

Olle Törnquist
University of Uppsala
Dept. of Government; The AKUT research collective
St. Olofsgatan 11 B
S-753 21 Uppsala
Sweden

WHO IS NOW FIGHTING FOR DEMOCRACY IN THE PHILIPPINES?

A few miles away from the finance and hotel districts in Makati, which recently was the centre for the sixth abortive coup d'etat in a little more than three years, the Metro Manila circle road, usually called E.D.S.A, has given name to the gigantic popular manifestation which in February 1986 brought Corazon Aquino to the presidency. More than a million people then blocked the avenue at the Camp Crame police headquarters, and prevented Marcos from using his troops against dissident military leaders. Eventually these events forced him into exile.

The movement was not completely new, but it had been strengthened and broadened during an election campaign that Marcos had felt compelled to arrange, but during which he did all in his power to thwart the opposition's victory.

Along the EDSA then the peaceful struggle for democratic rights had culminated in an important partial victory - and this under bourgeois and church leadership. Only half a year earlier the ever-growing communist-led united front, which up until then had been Marcos' worst headache, had lost the initiative in no time by boycotting the elections, true to their doctrines.

So where do we find any massive interest for democracy four years later?

Several of the officers who had been against Marcos then have later joined the repeated coup d'etat attempts. Foreign and domestic businessmen who have been bestowed with extensive privatisation moves, want a more powerful and efficient regime, and are trying to gain the best possible contacts and positions. The church is turning increasingly "neutral". Aquino's administration is compromising with conservative forces. Corruption abounds again. Political bosses with private armies rule a number of provinces. The promised land reform is postponed. The victims of inflation and cuts in public spending are, as a rule, the numerous poor people.

The communist-led united front, which still is the dominant force on the left, thinks that the new regime is little better than Marcos - the US is still all-powerful, and the peasants still have to fight feudal landlords with their New People's Army.

The democratic struggle for a new Philippines is instead being fought by leftists with communist, social democratic or liberal roots, who advocate new ways of thinking, and who are supporting the great number and variety of progressive interest and action groups, and also voluntary development organisations, which have emerged during the 1980s.

For many years the story has been that this new democratic movement mainly is limited to the intellectuals and middle class progressives in the cities. But if I am not entirely mistaken, the perhaps most successful and innovative project for popular and democratic development was started by exactly those peasants and their leader Bernabe "Dante" Buscayno, himself a tenant son, who in the beginning of 1969 founded the New People's Army.

Let us then this time abstain from adventures together with the guerillas, which is still holding out in the mountains, and instead pay a visit to Dante and his peasants in Tarlac on the more prosaic plain on central Luzon.

FROM ARMED STRUGGLE TO ELECTION DEFEAT

The bus quickly brings us northwards along Marcos' toll motor-way. About an hour and half later we can get a glimpse of the Clark Air Base. In the restaurants of surrounding Angeles Dante once worked as a young man. About twenty miles later, right after Capas, you can discern the gigantic radio masts of Voice of America, where Dante and rebels some twenty years ago were employed as construction workers and security guards (!) - which enabled them to pinch a whole lot of communication equipment. It was not very far from here that Dante was born in the beginning of 1940s, and the New People's Army founded in the late 1960s.

Here we get off the bus.

At the time when Dante was born, tenants, who lived under serf-like conditions, where toiling in the large fields nearby . Many of them had, like Dante's father, taken part in the communist-led Huk guerilla movement, which first fought feudal oppressors and the Japanese occupying force, and then, after the wars, turned against US-created puppet governments. At the end of the 1950s Dante joined the remnants of this movement.

While Dante was leading impoverished peasants who in protest against appalling conditions put fire to the adjacent sugar cane field at the Hacienda Luisita, young lady Corazon grew up in the saloons of the mansion among landlords and businessmen, including one who was to become a real favourite of Marcos. But Cory married the son at the hacienda in Concepcion, not far away. He was Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino, and grew up to be radical liberal politician, who saw Marcos as the main enemy, and developed close relations to popular leaders such as Dante.

During some years as a house boy in Manila Dante had been able to get high-school education. Later he devoured the Marxist classics, and became responsible for educating his comrades in the Huk guerilla forces. In the end they broke both with the increasingly corrupt commander in the area, and with the old communist party leadership in Manila, which compromised with Marcos. This was the time when Dante instead sought contact

with the new radical student movement, joined forces with José Maria Sison in the Maoist communist party, and created the New People's Army in 1969.

During the following six year period Dante was working in the mountain ranges, educating and organising guerilla fronts all over the country, while Joma Sison was in charge with the central ideological leadership on the basis of Mao's texts. In 1976 Dante was arrested, and in 1977 Sison. But the movements they had created were solid enough to not only survive, but also to expand swiftly and considerably during the increasingly despotic Marcos regime.

