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Philippines

A Revolutionary Marxist Party in Mindanao

- IV Online magazine - 2007 - IV388 - April 2007 -

Publication date: Friday 6 April 2007

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The origins of the Revolutionary Workers' Party-Mindanao (RPMM) are to be found in the split that took place in the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) in 1992. The CPP, founded in 1968 under the leadership of Jose Maria Sison, rapidly became a significant political force and played an important role in the struggle against the Marcos dictatorship (1972-86), both through its armed wing, the New People's Army (NPA) and in the mass movement.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/RWPM.jpg>]

The party was formed in an uncompromising Mao-Stalinist mould. Philippine society was characterised as “semi-colonial and semi-feudal” and the revolution defined as “national-democratic”. The CPP's strategic line was that of prolonged people's war, surrounding the cities from the countryside, and passing through rigidly defined stages of strategic defence, strategic stalemate and strategic offensive, each with sub-stages.

All the party's work was to be subordinated to the primary objective of building a rural guerrilla army. The open mass struggle against the dictatorship and for reforms was considered as simply a propaganda exercise and a source of recruits for the underground party. The party's organisational principles were based on Stalinist bureaucratic centralism, with no right of tendency. Its First Congress was announced to have taken place in December 1968. There has never been a second congress.

All of these aspects of the CPP's politics were going to run up against quite different Philippine realities. Contrary to Sison's analysis, Philippine society was not semi-feudal but dependent capitalist. Secondly, the complex reality of Philippine society and the struggle against the dictatorship pushed the party to develop combinations of mass struggle and armed struggle that rapidly outgrew the simplistic “prolonged people's war” schema. This produced debates over strategy and tactics that for a time endowed the CPP with a certain pluralism.

Debates around the issues that would be behind the 1992 split began as early as the 8th CC plenum in 1980. But at that time, as Francisco Nemenzo observed in a 1994 interview, “it did not seem to be urgent to resolve them since the movement was surging forward” [1]. Not only was there time and space for debates, but there was even experimentation with different forms of struggle that did not fit with the strategy of prolonged people's war. This was particularly the case in Mindanao. These experiments were influenced to a considerable extent by the experience of the revolutionary movements in Central America and by the Vietnamese experience. This was taking place in a period when Sison himself had been captured and imprisoned, from 1977 to 1986.

A turning point came in 1986 when the CPP took the decision to boycott the “snap election” that was held following the “people's power” movement that overthrew Marcos. The election led to the victory of Cory Aquino and the restoration of bourgeois democratic forms. This decision left the party isolated from the mass movement. Some months later the party leadership published a self-criticism, saying quite clearly that the boycott was an error, but failing to analyse the reasons for this major error. Subsequent discussion was cut short by the leadership. It was following the restoration of bourgeois democracy that the contradictions created by the subordination of mass work to the armed struggle, specifically the rural armed struggle, became sharper.

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/sison.jpg>]

Jose Maria Sison, founder of the Mao-Stalinist CPP

Throughout the period of the CPP's growth in the late 70s and early 80s its organisation in Mindanao had developed at an even faster rate. In many ways the struggle in Mindanao was one of the most advanced in the Philippines, both

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in terms of the armed struggle and the mass struggle. But as the party sank roots in Mindanao it had to confront the specificity of the island. In the epoch of Spanish colonisation Mindanao had never been occupied, beyond a few coastal outposts. The island was inhabited by Muslims, known as Moros, organised under the sultanates of Maguindanao and Jolo, and by indigenous tribes. When the Philippines were sold to the United States for 20 million dollars at the end of the Spanish-American War in 1898 the Americans had to conquer the country against strong resistance from the revolutionary nationalist forces who had launched an insurrection against Spanish rule in 1896.

