

Left in Parliament: From Boycott to Intervention

**THE ROLE OF THE
DEMOCRATIC LEFT IN THE PHILIPPINE PARLIAMENT
By Rep. Etta Rosales***

***Intervention – A Brief Interregnum by the Democratic Alliance
And Boycott – Under the newly established CPP during the
Marcos Regime***

When I try and think of the Left in parliament within the historical landscape, I can only recall that brief shining moment when the Democratic Alliance (DA) under Luis Taruc was able to gain six seats in the 1946 elections through the solid strength of the Central Luzon peasant vote. The DA's platform was to oppose a parity provision that would amend the 1935 Charter and ensure American parity rights in the exploitation of Philippine natural resources beyond the end of American colonial rule. As far as DA was concerned, priority in the development of our natural resources should benefit the Filipino people. Allowing the Americans equal access in the exploitation of our resources would undermine Philippine sovereignty for which the Katipuneros (Filipino revolutionaries) had earlier laid their lives in battle. Apolinario Mabini, one of the intellectual leaders of the Philippine Revolution had warned about the threat of foreign imperialism if we did not gather the collective resolve to fight for real independence.

But this collective resolve, political will, if you wish, was not that easy to exercise. Even while preparing the Philippines for independence, the United States government had deftly evolved a system of economic, social, political and cultural ties that made it difficult to exercise independence beyond its formal declaration. This intricate network of multifarious ties made it much easier for the local leaders to continue a relationship of dependence, of almost obsequious reliance on the colonizer, institutionalized over half a century of colonization.

There were two strategic knots I could cite here. One, America made it policy to offer relief and rehabilitation to allied countries where American bombs had been dropped to crush the enemy. Manila was terribly hit and destroyed, less by Japanese artillery as by American bombs that sought to bring out in the open Japanese soldiers from their dugouts. It was tremendous work for the Philippines to recover as a young fumbling nation, and for this the Americans offered a long-term rehabilitation plan. The quid pro quo for this generous offer was equal access by Americans in the exploitation of Philippine natural resources –

a demand that needed an amendment to the 1935 Philippine Constitution.

It was in this context that the Democratic Alliance sought to participate in parliament and oppose the Charter amendment. Backed by the organized peasants of Central Luzon, the DA genuinely represented a significant segment of the peasant voice seasoned in historical struggle against foreign oppression from the period of Spanish rule to the time of independence.

The options were harsh for a young nation: it was a choice between respecting the sovereign voice of the people and allowing the DA to represent the organized peasants of Luzon at the expense of losing rehabilitation aid, or giving in to the demands of the former colonizer and booting out the representatives of the peasant masses. The newly elected elite leadership opted for the latter.

A second knot that undermined the spirit of independence was a tradition that ensured the election of elite leaders to the highest positions of the land only with the sound approval of the U.S. government. President Diosdado Macapagal, father of the current President Arroyo, had written in his memoirs that no president of the Philippines could ever be elected into office without the approval of the American government. True enough, under his presidency the Philippines was pressured to lift import controls and open the economy to American finished products. American surplus drowned the market with goods that competed with the products of an emerging light manufacturing industry nurtured by import substitution and foreign exchange controls. Under Macapagal, the peso was devalued and the protective policies for a nascent manufacturing industry were dismantled.

The decade of the fifties and sixties witnessed the peak of anti-communism under the McCarthy policy that spilled over American territorial boundaries. This period saw the defeat of the Huks under the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP) in the '50s. By 1968 the Communist Party of the Philippines led by Jose Maria Sison was re-established and the new People's Army set up the year after. Armed struggle became the primary arena for the Left and with the declaration of martial rule in 1972, attention was given towards strengthening the armed left while boycotting all parliamentary initiatives under Marcos.

It was in these dark days of martial law where the workers and the church sector gradually contributed in breaking the climate of public fear under a rule of terror. In 1977, the La Tondena workers struck, challenging not just the Management but the regime's no-strike policy. The Gelmart workers followed suit, and during these dark days, the

workers with some students took to the streets with seminarians, nuns and some priests marching with them calling for a more liberal climate and better wages within the factories.

