

## OCCUPY: FROM WALL STREET AROUND THE GLOBE AND TO MANILA

by Steffen Rudolph

*Starting from New York City's financial district on September 17, 2011, the Occupy-Movement became a world-wide-phenomenon in a couple of months. People all around the globe seem to share frustrations and express their concerns via Occupy. Is Occupy a short-lived side-issue or a legit and fundamental protest-movement of present day?*

### What is „Occupy“?

Regarding the many supporters of Occupy, the movement can be considered as one of the biggest peaceful protest movements in the last decades. Occupy activists hold or try to hold long-lasting gatherings, marches and debates in public places which usually inherit a symbolic significance, such as financial markets, banks and others. The protesters campaign against economic and social inequality, unemployment and corruption. Their aspiration is to cut down the influence of corporations - especially „Global Players“. The famous slogan „We are the 99%“ refers to the growing income inequality and wealth distribution between the prosperous 1% and the rest of the population. According to the activists it is the one percent that writes the rules of an unfair global economy that exploits the majority of the people. The movement is made unique by its sustained visibility in cities and towns. All around the globe, activist groups are setting up rallies and encampments. In some locations these consist of tents, kitchens and entire outdoor communities for the purpose of constant „occupation“. Occupy is a vivid example of a peaceful protest movement which includes different social classes plus traditional and modern forms of protest. Although the movement began on Wall Street and focused on the financial sector, it lacks specific demands.

This enabled local movements to adopt messages and to personalize them beyond the focal Wall Street. The vagueness of the goals has led to the spread of the movement as well as massive criticism. This flexible frame, broad identity and the availability of replicable tactics as general assemblies and encampments have sustained a dynamic evolution.

### Where did it all start?

The Canadian Adbusters Media Foundation was the first to use the term „Occupy“. In a blog-post from July 13, 2011, they proposed a peaceful occupation of Wall Street to protest against the lack of legal consequences for those who brought the global crisis of monetary insolvency. Senior editor Micah White said, they suggested the protest via their email list. Later, it was spontaneously taken up in many countries. It was intended to combine aspects of the consensus decision making of the 2011 Protests in Spain with the use of a symbolic location, like it was done in the 2011 protests on the Tahrir Square in Egypt. The blog-post also showed an image of a dancer atop Wall Street's iconic „Charging Bull“ statue and was titled with the hashtag „#OccupyWallStreet“. The next days the number of times the hashtag was used in social networks exploded. Later, the internet group „Anonymous“ encouraged its readers to participate in the protests and other groups started joining the movement. The beginning of Occupy is an example of an internet-driven, decentralized genesis of a political movement.

### Divulagation: All around the Globe

The protest itself began on September 17, 2011. Hundreds of activists gathered in lower Manhattan, set up tents, kitchens and peaceful barricades. The movement received little media coverage until September 24, when YouTube footage showed a New York City police pepper-spraying peaceful protesters. Even more attention was drawn after about 700

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people were arrested on Brooklyn Bridge. At that time the spell was broken, the movement started spreading. At the same time state reaction increased. Repression was often the answer. Protest camps were cleared, protesters were arrested and many cases of police violence were documented. In some countries even the formation of protest camps was stopped. The public and the media had a high interest in reporting about the movement but the perception was mixed. Many appreciated the political interest and the dedication of the protesters. Most of them never participated in politics before. On the other hand many politicians and experts criticised the movement, mostly its focus on protest was described as too vague. Some politicians and media reports even called Occupy silly and regard it as a short-lived vogue. That raises a question: If the movement is silly and short-lived, why is the state reaction often so harsh?

### Arrival in the Philippines

Occupy reached the Philippines shores in late November 2011. In Manila, it was convened by a wide range of individuals, civil society actors and also by Catholic bishop Broderick Pabillo. The bishop said "Kilusang 99%" is a social reform movement which is about making the poor the center of development and making the government accountable for the welfare of the majority. He said the protest is mainly addressed to the well-entrenched financial system that has bred social injustice, economic imbalance, corporate greed and the darkest side of capitalism. What is happening now is that

the government is just at the backseat and they just let the market, which seeks profit and not the common good, dictate," he said. "We don't want violence and rebellion but we just want the people who are mostly affected by these problems to be heard". Among the sectors leading the protests are labor groups, farmers and fisherfolk organizations, the indigenous peoples and the urban poor.

Later several demonstrations were held. Mostly the protesters were stopped by the police before they could occupy symbolic places. In December 2011, protesters failed to reach the Chino Roces Bridge in Manila where they had planned to stage a protest camp. Riot policemen used truncheons and water cannons to disperse the 500 protesters. Five of them were arrested and now have to face complaints of illegal assembling and resisting arrest. State reaction was often rigorous when protestants tried to build long-term protest camps or tried to block streets and public spaces. Less or no repression was observed when protestants held demonstrations and gatherings of limited duration. Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU) chairman Elmer Labog called the police action "an overkill". "We condemn the Aquino government's repression of our right to hold protests even as it fails to solve the growing hunger and poverty in the country."

In the Philippines state reaction is very harsh in general and almost all media reports are very negatively about the movement. Often times the mostly peaceful protesters are described by the police and the media as "militant" and "leftist". In the Philippines

this means that they could face threats and violence. This so-called „Red-baiting“ is a big topic in the Philippines and was discussed in the "Observer" before.<sup>1</sup> Despite these threats and violent repression, the movement is still vivid in the Philippines and will continue to raise its voice.

### Relevance of Occupy

If Occupy is a short-lived mode or a long-lasting movement cannot be decided now. It is ambiguous at least, if the political and financial system can be changed by these



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protests. The peak of the movement seems to be past. Now it is the question which effects did the movement have? Without dispute, Occupy has given many impulses to start a discussion about the topic. It is also out of doubt that Occupy brought many people in contact with politics, who were not interested in politics before. Maybe this change will be regarded as the legacy of Occupy in the future. ■

1) See Observer, Vol.3, no.2, 2011.

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