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Philippines

The Second Congress of the Revolutionary Workers' Party (Mindanao)

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The Revolutionary Workers' Party (Mindanao) (Rebolusyong Partido ng Mangagawa-Mindanao or RPM-M) - was founded in 2001. But it is the product of a history which goes back a decade earlier, to the crisis of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP, Maoist) in 1992-1993. This crisis resulted in a whole series of splits, involving particularly commissions dealing with sectors of the party's work and territorial, regional party structures. In the South of the archipelago, this was the case with the Central Mindanao Region or CMR.

Historical note by Pierre ROUSSET

Let us go a little further back in time. In September 1987, the Communist Party reorganized its forces in Mindanao, creating five regions, including the CMR. The particularity of this region was to be responsible for work towards the Moros and Lumads - solidarity between the "three peoples" of the big southernmost island of the archipelago. Three communities do indeed live side by side in Mindanao. The "majority nationality", made up of the descendants of Christian settlers who had come in the framework of a recent process of "internal" colonization: during the twentieth century, the Filipino government pushed inhabitants from the North and South of the archipelago (often peasants) to migrate and settle in Mindanao. The Moros: Muslim populations which were converted to Islam before the Spanish (and Christian) colonization in the sixteenth century. The Lumads: mountain tribes, indigenous peoples, which were not Islamized.

The process of "internal" colonization and the arrival of big enterprises (transnational and Filipino) has created many economic, social and territorial conflicts which can easily take an inter-clan (within a community) or inter-community form. The historical resistance of the Moros gave rise to important armed movements: the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), then the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The resistance of the Lumad tribes, on the other hand, remained localised.

The principal territorial bases of the CMR (and today of the RPM-M) are in the provinces of Lanao (Northern and Southern), part of Eastern Misamis, North Cotabato and Maguindanao. They include urban centres like Iligan and Marawi. But its networks extended everywhere where there are Moro or Lumad populations, to Sultan Kudarat, to Zamboanga and the southernmost islands. Further afield, the CMR also had the responsibility for work towards the Moro and Lumad communities established in the Visayas (in the centre of the archipelago) and in Manila.

Within the Filipino Left, the experiment of the CMR is thus extremely particular, located in the principal zone of military conflicts of the archipelago, in constant contact with the MILF, with a limited implantation in the Moro milieu but much more important among the Lumad mountain tribes in its provincial bastions, even though many of its members belong to the "majority nationality".

After the split in 1993, the CMR went well beyond its original borders. Wanting to take part in the constitution of a new revolutionary organization on the level of the archipelago, it founded the Revolutionary Workers' Party by fusing with other structures produced by the crisis of the CPP, in the Visayas and in Manila. Unfortunately, this attempt fell through, giving rise on the one hand to a "Filipino" RWP (RPM-P) and on the other to the "Mindanao" RWP (RPM-M).

Since then, the RPM-M has extended its implantation in Mindanao, in particular towards the East, to Davao, but it

has not succeeded, for the moment, in consolidating an organization in the capital (Manila-Quezon City), in Luzon in the North or in the Visayas in the centre of the archipelago. The RPM-M remains a formation with a very "Mindanaoan" identity. More generally, all the Filipino revolutionary parties resulting from the crisis of the CPP have a very unequal implantation according to regions or social sectors.

Although its members are often engaged in legal activities, the RPM-M remains a clandestine organization. All the older cadres of the RPM-M were members of the Maoist party. In the same way, its politico-military cadres of the Revolutionary People's Army (RPA) came from the New People's Army (NPA) of the CPP. But since 1993, many members have joined the RPM-M who never belonged to the Maoist movement.

The rejuvenation of the RPM-M is striking.

The RPM-M has joined the Fourth International, of which it is the Filipino section.

Pierre Rousset

Report from the Congress

Get up: 3 a.m. Departure: 3.30. Stop for coffee: 4.15 in a village at the foot of the mountains. Then a night march to reach Camp Usman where the Second Congress of the Revolutionary Workers' Party (Mindanao), (RPM-M) is to be held.