In 1978 the Marcos regime, under pressure from the U.S., decided to hold elections for the establishment of a unicameral parliament. The CPP was split on the issue of whether or not to participate. Its regional command in the north capital region opted to participate while the rest of the territorial chapters decided to boycott. Participation however was engaged in to use the arena for exposing the bankruptcy of the electoral process under dictatorial rule. The Opposition candidates were led by the late Ninoy Aquino, Jr. who was in detention then. A Left candidate, Alex Boncayao, joined the Laban camp (Ninoy's political party) and the election campaign ended with the noisiest and best participated in Noise Barrage of Metro-Manila under Ninoy's leadership. Even Metrocom cars with their sirens and lights joined in the collective noise, a feat that has never been duplicated to this day. It was the first concerted move by a coalition of left and anti-Marcos forces who had succeeded in drawing the spontaneous crowd to collective protest during the election campaign. On Election Day, the Military actively took over the guarding and counting of ballots resulting in a total defeat of all Opposition candidates led by Ninoy Aquino, with the regime's candidates, led by Imelda, winning all the seats. For one reason or another, the Batasan never convened and the regime legislated through decrees by the dictator.

By 1981, external pressure from the U.S. pushed the dictator to hold presidential elections and give a semblance of democracy by "lifting" martial rule. Marcos was challenged by the regime's hand-picked opponent, Alejo Santos, who lost a resounding defeat in an election bout boycotted by the Left, the Opposition, and a cynical electorate. Marcos thus got his "new mandate" to continue as president and with this, the regime "lifted" martial rule and "restored" normal rule with amendments in the 1973 Constitution that allowed Marcos to take over anytime the regime was threatened by its enemies.

The Opposition grew in numbers, strengthened by the worsening economic crisis highlighted by capital flight. It was during this period that a moratorium on the payment of debt was made simply because the government could no longer pay the foreign debt without fear of economic collapse. The mass movement continued to grow and by early 1983, the League of Filipino Students and the Alliance of Concerned Teachers dared to march in separate routes but merge towards Liwasang Bonifacio. There were a total of about two to three thousand in number, but we felt thirty thousand strong. It was the first time we were able to mobilize this number and it was a glorious feeling sitting on the steps of

the Post Office facing the monument of Andres Bonifacio, finishing our short program on the issues against commercialized education and underpaid teachers.

A turning point in the history of the Marcos regime took place with the assassination of Benigno Aquino, Jr., former Senator and formidable enemy of Marcos. By this time, Marcos was very sick and when Aquino stepped down from the plane, he was gunned down by assassins from the military. The incident sparked the flame of national outrage that swept across the nation. Justice for Aquino, Justice for All was formed as a broad coalition. Earlier, the Nationalist Alliance for Justice, Freedom and Democracy was established, drawing in nationalist politicians who were crippled by the declaration of martial law: Jose Diokno, Teofisto Guingona, Abraham Sarmiento, Aquilino Pimentel, and the like.

By 1984, the students dared the biggest threat at the time – to march to Mendiola under the leadership of the U.P. Student Council and other Student Council leaders all over Metro-Manila. They were tear-gassed, but they paved the way for bigger and broader marches challenging the dictatorship each step of the way. In the same year, the discredited regime was called on again by the international community to work for democratic reforms if it wanted to continue benefiting from international aid. The U.S. in particular was putting more pressure than the others. In response, the Marcos regime called for elections to the Batasan to set up the legislative assembly.

The issue of whether or not to participate in the Batasan elections became a major issue for the anti-dictatorship movement that had already taken shape nationwide. The Liberal Party had boycotted all elections and this was no problem to them. They were still going to boycott. Opposition political parties rooted in community struggle such as the PDP-Laban and UNIDO became the instruments for participation in the Batasan polls by traditional politicians. The Left, backed by a formidable grassroots base, pushed for a litany of requirements from the regime before allowing the broad coalitions it dominated to participate. “Boycott unless ...”, “Participation if...” were tactical calls that we made, stating that several requirements had to be complied with by the regime before the movement – Nationalist Alliance for Justice, Freedom and Democracy (NAJFD), Justice for Aquino, Justice for All (JAJA), Coalition for the Restoration of Democracy (CORD) would participate.

Naturally, the regime failed to comply with all the requirements and there was a countdown at the Ninoy Aquino Monument in Ugarte Park, Makati. By midnight, when the regime failed to respond to our tactical calls, we called for the Boycott of the Batasan Elections. Media, Local and international media witnessed the event and captured the

rapid polarization of forces. In the meantime, the UNIDO, PDP-Laban and other opposition politicians ran for office and won a significant number of seats in the 1984 Batasan Elections. On hindsight, Butz Aquino, younger brother of Ninoy Aquino, told me later that perhaps it would have been better if some of us decided to participate in the 1984 Elections because this is where the people were.

