

CHAPTER 3

Evolution of the armed conflict on the communist front¹

The armed conflict on the communist front, i.e., between the Philippine government and communist rebel forces—primarily the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP)-New People’s Army (NPA)-National Democratic Front (NDF) and its breakaway factions—has spanned more than 35 years, counting from the CPP and NPA founding years of 1968 and 1969, respectively. It is contemporaneous with the armed conflict on the Moro front which reckons its struggle from the Jabitah massacre in 1968. There was no such corresponding triggering event on the communist front. The closest to a signal event was the First Quarter Storm (FQS) of 1970, a CPP-led series of big, mainly student demonstrations in Manila against the Marcos administration which, partly due to police brutality against these demonstrations, drew public attention to the national-democratic movement and its issues.

But this new beginning for the CPP-led movement was actually only the culmination of more than a decade of its gestation and the rekindling of a progressive mass movement since 1959, practically the whole decade of the 1960s which witnessed “student power” globally. This “student power” was in fact a common experience of the first line of leaders of both the CPP and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), even crossing paths in such hotbeds of student activism as the University of the Philippines

(UP). But while some Moro student activists would draw inspiration from Islamic revival in Cairo, those who would found the CPP drew theirs from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in China. In both cases, however, the main historical terms of reference were local. For the MNLF, it was the several centuries of Moro resistance against Spanish colonialism since the 16th Century. For the CPP, it was the “unfinished” Philippine Revolution of 1896 against Spanish colonialism.

In their current form, one seeks independence or better autonomy for Moro areas in southwestern and central Mindanao vis-à-vis the Philippine republic; the other seeks the overthrow of the national ruling system and its radical replacement through the armed seizure of central political power. So much so that while one may be characterized as a clash between two imagined nations, Filipino and Moro, the other may be characterized as a clash between “two Filipino governments,” the established official government and the shadow underground “government,” competing for the allegiance, hearts and minds of the Filipino people. The CPP-led “People’s Democratic Government” offers them the alternative of a national-democratic society with a socialist perspective. The Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) perceives this as a threat to national security which includes the people’s way of life and institutions which must be protected by overcoming the insurgency nationwide. This clash between “two Filipino governments” has

¹ Condensed from Santos [2005] *Evolution of the Armed Conflict on the Communist Front*, background paper for the PHDR 2005. The original paper with complete footnotes is available at www.hdn.org.ph.

largely taken the form of a protracted people's war and a counterinsurgency war.

Root causes of rebellion

The National Unification Commission (NUC) Report to President Fidel V. Ramos in 1993, the result of nationwide consultations especially at the provincial and regional levels in 1992-'93, identified the root causes of Philippine internal armed conflicts and classified them under five categories:

- 1 Massive and abject poverty and economic inequity, particularly in the distribution of wealth and control over the resource base for livelihood
- 2 Poor governance, including lack of basic social services, absenteeism of elected local officials, corruption and inefficiency in government bureaucracy, and poor implementation of laws, including those to protect the environment
- 3 Injustice, abuse of those in authority and power, violations of human rights; and inequity, corruption and delays in the administration of justice
- 4 Structural inequities in the political system, including control by an elite minority, traditional politicians and political dynasties, and enforcement of such control through private armies
- 5 Exploitation and marginalization of indigenous cultural communities, including lack of respect for and recognition of ancestral domain and indigenous legal and political systems

Other identified causes were ideological differences between conflicting parties that include, on one side, the belief in armed struggle as the means to achieve political goals; perceived foreign intervention in domestic affairs; and degeneration of moral values. Serious concerns were also expressed about the destruction of the natural environment, the conduct of counterinsurgency, and the continuing hardships experienced by communities in the midst of armed conflict.

The government's National Peace and Development Plan of 2000 even more graphically depicts the insurgency as a tree whose "taproot" is maldistribution of the fruits of the land because of the concentration of wealth, especially land ownership, in the hands of a few. This "taproot" analysis actually comes from Gen. Victor N. Corpus, who has seen or come from both sides of the conflict, as NPA and as AFP. Corpus emphasizes the agrarian issue of the

peasant farmers as the taproot, to be dug out to find a lasting solution to the insurgency. He calls this digging out of the root causes the "silent war" aspect of counterinsurgency.

Indeed, in the literature of the CPP-led national-democratic revolution, like its 1970 "Bible" *Philippine Society and Revolution* (PSR), the **land problem** of the peasantry is the main issue of the national-democratic revolution. Stated otherwise, the revolutionary struggle for land is the main democratic content of the Philippine revolution to seize political power and consolidate it. Feudalism is actually one of the three basic problems of the Filipino people, the other two being US imperialism and bureaucrat-capitalism. These basic problems account for the semi-colonial and semi-feudal character of Philippine society dominated by the few of the landlord class and the comprador big bourgeoisie which exploit mainly the majority peasantry and the proletariat. The latter are the main and leading forces, respectively, of the national-democratic revolution to establish a national-democratic society with a socialist perspective.

A long-time observer of Maoist insurgency since the Vietnam War, albeit from a counterinsurgency perspective, argues that the "causes" of an insurgency must be viewed carefully. He points to "the tension between the goals of the leadership—in the CPP's case these are generally alienated intellectuals strongly committed to Marxism-Leninism—and its foot soldiers—primarily, estranged peasants committed to armed struggle as the means to obtain a degree of social justice... Put another way, the Philippine case is part insurgency—here, an ideologically motivated armed effort to make revolution—and part peasant/worker rebellion. The balance between the two components in any area is fundamental to predicting the impact of government reform efforts." There is basis to his view that the CPP's national-democratic revolution is *more a political revolution to seize political power than it is a social revolution to solve certain social grievances* related to structural disparities. Therefore, "political change is as basic to successful resolution of an insurgency as is socioeconomic development."

