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Philippines

With arms, for the people

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The Rebolusyonaryong Partido ng Manggagawa – Mindanao (RPM-M, Revolutionary Workers Party of Mindanao) recently celebrated the 18th birthday of its armed wing, the “Revolutionary Peoples Army” (RPA). RPA-members explained to international visitors why an armed wing remains essential for their party in the Philippines.

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

Meeting RPA members takes some effort. After a long drive over an almost abandoned country-side road, our car continues in the dark on a mud path. We stop at a small hut and get out. Our Filipino comrades exchange greetings with a few men wearing military uniforms, carrying rifles. With one of the armed men as our guide we walk along a small path and over slippery dikes between rice-fields. Our guide exchanges passwords with another barely visible figure in the dark and we arrive at a house made of bamboo and palm-tree leaves. On the porch and inside are more armed men, wearing the improvised uniforms of the “Revolutionary Peoples’ Army” (the spelling reflects the RPM-M’s view that Mindanao is home to different nations, the Muslim minority, the Christian majority and Indigenous Peoples), the armed wing of the Philippine section of the Fourth International. We sit down for coffee and introductions.

Meetings like these are a regular part of the visits of international comrades to Mindanao, the southern part of the Philippines where the RPM-M is based. They are a way to share experiences and explain to international visitors the decision of the RPM-M to maintain an armed force – although actual fighting is only part of the tasks of its members. Since 2005, the RPM-M has a ceasefire with the government army but the government does not seem very interested in pursuing the negotiations beyond that. And the official government army, which is guilty of regular Human Rights violations, is far from the only threat.

A need for self-defense

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/GetAttachment1.jpg>]

From the beginning, the RPM-M had an armed wing. Like most of the Filipino left, the RPM-M has its roots in the maoist Communist Party (CPP) for which “armed struggle is the primary form of struggle”. During the 1970s and 80s, the CPP build a powerful underground movement and guerrilla-army, the New People’s Army (NPA). After the fall of the dictatorship of Marcos in 1986, the CPP was disorientated: for years, it had been the principal anti-Marcos force but it played only a marginal role in the urban protests that brought down the dictator and it was side-lined by a wave of popular sympathy for the liberal opposition. Attempts to discuss revolutionary strategy and the party’s approach to the changing situation were met by the CPP-leadership with expulsions and a re-affirmation of the maoist dogma. A series of splits followed in the nineties. What is now the RPM-M started when a large part of the Mindanao section of the CPP broke away, together with the NPA-fighters under its command. The NPA units were re-organized as the Revolutionary Peoples’ Army.

But the reasons for the maintenance of the RPA are far from historical. Mindanao is a volatile region. And violent. The Philippine state is characterized by what Benedict Anderson called “cacique democracy”; local bosses (“caciques”, a term from Spanish colonialism) combine economic power as landlords and entrepreneurs with political power as mayors, governors et cetera. Elections are an opportunity for the caciques to compete with each-other for the control of parts of the state-apparatus. The most powerful caciques build their own dynasties, like the Dimaporo clan that has ruled large parts of Mindanao as their personal fiefdom for decades.

Especially in areas that are far removed from the capital city Manila, like Mindanao, the national state-apparatus is

weak. The weakness of state apparatus and contradictions between the caciques mean the state does not have a monopoly over the use of armed force. Many caciques employ their own armies. When another powerful clan in Mindanao, the Ampatuans, in 2009 massacred 58 journalists and members of a rival clan, they were revealed to control a (legalized) private army of 2000 heavily armed men, including armored vehicles. The Ampatuans also controlled the local police and judiciary. Often, government-organized militia that are supposed to be counter-insurgency forces shade over into the private armies.

The strongest insurgent armed groups in the Philippines are also based in Mindanao. Those are the secessionist movements of the muslim minority, the Moros. In the 1970s and 80s, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) fought against the Marcos regime and for self-determination. The MNLF entered into a peace-agreement with the government in 1996 and was supposed to turn in its weapons. Everybody knows they did not. A recent show of force saw the MNFL gather hundreds of fighters carrying automatic rifles and anti-tank weapons.

