

The Constrains on Democratization in the Philippines*

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Democratization does not occur in a vacuum. I will discuss some political realities that constrain this process in the Philippines. While they are not insurmountable, we must take them into account in planning our strategy in the struggle for genuine democracy.

Neither are realities unique to the Philippines. Earlier this month I was in Jogjakarta to represent *Laban ng Masa* at the founding congress of *Papernas* (the National Liberation Party of Unity of Indonesia). The Indonesian police prevented us from speaking on the ground that the presence of foreigners would provoke a bunch of fascist thugs. There were about 50 to 100 of thugs belonging to a group with the ridiculous acronym of FAKI (or Front Anti-Komunis Indonesia). They came in motorcycles, wearing black jackets and helmets, and brandishing truncheons and bladed weapons. Instead of dispersing these trouble makers, the police threatened to let them loose unless the congress excluded us and adjourned a day earlier.

That nasty incident showed in abundant clarity the superficiality of the so-called “redemocratization” in countries like Indonesia and the Philippines. We booted out the dictators, but only to be replaced with weak regimes that lack the strength and political will to consolidate the democratic gains. With liberal democratic pretensions, the successor regimes hesitate to do the dirty job which the fallen dictatorships used to perform with impunity. But these regimes also allow the vested interests who feel threatened by the mass movement to hire rightwing gangs. In this manner they are able to stop the regime change from developing into a process of system change. Repression is not diminished; it is simply privatized like other services in the neo-liberal economy.

If the Indonesians have their FAKI, we Filipinos have our NAD (or the National Alliance for Democracy). The NADmen do not strut around in motorcycles, but they sometimes infiltrate our conferences to heckle and provide the police an excuse to intervene. More menacing than NAD are the paramilitary units that operate under cover of anonymity, assassinating political dissenters. Since last year hundreds of Leftwing

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activists (including local leaders of Laban ng Masa) have perished in a wave of extra-judicial killings.

Let us not be deceived that in this epoch of neo-liberal globalization, democracy is on the march. Weak civilian regimes brought to power by elite-led upheavals do not guarantee the rights of movements seeking an end to elite rule. The fact that this conference is held on the campus of a public university should not give the illusion that in the Philippines there is an extensive democratic space. We do not know what will happen to us after this. There is an emerging pattern of intimidation. In fact, I am now facing the charge of rebellion for allegedly conspiring with some military officers to stage a coup against the Arroyo government. The evidence is flimsy but if the court issues a warrant of arrest, I can be kept in jail for the duration of the trial because rebellion is a non-bailable offense. The purpose is pure harassment, to intimidate Laban ng Masa.

In reaction to our experience with dictatorship, we tend to focus our attack on the state, as if it is the singular threat to freedom and democracy. By promoting this anti-state attitude we inadvertently fall for the bourgeois concept of democracy. Taking at face value the axiom that “the government is best which governs least,” some otherwise progressive individuals and groups support the legal and institutional arrangements to keep the state weak; like separation of powers and checks and balances, decentralization and local autonomy, two- or multi-party elections, etc.

In the West these structural arrangements may serve a democratic function; but in the Philippines and other Third World countries, they provide a democratic façade for the system of elite rule. Where the leading contenders represent rival factions of the same elite, elections do not threaten the system. Whoever wins is sure to pursue the same policies that serve the interests of the ruling class. Since the elite also controls the various branches and levels of government, they check and balance each other to forestall any possibility for fundamental reforms.

Power rests largely in the private sector, the bastion of the elite. With its hands tied, the state is too weak to protect the rights of its citizens and enforce its own laws. For example, our stringent environmental laws are laxly implemented due to pressures from the transnational companies whose local subsidiaries and joint-venture partners are the financiers of the politicians and bureaucrats. Thus, even in the remote possibility of the Left parties gaining a decisive majority in parliament, there is little they can do for as long as that the state remains a captive of the present legal framework.

Fundamental reforms require a strong state. Instead of going along with the neo-liberal project of weakening the state, the Left should fight

for a strong state. A strong state that is truly committed to reforms does not discourage militancy but, on the contrary, nurture and protect the militant social movements as a counterforce to elite resistance.

That is why in Laban ng Masa we do not confine our call to the ouster of Mrs. Arroyo. We are also calling for a transition period where the present legal framework is set aside to give the state the chance to repair our damaged institutions and bring back hope to a nation in despair. There is no shortcut to democracy. Democracy cannot be built by a wimp, like the governments that replaced Marcos.

