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Philippines

“The democratic content in self-determination struggles must be safeguarded”

- IV Online magazine - 2012 - IV449 - June 2012 -

Publication date: Tuesday 12 June 2012

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Anzelmo Guerrero, a central leader of the Rebolusyonyong Partido ng Manggagawa-Mindanao (Revolutionary Workers Party-Mindanao) <<http://www.rpm-m.org/>> spoke to B. Skanthakumar in Manila in late April 2012. The interview focused on the application of the right to self-determination by revolutionary Marxists in the specific context of Mindanao.

Tell us briefly about the origin and social base of your party?

The comrades who built the Revolutionary Workers Party of Mindanao (RPM-M) were once part of the (Maoist) Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). We were in the leadership of the CPP, especially in the southern part of the Philippines, that is, in Mindanao.

In this region, there are three main communities or “tri-peoples”: the Bangsamoro (Moro or Muslim nation); the Katawhang Lumad (non-Muslim and non-Christian indigenous peoples); and settlers and their descendants (mainly Christians from the majority nationality who migrated from central Luzon and the Visayas). We were tasked by the CPP to work with these three peoples. Our strategy at the time was that of “encircling the cities from the countryside”.

On the island of Mindanao, the indigenous peoples and the Bangsamoro were concentrated in the interior, whereas the settlers were in the urbanized settlements along the coast. So, we began organizing the indigenous and the Muslims in the mountains and plains ... to encircle the cities populated by Christians!

We did not root ourselves in those communities in defense of their interests or for their right to freely determine their future, but for the purpose of carrying out the strategy of the protracted peoples’ war. Ironically, the party militants implementing this perspective were generally from the majority Christian community themselves!

We were trying to organize the Bangsamoro and the indigenous along class lines, when social classes were not clearly developed in these communities, and our comrades were dying in the process. For example, the farmers identified with the clan and would report on our propaganda and activities to the clan leader (datu or sometimes sultan), to whom they were often related. So we drew the lesson that we should organize on clan lines, and we succeeded.

From the 1980s we began organizing people from Mindanao who were studying in Manila. These were the children of the upper middle class or elite of Mindanao, especially from the Bangsamoro. Also, we were able to organize others who were displaced by the conflict. We succeeded in recruiting them to the Party and many became full-timers. Through them we did legal work through front organizations.

What was your analysis of the right to self-determination and the national question in the Philippines, and how has it evolved?

In 1976 the CPP formulated its policy on the right to self-determination in the context of the Philippines. We supported the right to self-determination of the Bangsamoro, based upon the highly repressive nature of the Marcos regime, and the CPP supported their right to take up arms in waging that struggle.

Now, this was a flawed application of that right because it was tied to the issue of state repression. We did not then understand that the right to self-determination is a natural right of peoples, regardless of the political regime etc.

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The danger of the CPP's position – which we were engaged in debating within that party before the split (actually, our expulsion) – was that it assumed that once the national democratic revolution (which as Maoists was our goal) had been achieved, thereafter the Bangsamoro and the indigenous peoples would no longer be eligible to exercise their right to self-determination!

This was the historical experience in China too, where the Chinese CP initially supported the movements of indigenous peoples but after it had won power, denied that right as if it ceases to exist. Similarly, in Nicaragua where the indigenous Miskito's joined the revolution against Somoza, but were told that post-revolution they were no longer oppressed and therefore there was no need for any political arrangement that considered their aspiration for self-rule.

So this error of the CPP was also common to other Communist parties elsewhere: the belief that the right to self-determination was appropriate in the context of feudal or capitalist relations but no longer valid after a revolutionary process led by Communists.

Our criticism of the CPP line was that as Marxist-Leninists we do not organize in all sectors, but only among the most advanced part of the working class that is politically conscious. Therefore our program is most relevant to that section of the working class alone, and not even to the working class as a whole – though of course we aspire to convince those sections also of its correctness.

So where does this leave other classes and groups who are not organized by the Party such as the peasantry, the middle-class, the indigenous, and the minority nationalities? Our view was that as the Party did not organize in these sectors, it should support their own program as expressed by the democratic and political associations created through their self-organization, rather than forcing our program upon them.