Box 3.1 Periods in the evolution of the armed conflict on the communist front

	Formative Years (1968-72)	Early Years of Martial Law/Marcos Dictatorship (1972- 77)	CPP-NPA-NDF Recovery (1980-83)	Ninoy Aquino Assassination up to EDSA I (1983-86)	Aquino Administration (1986-92)	Ramos Administration (1992-98)	Recent Years (1998-2004)
GRP Key Developments, Issues and Decisions	Increasing repression during First Quarter Storm; Plaza Miranda bombing, writ suspension/ arrests	Main target: communist threat; Fascist form of rule; Political polarization; Marcos land reform	Political “normalization” w/ formal lifting of Martial Law and “presidential elections”	Marcos on political defensive, calls for snap presidential election under US pressure	Restoration of elite democracy; first peace talks, cease-fire, then “total war;” RA 6657 CARL; Senate rejection of bases treaty	Ramos “comprehensive peace process” policy; Peace negotiations with Hague Joint Declaration	GRP-NDF CARHRIHL; On & off peace talks; Estrada impeachment; “terrorist” listing of CPP, NPA & Sison;
CPP-NPA-NDF Key Developments, Issues and Decisions	CPP sets line, esp. Maoist protracted people’s war (PPW) strategy, builds guerrilla army & mass movement	NDF PrepCom; CPP adjustment; “Specific Characteristics” & “Our Urgent Tasks;” Capture of 1 st line	First internal debate on elections; “golden days” (accelerated advance of the movement), increased workers strike movement	Broad protest movement, nat-dem forces in lead; continued “golden days;” Internal debate on insurrectionism; <i>Kampanyang Ahos</i> ; Boycott blunder	CPP leadership disarticulated; Peak strength then big & sudden decline; crisis of socialism	CPP big split: “reaffirmists” vs. “rejectionists;” rectification movement; breakaway of factions	BAYAN participation in EDSA II; <i>Bayan Muna</i> in Party-List;
Key Military Features	NPA early substage of strategic defensive (ESSD) AFP “Task Force Lawin” type	NPA ESSD, mainly armed propaganda teams	NPA entry into advanced substage of strategic defensive (ASSD); platoon-size then company-size tactical offensives; AFP Oplan <i>Katagan</i>	NPA ASSD, program towards strategic counter-offensive (SCO)	CPP scraps SCO, back to ESSD; AFP Oplans <i>Mamamayan</i> & <i>Lambat-Bitag</i>	Continued decline in NPA strength & TOs up to 1995; <i>Lambat-Bitag</i> terminated; NPA recovery 1996 up	CPP-NPA now in process of developing middle phase of strategic defensive
CPP-NPA-NDF Strength and Growth	1969: 60 fighters, 35 rifles, 80,000 mass base in 1 district 1972: 10 guerrilla fronts (GFs), 600 rifles, 1,000+ fighters	1976: 21 GFs, 1,000 rifles, 1,500+ fighters	1980: 28 GFs, 4,000+ rifles, 8,000 fighters 1983: 45 GFs, 10,000 rifles, estimated 20,000 fighters	1985: 6,800 high-powered rifles (HPRs), 6,849 fighters, 26 companies, 38 platoons, 17 squads	1987: 25,500 guerrillas, 15,500 firearms, 72 GFs 1988: mass base of 7M dwindled by 60%	1995: 6,025 fighters, 5,298 HPRs 1997: recovered 1983 mass base level	2001: 11,930 fighters, 7,159 HPRs 2003: 04—128 GFs with equiv. of 27 battalions, all GFs have companies

Periodization and brief history of the conflict

The armed conflict on the communist front may be laid down in the following periods, based on qualitative changes in the situation, key issues, decisions and developments in the history of this conflict [Box 3.1].

1. Formative years (1968-72)

This period saw the founding of the CPP and NPA by university intellectual Jose Maria Sison (as “Amado Guerrero”)—the latter through peasant rebel Bernabe Buscayno (as “Commander Dante”)—in close succession on December 26, 1968, and March 29, 1969, respectively. Silently at first, a guerrilla (and counter guerrilla) war shortly ensued, starting with its first peasant mass base in the Second District of Tarlac, then expanding to Isabela and subsequently to other regions nationwide. The national-democratic revolution, however, burst into the open with the CPP-led “First Quarter Storm” (FQS) of big student demonstrations against the Marcos administration in January-March 1970 and the release of Sison’s PSR book in July 1970. With these, the CPP laid down and propagated the national-democratic (nat-dem, ND) line, and completed the “collective action frame” (vanguard party, guerrilla army and mass movements) of the revolutionary movement. Marcos responded with increasing repression. The Plaza Miranda bombing and ensuing suspension of the privilege of the writ of habeas corpus on August 21, 1971, were seen as part of Marcos’s moves to cling to power, although one account still holds that Sison/ CPP authored the bombing to induce a revolutionary situation.

2. Early martial law/Marcos dictatorship (1972-77)

The September 21, 1972, proclamation of martial law mainly targeted the CPP-NPA. It marked the start of the Marcos dictatorship with

a blatantly fascist form of rule. Aside from “saving the republic” from the communist threat, Marcos also sought to “reform society” dominated by an oligarchy by instituting redistributive reforms like land reform in rice and corn lands. In 1976-1977 martial law captured most of the first line of the CPP Central Committee, including Buscayno and Sison. Leadership of the CPP passed on to its cadres from the FQS generation of student activists.

3. CPP-NPA-NDF recovery and advance (1978-83)

This period, especially 1980-83, saw the recovery and then accelerated advance of the revolutionary movement, to basically continue until 1987. These were considered “golden days” of the Philippine revolution when the movement had hegemony in the anti-dictatorship struggle. There was large-scale mass organizing, an expansion of its international solidarity work, and an intensification of guerrilla warfare. The CPP assessed that the protracted people’s war was moving beyond the “early substage of the strategic defensive” and entering the “advanced substage.” These substages, including a third one of “strategic counteroffensive,” were conceptualized around 1980-81. Earlier, however, in 1978, the CPP had its first major internal debate on participation in that year’s interim parliamentary elections, the harbinger of future disunities within the CPP, especially on the question of elections. From 1981 up to the end of the Marcos regime, the AFP employed Oplan *Katatagan* as its basic strategy against the NPA and massively redeployed troops from MNLF areas, as the CPP-NPA became the major threat to national security in the 1980s (compared to the MNLF in the 1970s). On the political front, Marcos initiated some political “normalization,” (some say) with the 1978 interim parliamentary elections, the formal lifting of martial law in September 1980, and the holding of farcical presidential elections in June 1981.

