

Estrada's decline and the Philippines' left

Tuesday 11 September 2007, by [MELENCIO Sonny](#) (Date first published: January 2000).

Contribution given at the Second Asia Pacific Solidarity and Education Conference, organized by the Democratic Socialist Party in Sydney, Australia, January 2000.

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Former movie actor Joseph Estrada was elected president of the Philippines in a landslide vote in June 1998. This electoral mandate, however, paled in comparison with the people's mandate that brought Corazon Aquino to power in 1986. The latter was a product, not of an election, but of the people's power uprising known as EDSA.

This comparison is significant in that Estrada's landslide represents a lowered expectation of the masses in the government that they voted into office. The people's euphoria during the initial period of the Aquino administration was subsequently damped by the regime's incapacity to alleviate the destitution of the people during its six-year existence. The succeeding administration of Fidel Ramos was a continuation of this suffering.

Some former left personalities who helped set up Estrada's electoral machinery, like Horacio "Boy" Morales and Ed de la Torre, former leaders of the National Democratic Front (the democratic front of the Communist Party of the Philippines), explained that their support for Estrada was based on his being the lesser of the evils who ran for presidency. According to them, he could at least listen to the voice of the poor because his movie image and his personal character both tended to be identified with the poor.

Estrada's supporters exploited the image of the actor and campaigned for him under the slogan "Erap for the poor". Some of them even hailed Estrada as a populist, putting him in the same league as former president Ramon Magsaysay in the 1950s, whose personal style of consultation with the people was legendary. But it turned out that the most talked-about personal style of Estrada was not consultation with the poor but drinking sessions with his buddies. Even to call him a right-wing populist was to give him too much credit.

In fact, this so-called populist image was soon put to the test, as something ominous happened shortly after Estrada took office. During the first months of his presidency, poor people coming from around the country trooped to Malacanang (the presidential office) looking for jobs promised by his campaigners. The palace soon set up an office to dispense job referrals to various government agencies. At first, the crowd came in tens, then in hundreds, and, eventually, there were thousands camping at the gates of the palace. One morning, when the gates were finally opened to allow a few dozen people to enter the palace, pandemonium broke loose and the guards had to use batons and

tear gas to disperse the crowd. Three or four people died in the tumult, which led to Estrada closing down the job referral office; the function was returned to regional and local government offices to avoid another “disturbance”.

But this was not the last of the disturbances. Estrada also campaigned for massive low-cost housing projects for the poor. But his promise was not matched by the will to follow through. One housing project that remained unoccupied for years (because the government was looking for poor families that could afford the rent) was taken over by poor families coming from various provinces. They were charged with illegal squatting and forcibly thrown out of their dwellings by riot police who tear-gassed the whole village.

So after one and a half years of the Estrada administration, the poor are slowly recognising that they have been had, and that this regime is as useless as the previous ones.

Economic doldrums

The economy is still in the doldrums despite the crowing of the International Monetary Fund. Industrial production dropped by 1.4 per cent in 1999. The value of the peso dropped by thirty-one per cent. Real unemployment is at fifty per cent of the labour force. By September 1999, around three million workers had lost their jobs to retrenchments and closures of industries.

There is massive unemployment in both the urban and rural areas. An extensive shutting down of factories in Metro Manila recently affected big industries such as pharmaceuticals, garments and textiles, car assembly and others. Despite good harvests last year, agricultural products cannot be sold and are rotting in warehouses due to massive dumping of imported agricultural produce.

Bankruptcy and unemployment in the rural areas have led to a continuing population explosion in the cities. Economic desperation rules the cities, reflected in the number of beggars and others trying to survive by hawking anything they can in the streets.

In fact the entire economy hangs by a thread, and if you ask any government official, this thread is woven by millions of overseas contract workers, who contribute around US\$8 billion a year to the dollar inflow.

So far, the only accomplishment of the Estrada government is the passage of the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) with the United States. This treaty allows the us to use its former military base facilities for refuelling, for rest and recreation purposes and even to conduct war exercises. Estrada campaigned in the Philippine Senate to get the treaty approved, on the pretext that it would provide more jobs (in the “tourism”, i.e., prostitution, industry), and therefore more money to the economy. The VFA was approved by the Senate six months ago, but until now, even the promised boom in tourism has not materialised.

In terms of other accomplishments, the Estrada regime is in fact merely continuing the neo-liberal economic policies of the former administrations, from Marcos to Aquino and Ramos. These take the form of further trade liberalisation, privatisation and deregulation of the economy. Estrada’s latest project is to have the constitution (the 1987 “Cory” constitution) amended by the Congress to keep it “in tune” with the “globalised” economy. Estrada’s campaign for the “Charter change” (or Cha-cha) has galvanised various oppositions (including Aquino and church leader Jaime Cardinal Sin), and led to a recent spate of mass mobilisations and protest actions.

