Rebirth of the Filipino Revolution

THE DEMONSTRATIONS IN MANILA over recent months mark the re-awakening of the liberation movement in a country where it has been twice cruelly robbed of victory just when it seemed on the brink of achieving it. In 1898 the Filipino Revolutionary Government controlled the whole country, confining their former Spanish colonial masters to the walled citadel inside the capital when the Spanish-American War broke. After a lightning victory over the Spanish the United States claimed the Philippines as its booty, although it took five long and bitter years and 70,000 US troops to make good this claim. In 1945 the Huks (Anti-Japanese Liberation Army) had succeeded in liberating nearly the whole of Luzon, the largest island which contains over half the population, when again the US army arrived to frustrate it; this time it was not until 1954 that a pro-American government could claim to have established a precarious social peace.

President Marcos was no doubt uneasily aware of this tradition when he branded the capture of a slice of his Malacanang Palace last January 30th as an ‘attempt to seize power’ by ‘Maoist elements’. Troops were ordered to fire on the demonstrators (six deaths and many hundreds of other casualties resulted) and two frigates were ordered to the Palace sea-front to rescue the President and his staff. Today a force of 5,000 soldiers has been permanently stationed within the Palace grounds. Despite the evident exaggeration in Marcos’ description of this particular incident it is certainly part of a new revolutionary attempt to smash the neo-colonial state in the Philippines.

As Marcos is aware, this State is a very strange, and far from invulnerable, historical excrescence. It seems to have been designed to violate every generalisation the sociologists and political scientists have made about the modern state. Weber, for example,

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defined the state as the body which exercised the monopoly of legitimate force over a given area. In the Philippines the state does not any longer even seek to challenge the multiplication of armed groups which together exceed in size (and often the quality of their equipment) that of its own armed forces. Every political leader, every large landowner, every major company has its retinue of armed men quite apart from the private armies which hire themselves out to the highest bidder. It is this which provides the substance of the formal, Western-style, two-party bourgeois democracy which has prevailed since 'independence' was granted in 1946. It has ensured the continued rule of the possessing class and its foreign masters—but it has also ensured a genuine pluralism within the ruling group such that no faction (army, Sugar Block etc) has so far been able to monopolise effective political power. The two political parties, the ruling Nacionalistas and the opposition Liberals, are loose coalitions uniting the brokers of financial corruption and political violence. Both the present President and his predecessor, Macapagal, adroitly switched parties in order aggregate a decisive force and win 'election'. At every level this exchange of party loyalties occurs with any change in the ruling party. In Filipino political lingo this is known as acting 'patriotically' by 'placing the interests of the nation above those of Party.' As in many neo-colonial societies access to Government with its limitless opportunities for financial gain, is the chief source of capital accumulation since most other sources are foreign-owned.

**Elections**

The official Comelec (Commission on Elections) reports that "rampant over-spending, fraud and terrorism marked the last elections" held in November 1969. President Marcos spent over $50 million on his campaign and 72 political murders were officially recorded during the election period. It added that although "terrorism was the most brazen and scandalous method employed by political warlords to subvert the people's mandate, the Comelec cannot do much to prevent it because it lacks ample power over the law-enforcement agencies acting as its deputies". Indeed it confessed that "the conduct of Comelec personnel contributed to the disruption of orderly elections". In one constituency in Southern Cebu the Liberals controlled one polling station, the Nacionalistas the other. The Liberals announced that every single one of the 9,400 registered voters had opted for their man; their timidity was rebuked when the Nacionalistas won with a vote for their candidate some 2,000 greater than the registered total. This was tame compared with the goings-on in the Northern Island of Batanes where an armed band known as the Suzuki Boys took over
the whole island for election time, murdering the local Public Prosecutor, closing the airport, occupying the radio and telegraph offices as well as the polling stations to ensure the harmonious elevation of their elected patron Congressman Rufino Antonio Jnr. They secured the co-operation of the local police and armed forces by dressing themselves up as government Special Forces and it was this imposture rather than anything else which provoked scandal. The Comelec comments: “During all these election years, the dice have been loaded in favour of the affluent, the rich and powerful, rather than the generality of our people . . . Indeed this is one of the primary causes of the youth unrest and the student demonstrations that we witness today.”

However the students are well aware that Filipino politics simply reflect the underlying pattern of the society as a whole. Added to the normal dimensions of capitalist exploitation are a swarm of special tolls, tithes, protection money (known as ‘tong’) kickbacks, and undercover payments exacted alike by the police and the private armies and gangs. Some of the gangs, such as Sigue-Sigue and OXO, are regarded by the masses as providing a measure of genuine protection against the brutal and arbitrary power of the rich. However the corruption of the social order does not alone explain the reverberations of the demonstrations.