4. Ninoy Aquino assassination up to EDSA I (1983-86)

Any pretense at “normalization” was shattered with the August 21, 1983, assassination of Ninoy Aquino, chief political rival of Marcos. Almost immediately, this generated an unprecedentedly broad anti-Marcos dictatorship protest movement which continued up to 1985, with national-democratic forces playing a leading role as a factor for radicalization. This may be considered a continuation of the “golden days” of the Philippine revolution. On the protracted people’s war front, a program for advance to the “strategic counteroffensive” (SCO) was drawn up. But the revolutionary movement would also encounter some setbacks: the internal debate on an alternative insurrectionary or “political-military” (“pol-mil”) strategy; the falling out with allies in the formation of the “broad legal alliance” *Bagong Alyansang Makabayan* (BAYAN); the *Kampanyang Ahas* anti-infiltration campaign against “deep penetration agents” in Mindanao; the “tactical blunder” of the decision to boycott the snap presidential election; and the consequent marginalization at the February 22-25, 1986, EDSA “People Power” Revolution which ousted Marcos.

5. Aquino administration (1986-92)

The assumption of Cory Aquino to the presidency on February 25, 1986, signaled the restoration of elite democracy. One early post-EDSA feature was some “democratic space,” highlighted by the release of political prisoners including Sison and Buscayno in March 1986. But in April 1986, the AFP adopted a new Oplan *Mamamayan* strategy against the NPA. It then held the first peace talks with the NDF from August 1986 to February 1987, including a 60-day cease-fire. But after the talks collapsed with the January 22, 1987, Mendiola massacre of peasants demonstrating for land reform, the Aquino administration waged “total war” on the NPA by March 1987. Early on, but most seriously in August 1987 and December 1989, President Aquino would

be rocked by seven military coup attempts which had the effect of pushing her government to the Right. By September 1988, the AFP would have its best so far Oplan *Lambat Bitag* strategy against the NPA.

From 1986 to 1989, the CPP leadership seemed quite disarticulated, then, in the international scene, came the crisis of socialism of 1989-91. Though the continued momentum of the earlier “golden days” of the Philippine revolution would carry it to its peak armed strength in 1987, 1988 saw the start of a big and sudden decline of the revolutionary forces in the whole country and in 1990, the SCO program for its protracted people’s war was scrapped. With the US military bases voted out in September 1991, the revolutionary movement was coming to an ineluctable crossroad between a push for a fundamental change in the CPP’s orientation and a reaffirming of the original party dogma.

6. Ramos administration (1992-98)

The Ramos administration took the initiative to develop a comprehensive peace process after military threats from both the Right and Left subsided towards the end of the previous administration. This would lead to the second (and still current) series of GRP-NDF peace talks signaled by their *Hague Joint Declaration* of September 1, 1992, setting the framework for peace negotiations without an interim cease-fire. But the end of 1992 saw the surfacing of a big split or “Great Schism” in the CPP between “reaffirmists” (RA) and “rejectionists” (RJ) of the original party line centered on the protracted people’s war strategy. The RJ factions would break away while the RAs, led by Sison, launched what he called the “Second Great Rectification Movement,” and redeployed the NPA to recover the mass base. From 1992 to 1995, NPA strength and tactical offensives continued to decline and by 1995, the AFP terminated *Lambat-Bitag* and shifted its focus to external defense and the Moro front (but from 1996 onward, the NPA strength then steadily increased). In March 1998, the peace negotiations produced its first substantive

agreement, the *Comprehensive Agreement on Respect for Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law* (CARHRIHL).

7. Estrada administration (1998-2001)

In August 1998, President Estrada approved the CARHRIHL, but subject to implementation in accordance with Philippine constitutional and legal processes. This led to an impasse on the modalities for its implementation. The peace negotiations were also suspended several times on side issues like the government's ratification of the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) in May 1999. Estrada then, in June 1999, opted to localize peace efforts. His impeachment process in 2000, leading to his ouster in January 2001, was participated in prominently by BAYAN and allied national-democratic forces.

8. Arroyo administration (2001-04)

The nat-dems' prominent role in EDSA II marked the revolutionary movement's resurgence on several fronts. In the second party-list elections in May 2001, nat-dem party-list group *Bayan Muna* topped the list to get the maximum three seats on its first try and by the third party-list elections in May 2004, the nat-dem bloc doubled its number of seats to six, the biggest party-list bloc. The NDF also got a boost when Norway resumed peace negotiations in 2001 and then facilitated it in 2004. In its 35th anniversary statement of December 26, 2003, the CPP assessed that it has "by and large developed the early phase of the strategic defensive and is now in the process of developing the middle phase." The CPP-NPA and Sison himself were set back after 9/11 by their inclusion on a "terrorist" list by several countries, including The Netherlands, where he is based and In August 2002, President Arroyo issued "Nine-Point Guidelines on the CPP" which welcomed that "terrorist" listing. Earlier, in January 2002, a new AFP Internal Security Operation (ISO) Plan *Bantay-Laya* and Campaign Plan *Balangai* took effect for the next

five years (up to 2007). **The war goes on.**

Protracted people's war and counterinsurgency

Unlike the conflict on the Moro front in which the main forms of struggle or strategy, Islamic diplomacy and peace negotiations, alternated with armed struggle, the main form of struggle and strategy on the communist front *all the way* has been protracted people's war (PPW). The principal stress here is on revolutionary struggle in the countryside through armed struggle, land reform and base-building, notwithstanding several major political changes along the way. This shows the particularly strong role of the ideological framework (e.g., Marxism-Leninism-Maoism) in this case.

PPW was conceptualized (and accomplished by Mao in China in 22 years) with three major stages: the strategic defensive, the strategic stalemate and the strategic offensive. The CPP-led PPW (now 36 years from 1969) has so far been in the strategic defensive stage.

While armed struggle in the form of rural guerrilla warfare is the principal form of struggle in PPW, the key requirement for this is mass base-building, meaning guerrilla fronts to encircle the cities from the countryside. This mass base-building involves more political and organizational, rather than military work. In the earlier stages of mass base-building, the NPA in fact plays more the role of a shield, rather than a sword or spear, to enable the CPP to painstakingly construct a political infrastructure of mass organizations and local organs of political power. All these require TIME or *protracted* work, thus the *protracted* characteristic of this people's war. This war cannot be sustained without mass support; thus, it must be a *people's* war.