The left’s response

The rallies and marches that hit the streets of Metro Manila from July to December 1999 show that

the organised left is very much alive. At the very least, their forces and base are still intact. That these mobilisations, running from a few thousands to tens of thousands, continued almost without let-up during that period is both refreshing and significant in the political atmosphere today. It signals the comeback of the “parliament of the street” that was so popular in the 1980s.

The biggest of these mobilisations was the August 20 rally in Makati, participated in by 80,000 people. It was also instructive due to the spectrum of political forces that joined the rally. This spectrum was colour-coded. One-third of the participants belonged to the “yellow crowd” of Cory Aquino, i.e., the upper petty bourgeois groupings that used to participate in the Aquino rallies in the 1980s. Another third came from the “white crowd” of church forces, while the rest were the “red crowd” militants coming from the various groups of the left. There was no ambiguity about people’s affiliations, as participants observed the colour coding down to the colour of their clothes.

The August 20 rally showed that the liberal bourgeoisie (represented by Aquino) and the liberal church forces (represented by Cardinal Sin) have a strong leadership over the gathering parliament of the streets. They can still muster the yellow and white forces and direct the gathering movement along a bourgeois reformist track. In fact, the main criticism of the two liberal leaders against Estrada’s Cha-cha scheme is not that it aims to fast track the neo-liberal agenda, but that it opens up the possibility of an extended term of office for Estrada.

But it was mainly the left forces that kept up the six months of protest actions. What is also significant about this spate of rallies is that it showed the increased tendency for various left groups to unite and to march together. In fact, in all these rallies the left forces can be divided into three separate groupings: the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) forces, the Popoy Lagman group (of the former head of the Manila Rizal regional committee of the CPP) and all the other main left groupings.

The major blocs in the third grouping include the Kilusan sa Pambansang Demokrasya (KPD), Alab-Katipunan, the SPP, forces belonging to the Partido Proletaryo Demokratiko (PPD) and others. In all these mobilisations, the CPP forces and the Popoy group maintained a sectarian stance, organised their separate activities and refused to join united left actions—which outnumbered those of the CPP and Popoy groupings.

Dangerous times

In November and December, almost all polling agencies reported a drastic drop in President Estrada’s popularity rating. From as high as seventy-five per cent, it went down to around forty-five per cent. Surprisingly, a survey of 500 top corporations reported a negative rating for Estrada, exploding the myth that the business sector was squarely behind him. The survey shows a creeping disenchantment and discontent with Estrada by sections of the ruling class.

Issues raised by the business sector focus on Estrada’s cronyism, especially the type of cronies he keeps, and his high-handed manner of dealing with the capitalist captains of industry. One story circulating in business circles claims that Estrada summoned the head of a major telecommunications company in the dead of night and castigated him for not selling his shares to Estrada’s cronies. The next day, reports had it that the shares had been sold forthwith.

Estrada’s cronies, whom newspapers report being involved in some shady deals, consist of the likes of Mark Jimenez, who has an extradition case pending in the United States regarding illegal contributions to President Clinton’s campaign fund. Jimenez used to be Estrada’s adviser on Latin American affairs, which, according to rumours, involve Colombian “affairs” or dealings with the

Medellin cartel. Another alleged crony is casino king Stanley Ho, reportedly also an illegal contributor to the Clinton campaign and head of the so-called Asian mafia. If rumours are to be believed, their operations involve the laundering of narcotics money that is now circulating in most poverty-stricken Asia-Pacific countries.

The disenchantment of the business sector comes on the heels of widespread rumours of a possible coup d'état against Estrada. Estrada himself has identified a Makati business circle, a Quezon City business circle and a group led by former president Ramos as plotting to destabilise his administration. We have also come into contact with a group that admits the authenticity of coup plans. Some of those involved are preparing the ground for an acceptable civilian leadership to take over once the coup succeeds.

In my view, a coup seems to be a losing proposition, given the support of US imperialism for Estrada. But there is no discounting the fact that power-hungry idiots abound in the country, and a slim chance of success may be all they need in order to mount a coup attempt. The plotters may even be emboldened by the Pakistan scenario, where the military ousted Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif without the US doing anything to stop it, afterwards adopting a wait-and-see attitude.

A coup would be primarily aimed at attacking the remaining democratic rights of the masses. It would aim to crush the revolutionary and progressive forces in order to save the crumbling system. In the event of a coup, the SPP will use all our available forces and resources to resist and to rally the people, not in support of Estrada, but in support of a government that will be run by the poor.