The System Shaken

Two factors have combined to upset the Filipino political system which in its own way has worked well enough for twenty years or more. Firstly there is the acute economic crisis which is focussed on the problem of the International Monetary Fund special additional loan of $27 million. This is required to ‘roll over’ previous loans, that is pay the interest due on them. As a condition the IMF insisted in late February on a ‘floating exchange rate’ for the Filipino peso which has so far resulted in a 50 per cent devaluation. The sharp rise of living costs for the masses this entails is aggravated by the second IMF condition that there should be drastic cuts in Government expenditure with a consequent rise in unemployment from its present level of 17 per cent of the labour force. However all this does not just affect the masses (who usually suffer whatever happens) but it also threatens to deprive the political machine of its necessary lubricant. Even scraping the pork-barrel will not ensure the adequate flow of patronage.

The second factor to disturb the usual balance of forces is that in the November elections Marcos became the first Filipino President to be elected for a second term. The usual circulation of ‘ins’ and ‘outs’ ensures the underlying loyalty of all to the system.
Hence the disruptive effects of Marcos’ continued control of the public purse. Most powerful of the ‘outs’ is Vice President Lopez whose office entails only limited access to the Government machine and treasury. He is backed by the Sugar Block (sugar is the main export) and himself controls two TV channels, three radio stations and two of the largest newspapers. This media-barrage has been providing an enthusiastic chorus to the student agitations in so far as they are anti-Marcos. Indeed Marcos himself has tried to use the students and the red bogey to extract better terms in the loan negotiations with the United States. Police turned up thirty minutes too late to defend the US embassy from the ravages of the demonstrators on February 18th.

But though, as ever, ready to turn any situation to profit Marcos has good reason to be most anxious about the cumulative impact of mounting economic crisis, embittered political rivalries, and now the re-emergence of a revolutionary challenge to the social order itself. He has himself spoken on the danger of a military coup. Indeed one certainly cannot discount this as a possibility though so far it has been held in check by the diffusion of different armed groups.

In addition to the private armies there is a profusion of paramilitary forces loosely dependent on the State: Special Forces, Barrio Defence Units, Riot Squads, local police, etc. For example a report in the Manila Chronicle for March 1st began as follows: “Eleven heavily armed members of the mobile patrol division of the local police force raided the police department early this morning to rescue a policeman arrested for allegedly violating the anti-graft law.” It is such incidents that give a special meaning to the declaration on March 1 of General Yan, the Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces: “Let me assure our people, at this stage, there should be no cause for alarm. The security forces of our government, especially those under my command, have the situation well under control.” (emphasis added). Even within the Army there are strong factions based on region (many officers come, as does Marcos, from Ilocos in Northern Luzon and are fiercely loyal to him) and also on education (between graduates of the Philippine Military Academy and those who entered from ordinary universities). A factor which so far has united the army behind Marcos is the support of the US military. Ninety per cent of the officers above the rank of captain have attended training courses in the US; General Yan is a Westpointer himself. So long as the US government is prepared to tolerate Marcos he is safe from a military coup. Despite his talk of coups Marcos is really frightened of the people, nothing else.
Despite a partial bourgeois Agrarian Reform opposition continues to smoulder in the countryside — indeed the independent peasant is a more sturdy opponent of the money-lenders and tax officials than are the share-croppers. And now the towns and cities where a third of the population live have exploded.

The Left

This brings us to a discussion of the forces of the Filipino left. In the decade or so following the defeat of the armed uprising of 1949-54 the revolutionary left in the Philippines was reduced to a vestigial force. The entire Politburo of the Communist Party was in prison and the Commander of the People’s Liberation Army, Luis Taruc surrendered first to the Government and later in prison, to the Christian Social Movement. An armed force claiming to represent the Party continued to operate in two provinces of Central Luzon but mainly by assimilating itself to the local power structure and becoming increasingly like any of the other private armies. During this time the only opposition to imperialism and its attendant regime in the Philippines came from bourgeois nationalists like Senator Claro M. Recto. Although he died in 1962 it was his ideas which inspired the foundation in 1964 of the KM (Kabataang Makabayan or Nationalist Youth) which quickly became a powerful force among the more than half million Filipino students. This organisation developed in an atmosphere in which the Communist Party was illegal and expression of even mildly socialistic views was liable to lead to summary imprisonment under the Anti-Subversion Law. If there were any revolutionary socialists in the student movement they were forced to adopt an Aesopian language made up of one part appeals to ‘social justice and human dignity’ and two parts nationalism of the Recto variety. The establishment of a Filipino branch of the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation (BRPF) in 1965 allowed anti-imperialist sentiments to be more openly expressed.