Dante still claims that oppression under feudal landlords and the Marcos regime was for long so massive that people simply had to fight illegally, and defend themselves in armed resistance. But during the first half of the 1980s the situation started to change. Ninoy Aquino was murdered as soon as he had returned from exile in 1983. This sparked off growing protests. From the prison cell Dante argued in vain for, among other things, the participation of the communist-led fronts in the election campaign against Marcos in early 1986.

Thus the powerful revolutionary leftist movement lost the initiative. Mrs Aquino released the political prisoners, and Dante returned as an observer in the highest organs of the communist party. Even the steadfast leaders now did admit that boycotting the election had been a "tactical blunder". But when not only leftist dissidents on lower levels, but also Dante himself, claimed that the mistake was much more fundamental than that, he again found himself part of a tiny minority. The dissidents, for example, questioned the thesis that the Philippines is still semi-feudal and that armed Maoist peasant struggle was indispensable. They argued that several years' of capitalist expansion had created many more and complex contradictions. And they also argued that all resources should be geared towards making use of the "democratic space" under Aquino to support progressive activity in all the groups and organisations which had sprung up.

When new elections to the Senate and the Congress were to be held in May 1987 the revolutionary left made an attempt to strike a balance between the opposing points of view. The dissidents were allowed to stand for election, while other activists were to seize the opportunity to agitate, but apart from this they were to continue their actions and their armed struggle as before, spared all disturbing debates.

Dante was one of the candidates for the Senate.

The election results were extremely depressing. Perhaps the movement as a whole had been serious in bringing out their propaganda. But its full capacity was far from being used to support the candidates and underpin an alternative democratic action plan. Even the campaign organisation had serious flaws, for example, in choosing suitable election districts for priority, in getting people to register, and then making them actually vote, and finally in the control of ballot counts. In a number of areas other

candidates could even buy out revolutionaries who wanted to raise means for what they considered as more important forms of struggle.

But more important still was the fact that the leftist candidates had nothing to offer but progressive ideas - no credible promises of what the movement was to achieve in the case of victory. To those activists who were fighting against landlords in the fields and against capitalists in the companies, or protesting against the US bases access to positions in elected bodies, and influence in the bureaucracy or over public resources was simply not particularly relevant. The well-established political machines and the deeply rooted patron-client relationships consequently were given free range, and this secured a massive victory for the traditional political elite.

A NEW POLITICAL PROJECT AMONG THE PEASANTS

The election was no personal disaster for Dante, who got more votes than anybody else in the left. But politically he had to start from scratch. The violence he wanted to evade forced itself upon him directly after a TV show where he had analysed the election results. Right-wing terrorists attacked his car equipped with submachine guns, but were able "only" to murder two of his friends and seriously wound two others. Dante thus had many reasons to return to Tarlac, where the people would protect him, and where he could try out in practice the new road that he so far only had been able to speak about.

Dante and his colleagues began by examining how conditions had changed for the peasants. Decades of militant struggle against the feudal-like landlords had compelled Marcos to initiate a minor land reform in areas where maize and rice were grown. Many of the old sharecroppers were now independent small farmers. As far as they were concerned the anti-feudal struggle for land was over, for all practical purposes .

Instead, they were now exposed to all the disadvantages of capitalism. Their plots were small, and they had no access to support from politicians and bureaucrats. The farmers therefore were not able to get the effective production inputs which businessmen sold or rented at good profit. After the harvest mill-owners and others charged exorbitantly. And middlemen bought cheaply and sold dearly. Most of the farmers were heavily indebted. The workers were given miserably low pay. And of course there was also a scarcity of labour opportunities.

Many had already lost their land. Concentration of land ownership, or at least "kulakisation", i.e. the growth of a group of rich farmers with their own workers, seemed imminent. Dante therefore suggested that the many small farmers should make use of the new room for manoeuvre under president Aquino, and cooperate openly and seek public credits. By acting in common they could provide more and cheaper input goods, and use them more effectively. Better preparation and irrigation of the fields could be organised collectively. Everyone could harvest their own fields, but then the harvest should be stored collectively, and be sold only on their own terms, and

preferably with no middle-men involved. The cooperative could take care of as many bags as were needed to repay the loans, and then ask for new money. Later they could invest in their own mill and in other processing. And this, in turn, would give the workers better wages and more jobs.

The peasants shook their heads in disbelief, thinking of all the unsuccessful cooperatives that smart businessmen and politicians had turned to their own profit. But Dante had been able to gain unquestioned confidence among perhaps 500 peasants since decades of dedicated work among them. If for nothing else, they joined in loyalty. And the guerilla in the nearby mountains let their former commander in peace.

Now the next item of the agenda was to avoid being obstructed by the state, and on the contrary get access to sizeable credits. Just as Ninoy Aquino in the 1960s the present governor in the area choosed a live-and-let-live relationship with Dante and his peasants. In the presidential palace Corazon Aquino probably neither dared nor wanted to move against a man who had been the friend and prison mate of her assassinated husband during the 1970s.

Late in 1988 the project could be launched.