Let me put it another way. If the socialist revolution succeeds, then it is (or should be) automatically understood that there will be a multi-party system. Even if it was one party that led the revolution, it does not have a political monopoly, and not can it impose its program on others who have the equal right to organize their own political associations and promote their own program. Likewise, as Marxist-Leninists in Mindanao, we do not have the right to impose our program on those whom we have not yet won to our program.

The right to self-determination struggle is a natural right of people to freely determine their own economic, political and cultural future. The role of party members who are also members of communities exercising their right to self-determination is to ensure that the democratic content of those struggles is safeguarded, both in the course of those movements, and once their goal has been realized.

Why is this? Well, the self-determination struggle is a multi-class movement and includes – as for example in the case of the Bangsamoro – its bourgeois class too which often provides its political leadership. While struggling for the political objective of removing the oppression of the minority nationality, the democratic content – by which I mean the participation of workers and peasants' – should be already there, so that their interests are also protected in the future political order.

Otherwise, once the national oppression by the majority nationality is removed, it will be replaced by the oppression of the ruling class within the minority nationality. World history would attest to this dynamic.

How does the RPM-M relate to the movements for self-determination of the Bangsamoro?

When we were in the CPP we had close links with the Bangsamoro movements, beginning with the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). Even when the MNLF leadership-in-exile was based in Libya in the 1970s, the CPP also maintained an office in Tripoli for liaison with them.

We had many debates with the MNLF. Their position was that our role was to combat the State, while they should organize the Bangsamoro. We responded that we would not build competing organizations, but that our members from the minority nationality should be able to work freely among the working class, peasantry and urban poor and that these sections should be integrated in the self-determination struggle.

Similarly we worked with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) from its inception. We have been debating with them recently too, regarding their conception of an “ancestral domain” of the Bangsamoro, as it directly conflicts with the rights of the indigenous communities who occupy the lands that are being claimed.

The MILF leaders argue that the first stage is to win these lands into their control, and thereafter the question of the rights of the indigenous can be addressed! The leaders of the indigenous peoples reply, “why not discuss now...why wait until after the struggle is won?”

This is another illustration of what we mean by the democratic content of the self-determination struggle. We agree with the indigenous peoples that they need to be consulted and their rights have to be respected; otherwise, one war (against the majority nationality) will be replaced by another war (between the minority nationalities).

The MILF is also a bourgeois-led movement and this is very clear from the composition of its “peace panel” that is currently conducting negotiations with the government of the Philippines

There is a gulf between the leadership and the ordinary Bangsamoro who don’t understand the deep and radical meaning of “self-determination”.

In my view, there is a parallel here with the LTTE [Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam] and its relationship with Tamil people in Sri Lanka. The LTTE was leading the struggle but it didn’t value the role of peasants and other oppressed social classes in the movement for self-determination. It believed that only its leadership knew best how to conduct the struggle, and also how to rule the state [Tamil Eelam] that it wished to create. Unfortunately, the LTTE also antagonized the oppressed among the majority Sinhala nationality, through targeting of civilians and suicide bombings, instead of making them allies of the Tamil people.

How do you take up the question of self-determination with the majority nationality in Mindanao who may identify more with the State?

Yes, we are very conscious of this issue. Our approach is to encourage the tri-peoples to work together on their democratic rights; which of course is viewed with suspicion by the leaderships of these peoples because they fear that they will lose control of their communities once the oppressed become conscious of their rights. Our perspective is that social liberation cannot wait until after national liberation but must be pursued together.

We link the problems of the working class in the majority community with those of the poor and oppressed in the minority nationalities, and try and show them that the causes are common and therefore the solutions can be found when they act together. We explain that unless the democratic content is present in the self-determination struggle, then once the goal has been achieved, the oppressed will find that all that has happened is that one (external) oppressor has been replaced by another who is internal to your community.

If the political expression of the struggle for self-determination is secession, then that too as a proletarian party is what we support. If later, through democratic decision, there is a voluntary union between Mindanao and the rest of the Philippines then we would support that too. However, for now, there should be no doubt in the minds of the minority nationalities that we are with them in their struggle for self-determination.

What were the consequences of the split in the CPP in the early 1990s for your revolutionary organizing in Mindanao?

Actually, we just carried on doing our work among the Bangsamoro and the indigenous, as had been our responsibility when we were members of the CPP. However, we maintained our armed units [Revolutionary Peoples' Army—RPA] because we have to be able to defend ourselves in the course of our political work.