Under the impact of events like the Vietnam war, the development of guerrilla struggles in Latin America and the Cultural Revolution in China the perspectives of Filipino students radicalised. The reflections of these struggles in the US news media, as well as the rise of a new left in the United States itself considerably contributed to this development. As a consequence of its colonial past and neo-colonial present English is almost as widely spoken as Tagalog, the national Filipino language (there are many other dialects in addition to Tagalog). Ironically Time and Newsweek reports of the Vietnam war and student struggle have done more to radicalise Filipino youth than Peking Review which is of course...
banned. From 1966 there was mass student agitation against Filipino participation in the Vietnam war and from 1968 for 'student power' on the campus. In 1967 the KM split into three. The majority which retained the name KM were increasingly attracted by the ideas of Mao Tse-tung as were another splinter group SDK (Union of Democratic Youth). The BRPF and a new grouping the MPKP (Free Association of Filipino Youth) drew closer to more orthodox ideas within the international movement.

All these groups now sought to expand their membership and activities outside the student sector. The KM developed worker and peasant sections and co-operated with NATU (National Association of Trade Unions) a 200,000 strong trade union group with considerable white collar support, which had always opposed the main CIA-sponsored Labour organisation. The national membership of KM is now around 12,000 and includes young textile workers, car assembly workers and some peasants as well as students. The SDK which is not divided from the KM on any fundamental question has a membership of 1,500 mainly drawn from the universities. Membership of the MPKP is around 5,000 and 80 per cent of these are young peasants or rural workers. The MPKP co-operates with MASAKA, a peasant organisation of some 45,000 members which is successful in the areas where the old revolutionary movement used to be strongest. All these forces combined to form the Movement for a Democratic Philippines (MDP) in November last year. This umbrella organisation co-ordinated the mammoth demonstrations of January 26th, January 30th, February 12th, February 18th and February 26th. The ostensible object of the first demonstration held outside the Congress building on January 26th was to discuss the forthcoming Constitutional Convention which it was predicted would be dominated by the vested interests of the prevailing order. This was ruthlessly dispersed by the Manila Police despite the participation in it of moderate groups such as the National Union of Students of the Philippines (NUSP).

A curious feature of the system of political violence in the Philippines is that it usually operates with a certain restraint in Manila itself where the great bulk of the middle class is to be found; in the rest of the country where the other 35 million Filipinos live it is less inhibited. The unleashing of open repression in the capital itself (public beatings, tear gas and then troops firing on crowds) helped to alienate middle class opinion from the Government. The apparent effectiveness of the student demonstrators also impressed itself on less privileged social strata. Strikes broke out in a number of assembly plants and the jeep drivers who provide the city's main transport began a campaign against the 'tong' which
they have to pay to the police and the gangs. Despite the lively fear of further repression the MDP was able to attract over 60,000 to a “People’s Congress” on February 12th and 18th. Attempts to stem this tide of demonstrations led to further clashes with the police in February and March in which a further four demonstrators were killed.

The MDP has always sought to make it clear that its target was the whole prevailing order and its subordination to US imperialism, not just the Marcos Presidency. It proclaims its ultimate goal to be a “National Democratic revolution” in which the broad masses of peasants, workers, petit-bourgeois, students and “national bourgeois” will combine to defeat imperialism, feudalism and fascism.

Inside and Outside the Institutions

It should be remembered that for a long time Filipino politics have been totally dominated by the violence and corruption of neo-colonial politicking. Even the armed class struggle of 1949-54 was not accompanied by much mass political agitation in the towns, or in the islands other than Luzon. The historic significance of the Movement for a Democratic Philippines is that for the first time the Filipino people have been exposed to politics and offered the alternative of non-institutional political activity. So far this impact has been greatest in the urban areas where politics used to be least developed. Of course the leaders of the MDP are aware that their objectives cannot be achieved simply by demonstrations any more than by elections. They envisage a protracted struggle with its main force in the countryside. It is at this stage that a discussion of the rival Communist Parties becomes necessary.

