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Philippines

After decades, an insurgency falters - Philippine Maoists under pressure

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Leading one of the world's longest running insurgencies and with tens of thousands of members, the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) is still a point of reference for parts of the radical Left internationally. The International League of People's Struggles (ILPS), represented in the U.S. by organizations such as Bayan, takes its political line from the framework of the CPP. In the Philippines itself, the CPP and the "national-democratic" movement it leads is still the dominant force on the Left. This makes the recent evolution of the party a matter of interest for internationalist socialists worldwide.

In recent years, it has become clear that the CPP is under increasing pressure. After the breakdown in 2017 of its alliance with president Rodrigo Duterte, the violent repression of the party, its guerrillas, and its legal allies escalated.¹ A government strategy of combining murderous force and material incentives to abandon the movement has been successful in weakening the insurgency. The passing of the party's ideologue and founding chairperson Jose Maria Sison in late 2022 while in exile in the Netherlands was a symbolic moment. More significant was the fate of Benito and Wilma Tiamzon in August that year. The Tiamzon couple were radicalized as students in the early 1970s and became leading activists in the CPP in the following decades. In April 2023, the party confirmed that the two had been killed by the military some eight months earlier. At the time of their death, Benito Tiamzon was the chair of the central committee, and Wilma Tiamzon was general-secretary. An article on the news website Rappler detailed how the two had been pursued by the military for months on the island of Samar, once a stronghold of the CPP and its armed wing, the New People's Army (NPA). They were not the only high-ranking CPP members killed in recent years. Less than six months earlier, Ka Oris (Jorge Madlos), former commander and spokesperson of the NPA, was killed. In late 2020, the body of Antonio Cabanatan was found. As a member of the party's executive committee, Cabanatan was among those responsible for the fateful decision to boycott the 1986 elections. Among other CPP-NPA leaders killed in the last few years are members of the party's central committee and high-ranking commanders of the NPA.

Signs of decline

For obvious reasons, gathering information on the development of the underground CPP/NPA is difficult. The sloganeering statements from the party mean little, the revolution is "surging forward" and "the crisis of the rotten system is ever deepening," and this has been so for decades. Data gathered by the NGO Armed Conflict Location & Event Data (ACLED) shows a slight decrease in armed clashes involving the NPA in the period 2016–2023 but does not specify who initiated the clashes. According to a report by the think-tank International Crisis Group, the number of people killed in the conflict is in the low hundreds per year, with 2024 probably seeing fewer deaths than previous years. Ang Bayan, the party's newspaper, gives detailed reports of activities of the NPA. Adding up figures given there presents a similar picture of yearly casualties, with most clashes taking place in a small number of regions. The party claims it is "eroding" the military capacity of the Philippine state, but in a country of almost 120 million, a median age below 26 and mass unemployment, the army can easily find new recruits.

Top half of a newsletter, tinted blue on a darker blue background.

Ang Bayan, the party's newspaper, gives detailed reports of activities of the NPA." The English version of the latest issue (December 21, 2024). Image by Ang Bayan, modified by Tempest.

Overall, the conclusion that the party has been weakened when compared to the last years of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's presidency in the first decade of the 2000s is inevitable. Those years saw an increase in NPA activity and a strengthening of the party compared to its crisis in the 1990s. After the collapse of the regime of Ferdinand Marcos in 1986, who had declared martial law in 1972, the party was caught by surprise by what was in

many ways a restoration of the “elite democracy” of the pre-Marcos period. Revelations of how hundreds of comrades were tortured and killed in paranoid purges during the 1980s undermined the credibility of the NPA as an alternative.²

Behind a facade of monolithic ideological unity, with Sison as the authority figure on everything, the CPP had been a fairly decentralized movement with different experiences generating a certain ideological pluralism. This became explicit as a period of intense debate broke out in the movement. In the early to mid-nineties, Maoist hardliners put a stop to this debate through mass expelling, leading whole party units to declare their disaffiliation. A large part of the Philippine Left emerged from such splits and disaffiliations. When the CPP emerged from the crisis, it was significantly smaller. Intensely hostile to other parts of the Left, it initiated a campaign of assassinations of “fake leftists,” like peasant organizers who followed a different strategy³ and members of other revolutionary groups.⁴ Although it never again came close to its peak in the mid-1980s, after “re-affirming” Maoism, the CPP, now more homogeneously Stalinist and organizationally rigid, was able to recover some lost territory during Arroyo’s increasingly unpopular presidency.