The main Moro rebel group at the moment is the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) which is negotiating with the government over extending the autonomy of the Islamic community. The MILF is the strongest insurgent group in the country. The RPM-M has a “non-aggression” pact with the MILF but relationships between the party and the Moro-group have become uneasy because of criticisms the socialists have of the MILF’s lack of respect for rights of the Indigenous Peoples. The MILF is a loosely structured organization and its leadership is unable to control all the actions of its local commanders. And there are other, smaller but more unpredictable Moro-groups like the Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters.

And of course there is the NPA. Mindanao used to be one of the strongholds of the maoists in the 1980s. Nowadays, the CPP is far weaker than in its heyday; except from the splits, the party here was heavily damaged by revelations of murderous purges that were concentrated in Mindanao and cost the lives of hundreds of party-members and sympathizers. But in parts of the island, the CPP still maintains relatively strong guerrilla-units. The maoists are trying to rebuild themselves and are violently hostile to other left-wing groups.

Those are only the “official” armed groups. There are others: armed cattle-rustlers, kidnapping-gangs, vigilante groups... RPM-M members enjoy riling up international visitors by listing all the different risks. The weakness of the central government on large parts of the island and contradictions between caciques open up spaces in which armed groups of radically different kinds can flourish. Add to this fierce competition over the rich resources of the most underdeveloped part of the Philippines and you get a sense of why the island is sometimes called the “wild west of the Philippines”.

Obviously, any political organization that tries to win support of communities in such an environment needs to think very seriously about self-defense of itself and its supporters. Securing the meetings of the underground RPM-M is one of the main tasks of the RPA. The RPA is a modest force and no match militarily for the major Moro-groups or the private armies of the powerful clans. But their presence does make other actors more hesitant to use force.

Politics over arms

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/GetAttachment2.jpg>]

The RPA-members we are meeting are “full timers”– the core of the RPA. They carry the best equipment and move around in areas where the local population is sympathetic to the party. The RPA also organizes local defense forces. Unlike full-timers, members of the local defense forces remain in their communities and do not depend on the organization for their livelihood. In principle, new full-timers are recruited from the local defense forces. Bong, the commanding officer of the group we are meeting, and Jojo, another officer, do the talking. The other members are

satisfied with listening while other comrades translate between English and the local Bisaya.

Bong explains that the RPA could be a larger force: there are enough (young) people who want to join. A larger force of full-timers would be a heavy burden on the party: except from the livelihood and equipment of the combatants, the party is also responsible to the family of the RPA-member since they will be lacking a pair of hands. But this hurdle is not impossible to overcome, Bong says. However, the RPA is very selective in who it accepts and only lets in new recruits that have shown to have a longterm commitment to the movement. It is one reason why a large part of the RPA-membership consists of veterans of the NPA-days. Bong compares the RPA recruitment policy to what they learned in the NPA. The NPA, he says, would eagerly recruit anyone who wanted to join, for example to take revenge on the army for the abuse of a family-member or on an exploitative landlord. But, he asks rhetorically; "what happens after taking revenge? Is such a narrow, selfish motivation enough to be a revolutionary?".

In theory, the CPP demands NPA-fighters should be soldiers as well as political militants but the maoists' stress on armed struggle means in practice that they give priority to building military strength. "In the NPA, we only learned how to kill", is how one veteran described it. With a term also used by the NPA, Bong describes the RPA as a "political-military" organization that balances preparing for armed struggle with political work. A crucial difference with the maoists is the strategic conception of revolution of the Mindanao comrades. For the CPP, revolutionary struggle in the Philippines is "essentially a peasant war", but the RPM-M does not prioritize armed struggle over other forms of struggle. Armed struggle is one component of a strategy of building revolutionary mass movements.

The RPA is under the command of the RPM-M but not all RPA-member are party-members. Part of the "political-military" orientation is that all RPA members undergo political education. If they express interest and have shown to be reliable, RPA-members can be asked to join the party. Although the party controls the RPA, the combatants elect their commanding officers at their own congresses. The congresses evaluate not just on the candidates' military qualities but also their relationships with the local communities and their ability to win support for the movement.