The CPP political infrastructure, with its local organs of political power at the barangay level (Barangay Organizing Committees and Barangay Revolutionary Committees) at the base, is what it treats as its nascent "People's Democratic

Government.” This has been the framework from the very start, more so at present, as the CPP asserts that “Two governments exist in the Philippines.”

Again, while rural armed struggle is the principal form of struggle in PPW, it also engages in other *supporting* forms of struggle especially in *urban* areas—legal struggle, mass movement, coalition work, elections, parliamentary work, peace negotiations, and international solidarity work. All these involve political and organizational, rather than military, work. But the important thing is how they serve the armed or military struggle. So there is also an urban counterpart to the rural infrastructure.

The protracted armed conflict in the Philippines of more than 35 years spells tremendous accumulated human, economic and environmental costs in terms of human security and human development, but for Sison and the CPP, “The costs of keeping the reactionary ruling system are far higher than the costs of waging armed revolution. Exploitation and oppression exact a terrible toll on the people and are precisely what drive people to wage armed revolution. We should be able to see the high cost of the violence of daily exploitation to recognize the necessity and lower cost of armed revolution.”

There are some factors or *reasons for the relative success, resilience or staying power* of the PPW. *First*, the perseverance, determination and commitment, a sort of “voluntarist” spirit, of CPP cadres coupled with good organizational skills. *Second*, the good early guidance in 1974-76 from key documents which systematized and “codified” revolutionary work. *Third*, weaknesses in the AFP counterinsurgency strategies and table of organization and equipment, including a “strategic blunder” of terminating the effective Oplan *Lambat Bitag* in 1995. That it was forced to expand drastically and quickly at the time of martial law, also resulted in estrangement between combat formations and the higher headquarters, patronage and the like. *Fourth*, the AFP concentration in or redeployment to Moro areas in the 1970s and in 1996-2002, thereby easing the military pressure on the NPA. And *fifth*, the small archipelagic country, and uneven development

of base areas. Of course, these two factors *can work either way* for the NPA and the AFP tactically and strategically—for the NPA, the advantage of dispersing the AFP forces deployed against it and of operating in or expanding into areas not covered by the AFP. The NPA’s disadvantages, though, is the difficulty of securing arms support from abroad. It allows the AFP to use strategic massing against priority target guerrilla fronts, and prevents the NPA from strategic naval transport and concentration of forces for a final offensive on the seat of power.

Then, of course, there have been some factors or *reasons for the setbacks, decline and slowdown* of the PPW. *First*, the internal problems of the CPP—major errors of deviation from the PPW strategy (the official/RA view), self-destructing anti-infiltration campaigns; the big split and consequent focus on consolidation/rectification. *Second*, the leadership abilities and efforts of AFP field commanders (especially battalion level) who were militarily proficient and followed a professional code of the officer corps. Ironically, the patronage at the higher echelons during martial law made the situation more difficult for the NPA, because it strengthened the AFP as an opponent in the field, with combat units often led by veteran commanders. Even the AFP’s lack of weapons and equipment on field had the unexpected impact of boosting counterinsurgency. The 70 or so AFP battalions became the critical foundation upon which government survival depended. Thus, a war of battalions. At no time did the NPA achieve a concentration of strength such that the AFP could not appear at will. The result was that, even in NPA strongholds, the CPP could not develop a viable societal alternative to the existing structures.

Third, the informed reworking of AFP counterinsurgency strategies, particularly with the *Lambat Bitag* series, around a general strategy of “war of quick decision” and campaign strategy of “gradual constriction” (with the usual four basic phases of “clear, hold, consolidate and develop”) in a kind of *reversed people’s war*.

A new approach was also anchored on

democratic institutions/political processes even as the CPP took a more militarist approach. The restoration of democracy, albeit elite, after the ouster of the Marcos dictatorship, led to the government's embrace of the primacy of political factors. So, in more recent years the CPP has returned to its roots of political organizing, after a period of pushing to the fore military considerations in what was, after all, a political war. And it has regained ground, if the increased number of guerrilla fronts is any indication.

The CPP's claim of belligerency status—or that it leads another state—seems to be the source of a lot of violence or coercion being committed in its name. This has been manifested in its enforcement of “revolutionary taxation” and even “permits to campaign” in its areas for candidates in elections. The “two-state” claim has led to some insensitivity on its part to popular sentiments and civil pursuits. When it tends to be more militarist, the danger grows that it may lose the moorings which it had in dealing with civilian and noncombatant elements in areas of civil strife.

There is always the question of “who is winning?” But is this measured when it is the political organization of the mass base that is critical? How does one measure the influence of a political movement whose power is not primarily reckoned in terms of votes? *Or should this “who is winning?” question be entertained at all?* Should war instead be viewed from a human security and development frame because there are no real winners in war?

Impact of political changes on the war

In this continuing war of more than 35 years, the major political periods have been really just two: the martial-law *dictatorship* (1972-86) and the restored elite *democracy* (1986-present).

One might also a bit simplistically characterize these two periods as representing the mainly military and mainly political approaches, respectively, to the communist insurgency. Ironically or perhaps not,

the former has been less effective than the latter. It is already clear that the martial-law dictatorship was a tactical setback for the CPP-NPA-NDF in the short run but a strategic boost for it in the long run. The blatantly fascist form of rule was the best argument for armed struggle against it.

Soon after the Aquino administration took over from the Marcos dictatorship, the new “democratic space” in the political field was complemented by a more sophisticated counterinsurgency doctrine known as “low intensity conflict” (LIC), which was developed based on both Philippine experience and US influence. The term “low intensity” is misleading when in fact it involves “political, economic, and psychological warfare, with the military being a distant fourth in many cases.” A US commander said, “It is total war at the grassroots level.”

But *the new political context of restored elite democracy allowed for a more politically (and militarily) sophisticated counterinsurgency.* The early years of this new political situation from 1986 to 1989 saw the CPP leadership seemingly disarticulated, including its discernment of the character of the Aquino administration. It engaged in several arenas like the 1987 congressional elections without a clear sense of where these would lead; recruitment of new members to the CPP-led movement significantly declined. From another perspective, it is explained that such recruitment becomes difficult without the engine of repression, like that of the Marcos dictatorship, to drive the alienated into the movement fold.