Reading through the stereotyped party writing, CPP statements give some indication that not all is well. Rather than the hundreds of guerrilla fronts the party claimed back in the 1980s, recent statements claim “more than 110” guerrilla fronts. In 2007, the party set a five-year deadline for the armed struggle to advance to “strategic stalemate,” but after admitting the goal was not met, no new deadline has been set, meaning the guerrilla war is in the same phase it was four decades ago. Statements from the NPA claim it has “thousands” of fighters, according to government claims, the NPA is down to 1,500 full-time combatants. Both sides have made misleading claims in the past, and such figures should not be accepted unconditionally.

The clearest indication that the party is facing hardship was its 2023 anniversary statement. Such statements are supposed to give a general orientation for the year to come. The 2023 statement was somewhat different because it announced a “rectification movement” to overcome “critical errors and tendencies, weaknesses and shortcomings.” “Not a few guerrilla fronts of the NPA stagnated,” the party writes, and there have been “grave setbacks.” Such setbacks are blamed on deviation from the Maoist line: Since the line is supposed to be correct, and “objective conditions” to be excellent, setbacks must be the result of deviating from Maoism. Hence, the answer to the party’s hardships is more Maoism. This kind of circular logic is not new for the party. That the CPP brands this call a “rectification movement” is remarkable, though. Only twice before has the party labeled a campaign a rectification movement: the founding of the party in the late 1960s, when it broke away from the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas, and the campaign against dissidents in the mid-1990s. Using the term “rectification movement” is an indication of how serious the problem is.

Changing terrain

How did the movement get to this point? Part of the answer is that the long-term process of the party since the early 1990s has been one of decline, although as we have seen not constant. The party is deeply committed to a view of the Philippines as society that is not capitalist but “semi-feudal.” The basic problem of the Philippine land, the party asserts, is “semi-feudal exploitation” in the countryside, meaning exploitation not through the exploitation of waged, “free” labor but based on direct coercion. The archetypical example of such exploitation is the tenant farmer, living and working on land owned by a landlord, forced to turn over a large part of their harvest as well as to do unpaid labor for the landlord. From this reading, the party deduces in unmediated, mechanical fashion that revolutionary struggle means essentially a peasant-based guerrilla war.

Whatever the merits of its analysis for the Philippines of the mid-twentieth century or even the 1980s, it has come into increasing conflict with reality. Although the Philippine economy remains largely based on agriculture and the export

of agricultural products, the relations of production have changed significantly since the CPP was founded. Among “farm operators,” tenancy has decreased from over a third in the 1960s to only 15 percent already a decade ago. The proportion of those working as peasants halved in the same period.⁵ Wage workers in the formal and “informal” sector now make up a majority of the working population. The peasantry has been declining as proportion of the working population and in terms of importance for economic production. Rapidly growing on the other hand has been the service sector—something not foreseen by Maoists, who assumed that economic development would by necessity take the shape of industrialization, which they saw as blocked by imperialism. But as late as 2020, Sison declared that no “qualitative” change had occurred since the 1960s—or for that matter since the period of U.S. colonialism. The CPP’s program is of declining relevance, but the party has spent decades denouncing those who disagree with their view that the Philippines is a non-capitalist, semi-feudal society.