At least that was the plan.

In fact, the car which was supposed to be for us had to urgently take a woman to the hospital. At 2 o'clock in the morning, we had to look for a new vehicle. It was pretty much a wreck. It no longer had any headlights. We drove at dead of night with, to light our way, a flashlight held out of the window of the front door. It was a big first for me! So of course we arrived late, with the dawn, and we could not fully benefit from the protection of the night to reach the guerrilla camp. Time pressed and we no longer had the right to the promised coffee!

Although engaged in peace talks with the government, the RPM-M is a clandestine party. Mindanao, the big island in the South of the archipelago, is the most militarized area in the Philippines, where the army is opposed to the MILF in particular. The RPM-M must protect itself from many hostile armed groups: governmental forces and the civil units that they have created (CAFGU), the "vigilantes" and other far-right militias, the armed bands of the landlords and the private armies of the warlords, gangsters and kidnappers... The saddest thing is that one of the principal threats comes from former comrades, namely the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its New People's Army (NPA) who have been embarked on an ultra-sectarian course for the last twenty years.

It is impossible under these conditions to hold a congress in a town, in an ordinary meeting room, more especially as many cadres of the party are still officially wanted and, more serious still, they are named in the order of battle of the NPA: authorization is given to assassinate them if the opportunity arises...

So the congress must meet in the mountains, in a zone where the RPM-M has a lot of popular support. The chosen place is quite easy to reach. The regional delegations arrive one by one, often bringing food with them. The work of getting the camp ready for the congress is not finished yet. Camp Usman – which takes its name from a veteran of

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the revolutionary combat who died in 2008 - is not used to accommodating so many people. Under the foliage and big green waterproof covers, a huge kitchen, wooden houses often built on piles and the meeting room have already been built. We still have to assemble a micro-clinic (extremely rudimentary) for the doctor-acupuncturist, dig the toilets, set up the "shower" corners, lay the pipes to bring water, cut out steps on dangerously slippery paths, reinforce bamboo ramps, improve the camouflage...

We are at the bottom of a small ravine. Everything is on a slope; and it's a steep slope. To put up the smallest tent (the European guests each have the right to a small individual tent), requires digging a flat space. Digging, cutting down trees, cutting off the branches, assembling structures, marking out the paths, digging again... All that represents a great deal of work, done by the unit of the Revolutionary People's Army (RPA) which is accommodating us and which must in addition ensure our protection. When we reach the camp, the combatants are exhausted and are only hanging on thanks to coffee! Fortunately, fresh reinforcements arrive and they can take a little rest.

The construction of the camp and the supplying of the kitchen with firewood every day means cutting down quite a few trees; the comrades replant systematically, to replace what they have used.

At the bottom of the ravine, everything becomes terribly slippery as soon as it rains. The ground is muddy clay. The Filipinos look out of the corner of their eye at this European who has trouble keeping his balance: will he fall or won't he? Sympathizing with me, they cut me a walking-stick; and I am very proud to announce that I did not fall! [1] I point out to one of my companions that it is not necessarily an excellent idea to organize the congress when the monsoon rains have started. He replies that otherwise, it would be difficult to find an adequate place with a sufficient supply of water...

Electricity is provided by a small generator and some solar panels. Delegates are regularly reminded that priority must be given to the radios (which particularly enable communication between military units) and to the computers, rather than to recharging individual cellphones. Filipinos are famous for the immoderate use which they make of SMS, but their sending is regulated here for security reasons.

The congress is opened by the two oldest participants (a man and a woman) and will in a few days be closed by the youngest participant - a nice idea, full of symbolism as to passing the baton between generations. Everyone is asked to choose a pseudonym for the occasion, which often leads to fantastic names which thoroughly perplex the comrade responsible for taking them down on a large sheet of white paper. There is a moment of confusion. One of the participants has chosen the name of someone who is being actively sought by the local police. They are asked to change it.

