



George Packer

Since Corason Aquino's rise to power, the Philippine revolutionary left is again stressing armed struggle.

NPA members admit. Conventional wisdom says the CPP "influences" about 20 percent of the nation's barrios. Only a handful of PRGs exist in scattered rural communities. The NDF also lacks a strong structure and distinct identity in many provinces. Building district and municipal councils, as well as constituent organizations, remains a formidable task. But in the meantime, functioning PRGs and BRCs and barrio-based mass organizations add depth to the support for the movement in the hinterlands.

Political ties that bind: The revolutionary movement has a structural advantage over the government and traditional political parties in the hinterlands: its cadre system. Traditional parties do better in electoral politics, but the government fails to maintain a strong presence in the agrarian communities dotting the countryside. The government simply does not deliver basic services and daily leadership here. In fact, Sen. Agapito "Butz" Aquino, the president's brother-in-law, recommends the establishment of a domestic "peace corps" to provide an alternative to the revolutionary left.

Observers on both sides of the conflict see the failure of the government to deliver services as a factor behind the continued popular appeal of the left. The military wants to see the local government units going into the villages, providing services and organizing people into anti-Communist civic groups coordinated by local civil-military "peace and order councils." Some government officials hope to see the municipal and provincial governments extend their reach now that elected officials hold office.

So far this hasn't happened. Corruption, lack of funds and the absence of meaningful national government programs advancing social justice make this sort of approach difficult.

The government has scored some successes in its battle with the insurgents since

1986. Its candidates won tremendous victories in local and national elections, minimalizing the impact of those seeking to

introduce left-wing issues into parliamentary politics. The government also wooed some international backers away from the

New People's Army finds in electoral politics

By George Packer

BICOL REGION, PHILIPPINES

THE COMMUNIST NEW PEOPLE'S ARMY (NPA) has been fighting the Philippine government for almost 20 years, and Sotero Llamas has been in the hills of Bicol, in southern Luzon island, for 15 of them. He is not just the NPA regional commander but almost certainly a member of the outlawed Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). So when several other journalists and I met him on the eve of January's local elections, he

The NPA's long-held opposition to electoral politics has given way to a new tactic: extortion.

spoke with authority about an important new strategy.

The NPA's long-held opposition to electoral politics had given way to a new tactic: extortion. In exchange for safe-conduct passes into guerrilla-controlled areas, candidates in Bicol had turned over to the NPA at least \$150,000 and perhaps as much as \$1 million in cash, guns, nails, used clothes, rice and French egg noodles.

This "selective participation" did not

mean that the Communists suddenly approved of an electoral system they have always held in utter contempt. In fact, as Llamas saw things, the election was a part of the U.S.-directed "low-intensity conflict" (LIC) against the insurgency.

"The election is no solution," Llamas said, "but it is there." And so, went this pragmatic line of thinking, the Communists might as well get a piece of the action.

According to Llamas, they were giving "low-profile" support to "anti-low-intensity-conflict" candidates. Like any traditional ward leader paying off an electoral IOU, the NPA would deliver its 20 percent of the vote to those candidates who paid the rebels off and opposed the formation of right-wing vigilante forces in their areas.

One of these politicians turned out to be Luis Villafuerte, the governor of Camarines del Sur province. He had contributed by far the largest chunk of money to the NPA, as well as the egg noodles. The noodles had ostensibly been made from first-class wheat flour donated to typhoon victims in his province by the French government. But opponents accused Villafuerte of selling off the flour, pocketing most of the profit, giving some cash to the NPA, and having egg noodles made of cheap local flour.

When I interviewed him, Villafuerte laughed off my questions about graft and deal-cutting with the enemy. And he certainly did not talk like an NPA puppet. He claimed to have organized 2,000 of his own vigilantes among rebel returnees. He also

left and its allies, got the powerful Roman Catholic Church to crack down on dissidents within its ranks and presented—for a time, anyway—alternatives to revolution.

There have also been some military successes against the rebels. The entry of "deep-penetration agents" into the movement in Mindanao shattered many organizations there two and a half years ago, and recently formed right-wing vigilante organizations set back the rebels on that southern island even further. Likewise, the organization of anti-Communist vigilantes slowed or reversed the growth of the movement in Bicol, Cebu and possibly other areas.

But there have been important failures as well. The government hasn't developed a vision that would provide the impoverished majority with an attractive future. Progressives still supportive of the government complain about the slow pace of social and economic reforms. Ultimately, the government has succeeded in retarding the growth of the left, but not in reversing it.

Where does that leave the country? Sen. Rene Saguisag suggests the government "is in a race against time" and the insurgents. A European ambassador has a more pessimistic view from the standpoint of the Aquino government: "Who's winning the war?" he asks. "Everyday I'm asked that question. I usually tell people it's a standoff." □

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said he was developing a "comprehensive counterinsurgency program" with economic and political components—something the military in Bicol hadn't done. It sounded like LIC.