The New People's Army grew in strength and developed the capacity to launch simultaneous tactical offensives in different parts of the country. It continued to erode the regime's rural base. With CPP in cooperation with the political opposition, the anti-dictatorship movement grew in strength and waged concerted mass actions all at the same time in different parts of the country. We called them "*Welgang Bayan*". Even the teachers under the Alliance of Concerned Teachers (ACT-Philippines) succeeded in holding concerted mass actions – walk-outs, mass leaves, strikes, etc. We had media support given that many of the media personnel were related to teachers – as husbands, children, aunts and uncles.

By 1986, the United States pressured the Marcos regime to call for elections and undertake political reforms. Marcos called for Snap presidential elections and the anti-dictatorship movement, led by the political opposition, pushed for a united opposition that would only have one standard bearer. It was a choice between the UNIDO leader Salvador Laurel or Ninoy Aquino's widow, Corazon Aquino. After a lot of haggling, Doy Laurel finally gave in to Cory Aquino, whose name was magic to the people who longed for a restoration of democratic rule. Lorenzo Tanada, who was elected Chair of the Bagong Alyansang Makabayan or *Bayan* was instrumental in forging this agreement. It was an agreement where Cory Aquino promised to vote for the termination of the RP-US Military Bases Agreement – an issue that was carried on against Marcos during his entire fourteen year rule since the imposition of martial rule. It became clear to the people that Marcos could not have lasted that long without the staunch and unstinted support of the U.S. government.

The election campaign was colorful, but the call for snap presidential polls divided the entire anti-dictatorship movement. The CPP called for a boycott because it felt that the U.S. government would never give up Marcos and the polls were a ploy to divide a dynamic and still growing anti-dictatorship movement. The signature campaign to get Cory as standard bearer caught fire and many of the legal organizations created under CPP initiative were divided in "Participation" or "Boycott". Only the basic sectors of workers and peasants remained solidly behind "Boycott", although the officialdom of the mass organizations initiated by the CPP were told to boycott under the leadership of *Bayan*.

This was a historical period which the CPP failed to grasp and when the entire nation went to the polls in early February to boot Marcos out of power – even the deputized personnel to monitor the elections through the computer walked out of their work when they saw that there was cheating by the regime that was taking place. Lorenzo Tanada, Jose Diokno, Ambrosio Padilla and several other stalwarts took their leave from the organizations they headed with CPP cooperation and decided to participate in the snap polls.

Marcos declared himself winner of the elections through his COMELEC shortly after he used his military to control the polling places and scare the people's watchdogs out of the polls. Shortly after, with the "Participation" camp of the anti-dictatorship movement fired up with the people at its side, Cory Aquino in Luneta called for a boycott of the cronies' firms to protest the rampant cheating that took place and to reject the regime's COMELEC counting sometime in mid-February. The protest movement grew in strength and by 22 February, Juan Ponce Enrile and Fidel V. Ramos defected from the Marcos camp and sought the Cardinal's help to call on the people to protect this defection. Both Cardinal Sin and Butz Aquino spoke before media and called on the people to go to EDSA and protect Camp Crame where Fidel Ramos and Enrile decided to stay after breaking away from Marcos. The people finally came in their numbers that grew to millions and the people's action came to be known as EDSA I or People Power 1. This was replicated in continuing protest rallies in urban centers all over the country. I was in Davao City then and we had a big rally where Cory Aquino was supposed to go. Since she could not make it, we were asked to take over in a program of protest.

EDSA 1 lasted from February 22 to the 25th. By this day, Marcos was whisked out of Malacanang by an American plane and shipped to Hawaii which he thought was Paoay up in Ilocos Norte, his hometown. Cory Aquino took her oath of office in Club Filipino and became President of the newly restored post-Marcos democratic government.

Left Intervention in a Post-Marcos Congress

The first national act done by the newly elected government of Corazon Aquino was to release all political prisoners, regardless of ideology. Many of them were national democrats who fought underground and above ground against the dictatorship. Despite opposition from Enrile and Ramos, Aquino stood her ground, strengthened in her conviction by the fact that her own husband was jailed by Marcos unjustly and later assassinated. On the other hand, she did not forget the fact that the CPP-led movement boycotted the snap

presidential polls, weakening the opposition drive to oust the dictator through the ballot.