The congress, at last!

The RPM-M was founded in 2001 and the statutes stipulate that its congress must meet every three years – so the second should have been held in 2004. But the last few years have been extremely agitated; the prevailing conditions in Mindanao make it difficult to organize the congress and the preparatory discussions. You sense a great feeling of relief: we've finally done it!

To hold a congress with debates and preparatory local assemblies, serious reflexion, collective political decisions, the election of a national leadership, has nothing routine about it, and not only because of the conditions of clandestinity in a militarized environment. It is a break with one of the worst aspects of the revolutionary tradition of the Philippines, dominated in the 1970s and 80s by a party - the CPP - which, once established, never held a congress, nor even made a pretence of holding one [2]. The break is all the more significant in that the historical cadres of the RPM-M

themselves come from the CPP and Maoism.

The congress is being held seventeen years after the break with the Maoist CPP. It is the occasion to measure the political distance that has been travelled. The first sessions resemble seminars and don't give rise to big discussions, recapitulating the evolution of the theoretical and strategic conceptions, an evolution already registered in 2001 at the time of the foundation of the RPM-M: Filipino society is no longer considered to be "semi-feudal, semi-colonial", but capitalist, even though subordinated to imperialism. The armed struggle is no longer necessarily considered as the principal form of struggle, whatever the characteristics of the period. All the sectors of activity are no longer placed under the watchful authority of underground cadres. The relationship of subordination in which the Lumad were kept is abandoned in favour of a relationship that is respectful of their right of self-determination. Democracy - in the party, in the relations between party and movements, in struggles - has become a major concern...

The congress also takes the measure of the social transformations in progress. The majority of the factories where the RPM-M was implanted have closed. The tribal communities are besieged by the commercial order. The peasantry is undermined, weakened by the rural exodus. The country massively exports its labour and it is the migrants who carry the economy on their shoulders, but the families suffer the shock of this human haemorrhage. How to respond to such brutal upheavals? This feeling of instability, of things coming apart, is probably accentuated in Mindanao by the recurring effects of the natural disasters and the military conflicts with their train of displaced populations, of "internal refugees".

In recapitulating the experience of the last few years, the Second Congress must go back over the fundamental documents adopted during the First Congress and amend them, define the tasks for the coming period and elect a new leadership.

Security measures, military protection

The atmosphere is good-natured and will remain so throughout the congress. But those in charge of the camp fear that the arrival of the participants in this isolated area has not gone unnoticed, in spite of the precautions taken. In the evening, instructions are given as to what to do in the event of an attack: a whistle to sound the alarm and indicate where the danger is coming from, regroupment points for a rapid evacuation of the camp, in several groups... I did not know about this point on the agenda and I had gone to bed early so as to be able to have a wash shortly after dawn in order to avoid queuing in front of the men's "shower". So the instructions were repeated to me the following day and I learned that I had the right - if anything happened - to a small personal escort.

The congress is placed under the protection of a few dozen combatants stationed on higher ground and surveying the surrounding area. The network of activists in the nearby villages is on the alert and must warn of any suspect movements. Moreover, quite a few of the people taking part in the congress are also armed. The instructions are clearly given: to avoid any risk of an accident; in the area of the meeting-place all bullets must remain in the loading-clip, none should be in the barrel of the gun.

We see the classic armament of mobile guerrillas in the Philippines, almost always of American origin to facilitate the supply of ammunition: the M1 rifle, 30-calibre ("the weapon of Che, as I remember). The M16, standard attack rifle of the US forces, or the M14, more powerful, developed from the M1 Garand. The M203, grenade launcher combined, here, with the M16. An exotic touch with the Ultimax, a Singaporean light machine gun with a sensitive trigger... Not to mention the handguns worn strapped at the waist.