Swimming in cash: Llamas, nicknamed "Nognog," an appealing, good-humored man in his late 30s with a small body and a large head, couldn't help a smile as he described how the Communists had the politicians in their pockets. On the kitchen table in the thatch hut lay a new 9-mm machine pistol, one of Villafuerte's gifts to the underground.

But, one of us asked, won't this confuse the masses—since after telling them for years that elections are a part of the corrupt system, you are now telling them to vote for a power-broker like Villafuerte? Llamas suppressed a belch and, rather mischievously, answered: "When you sit down to dinner with the devil, it is possible to become more angelic."

The Bicol NPA were swimming in cash. But during the several days with the guerrillas it became clear that events over the past year have put them on the defensive: not militarily, but in the game they play best—politics.

With surprising candor, Llamas spoke of recent setbacks. NPA "mistakes" and "excesses"—informers executed before their families' eyes, overtaxation of farmers—had contributed to the success of local right-wing vigilantes. In one town a strong NPA presence had been wiped out. In the cities,

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EDITORIAL



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Six years after being banned, Solidarity lives

The current wave of strikes in Poland, brought about by steep price increases recently imposed by government attempts to end subsidies, shows that the spirit of Solidarity is alive and well. Although banned in 1982, Solidarity still retains strong support among Polish workers, and even within the official trade unions, many of whose leaders are former Solidarity members. This was demonstrated last week at the striking Lenin shipyard in Gdansk—the site of Solidarity's birth—when Henryk Koscielski, head of the official union of shipyard workers, affirmed his support of the banned union. Responding to Lech Walesa, who once again is speaking on behalf of the strikers, Koscielski said the former Solidarity leader would “not find one resolution that will be against Solidarity. Many members of the new unions were in Solidarity. I was in Solidarity.”

Support for Solidarity persists six years after its banning and the imposition of martial law because it still represents the best chance for opening up Polish society. As Walesa said last week, the Polish

people “need to move to another system—not to capitalism, but to a Polish system, to pluralism.”

There is great popular support for this view in Poland, and, of course, it is what the ruling Communist Party fears most. That is why it is taking a conciliatory stance toward the strikers, while remaining adamantly hostile to Solidarity. “The government will not talk to illegal structures, Solidarity,” government spokesman Jerzy Urban said last week. “We might talk to individuals who were in Solidarity,” he added, “but not to Solidarity as a union.”

Confident of their popular support, however, Walesa and other Solidarity leaders are hoping that the new Soviet reforms and the general loosening up under Mikhail Gorbachov will give them space in which to function. Walesa expressed this indirectly last week when he said Solidarity's tragedy had been that Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev “lived two years too long.” Brezhnev died in 1982, two years after the founding of Solidarity, and the year of its banning.

And, indeed, the current demands for an opening up of Polish society are a test of *glasnost* and of the Soviet and Polish Communist Parties' commitment to reform. The world will be watching how both the Soviet Union and the Polish government deal with this revival of the spirit of democracy. ■

Congress finally gives atomic veterans a hand

In the face of strong administration opposition, the House gave final congressional approval last week to a bill providing compensation to veterans for illnesses presumed to have been caused by exposure to atomic radiation from nuclear bombs and tests during and after World War II. But while the House vote of 326-2 was clearly veto-proof, the Senate tally in passing the bill on April 25 was 48-30, much less than the two-thirds needed to overturn a veto. This leaves in doubt the bill's fate should Reagan follow through on his threat to kill it.

Between 1945, when the first atomic bomb was dropped on Hiroshima, and the early '60s, when open-air nuclear tests in the South Pacific and in Nevada were ended, some 250,000 members of the U.S. armed forces were exposed to nuclear radiation with little or no protection—except the false assurances of their commanders that it was all perfectly safe. Since then, some 6,000 veterans have asked the Veterans Administration (VA) for medical treatment for a variety of cancers and other diseases presumably caused by exposure to radiation. Only 44 of these requests have been granted by

the VA, which all along has insisted that there is no proven link between most veterans' exposure and their current problems.

And, in fact, a direct link is all but impossible to prove. The level of radiation exposure can be verified only in a handful of cases. Many armed forces members did not wear radiation-monitoring badges during the atomic bomb tests at which they were present, others lost their badges and some badges were later found to be defective. But there is no doubt that nuclear radiation causes cancer, or that the rate of cancers among those exposed is much higher than in the general population. Nor is there any doubt about the pain and suffering that thousands of veterans are experiencing, both because of their medical problems and because of the callousness of a government they have loyally served. As Sen. Thomas A. Daschle (D-SD) asks about the lack of scientific proof in these cases, “How long will we wait for that proof? Will we wait until all these veterans are dead?”

If left to the administration and its supporters in Congress, the answer to Daschle's question will be yes. After all, unlike the powerful corporations that grow fat on government subsidies, veterans are expendable. They do not fill campaign coffers or have their representatives in top government positions. The Reagan administration's response to the veterans—to whom it pays lip service at election time—is one more example of its disloyalty to the American people. ■

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