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Dogmatism in theory goes hand in hand with swerves in practice. The most dramatic of these was the party’s 2016 attempt to forge an alliance with recently elected president Duterte. When Duterte was elected, he was a political unknown to many, but not to the CPP. For decades, Duterte had been in charge of Davao City, the most important city in the country’s south, where he had a mutually beneficial relationship with the party. Duterte took a hands-off approach towards the underground who in return did not disturb the peace in “his” Davao city and turned a blind eye to the use of a death squad as a crime-fighting tool. Duterte, of course, introduced this tool on a national scale, meaning thousands of killings. This was not an obstacle to a honeymoon period between the president and the party. The first sign that the movement would extend its alliance with Duterte beyond Davao were statements from Sison. Sison declared that Duterte’s presidency would be good for “national unity,” and Duterte offered the Maoists cabinet posts. The CPP politely suggested several legal allies to take up the posts. One of them, Liza Maza, continued to serve Duterte in a cabinet-level post until August 2018. After that, Maza became Secretary General of the ILPS.

A photo from September 2016 illustrates the shifting relations. Taken on September 26 in the state dining room of the presidential palace Malacañang, it shows Duterte with members of his negotiating team and that of the National-Democratic Front (NDF), the label the CPP uses for diplomatic activities. The room is full of smiles, Duterte raising his fist together with the NDF representatives. Next to him is current NDF chair Luis Jalandoni, and then Wilma and Benito Tiamzon. The two had been released the month prior. In the following months, relationships would deteriorate, and in February 2017 the ceasefire between the government and the NPA broke down.

Looking back, it is not so clear what the CPP thought to gain from the attempted alliance. As long as Duterte was only a regional figure, friendly relations with the CPP were to his advantage as it meant they would not bother him. But as soon as he became president, that was no longer an option. Probably the most enthusiastic backer of transferring the existing relations with Duterte into a national alliance was Sison, acting as the chair of the NDF panel. For months, the NDF continued to discuss far-reaching reforms with a government that never had any interest in implementing them. Obviously, Sison overestimated the influence he had over Duterte, who was once his student.

Uncertain future

CPP statements are repetitive, but so are the statements from the Philippine government predicting the imminent defeat of the insurgency. As long as mass poverty exists alongside a political system that is blatantly dominated by the rich, the potential for an insurgency remains. Aside from a deep decline during COVID, the Philippine economy saw strong growth in recent years—not in the least because of the growing service sector. But this growth has meant little for the country’s poor, especially in the remote countryside. After six decades, the CPP is not going to disappear suddenly.

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When the ceasefire broke down, it seemed like back to normal for the party. There is one difference though. Under Duterte, the government had not only renewed the use of deadly force and the red-tagging of above-ground activists—it is now combining this with pardons and financial aid for surrendering rebels and support for communities that renounce their previous support for the NPA. The current government of Marcos Jr continues this policy. The government is obviously exaggerating the extent and success of this program, but the use of a “carrot and stick” approach is not without success. Advising the successful repression of a Communist-led rebellion in the 1950s in the Philippines, CIA counterinsurgency expert Edward Lansdale said a seemingly credible promise is more important than actual change. To quote the ICG report, “the rebels have found themselves increasingly adrift and on the defensive. Arrests and surrenders of fighters have come at a steady clip.”

The difficulties of the CPP and the bloc of social organizations that take its political line from it do not take place in total isolation from the rest of the Left. The CPP-led movement is still the strongest force on the Philippine Left. And although repression is focused on the CPP, it is not limited to it. Several members of the Philippine section of the Fourth International, the RPM-M have been killed as well, for example.

Philippine society is changing as urbanization progresses and the composition of the working classes is transformed. The Left needs a willingness to break with old dogmas and old divisions and confront new issues such as the climate crisis. The CPP is unlikely to do that, but especially in the above-ground periphery of the CPP, there are many young dedicated activists who are more moved by the desire to change society than by Maoist dogma. But for now, the right wing is dominant, as shown by the popularity of Duterte in the past and president Marcos Jr today. In the 2022 elections Leody de Guzman of the socialist Partido Lakas ng Masa ran for president with well-known activist-scholar Walden Bello as his running mate. The campaign broke new ground as the first openly socialist presidential campaign in Philippine history, but with 0.17 per cent of the vote, the result came as a disappointment to activists. An alternative pole of attraction on the Left remains to be built.

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