The congress is meeting in a zone where the situation is relatively calm. No open conflict with a warlord. Because of

the peace talks engaged with the government, the army must not (in theory...) attack the RPM-M. I have difficulty in imagining the NPA concentrating the considerable resources necessary to mount such a risky operation so far from its bases... An attack is very improbable, but in Mindanao, nothing is ever certain. The election of a new president implies that the negotiating procedures at the national level must be re-validated. Locally, a mayor can take matters into his own hands, eager to make the front pages of the media. In this area where so many armed groups operate, an event that has absolutely nothing to do with the congress can cause troop movements that are dangerous for our safety... So we can't lower our guard, but the improbable event isn't going to happen.

Fragments of daily life

How does a day at the congress start? With a shower, in the river, protected from being seen by covers. Water is collected in a large plastic dustbin; we collect it with a tabo - a kind of pitcher with a long handle which makes it possible for it to be sprinkled (very effective). Then breakfast (rice-based). Finally a daily gathering in front of the red flag with, in yellow, the traditional hammer and sickle and three stars symbolizing the three peoples of Mindanao [3] as well as the three great regions of the Philippines, with Luzon in the North, the Visayas in the centre and Mindanao (plus some other islands) in the South.

For a moment I am afraid that it's going to be a little too solemn for my taste but it's more like a family gathering. The unit of the RPA obviously has not had time to perfect how to present arms and everyone laughs. We sing the International and a revolutionary version of the national anthem. The Filipinos like to sing and, throughout our stay, the essential instrument is the guitar. It even accompanies the songs sung by a Lumad: we will not be entitled to the ritual gongs...

I forgot: the very first question which arises when you get up in the morning is: what to put on your feet? If the weather is dry, everything is fine. But if the rain has turned the ground into mud? And if my sports shoes are still sodden from having walked for a long time in a river to reach the camp? It's not a good idea good to have wet feet all day... Flip-flops? I see with satisfaction a Filipino, his foot raised, his flip-flop stuck on the ground behind him: I am not the only one to have problems on that score!

But others impress me: in all situations, they get along easily in flip-flops. I ask them to reveal the secret of their success: muscles! Their toes and their calves are so muscular that they impose their will on the rebellious flip-flops. I already liked the idea of these free, agile, mobile toes, which have not been precociously corseted by shoes; now I have a lot of respect for them. For my part, having always been a town-dweller, I get by as I can while waiting for the return of dry weather: bare feet, sandals...

The kitchen is a good size - it is also used as a dining room - and a lot of men are busy there. Interesting. But a woman seems to rule the roost. There are few vegetables, little fruit. As much rice as you want, three times a day (and on good days rice cake in the afternoon!)... Fish, sometimes dry, sometimes fresh (in this case, rather a small slice than a whole fish). A cow is ritually slaughtered in our honour. It is not very big, but it still provides a lot to eat. So, for a while, we are treated to beef and rice morning, midday and evening...Some participants, adepts of "organic" agriculture and a balanced diet, grumble. But on the whole I found the food to my taste. Thanks to the kitchen team.

The delegates are organized into teams which are responsible, each in its turn, for collecting wood, for bringing when necessary water to the toilets and the showers, cleaning the site every day... Hammocks are suspended here and there (with sometimes, the nec plus ultra, a mosquito net attached). The benches of the meeting room consist of simple boards, narrow, on which some people manage to sleep at night. I envy the Asians who are at ease at ease sitting cross-legged or squatting on their heels. Nothing to lean your back against, neither sofa nor grass to rest my

body – all that's left for me is the groundsheet of the tent, not very appealing. [4]

We are right in the middle of nature. Even though it is not possible for us to go for a walk in the area around the camp, when we have a break, we can contemplate it from the bottom of our ravine as we sip our coffee. The vegetation is ordinary (it is not unfortunately a primal forest!), but there are splendid butterflies and dragonflies which I could not name. A large green lizard prudently makes its way down the trunk of a tree. The birds are mostly common ones, like the Yellow-vented Bulbul (*Pycnonotus goiavier*). But with a little patience, you are lucky enough to see endemic species [5], specific to the Philippines, like this pair of White-eared Brown-Doves (*Phapitreron leucotis brevirostris*.) perched on a branch or this Blue Fantail (*Rhipidura superciliaris*, a passerine) which you only find in the South of the archipelago.