The political (and economic) situation in the early Aquino years did not remain static, and neither did the CPP. The CPP, through its combination of three “institution-like” components (vanguard party, guerrilla army and mass movements), has generally adjusted and adapted to changes in the strategic context of the international and domestic environments. But the CPP admitted a “tactical blunder” in its decision to boycott the January 1986 snap presidential election.

The boycott significantly marginalized the CPP-led movement from this final drive, causing it

to miss a key opportunity to share political power. Most critical analysts attribute the boycott error and other significant political errors of the CPP, to the overriding strength of the “PPW discourse” within the CPP. The boycott decision was made from the frame that it takes an armed revolution, not elections, to topple bourgeois state power since “political power grows out of the barrel of a gun.” It is this strategy and this thinking, however, which has remained static with the CPP.

It was mentioned earlier that “political change is as basic to the successful resolution of an insurgency as is socioeconomic development.” There are other examples of the impact of particular political changes on the evolution of the conflict on the communist front. Key examples are the 1989-91 crisis of socialism and the post-9/11 US-led “global war on terror.”

All these impacted not only on the state-CPP conflict but also on the CPP’s own internal debates. These debates covered a wide range of issues—an analysis of Philippine society and mode of production, revolutionary strategy and tactics, vision of an alternative society, international line, democracy within the party, the role of the NDF, peace negotiations, crisis of socialism, and so on. For example, debates on strategy and tactics significantly included the question of elections; that on the vision of an alternative society was about the Maoist “people’s democratic dictatorship” with the CPP as the designated ruling party versus notions of “pluralist democracy” or “democratic pluralism.” Such *evolution* of theory and theoretical debates within the CPP would help explain the CPP’s behavior, even as those theoretical aspects are not the main concern of this paper.

Eventually these internal debates would come to a head in 1992 in the big split in the CPP between the “reaffirmists” (RAs) and the “rejectionists” (RJs). To a certain extent, this has reshaped the evolution of the conflict on the communist front because the latter is no longer limited to the form of struggle and strategy of protracted people’s war [Box 3.2].

Suffice it to highlight for now, *again, the role or question of democracy as the key political change vis-à-vis the insurgency.* In fact, Victor N. Corpus once observed, “If we can maintain the democratic system, the CPP is indeed a spent force.” Of course, this is easier said than done. Among the RAs and RJs, there might be said to be an external debate on the discernment of the character of Philippine democracy as it is evolving. One view is to reject it and boycott its institutions and processes as a tool and façade for bourgeois class rule. A second view, the “instrumental view,” is to utilize the democratic institutions and processes as mere instruments for tactical gains, such as for propaganda, resources and legal cover, which serve the strategic agenda of armed revolution. The RAs and some RJs hew closer to these two views.

A third view coming from the emergent democratic Left, including some RJs, is the “integral view” of democracy which recognizes and accepts the intrinsic value of formal democratic institutions as more than merely formal because they at least make free and open debate possible, and can be deepened to become more participatory and egalitarian. In time, *the evolution of the armed conflict on the communist front will depend much on the evolution of Philippine democracy itself. Political conditions have to change but there is a difference between political change for counterinsurgency and political change to address the people’s needs.*

Peace negotiations and its role in overall strategy

What would it take to peacefully resolve the conflict? Are there *ideological* requirements for this? What are the prospects with the GRP-NDF peace negotiations, a particularly relevant *political* engagement/arena of the parties?

It doesn’t look too good because of both parties’ tactical or instrumental frameworks or approaches to the peace negotiations. For the GRP, the policy is mixed or incoherent because, on one hand, “peaceful negotiated settlement with the different rebel groups”

Box 3.2 “Rejectionist” and other Left paths

The “Rejectionist” and other Left paths are significant in that they influence the evolution of the conflict away from the war mode while still working for and achieving progressive social and political change. These “rejectionist” factions put a premium on the mass movement, trade unionism, peace negotiations, development work, elections, and parliamentary work over armed struggle.

One paradigm shift for Left groups is an integral conception of democracy, recognizing the intrinsic value of formal democratic institutions, even with their imperfections, to effect a gradual transformation of the power relationships in society—or a protracted process of social and political change. Some of the Left groups surveyed below have adopted or are moving toward this integral view, while old habits of an instrumental view of democracy die hard with some.

The brief survey below is limited to Left groups with national-democratic (as distinguished from “social-democratic”) origins or links. While the mainstream “reaffirmist” CPP represents a “unified orthodoxy,” the “rejectionist” and other Left paths since 1992 represent “divided pluralism.”¹

■ Rebolusyonaryong Partido ng Manggagawa ng Pilipinas (RPM-P)

- mainly in Western Visayas and Manila, though claiming a Luzon-Visayas-Mindanao presence
- Marxist-Leninist with a socialist orientation
- adopted the politico-military (pol-mil) concept as strategy, rejecting a war strategy as the principal means, and subordinating armed struggle to the mass movement
- has an **armed wing** Revolutionary Proletarian Army-Alex Boncayao Brigade (RPA-ABB) but not actively engaged in armed struggle due to an **interim peace agreement** with the GRP; has had armed encounters with the NPA
- has a **party-list group** Alab Katipunan but failed to get elected.