Thus, when BAYAN volunteered its most prominent leaders to be chosen by the President and her men among those who would frame the Constitution, the most vociferous and visible ND leaders were totally ignored and rejected. Jaime Tadeo, Dr. Minda Quesada, Prof. Ponciano Bennagen and Atty. Rene Sarmiento were friends we could trust. Beyond them and a few more allies, the ND leaders were deliberately glossed over. On hindsight, we saw how the boycott debacle was starting to impact negatively on our parliamentary initiatives.

But NDs never say Die. We set up our lobby network for the framing of the Constitution. While we lobbied strongly for nationalist provisions, we were more focused on our revolutionary task of creating a constitutional crisis. We encouraged the few forces and our allies within to push for a rejection of the Constitution if it failed to comply with our agenda for a nationalist and democratic Charter. For this reason, we failed to appreciate some electoral reforms that were being deliberated on such as the Party List System, the absentee voting, anti-dynasty and human rights provisions.

When the Constitution was drafted and a plebiscite was in order, we campaigned hard to get the people to vote for a resounding NO to the 1987 Charter. The Bayan leadership was split on the matter. Many of us opted to vote for a critical yes – we always had to qualify our Yes to any government initiative. But “the dark lords” as the Bayan Sec-Gen, Lean Alejandro, would say, called for a rejection without benefit of a rigorous discussion on the Charter provisions. Around 85% voted overwhelmingly in favor of the Charter while the steadfast ND boycotters campaigned for a NO. It was never figured out how many NDs voted because many of us were not registered.

With the ratification of the 1987 Charter, the next move was the election of members of the Philippine Congress. Eagerly we studied how to participate in the elections for Congress. *Partido ng Bayan (PnB)* was set up as the ND political party, which nominated its own ticket of senatorial candidates for the post-Marcos legislative elections including both the Senate and the House of Representatives. It absorbed the same ticket nominated by the Bayan National Council as recommended by its Electoral Commission. I was among those nominated by the Bayan NC for its senatorial ticket, but I graciously declined, feeling quite strongly that we would not be able to make it. The senatorial candidates elected were the leaders of the different sectors who figured prominently during the entire anti-dictatorship struggle against Marcos: Jaime Tadeo of KMP (peasants); Crispin Beltran of KMU (workers); Bernabe Buscayno (former

head of the NPA); Romeo Capulong (human rights lawyer); Boy Morales (popular democrat leader); Nelia Sancho (women); Joe Burgos (media). The campaign to get the national democratic base to vote for us was to remember the phrase "*Bubuka Sa Tabe Mo*" the beginning of the family names of each candidate. As pointed out earlier, President Aquino had no sympathy for the Left and never forgot the latter's boycott campaign against her candidacy. Hence, no effort was made to help the Left candidates who suffered a resounding defeat in the Senate race. At the House of Representatives, two PnB candidates were elected. The senatorial bets got zero even in their own bailiwicks. Cheating was smooth and decisive to ensure that no one would win a Senatorial seat.

Subsequently, local elections were held in 1988 and PnB fielded local candidates for councilor, vice-mayor and mayor. There were local coalitions with the Liberal Party and the PDP-Laban who were staunch allies in the anti-dictatorship drive. The results were so much more encouraging and reflective of the strength of the national democratic mass movement at the ground level. In an assessment report made several years later, it was found out that the local elections showed a total of 622 winning candidates, mostly councilors, vice-mayors and mayors with a sprinkling of vice-governors and governors. There were a total of 71 NDs, 47 ND allies, and 246 issue-based allies with an estimated number of 258 local seats in Mindanao that had to be fully reported. In sum, PnB reported 622 over 17,260 local seats or 3.6% of total seats in local government nationwide.

With the defeat of its senate slate at the national level and only two candidates making it to the House of Representatives, PnB and Bayan did not bother to try and consolidate the positive gains won by its two candidates in the House of Representatives and its 622 local seats won in the 1988 local elections. The potentials for engagement in local governance with 622 seats available to PnB were lost as the CPP had other matters in mind. The rift between armed and parliamentary arenas of struggle became increasingly pronounced.