Since 1986 elite-led upheavals have brought down two governments, but only the highest officials were changed. The common people experienced no improvement in their lives. Last year the elite opposition again called for people's power in support of their effort to remove Mrs. Arroyo through impeachment. The masses did not respond, partly out frustration and a sense of betrayal.

Lately opposition politicians have changed gears. They are soliciting for support in the coming midterm elections. This line is pleasing to US imperialism. George Bush equates American-style elections with democracy. But, as noted earlier, in the Philippines elections only provide a democratic façade for an essentially oligarchic system. An increasing number of people have become cynical of elections and contemptuous of the traditional politicians. They regard elections as entertainment, when the politicians shed off their business suits to intermingle with the masses. They employ movie stars, singers and clowns to amuse the crowds in campaign rallies. They spend hundreds of millions to buy votes and bribe election inspectors. They do everything except to discuss serious policy issues.

We in Laban ng Masa recognize that even this kind of elections is an arena of struggle. But we do not delude ourselves that this is an effective channel for the articulation of the people's will. Our elections are fraught with frauds. The opposition politicians warn that President Arroyo may cheat again, as she did in 2004. But we know that they, too, cheat just as brazenly.

Our electoral system is not only fraudulent; all the odds are loaded in favor of the elite so that only those with lots of money and enjoy the financial backing of landlords and big corporations have any chance of winning. Elections are usually described as a non-violent mode of regime change; but more people die in Philippine elections than in the coups in Thailand and Fiji. The rival political bosses maintain private armies and kill each other when maligning is no longer sufficient.

Laban ng Masa will participate in the coming elections for the purpose of highlighting their undemocratic character. Our line is that elections can be a democratic exercise only after we go through a

transition period with a revolutionary government that will clip the powers of the elite and empower the masses. In other words, fundamental reforms cannot be achieved through elections within the context of elite rule; elite rule must first be terminated to create the conditions for truly democratic elections.

My last point is that the struggle for genuine democracy cannot be detached from a cultural revolution. I am not proposing to replicate Mao's cultural revolution that caused havoc in China in the heydays of the Gang of Four. I mean a systematic effort to rectify the perverse values of mendicancy and subservience that the masses have internalized. Let us not romanticize the masses and imagine them to be the "wretched of the earth," anxious and ready to wrest power and transform the state into a liberating force. The politically conscious masses form a small minority; the vast majority is self-centered, undisciplined and mercenary. It is from their ranks that the vested interests recruit the fascist thugs. At their present level of consciousness, they are on their own incapable of shaking off the chains of oppression. They have to be ideologically reoriented, trained and organized to participate meaningfully in the exercise of political power. For as long as the culture of servility prevails, participatory democracy will remain a fiction.

In this conference we shall examine afresh the concept of participatory democracy – a concept popularized but left ambiguous in the days of student power, when all over the world young people stood up in support of the Vietnamese guerrillas. Now we want to know how the Vietnamese comrades hope to preserve socialism while playing around in the global market. I am curious to hear from our comrades of the Marxist party of India how they managed to run three state governments in the context of a capitalist federation. And I am sure all of us are interested in the current efforts of Venezuela to build a new brand of socialism for the 21st century.

As a coalition of previously squabbling Left organizations, we in Laban ng Masa would like to know how the Nepalese comrades were able to forge an alliance with Maoists and rightwing parties against a dictatorial monarch. When I was a student in England, the rightwing of the British Labour Party hailed Sweden as the paragon of democratic socialism; I wonder how the Swedish comrades of the Left party view their own social system.

Ever since we seceded from the Spanish empire, the Filipinos lost interest in Spain. But the Spanish heritage is still visible in our churches and language. At a conference in Moscow in 1969 I had the privilege of sharing a table with the Spanish delegation headed by the legendary Dolores Ibaruri, La Passionaria. The Russian hosts ostensibly assumed that with my Spanish-sounding name I must know how to speak Spanish.

I have kept up to date with developments in Australia because I regularly read the *Green Left Weekly*. I am also quite familiar with developments in Cuba because I am the chairman of the Philippines-Cuba Cultural and Friendship Association. My knowledge of the Partai Sosialis Malaysia was updated recently because Comrade Selvan and I were at the Papernas congress in Jogjakarta. But there is much more we can learn from each other. There is much we can do to support one another.

In this conference, let us try to concretize the nebulous concept of participatory democracy and see if it is indeed possible to reinvent socialism on this basis, without the authoritarian and bureaucratic deformities that diminished its appeal to the peoples of the world.