■ Partido ng Manggagawang Pilipino (PMP), a merger of the original PMP with the Sosyalistang Partido ng Paggawa (SPP) and the Partido Proletaryo Demokratiko (PPD)

- mainly in Manila-Rizal but also with a Luzon-Visayas-Mindanao presence
- Marxist-Leninist, esp. Leninist, with a socialist orientation
- accent on the mass movement, especially trade unionism
- has an **armed city partisan** wing Armadong Partisanong Panlungsod (APP)
- has two **party-list groups** Partido ng Manggagawa and Sanlakas, which have gotten elected

■ Rebolusyonaryong Partido ng Manggagawa ng Mindanao (RPM-M)

- mainly in Central Mindanao and more recently other parts of Mindanao
- Marxist-Leninist with a socialist orientation and a Mindanao tripeople (Christians, Moros and Lumads) approach
- multiform struggle but gives paramount importance to peace-building and development work at this time because of the adverse effect of war on the “tripeoples” of Mindanao
- has an **armed wing** Revolutionary People’s Army (RPA) but not actively engaged in armed struggle due to engagement in **peace negotiations** with the GRP
- has a **party-list group** Anak Mindanao (AMIN), which has gotten elected

■ Marxista-Leninistang Partido ng Pilipinas (MLPP)

- mainly in Central Luzon and Manila
- originally a “reaffirmist” faction which was more “reaffirmist” than the mainstream CPP
- has an **armed wing** and is **actively engaged in armed struggle**, both with the AFP & the NPA

■ Akbayan! Citizens Action Party

- a **party-list group** project of the independent socialist Bukluran para sa Ikaunlad ng Sosyalistang Isip at Gawa (BISIG), the rejectionist faction Padayon, the democratic socialist Pandayan para sa Sosyalistang Pilipinas (Pandayan), and ex-popular democrats
- said to have fully taken an “integral view” of democracy, as distinguished from the “instrumentalist view” of the CPP and possibly some of the “rejectionist” Marxist-Leninist parties

■ Movement for Popular Democracy (MPD), formed post-EDSA 1986 well before the 1992 split, but effectively dissolved in 1999

- promoted popular democracy (people’s empowerment and political pluralism) initially as a development of and then later a possible alternative to national democracy
- emphasized the role of **nonparty political formations** (NPPFs) and civil society in changing society from below

¹Caouette, *Persevering Revolutionaries*

is one of the official “Six Paths to Peace,” but on the other hand the pursuit of a “multitrack peace process” is also subsumed under the national internal security plan and strategy to overcome insurgency nationwide [see Chapter 1].

For the CPP, the peace negotiations are clearly subordinate to the PPW strategy and is only of

at most tertiary importance as a form of struggle. (Unlike the cases of the MNLF and MILF), *there has been no strategic decision to give peace negotiations a real chance for a negotiated political settlement.* There are only tactical objectives: international diplomatic recognition of belligerency status; propaganda; prisoner releases; and, more recently, to help secure the

legitimacy of the CPP, NPA and Sison internationally in view of their “terrorist” listing. Some critics, from the Left at that, even say that CPP leader Sison, as chief political consultant of the NDF for the talks, is fashioning protracted peace talks to be a form of struggle within the PPW.

Actually, the mutually antagonistic frameworks of the parties account for the protraction of the peace negotiations—leading to this historical situation of PPW (36 years from 1969 to the present) and protracted peace talks (19 years from 1986 to the present but more off than on). These two tracks have run simultaneously since 1986 without an interim general cease-fire except for a brief 60-day period in 1986-87, thus constituting a mode of “talking while fighting,” though it has been much more fighting than talking. This creates its own dynamic, with developments in the field like arrests, captures and killings often impinging on the talks.

There have been two series of peace talks. The first, a one-shot affair from August 1986 to February 1987 during the Aquino administration, collapsed because, among others, the parties could not even agree on a framework for the talks. Each side did not have a clear framework or game plan of its own. The second started in September 1992 with an agreed framework in the *Hague Joint Declaration* which provided for mutually acceptable principles and for a four-point substantive agenda. Since then, there have been many rounds of talks but most were on preliminary and peripheral matters. Besides these, there were long suspensions and impasses.

Still, the peace negotiations produced the CARHRIHL on its sixth year (1998), and continue to hold the promise of socioeconomic, political and constitutional reforms next on the agenda. On the other hand, the reform agenda in the peace negotiations may not progress further without a framework or paradigm shift at the strategic level on both sides. Until there is some kind of breakthrough, maximizing the CARHRIHL through implementation, or the framework of human rights and IHL, might be the best to hope for, besides pursuing the reform agenda

on its own merits *outside* the peace negotiations.

The GRP’s recent attempt in early 2005 at a paradigm shift of sorts is to break the “talk and fight” mode by demanding an interim cease-fire for a limited period of, say, six months of intensive talks focusing on the substantive agenda towards a final peace agreement. The NDF has rejected this outright, not surprisingly because of its well-known aversion to what it considers long cease-fires like six months. This is now part of the current impasse in the talks, perhaps the most serious all these years because of the likely shift from “talk and fight” to “fighting without talking.” With due respect to the GRP, it is hard to see how this can be better. People forget that the “talk and fight” mode at least produced the CARHRIHL and other agreements, the groundwork for the next substantive negotiations, and maintained lines of communication and discussion on certain issues even if peripheral but still relevant to some reduction in the level of violence. The substantive talks should not be held hostage even by the valid desire for a cease-fire—especially since this lately “seems to be the hardest word” on both the communist and Moro fronts.

On the other hand, neither should the substantive talks be held hostage by the likewise valid NDF demand for more effective GRP action to lift the foreign “terrorist” tag on the CPP, NPA and Sison, which caused the current suspension of the talks in August 2004. There are indications that the GRP has taken advantage of this to keep the diplomatic pressure on the CPP, NPA and especially Sison, in his place of self-exile, The Netherlands. This appears to be part of what the GRP likes to describe as a “multitrack process,” including military and diplomatic components, in dealing with insurgencies, whether on the communist or the Moro front. The government cannot seem to develop a bolder, more imaginative and coherent plan of dealing with the CPP-NPA-NDF that puts the main premium on a negotiated political settlement.

Here in the GRP-NDF peace negotiations is most true the observation, albeit made in the Moro

context, that “if war, as once aptly put, is an extension of politics, and negotiation is an aspect of war, then negotiation is war in another form.”