The New People’s Army has experimented with Vietnamese style tunnel warfare which provides one solution to the problem of the absence of cover on the Luzon plain. After the shooting of demonstrators on January 30th Commander Dante sent a letter to President saying that the New People’s Army would exact reprisals from senior Government agents for incidents of this type. Supplies entering the Clark airbase now have to arrive under heavy escort as a number of lorries were captured by the NPA and their contents distributed to the local inhabitants.

In 1967 the remnant of the illegal Communist Party split. Both sections repudiated the leaders of the armed force which claimed to be Communist. This force under the leadership of Commander Sumulong controls the area around the city of Angeles, right next to the Clark air-base. Political cover is provided by Pedr Taruc,
nephew of Luis, who was appointed General Secretary of the Party in 1962 but has never convened any meeting or congress of the Party he claims to lead—indeed it is alleged that he is the semi-captive of Sumulong who otherwise operates much like any other Filipino warlord hiring out his “protection” to local big-wigs, suborning the local police, teaming up with the Nacionalistas at election time and drawing a ‘tong’ from everything that moves in Angeles including the brothels which service the US air-base. Sumulong’s men are now generally known as the ‘Beatles’ while the hated Government para-military force created to suppress them is known as the ‘Monkees’.

It is unlikely that any genuine Communists are still involved with Sumulong. In 1967 the pro-Chinese section of the Party succeeded in winning the support of Sumulong’s former No. 3, Commander Dante, a young and brilliant guerrilla leader who now commands the New People’s Army. Although this new Huk force is small, numbering not more than five hundred effectives at the present time, it maintains a steady pressure on landlords, government and local goons. Not a week passes without a report of some daring exploit conducted by Commander Dante’s Men—a raid on the Clark base, an ambush of police, the execution of some detested landlord or Government agent. Most of these actions are concentrated in Central Luzon in the provinces of Tarlac and Pampanga. Less is heard of the armed force of the other Party which calls itself by the old Huk name, People’s Liberation Army. This is led by Commander Diwar and is strongest in Nueva Ecija and neighboring provinces. It lends muscle to the agitation of the peasants in these regions as well as curbing the activities of cattle-rustlers, bandits and government agents. The best way to estimate the character of the two forces is to give an account of the two Parties on which they depend.

The ‘re-constructed’ Communist Party of the Philippines (Marxist-Leninist) founded on Chairman Mao’s 75th birthday, December 26th, 1968, is led by Amado Guerrero. Filipino newspapers say this is the nom de guerre of Jose Maria Sison, an outstanding young intellectual educated at the elite Jesuit Ateneo College, former founder and National Chairman of KM and author of Struggle for National Democracy which is the bible of most young Filipino revolutionaries. The reconstructed CPP (M-L) was established after searching and uninhibited criticism of the old Party. It was criticised for its right opportunism in 1945 when it disbanded the popular Anti-Japanese Army that controlled a large part of Luzon; and for commandism and military adventurism for attempting to re-start armed struggle in 1949 without basing
itself on the principles of people’s war. These switches were strongly influenced by Cominform directives: see for example the parallel experience of the Greek CP recounted in C. Tsoucalas *The Greek Tragedy* (Penguin). The old Party leadership was also criticised for violating democratic centralism and for being regarded as a personal property of the Lava family which supplied over the years four of the General Secretaries.

The CCP (M-L) accuses the Party from which it split off of being subordinate to bourgeois nationalism and of carrying the sedan chair for bourgeois personalities who do not even have any definite mass following. It criticises the leadership of the rival Party for treating the affairs of the Party as merely a side interest, a weekend hobby to be attended to by bourgeois academic experts and high bureaucrats who actually give their best hours and efforts in the service of the bourgeois reactionary Government. Finally this Party, the “heavy baggage of the Filipino liberation movement” has “sinister links” with revisionism internationally.

The rival Communist Party denies this and accuses the CPP (M-L) of applying the thought of Mao mechanically to Filipino conditions — some even add “What is the thought of Mao anyway?” though the Education Secretary told me that Mao’s writings are used in the training of cadres. The Chief of Staff of the People’s Liberation Army told me that the CPP defines itself in fighting feudalism and imperialism in the Philippines and has criticisms of both the Russians and the Chinese on international questions. As an example of such criticisms he said that the Soviet Union emphasised peaceful co-existence too much in Khrushchev’s time and that China should not have boycotted the recent Moscow meeting. Although the CPP endorsed the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia they generally prefer to remain agnostic on such international issues, saying that they feel closest to the positions of the Cubans, Vietnamese and Koreans.