A wealth of political experience

The debates open up when it is a question of systematizing the “framework of reference” of the RPM-M in the form of a diagram connecting basic principles, political organization and tasks. What comes first: the theory or the concrete situation? A small “war of diagrams” excites the assembly, until a synthesis (or a compromise?) is found. The reporter insists: all the sectors of intervention are legitimate, we do not treat them on a hierarchical basis, they must dynamise each other...

You get the feeling that the young generations who organize legal associations are at ease handling the computer which projects the disputed images on a cloth that serves as a screen.

The urban youth, both women and men, are voluble. They often have hundreds of “friends” on Facebook. The delegates of the more rural zones have especially spoken in the preparatory assemblies for the congress. They are more discreet and the idea of putting their photograph on Internet would not occur to them! A mixture of political worlds. The use of these computer “social networks” poses a problem: extremely dangerous for security, they are also extremely effective in mobilizing a certain section of youth. As someone who is neither young nor on Facebook, I hope that these ways of making contact that are so popular today do not turn out to be riskier than they are useful.

Reports and discussions show that the RPM-M is confronted with the same challenges as the other organizations of the Left: how, in particular, to mobilize faced with a new president, Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino, who belongs to the traditional elites but benefits from broad popular support, from recognized electoral legitimacy? But they also show to what extent the situation in Mindanao exacerbates the most problematic features of the political life of the country with, in addition, the Moro question.

Mindanao is the region where the big political families from all over the country come to buy the votes that they need to ensure their success in the national elections; where the conflicts between rival clans are most murderous; where the threat of armed reprisals is greatest; where the state of war is permanent; where the corruption of the administration is astronomic (although this cancer corrodes the archipelago from north to south); where the interpenetration of socio-economic and intercommunity tensions leads to situations that are particularly difficult to solve; where the people displaced when there are humanitarian disasters are most numerous...

Moreover, the historical bases of the RPM-M are in the regions where the “three peoples” of the island encounter each other directly, in particular where the ancestral domains of the Lumads are within the Bangsa Moro territory [6]. Where it is necessary to build solidarity between the three populations, to prevent political demarcations from corresponding to ethnic frontiers, to conduct a common struggle against exploitation and to simultaneously defend two rights of self-determination: that of the Moros and that of the Lumads.

The party is engaged in peace talks with the government, judging that in the present context, it is not through the armed struggle that the revolutionary combat can develop in the Philippines. The RPM-M directly involves the popular communities of the zones concerned in these talks, so that they are actors and not hostages of the negotiations (a very innovative conception in the Philippines). But the ultra-militarized environment that characterises the region makes the outcome of this process quite uncertain: how can you disarm when you are surrounded by hostile armed groups? What risks should you take to enable the talks to advance and so that the populations derive real benefits from them, without having to wait for uncertain results in the future? The answer to such questions has not been immediately unanimous over the last period. The party learns from experience.

For the time being, the RPM-M/RPA has adopted a purely defensive military posture and is discussing the ways of organizing the combatants that are best adapted to the situation (militia, regular forces...).

The electoral field is one of the new terrains of struggle on which the RPM-M embarked after its foundation. In spite of temporary successes, it is however in this field that it experienced one of his most expensive failures, running up against the wall of corruption and the weight of family clans: for the trapos (traditional politicians), the elections are an investment which must be profitable; they do not accept a progressive movement coming along to change the rules of their games. This is true all over the country, but it is particularly true in Mindanao. So the delegates started to reflect on these first failures in order to be better prepared to face the snares of the Filipino institutions. Here again, it is necessary to learn from a sometimes bitter experience.