Impact of the post-9/11 U.S.-led “global war on terror”

The post-9/11 (2001) US-led “global war on terror” has added fuel to the local war situation, both the PPW and the counterinsurgency war. The latter has a tendency to be framed as a counterterrorist war with the US-led “terrorist” listing of the CPP, NPA and Sison. The Arroyo administration has welcomed and taken advantage of this listing, as shown soon thereafter by the “Nine-Point Guidelines Issued by the President Re: the CPP” and by her order for redeployment of the AFP against the NPA in August 2002. Among the guidelines were:

2. The CPP-NPA has engaged in terrorist acts against civilian targets... as part of the overall aim to overthrow the duly constituted government and the democratic system;
4. The government welcomes the US action declaring the CPP-NPA as a terrorist organization; this is not interference in the internal affairs of the Philippines;
6. The government will maintain open lines of communication with the CPP-NPA in the hope of ending the use of violence and terrorism as a means to attain political ends, and to achieve national unity and reconciliation under the Constitution;
7. There is no cease-fire between the government and the CPP-NPA; military and police operations will continue;
8. The government calls on other communist organizations that are not engaged in unlawful acts to condemn the violence and terrorism being perpetrated by the CPP-NPA;
9. The government calls upon the entire citizenry to get involved in the fight against the CPP-NPA....

Sison instantly reciprocated with a call for “all-out resistance” against the “US-directed Macapagal-Arroyo regime,” and for strengthening “all types of alliances to isolate and remove the Macapagal-Arroyo

ruling clique.” The “terrorist” tagging seems to have created a siege mentality on the NDF side, especially as far as Sison himself is concerned.

It was clear from the “Nine-Point Guidelines Issued by the President Re: the CPP” that the Arroyo government was putting military action over peace negotiations in dealing with the CPP-NPA, which it treats more as “terrorist” than as “communist.” And while it “will maintain open lines of communication with the CPP-NPA,” there is no longer even mention of peace negotiations.

In fairness to the CPP-NPA’s historical record of armed struggle, it has not, as a policy—and has not generally in practice—engaged in terrorism or acts of terrorism by deliberately targeting civilians. Unlike the *Abu Sayyaf* or the MILF, the CPP-NPA has no Islamic connection that could possibly put it in the network of *Al-Qaeda* or *Jemaah Islamiyah*. The CPP-NPA and, for that matter, the MILF, through its antecedent the MNLF, have pre-dated *Al-Qaeda*-type terrorism by several decades, having instead come from the tradition of national liberation movements of the 1960s.

The US-led campaign against terrorism reflects a drift to militarize of the response to terrorism, and a predominance of the military and military solutions in addressing not only terrorism but also rebellion and internal armed conflict. At another, more comprehensive or encompassing level, it has reinforced an already dominant or hegemonic ideology of national security, particularly its thrust of counterinsurgency as the framework to address insurgency or rebellion. Even the peace process has become subsumed under a national or internal security framework. The peace negotiations in particular, through the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (PAPP), have been subject to the Cabinet Oversight Committee (COC) on Internal Security created by Executive Order No. 21 with a counterinsurgency “Strategy of Holistic Approach.”

The Arroyo government’s objective for the peace process is no longer so much addressing the root causes of rebellion as it is demobilizing the rebel

forces. And even before Arroyo, there has been the persistent militarist mentality of degrading the rebels' military capability so as to be able to impose a peace settlement on them. And now there is the temptation to try to even finish them off with US anti-terrorist logistics support which also funds the AFP's modernization aspirations. More than 35 years of armed conflict should have shown to both sides the futility, illusion, and great cost of aspiring for a military victory over the other side.

Explaining the persistence of the movement

Cauoette [2004] posed this interesting question of explaining the persistence of an armed revolutionary communist movement in the Philippines, which may appear as a historical anachronism, the exception that confirms the rule. Such persistence is all the more puzzling given that the movement missed a key opportunity to seize or share in power towards the end of Marcos rule in 1986, underwent traumatic internal purges in the second half of the 1980s, and survived a major split in the early 1990s, any of which would have irremediably shattered a weaker movement. The CPP was in the doldrums for most of the 1990s but has recovered since. How to explain this? Explanations from the perspective of independent scholars and the critical Left are surveyed below.

One is that the Philippine revolutionary collective action frame gives meaning to action and rebellion, it has the capacity to organize, it helps people understand or rationalize why they engage in such high-risk activism, it makes "sense" given everything else. A related explanation is that people in dire straits, especially in the countryside, crave simple answers to their problems. The national-democratic argument about Philippine society and revolution, with its consolidated, clear-cut and confident explanations and answers for everything, has a certain compelling appeal. Sison himself explained it this way:

The CPP attracted young men and women because it showed the revolutionary way out of the

oppressive and exploitative system. When people recognize a just revolutionary cause and the way to carry it forward, they become dauntless and consider it a duty to work hard and struggle, make sacrifices and overcome the odds.

They become unafraid of the high risks and adverse personal consequences. They become more resolute and militant as they become part of a growing movement, in which more and more people are being aroused, organized and mobilized. Their lives become meaningful and fruitful through the struggle for national liberation, democracy, social justice and other lofty goals.

Another, as already noted above, is the movement's particular form that combines the three components of vanguard party, guerrilla army and social movements. This allowed it to adjust and adapt to changes in the national and international situation, or to respond to political opportunities, in a way that ensures its survival. Unlike its fraternal communist parties in the region, the CPP did not limit itself to just waging a rural insurgency nor to engaging in purely parliamentary struggle. While constantly avowing the primacy of armed struggle in the countryside over legal, political struggle in the urban arena, the CPP in actual practice has given the latter equal or higher priority.

Following this is the more controversial or contestable explanation that some of the CPP's recent gains are attributable not to a reaffirmation of Maoist principles but to a departure from them. The fact that NPA activity has remained stuck at the level of small guerrilla actions despite an increase in tactical offensives indicates that in actual practice the political struggle has been given greater attention and prominence than the armed or military struggle in the past few years. This is controversial particularly to the CPP, because it attributes its recent resurgence to its rectification movement, which featured notably the redeployment of NPA forces mainly for mass work to recover the mass base and secondarily for military work.

And then, of course, there are many potential

Box 3.3 Is agrarian reform the 'taproot'?

If the "taproot" is the land problem, then shouldn't actions or achievements by either side in terms of agrarian reform or the agrarian revolution have a bearing on the evolution of the conflict?

Borras (2004) makes a critical assessment of the government agrarian reform program from 1972 to 2002. The redistributive reform attained so far through the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) process has been *significant in scale*. First, according to official data, nearly three-fourths of CARP's total working scope has been redistributed to peasant beneficiaries. The number of beneficiary households is some 2.5 million, or 15 million individuals, accounting for about 47 percent of the total rural household population of 5.2 million. (Compare this with CPP official figures that at its peak in early 1988 the NPA mass base was 10 million, broken down to seven million in the countryside and three million in the urban areas.) The total redistributed land accounted for a little more than 50 percent of the total farm land. The leasehold accomplishment is likewise substantial at 1.5 million hectares, which could be benefiting some .5 million tenant-households.