The American “pacification” of the Philippines is estimated to have cost the lives of about one sixth of the population. In the case of Mindanao this conquest was particularly difficult and particularly bloody and resistance lasted until 1914. Subsequently governments in Manila pursued a conscious policy of colonising Mindanao with Christian settlers from other islands, so successfully that the Muslims and the indigenous peoples became a minority. Nevertheless the settlers did not constitute a privileged layer, as in for example South Africa or Israel, they were workers and peasants who were also exploited. But there does exist a national question of the Bangsa Moro people and an armed struggle for self-determination began in the early 1970s. There is also the question of the rights of the indigenous peoples to their ancestral lands, in both Muslim- and Christian-dominated areas.

The CPP in Mindanao had to confront this reality and began to develop alliance work both with the Moro movements - Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) - and with the indigenous peoples. This provoked debate and dissension within the party in Mindanao and with the central CPP leadership. In fact the CPP's conception of the national democratic revolution did not take into account the specific national questions in Mindanao, which in the thinking of the Sison leadership were relegated to be resolved after the victory of the revolution. The level of struggle in Mindanao also involved the use of urban partisan units and military offensives of a semi-insurrectional nature which did not fit into the prolonged people's war schema

The origins of the RPMM lie specifically in the Central Mindanao Region (CMR) of the CPP-NPA, which was established in 1987 through the merger of the North West region and the Moro region. This was at a time when the CPP and its organisations were running into serious difficulties. In the first place these were caused by the inability to analyse the new situation following the transition from dictatorship to bourgeois democracy and to reorient the party's tactics in accordance. This involved not only tactical problems but related to the whole strategy of the CPP.

Secondly the party was debilitated and traumatised by a series of self-imposed purges in an attempt to root out government infiltrators, in which thousands of party members, most of them innocent, were liquidated. This weakened the party considerably, and the purges were particularly severe in Mindanao. The debates became more acrimonious. Sison, who had gone into voluntary exile in the Netherlands in 1988, issued a document at the end of 1991 entitled “Reaffirm Our Basic Principles and Rectify Errors”, whose aim was to return the CPP to his version of Maoist orthodoxy and purge the party of those who questioned it. All party organisations were called upon to “reaffirm”. Those who supported Sison and did so became known as “reaffirmists” or “RA”, those who refused to were “rejectionists” or “RJ”.

Sison's position was endorsed by the 10th CC plenum in 1992 and the party's executive turned down a call for a congress - supported by some reaffirmists as well as by rejectionists - to settle the differences, making a split inevitable. Subsequently those who rejected his positions were expelled and from 1993 substantial sectors of the party, both geographical areas and departments, began to declare their autonomy from the party centre [\[2\]](#). At this point the differences were wide-ranging, covering the party's analysis of Philippine economy and society, its political and military strategy, the question of minority nationalities, the party regime and the appreciation of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the process of capitalist restoration in China. On these latter points the party leadership confined itself to ritual denunciations of “modern revisionism”, whereas sectors of the opposition were beginning to use the concepts of Stalinism and bureaucracy to understand what was happening.

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The split confronted the oppositionists with the task of organising an alternative. Towards the end of 1994 the CMR issued a call for a Party Conference and invited the other main sectors of the rejectionists from the rest of the Philippines. The result of this conference was the launching of a pre-party formation in Mindanao called the People's Communist Party (PCP). The PCP maintained contacts and relations with other RJ forces and in September 1995 it called a summit with the leaderships of the Manila-Rizal (National Capital) and Visayas regions, with a view to forming a new party on a national level. During this period the PCP launched a thoroughgoing reassessment of its ideology and politics, drawing a balance sheet of ten years of party work in Mindanao, holding conferences on electoral and parliamentary work, mass work and mass movements, international work, development and peace-building work.

In 1998, after three years of discussion and debate, there was a serious attempt to form a new party on an all-Philippine level, involving the PCP, the Visayas party committee and part of the leadership of the Manila-Rizal region. At a congress held in the mountains of Mindanao, the Revolutionary Workers' Party of the Philippines (RPMP) was formed, with as its armed wing the Revolutionary Proletarian Army/Alex Boncayo Brigade. Unfortunately this promising initiative towards an all-Philippine party was not successful. Serious differences arose regarding the functioning of the new party. In the opinion of the Mindanao comrades the Visayas leadership in particular had not broken from certain practices of the CPP. In 1999 peace negotiations between the government and the RPMP-RPA/ABB began and in 2000 a peace agreement was signed. The Mindanao comrades contested both the undemocratic way in which this was done and the content of the agreement, which they thought amounted to a plain and simple capitulation.