By 1989 to 1992, the CPP was bogged down by internal conflict and debate on how to approach the "democratic space" created by the ouster of the dictator Marcos. The debate was partly fed by the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, the fall of the Eastern European socialist countries, followed by the 1990 disintegration of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. Between 1992 and 1993, the CPP split and those who remained within the orthodox line were known as the Reaffirm group and those who bolted out of the Party were called the Rejection group. In short, they came to be known as the RAs and the RJs. The former steadfastly held on the concept that armed struggle remains the principal form in attaining change in society. The latter opted for

parliamentary struggle over armed struggle, participating more seriously in the electoral arena to push for their agenda of social reform. The proliferation of NGOs in 1986 led to the enrichment of alliances and coalitions among the RJ initiatives and other non-ND blocs. These initiatives became active in lobbying for reforms, one of which was the Party List Law which was passed in 1995. With its passage, new party list organizations cropped up – Akbayan, a coalition of Bisig, Pandayan, Popdems, and RJs from PnB and Bayan. Sanlakas, homogenously RJ and a host of social democratic initiatives and non-political organizations. AKBAYAN and SANLAKAS won in the first party list elections in 1998 with one seat each, joining non-political bloc groups to form 13 organizations occupying 14 seats in the 11th Congress. Both Akbayan and Sanlakas were able to figure prominently in the 11th Congress when they exposed the payola of P500,000 given to each Congressman to ensure a quorum for the passage of the energy bill into law.

Both became part of the Minority who ultimately joined civil society initiatives calling for the resignation and/or impeachment of President Estrada in October 2000. The combined efforts within and outside Congress ultimately convinced the Speaker of the House to join the Minority in charging the President with issues of plunder and with the Speaker and his group, the House got sufficient votes in pushing for the impeachment of Joseph Estrada.

With the 12th Congress, the orthodox Left, who earlier scoffed at the party list initiatives, decided to organize their own groups, seeing the positive gains of Akbayan and Sanlakas as House members in pushing for basic reform issues like the payola expose and the impeachment of the President. Bayan Muna was formed and won a formidable victory of 1.7 million votes. It had the obvious support of both the Administration and the Underground. While the show of force was impressive, underground initiatives in harassing other party list campaigners through the use of force and arms became a ticklish issue that challenged the integrity of the party list system against the use of guns and goons.

Again on hindsight, when the Orthodox Left changed their tactics (not their strategy) in the 2001 polls, they easily aligned themselves with the Administration (something they accused us of earlier) and were able to get some favors that helped them win their votes in the party list elections. In the 12th Congress, Sanlakas, Partido Manggagawa, both RJ forces and Amin from Mindanao won seats at different times while Akbayan was able to get two seats and the chairmanship of the Committee on Human Rights. Meanwhile, the debate in determining who should be qualified as party list candidate and how does one determine

the allocation of seats in the House drew several Supreme Court rulings and COMELEC resolutions. Unfortunately, a Supreme Court ruling that exists to this day defines proportional representation in a manner that limits the entry of party list groups into the House.

In the 13th Congress, Akbayan won three seats, PM won one seat and Amin won another seat. All five party list representatives came together to form the Laban ng Masa PL representatives. On the other hand, Bayan Muna split itself and formed several other groups like Anak Pawis and Gabriela, numbering six in all. With two impeachment initiatives this time against President Gloria Arroyo and basic issues of gross human rights violations and the need for wage increase, all 11 members of LnM and BM Cluster found themselves in tactical alliance within the Minority to push the more complex issues of impeachment and plunder and the struggle to amend the Party List Law to genuinely accommodate the under-represented and marginalized sections of society. Wage increase for the workers, a continuing dialog on the installation of farmer beneficiaries in land that belongs to them and perennial inquiries into gross violations of human rights, compensation for the Marcos victims were among the common issues that forged tactical unity among the party list groups of the Left.

On the other hand, the persistence of the armed underground to intrude and assert its presence continues as obstacle in democratic and parliamentary reform in much the same way fascistic-minded elements of the military go roughshod against dissent of any form. On the cultural front, sectarian thinking, bigotry and patronage politics remain as major obstructions to the collective effort to liberate the people from the shackles of poverty and ignorance. Such efforts can only be done if we commit ourselves to the people and the institutions that protect them; if we remain steadfast in helping the people empower themselves, that they develop the capacity to make independent and informed choices on questions that affect their lives. We must be on their side in collectively traversing the less traveled road to social reform. **Intervention, rather than boycott in parliament is still the strategic option in this direction. #**

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