist CPP. A party circular ordered its cadres to desist from engaging in armed warfare against Marcos and to continue the parliamentary form of struggle.

At the Politburo, Dodong objected to this assessment and gathered urban-based activists and cadres to mount armed opposition to martial law in the cities. He resigned from UP and went underground. Deprived of a rural base to fall back on as the latter remained under the control of the PKP old guard, he soon realized the futility of his maverick moves. Worse, the PKP retaliated by declaring him and his group guilty of treason to the party followed by the abduction and execution of the dissident group’s top leaders after summary trials. Dodong managed to elude the same fate while stranded in a rural village in Central Luzon. Those assigned to eliminate him refused to follow the order and let him escape to Manila. Following this turn of events, he had no recourse but to cut his ties with the PKP.

Dodong, however, would be apprehended by Marcos’ military in January 1973 and would spend almost two years in prison. Princess had joined him in the underground and was similarly arrested and incarcerated. After his release, Dodong was reinstated as a professor of political science at UP, where he devoted himself to teaching and research, imparting radical and socialist ideas to a generation known as “martial law babies.”

As a result of his PKP experience, he had adopted an unconventional and unorthodox approach to Marxism, rejecting a staid and uncreative application of Marx’s ideas and analyses of society and revolution, and critical of both the Soviet and Chinese models. Commenting on the splits and conflicts between various Philippine Left formations, he identified sectarianism and dogmatism as the bane of revolutionary movements everywhere.

Academic life

As a professor, he was a favorite of students who were drawn to his revolutionary and heretical ideas

on politics, society, and life in general. Moreover, he had an affable, generous and highly approachable personality that made students comfortable with him. For some reason, even his Visayan accent was attractive to some women students. In an FB post, a former student, Babeth Lolarga, wrote: “Francisco ‘Dodong’ Nemenzo Jr. was that memorable political science professor who made Marx and Lenin so palatable to us students that we were ready to march out with raised fists after his lecture or smack the first multinational corporation executive on the nose. That was how persuasive he was.”

Upon his return to academic life, Dodong was thrust into administrative work—first as dean of the then still unified College of Arts and Sciences, chancellor of the UP Visayas constituent university, faculty regent, and, in 1999, president of the UP System. As an academic leader, he championed academic freedom and autonomy, critical thinking, students’ rights and welfare, and resisted incursions of the martial law state into the academe.



He recounted the interview for the UP presidency by the UP Board of Regents thus: “The Board of Regents—sitting *en banc* as the search committee—asked me point blank if it is true that I am a communist. I said, ‘Yes, with a small letter ‘c,’ meaning I remain a Marxist but I do not belong to the Communist Party of the Philippines or the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas. I had severed my ties with the latter. If elected president, I will take no orders from any external group. The university will be my singular concern.

“I refused to recant even if I no longer belonged to a communist party. I still believe that Marxism is the best framework for analyzing capitalism. It would be sheer opportunism to repudiate what I sincerely believe in just to get the presidency. But I would never use my authority as president to promote an ideology. The university should always be an arena for contending schools of thought. Throughout my incumbency I kept in mind that UP is a school operating in a capitalist system. To institute radical reforms in the university, that system must be wrecked; otherwise, the benighted forces of reaction will have the pretext for intruding into this refuge of free thought.”

Upon the 1983 assassination of opposition leader Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino Jr., Dodong joined former senator Jose W. Diokno in establishing Kaakbay (Kilusan para sa Karapatan at Kalayaan ng Bayan), which formulated a democratic and nationalist alternative to martial law politics and economics. Liberal nationalist ideas, however, were beginning to sound inadequate in the aftermath of the Marcos dictatorship’s horrors and the complicity of the capitalist and ruling classes in maintaining an oppressive and exploitative system whether under martial law or the liberal democratic setup that succeeded Marcos.

Bisig

Accordingly in late 1986, Dodong headed a group of Marxist activists who had left the CPP and PKP, independent leftists and left social democrats in establishing the socialist formation, Bukluran sa Ikaunlad ng Sosyalistang Isip at Gawa (Bisig), or “Union to Advance Socialist Thought and Deed.” The group characterized the Philippines as a capitalist society and argued that the socialist paradigm and program should now guide social movements for radical change. He was Bisig’s founding national chair.

Dodong’s influence and his brand of political analyses resonated among not only leftwing circles but also reformist officers in the Philippine Armed Forces who sought his counsel and advice and conducted learning sessions with him on all topics related to Philippine and international politics. An unlikely friendship also grew between Dodong and Joseph “Erap” Estrada, when the latter was still a senator who opposed the presence of US military bases and continued until Erap became president of the Philippines. It is believed that Erap was instrumental in Dodong’s assumption of the UP presidency in 1999.

In 2016, Dodong contracted bacterial meningitis that physically incapacitated him—relegating him to a wheelchair and 24-hour caregiver assistance. But his mental acuteness remained intact, and he continued to participate in forums and symposiums albeit with reduced speaking facilities. At the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution in 2017, he delivered a 2-part 4-hour lecture on the global significance of the Bolshevik takeover of Russia. At the Marx 200 lecture series in 2018, he gave a 3-hour lecture on the history of the socialist movement in the Philippines. In the 2022 presidential election, he gave unqualified support to the presidential and vice presidential candidacies of worker-leader Leody de Guzman and radical scholar Walden Bello whose electoral platform for a socialist Philippines was the first in the country.

Dodong never fully recovered from his ailment. Over the years, his condition slowly deteriorated. After three hospital confinements in a span of three months in 2024, he passed away, leaving a legacy of principled and unswerving commitment and action to the cause of the working classes, the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized, and lasting hope for a better and humane world for all.

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