It is a complex situation in Mindanao where in addition to the armed forces of the Government of the Philippines, and the New Peoples' Army (NPA) of the CPP, we also confront the armed goons of political warlords. Even as we try to organize the tri-peoples on democratic issues and struggles, we also have to be able to defend the gains of peoples' movements and struggles.

I should explain that we don't only organize on the island of Mindanao. We also work with the majority nationality from Mindanao who have migrated to the northern (Luzon) and central (Visayas) regions of the country and try to win their support for the self-determination struggle.

In this way, we want to ensure that any 'peace' agreement between the elites of the Bangsamoro and the Government of the Philippines is subjected to the critique of the majority nationality too and that their issues and concerns are also integrated.

In addition to working with migrants from Mindanao in other regions of the country, how does the RPM-M relate to other revolutionary groups and parties based on the majority nationality in those regions?

The 'split' in the CPP was unplanned and unforeseen. The debates had begun in the late 1980s. The Party fractured on the lines of its regional bureaus and territories which were more or less intact and retained their own cohesion.

For example, in the central or Visayas region, we were supported by the highest unit of the Party known as the 'Commission'. Initially in Mindanao, 4 of the 7 party regional committees supported us 'Rejectionists', but after the counter-ideological offensive, only the Central Mindanao Region and its armed wing remained outside the CPP. The Manila-Rizal region, which was numerically the largest, left the Party en-bloc.

As an underground organization, because of fears for our security and infiltration by state security agents, CPP militants did not know many other militants outside of our region or sectoral area of work. This was one factor which impeded the unity of those who rejected the strategy of protracted peoples' war.

In 1996, we convened the first ideological summit where we gathered those former Maoist organizations or Party structures that had territorial command: such as our group from Mindanao, others from the Visayas, and from Luzon. We had an open debate – which was new for us because nothing like it was (or is) allowed in the CPP – and developed our critique of the old Party and its strategy. So this was the period when we began developing political relations with each other.

Then in 1998, we in Mindanao became aware of the demoralization that had set in among many of the leaders of the other groups, for reasons of age and exhaustion, and to counter this we boldly called for the unification of the rejectionist forces.

We invited groups to Mindanao and prepared a unity congress based upon written documents. At the conclusion of the congress we proclaimed the Revolutionary Workers Party of the Philippines (RPM-P) and its military wing, the

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Revolutionary Proletarian Army/Alex Boncayo Brigade (RPA/ABB).

One of our errors was that we immediately engaged in peace talks with the Government of the Philippines, before we politically consolidated ourselves. Deals were done to buy the support of the RPM-P leadership for an end to armed hostilities.

Finally in 2000, the peace agreement was signed by the leadership, and took its members by surprise as they had been excluded from the process and final decision. However, the only organized opposition was in Mindanao.

We formed the Revolutionary Workers Party of Mindanao on May 1st 2001, although we only publicly announced our formation in the following year. We knew we needed to consolidate ourselves, politically and militarily, before we were attacked by our erstwhile comrades, in addition to all the other forces ranged against us.

As we anticipated would happen, our main camp was bombarded by the Armed Forces of the Philippines in 2002. We believe that its location could only have been disclosed by those who had visited there and stayed with us during the unity drive. Anyway, we had decided beforehand, not to die defending the camp, but to abandon it and build new camps elsewhere.

Still we didn't give up our will to unify, and in 2005 we joined with others to form the broad coalition Laban Ng Masa (‘Power of the Masses’). We were even willing to bury our differences with those ex-comrades in the RPM-P who had signed that rotten peace agreement with the government, and most likely betrayed us. Many of the personalities of the Filipino Left such as Joel Rocamora, Horacio ‘Boy’ Morales, Walden Bello and Roland Llamas participated. But it wasn't successful.

Now, our perspective is not to rush into organizational unification. We want to have good relations with diverse groups and currents on the Filipino Left, including the Partido Ng Manggagawa (Labor Party – PM) and the Marxist-Leninist Party of the Philippines (MLPP). We think we should begin by working together on common issues and common campaigns, and collaborating in educational work, and use these experiences to know and understand each other better, so that in time we can also achieve lasting political convergence.

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