Protecting the communities

The RPA full-timers are supported by local communities they help to protect. The RPA for example protects the communities against cattle-rustlers that try to steal from the peasants their water buffaloes. Bong also relates how RPA-members recently caught several members of a gang that was engaged in kidnapping-for-ransom. The gang-members were handed over to the local police. Bong laughs; "it was one of the few times the police was happy with us". Another way the RPA-members gain support is by helping the local communities in their daily work, most often as peasants. Most of the RPA-members come from peasant families and are familiar with the work. Helping the local population also provides a good opportunity to talk with them about party-campaigns such as for food sovereignty and to share knowledge about ecologically sustainable agriculture. To make sure the RPA does not lose the support that they depend on, members follow a strict code of conduct. No gambling, no drinking liquor and always show respect to community-members. Jojo: "we need the local population to genuinely put their trust in us, and not to just keep quiet because we carry weapons. To win support, we have to show we are revolutionaries and that we are different from the armed gangs."

Another threat the RPA has acted against is thugs employed by landlords. The weakness and corruption of the official law-enforcement forces gives members of the elite more or less a free hand. Not very far from where we meet, a landowner hired thugs to chase tenants of the lands they had been tilling for decades because he wanted to sell the area. One leader of the tenants organization was murdered. And in June 2012, Venecia "Inday" Natinga, a peasant leader, was murdered because of her activism for land reform.

Without the RPA, such murders would be more frequent but the organization is walking a tightrope when acting against the elite's thugs. Normally, the government army and police do not pay much attention to what goes in these communities, but that would easily change when an armed left-wing group draws attention. In such a case, RPA combatants could probably evade the security-forces but the communities that support them could not. They would be subject to harassment and the disruption of daily life as soldiers move into the area. Jojo again draws a comparison with experiences in the NPA; "the NPA didn't have much problems with provoking the military into aggression against local communities. On the contrary, their idea was that oppression would automatically drive people to join the revolutionary movement. But right now, the revolutionary movement is weak and we need to consider how people will be able to survive if the movement is not able to protect them against the armies of the elite."

Continuing threats

The comparisons with the NPA bring up one of the most painful experiences of the RPA. After the splits and expulsions in the nineties, the CPP hardened its hostile attitude towards other parts of the left. It has denounced left-wing movements outside its orbit as "saboteurs" and "counter-revolutionaries" and its armed wing has murdered left-wing activists from different organizations and tendencies. Bong; "After we left we CPP we tried to have an agreement with the NPA. We suggested a truce and to build our own strength in different parts of the island. But the CPP-leadership declared us to be enemies. One of our commanders thought he could negotiate because he had been in the NPA with many of them. But when he approached them for negotiations he was killed. Now, we can't allow the NPA-units to enter into our areas because they would attack us and our comrades on sight. There have been several clashes with them. We still regard the NPA-members as revolutionaries and we wish it would be possible to have a ceasefire with them."

The RPA also assists in the creation of other defense groups. In the recent period, members of the RPA have been helping to organize and train self-defense groups of the Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous Peoples have clashed with security-forces and goons of loggers and mining companies that destroy the natural environment that local peasants and fisher-folk depend on. Several RPM-M comrades express the fear that in the future, after the MILF reaches a final agreement with the Philippine government, the Indigenous Peoples will have one more enemy since the MILF denies them autonomy and claims control over the resources in their lands.

Facing all these risks, a capacity for armed self-defense remains of vital importance for the Mindanaon socialists. Basing themselves on the principle that the only justification for lethal violence is the self-defense of the popular movements, the RPM-M and RPA have developed their own distinct approach to armed struggle. When explaining the need for armed struggle to their foreign visitors, the RPA comrades seem almost apologetic; "the Filipino ruling classes will never stop oppressing the people unless they are forced to, that is why revolutionaries need to prepare for armed struggle, it is not our choice. What we want most of all is peace."