Inasmuch as they will defend its history and past leadership the CPP is the most authentic continuation of the traditions of the old Party and in fact they inherit a significant mass peasant base from this source. The veteran leadership has however been strengthened by an infusion of young blood including some of the most able leaders of the student movement. It insists that the working class must develop its own independent organisations within the National United Front against feudalism and imperialism, and that victory will only come through armed struggle. They accuse the CPP (M-L) of having only obtained any influence within the working class by collusion with opportunist and rightist
elements. They feel that the mass peasant base which they can still command will provide the surest base from which to relaunch armed struggle — the CPP (M-L) refer to this as the "souvenir of a defeated struggle".

At the moment the People’s Liberation Army is contending for control of Mt. Arayat, the spectacular, cloud-capped lone mountain which dominates the Central Luzon plain because as they say, "Whoever controls Mt. Arayat controls Luzon". This ‘mountain stronghold’ approach is criticised as a militarist deviation by the CPP (M-L). The polemics between the two parties have not been much changed by the release of the former Politburo from prison in January this year. Though they endorse one side or the other they do not seem to be integrated into the organisation of either. Though the conflict sometimes generates a virulent sectarianism, so far it has probably been a positive factor in the development of the movement. It has ventilated many formerly taboo questions and it has not impeded co-operation within the mass movement. Indeed the present division is relatively recent and further re-arrangements should not be ruled out. A leading member of the CPP (M-L) told me he envisaged future close collaboration of the youth groups of the two Parties.

Revolutionary Perspectives

On some key questions of strategy there is remarkable unanimity. Both for example see the ‘national bourgeoisie’ as a potential ally in the struggle for ‘national democracy’ though the proneness to vacillation of this social class is acknowledged by both. Both insist that the social formation prevailing in the Philippines should be described as ‘semi-feudal and semi-colonial’. From a scientific point of view it makes little sense to claim that ‘feudalism’ in any meaningful sense survives in the Philippines where commodity production and even wage labor are very prevalent in the countryside and are becoming more so in the wake of the bourgeois Agrarian Reform.

It is also very unlikely that an authentic national bourgeoisie can be said to exist, that is, a section of the bourgeoisie economically opposed to imperialism, given the latter’s long hegemony over the Filipino economy. Among the few enterprises to be wholly Filipino-owned is, for example, the Manila Hilton, and it is difficult to see its owners becoming even a vacillating anti-imperialist force. The limits of bourgeois nationalism are usually provided by its underlying loyalty to its own bourgeois state which in turn is usually in fief to imperialism. The Latin American experience suggests that bourgeois nationalism only allows itself to be anti-imperialist when
the revolutionary left has been defeated (Peru, Bolivia); in other circumstances it is infinitely more hostile to the masses than to imperialism.

Do such considerations have implications for political practice? An increasing number of militants in both parties believe they do. Too much obeisance to bourgeois nationalism limits the development of the movement. Petit-bourgeois nationalism of the sort represented by such leaders as Nkrumah, Soekarno and Nasser leads the movement to defeat because it can only manipulate the masses, not mobilise them for their own emancipation. If the working class is to become a vital force in the Philippines then uninhibited appeals to class struggle must be made whether this alarms the ‘national bourgeoisie’ or not. It is also obvious that national minorities like the Moslems in Mindanao cannot be appealed to in terms of Filipino nationalism, however radical. As all recognise that spreading the base of revolution outside Luzon is an urgent task this point is of great importance. This said, nobody questions that the democratic and nationalist aspirations of the numerous petit-bourgeois, of many school teachers, lesser government bureaucrats, etc., can become a significant revolutionary force if it has a strong proletarian leadership.

Another question which has not been theoretically resolved is that of the relation between mass mobilisation and armed struggle, between legal and illegal work, between work in the countryside and work in the towns. The demonstrations of January and February go a long way towards indicating a practical solution to this. One reason the armed struggle of 1949-54 was defeated was the absence of any support coming from the cities. Today it is the Manila bourgeoisie which fears for its control of the urban areas. Security guards throughout Manila have now been doubled and many houses are up for sale in the insolently luxurious Forbes Park suburb with its heart shaped swimming pools and air-conditioned stables. Class pride in conspicuous consumption has been rapidly displaced by fear.

The conquests of the ‘generation of 1970’ promise to be a deliverance from the long frustration of revolutionary hopes in the Philippines. The original feature of this movement seems to be that in the countryside it is learning from Mao and the Vietnamese, in the towns from the Black Panthers and the student movements of the imperialist countries themselves. However, given the quality of the new leaderships that have been tested in these recent struggles we need have no doubt that soon it will be the Filipinos who will be offering lessons for other revolutionaries to follow.