Estrada has not openly acknowledged the possibility of a coup (he merely prattles about the so-called destabilisation scheme of his opponents), though he has attacked the US think-tank Stratfor for publishing reports that he may not last his six-year term of office (Stratfor projects that Estrada will be impeached before the end of his term).

On the other hand, Estrada's successive actions during the past few months belie his confidence. He is strengthening his flanks and defusing the situation. Estrada appointed his close supporter, the human rights violator Ping Lacson, as head of the Philippine national police, openly bypassing military seniors. Recently, he deployed battalions of marines to Metro Manila on the pretext of keeping order. To pacify the Aquino and Sin forces, he declared the cancellation of Cha-cha and appointed Aquino's supporter Alfredo Lim as head of the Department of Interior and Local Government.

Third scenario

In the SPP's political platform issued a year ago (published in Links No. 12), we mentioned three possible scenarios on the development of the political situation:

- President Estrada could be forced to deal with the mass discontent through an iron fist. This might take the form of escalating infringement of existing democratic space, and a resort to presidential emergency powers to quell discontent. Increasing authoritarian tendencies are already visible.
- Other factions of the ruling class could resort to drastic action through parliamentary or extra-parliamentary means (coup etc.).
- Both the above scenarios referred to the reaction of the ruling classes to an escalation of mass discontent. The third scenario—in which mass discontent can lead to a revolutionary upsurge—is based on the capability of the revolutionary and progressive forces to unite and provide political leadership to the gathering movement.

The SPP's analysis has been proven quite sound in many aspects. But to paraphrase Marx, our aim is not merely to interpret the situation in various ways; the point is to change it by intervening as conscious elements. We focus now on the possibility of the third scenario.

The left movement in the Philippines is exceptional in that, despite all its blunders and shortcomings, it has not been thoroughly defeated nor crushed compared to its contemporaries in Asia (the PKI in Indonesia, the Maoist movements in Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore). It is in fact growing, although very gradually today, as shown in the July-December mobilisations. The Philippine left is exceptional too in that a large proportion of it has not collapsed to the right, as has much of the left in Europe and in Latin America. The left in the Philippines continues to carry on militant activities aimed at raising the revolutionary consciousness of the masses.

The problem with the Maoist CPP, for instance, is not that it is moving to the right but that it remains trapped in an ultra-leftist framework. There may be groups that are abandoning the revolutionary project and are part of the governmental machinery now, like the Popular Democrats headed by "Boy" Morales, but it still remains to be seen whether their leaders can continue to take the mass bases of these organisations in a rightward direction if the situation deteriorates further.

Left unity

The above factors should be considered in instigating a left unity project. We may have ideological differences, but the fact remains that there has been a high level of political unity among our ranks as shown in the recent mass mobilisations. It is clear that there are no fundamental political differences among the revolutionary socialist left.

Left unity has a special importance in the Philippines today. Some groups have admitted that the social vanguard is scattered and dispersed among various groups, and that no-one can claim to encompass them.

It is in this light that the SPP has been very conscious in projecting the tasks of "generic" socialists in today's situation. The SPP has also shown to various groups the possibility of a left regroupment, as it is itself a product of a merger of former CPP and Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP, the old pro-Moscow party) forces, with some leaders coming from the left-wing of the social democrats.

By "generic", I mean socialists who belong to various left groupings and who understand the need to carry on the democratic, anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist struggle in the Philippines.

There is a need for regroupment, if only to ensure a strong socialist intervention in the political arena. Socialist intervention should be non-sectarian. It should not be advanced in the interest of any one group, nor should it exclude any group from intervening in the political arena. Socialist intervention should aim at raising the level of propaganda among the masses. It should include demands that are not merely do-able (within the capacity of the capitalist state to grant) or economic, but that clarify the need to seize state power.

This is what we refer to as advancing transitional demands that challenge or expose the capitalist state and the system. The SPP has been raising the slogan of the need for a government of the poor, by the poor and for the poor. This may not sound class-conscious enough to some, but the poor in the Philippine context can only be the working class, the urban poor, the peasantry and the lower sections of the petty bourgeoisie. This slogan allows us to counter indirectly the old national-democratic concept, which includes the national bourgeoisie in the so-called "national democratic revolutionary coalition government".

There are of course difficulties in the pursuit of left unity. We have to be careful not to get bogged down in ideological debates that close off the prospect of political discussions. Issues such as the character of Philippine capitalism (whether backward capitalist or semi-colonial and semi-feudal) and the evils of Stalinism can and should be dealt with in the proper context. Debates of this type can be addressed through a left newspaper like Progresibo. For more theoretical discussions, the SPP has been circulating its internal bulletin, *Manifiesto*, among the ranks of the non-sectarian left. Left unity is possible at this stage around a set of political demands or issues that the left can agree on. The SPP offers its political platform as a starting point. Basic questions such as the correct revolutionary attitude to the Estrada regime should be dealt with first. In order to block the drift towards right-wing politics among some left groups, we must immediately address such burning political questions as our attitude to the IMF-World Bank's structural adjustment programs, the Charter change (a total rejection or the convening of a constitutional convention), the debt issue and tripartism or class-struggle unionism, among others.