Aid to the internal refugees and responses to humanitarian catastrophes, reciprocal solidarity between communities and organization of the popular communities, a unitary ant-war movement and social struggles, peace talks, modification of the military policy, electoral front... As one of the messages presented by the foreign guests underlined, because the situation in Mindanao is particularly complex, the experience of the RPM-M is particularly rich - and it is a real pity that it is not very well known on the international level [7].

A rejuvenated organization

The organisational balance sheet of the RPM-M is not without black spots. In particular, the break with the congressman whose election it had supported had detrimental repercussions in certain provinces for its implantation in the Moro milieu, as well as for the construction of its organization in the capital, Manila-Quezon City.

But the congress also shows that the RPM-M has recruited among young people. The average age of the delegates is quite low, the percentage of women much higher than in many other countries. It has diversified its intervention considerably, including by dealing with LGBT rights, whereas it is in contact with communities which are often conservative on the question. It has projected itself onto the world arena, joined the Fourth International and has been involved in the global justice movement, developing links with a growing number of organizations in Asia and Europe.

The congress is joyful. Techniques of group animation, inherited from NGOs, are sometimes used to "break the ice" or to facilitate the intervention of delegates - which Filipino culture makes possible; but I have difficulty in seeing us doing the same in France.

That does not prevent serious, even fastidious, debates, when it is a question of amending the documents of the founding congress, and in particular the statutes.

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The election of the new national leadership is done in two stages: first of all the election of the president, vice-president, general secretary and assistant general secretary. Then the election of the central committee. Several candidatures are presented, followed by a secret ballot vote.

The election of the national leadership is a bit like squaring the circle. It is necessary to represent the communities ("majority", Moro and Lumad), the regions (provinces, cities), the social sectors, the generations, the sexes... No list is presented; just some recommendations are given concerning the equilibriums to be respected. The result appears a bit random, but finally rather satisfactory. In particular, many young people and many women were elected.

On the last day, the debate on the amendments and the counting of the votes after the secret ballot took a lot of time. It was well after dark when the congress finished in good humour. It was necessary to prepare the departures and to abandon the "solidarity evening" that we were ready for. Too bad.

The departures take place at night, by successive groups. Once again, our feet are in the water of a river. A vehicle awaits us in the valley and a small armed escort still accompanies us for a few kilometres. Look-outs along the road check that the road is free and wave to us as we pass. Then we find ourselves on the ordinary roads of Mindanao, that is to say, frequently cut by "checkpoints": road blocks maintained by the police or the army (most of them are deserted, but they oblige us to drive very slowly).

An uneventful return journey, following a very enjoyable experience.

Joel FRENCHMAN

[1] The tribulations of a European at the congress of the RPM-M could provide the material for a comic film. One scene in particular would make the entire Philippines die laughing: a big pot-bellied white man perched in an unstable fashion on large shaky stones above a tiny toilet bowl set into the ground, a flashlight between his teeth to pierce the pitch-black night, surrounded by an ocean of mud ... Later, some sensible person removed the most treacherous stone and electricity was brought to power a neon light, making the visit to the toilets less adventurous.

[2] The founding congress of the CPP, in 1968, had only twelve participants. It initiated the process of constitution of a party which still remained to be built. The splits of 1992-1993 became inevitable precisely because the holding of a congress was refused by the majority block in the leadership. More than forty years after its foundation, the CPP has still not held a congress.

[3] See the introduction by Pierre Rousset.

[4] A warning to rookie campers. The first night, the body is happily satisfied with the springy earth under the groundsheet. But with use it subsides, hardens and the stones hidden under the surface appear. It is then necessary to discover the sinuous path which makes it possible for the body to stick to the hollows, avoiding the peaks...

[5] We say that a species is endemic when it exists only in the territory considered (country, island...).

[6] Bangsa Moro: the Moro country.

[7] See Roman, [Message to the second Congress of the RPM-M](#) and Ponka, ["Greetings to the second congress of the RPM-M"](#).