When we disembark from the bus in Tarlac about a year and a half later the 500 sceptical peasants have become more than 4,000 enthusiasts. Their plots, which still are individually owned, comprise more than 8,000 hectares. The sugar cane-growing Hacienda Luisita close by is 2,000 hectares smaller, but is, of course, endowed with more capital. The cooperative is the largest in the country. Production has increased drastically. The rice, maize, and beans harvest is stored collectively until the purchasers offer acceptable prices. Even those harvest-time farm workers who are employed by the farmers themselves get better pay under the supervision of the cooperative. The farmers have been able to repay their previous loans, and are no longer threatened by bankruptcy. The state credits of the cooperative have even been repaid ahead of schedule. Now they have been able to get even bigger loans from a government which lacks its own success stories, and is doing its best to exploit those of Dante. In and outside the country even conservative columnists and business reporters write astonished and admiring articles about the cooperative.

While small mice are chasing each other under the personal computer, Dante's new partner Fatima (whose husband was murdered in the car which the rightist terrorists attacked in Manila almost three years ago) shows me how the organisation works. 77 elected local leaders cooperate in 23 groups with one cooperative coordinator and one technical adviser each, and they constitute the basis of the central leadership. Internal democracy is developed according to the speed at which the peasants themselves recognise the advantages of cooperation.

To prevent infiltration there is a requirement that those who have been employed by the cooperative must have a local basis. Those who are to run the new rice mill are going to have their own shares, and thereby their own interest in its effectivity.

Of course there are also problems. Recently one had to solve a conflict about how much harvest was to be used for investments when debts had been paid. Now they are discussing the wages of those employed by the cooperative, and it is said that some farmers are becoming spoiled by comfort. But above all the cooperative suffers from growth pains.

The heat vibrates in the air, and the mosquito are on the hunt. In the room that has been cleaned for me I seek refuge under the family's fan, while Dante first takes care of his appearance and then continues to work with frenzy. He takes his rickety car (the one peppered with bullets in Manila) to sleep in a hut near the rice mill, which is to be inaugurated in April. He is to keep an eye on construction workers with expensive machines, who are working extra for low pay here after working hours elsewhere.

The drought is getting serious. There is a frantic digging for water. When we visit the various fields we are discussing the possibilities to use windmills to pump water in several places. Diesel and electricity is expensive.

The main office is a few long tables in one end of an otherwise empty factory hall which has been rented cheaply, and mainly is used as a warehouse. Outside there is the first little cooperative restaurant. A bit further on there is the repair hall for some trucks, and for those few agricultural machines that they have been able to afford. Beyond the fields one can see the radio masts for Voice of America, raised for entirely other purposes.

NEW DEPENDENCE - ON DEMOCRACY

Seated on some rickety chairs near the office tables in the warehouse we discuss the background and development of the left. At last I ask Dante whether he has abandoned politics? Has he become merely a progressive moneylender with good contacts or a managing director for a farmers' cooperative? Does he want to exploit the success story in Tarlac to run for mayor, governor or congressman in the elections in 1992? How is it with self-reliance? Can this project really stand as model for other areas in the Philippines?

Dante is conscious of the fact that Tarlac is unique in some respects: the farmers own their land, he himself is a seasoned leader, they can now act quite openly, and they can get considerable credits - which the cooperative is productive enough to repay immediately.

But on the other hand, the preconditions are not extraordinary. The land was not theirs from the start, but they forced the change. The leadership grew with the struggle. Nor is today's room of manoeuvre a gift from heaven, but a product of hard work. Tarlac is not the only place where this kind of thing can be done, Dante says. When I mention areas where poor peasants cannot organise cooperatives or trade unions because of the

private armies of the landlords, Dante nods, and says that at least they can now form broad popular defense organisations.

But then he adds that "on the other hand, the whole point is really that we will fail here in Tarlac". The argument is that the project cannot succeed within the parameters of the system. Peasants must have more power.

Dante's big idea is that people do not become revolutionaries in Tarlac or anywhere else just by receiving propaganda, but only through their own practical experiences. Now when the room for manoeuvre is so much greater than during Marcos one has to work hard and fast together with the peasants to achieve as much as possible "under existing relations of production". Only when the peasants are themselves confronted with the unavoidably hard opposition from powerful businessmen, politicians and bureaucrats will they be able to develop the common political struggle. "And only then can I decide how I should proceed myself. I am not even sure how far this process has advanced by the time that the new elections will be held."

How important is the struggle for democracy? Dante believes that most peasants are conscious of the fact their freedom and possibilities to cooperate, as well as elected politicians and reasonably uncorrupt administrators who can fix loans on favourable terms, are indispensable if they are to continue. This heavy dependence on - and motive to fight for - not only democratic freedoms and rights, but also for a democratic state administration is partly explained by one specificity with Tarlac: in contrast to many other important development organisations and action groups in the Philippines, the cooperative in Tarlac does not primarily rely on international assistance.

Olle Törnquist

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