As a result on May 1st 2001 the Mindanao comrades formed the RPMM, with as its armed wing the Revolutionary Peoples' Army (RPA) - the plural form signifying its commitment to the recognition of the three peoples of Mindanao. The party has an all-Philippine perspective but its forces are in Mindanao and among Mindanaoans elsewhere. Following the split in the CPP, the CMR had established relations with other forces internationally, in particular with the Fourth International, to whose 1995 World Congress it sent a representative. These relations were maintained during the RPMP period and in 2003 the RPMM became the Philippine section of the FI.

The situation in Mindanao is far from stable. In the first place, the Moro national question has not been resolved. An agreement signed between the Philippine government and the MNLF in 1996 led to the creation of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), which has not fulfilled the hopes that were placed in it and is still dominated by Manila and plagued by corruption and clientelism. Negotiations are now taking place with the MILF, but their issue is uncertain and armed clashes with the army are not infrequent.

The presence of the Abu Sayyaf Group, a real terrorist group linked to Al Qaeda, is used as an excuse to maintain the militarization of Mindanao and to justify the presence of US troops, Mindanao having been defined as a front in the "war against terrorism". In addition, Mindanao, and the ARMM in particular, contain the poorest provinces in the Philippines. Multinational companies are plundering the island's natural resources, particularly mining and logging, bringing catastrophic effects for the environment and the invasion of the ancestral lands of the indigenous peoples. Armed conflict is not the only form of violence suffered by the people of Mindanao.

Although itself illegal and underground, the RPMM supports the efforts of a multiplicity of social movements and people's organisations which address the problems of the working class, the urban poor, the peasantry and fisher folk - health, housing, education, lack of employment, agrarian reform. There is in particular a strong peace movement based on the tri-people concept, which seeks to resolve the national question by the recognition of the right of self-determination and the organisation of a referendum and which seeks to unite the three peoples on this basis. In December 2006, there took place on the island of Basilan the 4th Mindanao People's Peace Summit which brought together 500 people from all over Mindanao, including representatives of the MNLF and MILF and the indigenous peoples. On the electoral level the same ideas are defended by the Anak Mindanao (Amin) party list which has currently one representative in the Philippine parliament.

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Mindanao is a highly militarised society. In addition to the Philippine army (two-thirds of whose forces are deployed in Mindanao) and police, there are the MNLF, MILF and the defence forces of the indigenous peoples. The CPP-NPA, which continues to be active in certain areas in Mindanao, has since the split had a policy of physically liquidating former members. Among those assassinated were two members of the RPMM-RPA. [3] Furthermore it is clear that the state security forces have been responsible for the death-squad-style assassination of hundreds of activists of social movements and people's organisations, including in Mindanao, since the arrival in power of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo in 2001.

In this situation, the RPMM maintains its armed wing, the RPA. It does not however consider an offensive armed struggle to be appropriate at the present time. Consequently it signed a ceasefire agreement with the government in 2005 and in December 2006 came to an agreement for the application of this ceasefire. But it has not disarmed and poses the question of a definitive peace agreement in terms of resolving the social and democratic issues that are at the root of violence in Mindanao. The negotiations with the government were not simply of a military nature but committed the government to provide finance for development projects in the areas under RPMM influence, the projects in question being defined by the local populations. The original negotiations covered 100 barangays (districts) but subsequently 100 more have asked to be considered as forming part of the RPMM's area of influence.

[1] Interview in Links no. 2, July- September, 1994

[2] These included the majority or important sectors of the party organisations in Manila-Rizal, Mindanao and the Visayas, as well as the peasant secretariat, the united front secretariat and the international department.

[3] Substantial documentation on the CPP's policy of physical liquidation can be found on the English- language pages of the site of Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières (www. Europe-solidaire.org), under the section: Philippines - CPP killings.