The prospect of left unity seems to be increasing. Some groups have raised the possibility of forming a revolutionary united front on the model of Latin America's revolutionary regroupments (the early phase of the FSLN, FMLN etc.).

We cannot even rule out the possibility of tactical unity with the CPP forces. There are two tendencies within the CPP today, and these may lead to another split. One puts emphasis on mass struggles and mass mobilisations in the urban areas (however tactically formulated within the CPP); the other puts forward protracted guerilla warfare as the main struggle. The SPP and other left groups can of course identify with the former tendency. We have not been lacking in efforts to invite them to joint mass mobilisations and campaigns.

The second tendency is in fact quite dangerous. It recalls the horror of a Sendero Luminoso or Khmer Rouge type of thinking and functioning. On December 31, the CPP's New People's Army (NPA) executed ex-priest Conrado Balweg, former head of the Cordillera People's Liberation Army (CPLA), for "blood debts" dating back to the early 1980s. The CPP has admitted to the killing, which was carried out by an NPA unit led by Balweg's younger brother.

Balweg was instrumental in splitting the NPA in the early 1980s and forming the cpla as a civilian paramilitary group. But things have moved on since then; the cpla disowned Balweg and was left as a small group connected with the government that could not do any kind of operation against the NPA. The struggle with Balweg is more political than military. To execute Balweg today is a political blunder and smacks of a Shining Path-type vengeance.

On the Balweg killing, the SPP has called on the revolutionary forces to remain united in pursuing the right to self-determination of the Cordillera nation and not to conduct any retaliatory actions against the CPP-NPA forces because these would benefit only the reactionary state.

The Revolutionary Workers Party (RPM) has gone into peace negotiations with the Estrada government. Almost all of the revolutionary armies are undertaking peace talks with the government (the CPP-NPA-NDF talks recently collapsed), and I take this as a sign that there will be a shift from guerilla warfare to mass struggle. We are proposing that the question of peace talks with the government be discussed by the revolutionary left because this is a matter of importance, not only to one group, but to the revolutionary movement as a whole.

Our main criticism of the CPP negotiations has been that the negotiations have not been able to proceed to the substantive issues—the demands of the revolutionary movement and the masses. One weakness is that negotiations are seen as an extension of guerilla war rather than as an extension of mass struggle. The former sees peace negotiations as more of a manoeuvre to buy time or, in some cases, to shift to the electoral struggle. This kind of approach keeps negotiations exclusively

between an armed group and the government. We think that the masses should be represented in these talks by bringing to the fore the demands of the masses and their organisations, such as agrarian reform, jobs and representation in the government.

Left unity is a key question among revolutionary forces in the Philippines. It is in fact a question of political survival for the left. The present situation of gradual development or gradual increase in numbers in the remaining revolutionary groups will not last forever. If we are not able to regroup the fragmented conscious forces, sections will become more demoralised and abandon the revolutionary project. Some may even drift more and more towards the right. This last scenario has been proven in the Latin American experience (and of course partly in the Philippine experience), where former revolutionary leaders are now the new right or apologists for the capitalist system.

The situation in the Philippines today points to either the advance of the class struggle or the escalation of class repression. This could be a period of upsurge for the left or a period of political reversal, a period of revolution or a period of reaction.

When we raise the slogan “socialism or barbarism”, some tend to see it as something that deals with a future choice, a bridge that we’ll have to cross in the near future. But it seems to me that what is happening now in the Philippines, or in most of the Third World, is already barbarism.

For instance, when the population is sharply divided among the very rich and the very poor, with a negligible middle class; when the very poor are struggling barely to survive; when there is a widespread explosion of urban and rural poverty; when an increasing number of children are resorting to prostitution or drug abuse or both; when a growing number of people are selling their blood and internal organs to survive; and when you see Third World governments immersed in widespread graft and corruption, and resorting to money laundering and mafia activities to finance their operations—then I don’t know of any other way to describe this situation except as barbarism.

That is why we have no choice but to unite and fight for the abolition of this moribund capitalist system. In the Philippines we can expect only further deterioration through a series of convulsions. We should be prepared, more than ever, to weather this coming storm. Even better, we should ensure that this time around, the storm will be ours, not theirs.

P.S.

* From Links n° 15, May-August 2000.