Second, the bulk of the accomplishment is in public lands, accounting for a total of 3.9 million hectares, or two-thirds of the total CARP output. This covers upland public lands where poverty incidence is usually high and which are the usual base areas of the NPA. Also, the bulk of DAR's balance is mainly in private lands outside of Operation Land Transfer (OLT) coverage of rice and corn land.

Borras [2004] cautions, however, that official government data may be contested. For example, the actual leasehold accomplishments may be much lower than 1.5 million hectares, and that some 300,000 hectares constitute "fake" land reform via voluntary land transfer. Nevertheless, the assessment is still that the CARP's land redistribution achievement is "modest but significant."

The same is true for the Agrarian Reform Communities (ARCs), the development program launched in 1993. An ARC is a barangay or cluster of barangays where a critical mass of farmers and farm workers await full implementation of agrarian reform, and an attempt is made to anchor the full socioeconomic development of the area through various projects and programs. The Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) under Secretary Ernesto Garilao produced empirical evidence that agrarian reform actually works, especially when systematic support services are

delivered. As of September 2004, there were a total of 1,664 ARCs found in 6,135 barangays in 1,137 municipalities nationwide. [Compare this with the CPP's latest claim of 130 guerrilla fronts in more than 9,000 barangays in substantial portions of around 800 municipalities and cities in nearly 70 provinces.] Again, a word of caution about the inherent limitations of ARCs—their nature and coverage—and the possibility that majority of officially declared ARCs are in fact "ARCs on paper."

What about the CPP's revolutionary land reform program? Borras discusses how the CPP's maximum program of land confiscation and free redistribution is to be implemented only after victory of the revolution. While this is being waged, the minimum program of land rent reduction, elimination of usury, raising of farm wages, improving prices of produce, raising production and rudimentary cooperatives is carried out. Some initial and partial gains for the peasants have been made, with some lands redistributed to landless peasants, and land rents and loan interests reduced in areas where the NPA was strong. But as soon as the general politico-military condition became unfavorable to the NPA in the late 1980s, most of these partial gains were rolled back as landlords violently took back their lands. The campaign to eradicate usury was contentious because it tended to stop local money lending, which was necessary to finance production. A former CPP insider says the rent reduction is still in the framework of share tenancy and therefore even inferior to the government's leasehold program. He says there has also been some CPP opposition to peasant acquisition of some big landholdings under CARP because these belong to landlords who are allies of the NPA [See example in Box 1.5].

It would seem then that agrarian reform and agrarian revolution are not in fact the crucial factors to the progress of the CPP's mass-base building. The CPP's peasant mass base (or at least its guerrilla front) appears to be increasing despite the significant redistributive outcome of CARP and the relatively low level of revolutionary land reform. Thus, the persistence or strength of the NPA must have some other stronger basis. According to a former CPP insider, this basis is precisely the NPA's function as a "social police" in the countryside where the state has no presence. Stated otherwise, "the insurgency survives because it is an alternative political movement supported by force." In short, *another state structure*.

recruits, mostly in rural areas. For many of them, there is no other alternative to survive economic deprivation. Field reports tend to show that many countryside recruits of the NPA join not so much due to political consciousness or commitment but for economic survival. Sison says, however, that "they join the revolutionary movement in order to struggle for their own national and social liberation.... The toiling masses of workers and peasants are the most oppressed and exploited. They have been the most interested in joining the movement...they know that

the movement can succeed only with their resolute and militant mass struggle."

Finally, related to those subjective forces of the revolution are the objective conditions. Capitalism (or semi-feudalism in the CPP's view of the mode of production) has not been much of a success in the country. Over the past few decades, the Philippines has lagged behind its neighbors in economic growth. Massive and abject poverty and economic inequity continue to be there, if not worsen [Box 3.3]. On the political side, there is revulsion against traditional

elite politics.

Beyond the regime change in 1986, various social and political scientists point to the persistence of “local political bosses,” “caciques” or “local authoritarian enclaves,” especially in rural areas. In these enclaves, the martial-law regime has not ended: despotic local elites, whether inside or outside the state apparatus, have continued to rule ruthlessly. For the poor peasants, these despotic elites represent the system that needs to be overthrown. It is *a wonder and no wonder* then that, every year for several decades now, Sison has proclaimed “the objective conditions for revolution are better than ever before.”

Conclusion

The protracted people’s war and counter-insurgency war seem destined to go on for the foreseeable future unless there is some kind of a breakthrough like a paradigm shift in both parties’ frameworks on war and peace—a remote prospect now, given the contending ideological visions. The rebellion has its root structural causes but it is also very clearly ideologically driven.

It seems little can be done to change ideology or even strategy as far as the CPP is concerned. One can at most find mutually acceptable terms of reference and the most promising for now is human rights, “the full scope of human rights and fundamental freedoms,” to use the wording of CARHRIHL. Together with international humanitarian law, these can alleviate to some, if limited, extent the threats to personal, community and political security even as the war goes on.

Of course, that would not be enough to address the full scope of human security and human development which the people need. For this, socioeconomic, political and even constitutional reforms are needed. It would be ideal to achieve these through peace negotiations, perhaps additionally informed by the frameworks of human security and human development. But they can and should also be pursued on their own merits *outside* the peace

negotiations and still be treated as part of a broader peace process. In other words, they should be pursued *not* with a counterinsurgency frame, not to overcome the insurgency, but to meet the needs of the people, to “serve the people.”

From both sides of the conflict, the people’s war is purportedly waged for and even by the people. It is time the people are empowered to freely decide, express and act about where they want this war to go. This itself may occasion some breakthrough. This in turn needs another breakthrough in terms of political reform for a more participatory and egalitarian democracy with mechanisms to address the root causes. Democracy, after all, is one of the mutually acceptable principles of the GRP-NDF peace negotiations. In its true or best sense, democracy might also be a framework for attaining a just and lasting peace.