

THE LONG TRADITION OF NON-VIOLENT PROTEST IN THE PHILIPPINES



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If one refers to profound incorporators of non-violent protest, most people would name Mahatma Gandhi or Martin Luther King. If it comes to outstanding non-violent protests in the history of mankind most people cite the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain or the decolonization of India. However, Philippines also possess a comprehensive legacy and authorship of non-violent protest themselves. In history there has always been a choice between the use of violence and its refusal, the same can be said at present time.

José Rizal: The first non-violent thinker in the Philippines?

José Rizal is famous to be “The First Filipino” and an integral constituent of the Philippine sense of national identity. This angle of view is only half the story and considers only one side of the coin. As a matter of fact, José Rizal has to be designated as one of the first non-violent political deep-thinker in modern history. Until his illegitimate execution by the Spaniards in 1896 he dauntlessly raised his voice against a violent revolution. In a time, in which many wanted to fight against the Spaniards to set Philippines free he advocated a peaceful change via reforms. He refused the use of violence by all means and at all times. His weapon of choice was neither the gun nor the “bolo”, but the quill. Coming from an affluent and well-educated family with roots in China and Spain his thoughts spread throughout the country and were even incorporated amongst the elites in Europe. Ironically, he was one of the first famous delinquents killed by the colonial power and his death was rated as beacon to start the rebellion.

He was born in 1861 on the island of Luzon as the seventh of eleven children. After studying in Philippines he moved to Madrid where he finished his exams in medicine. Later he worked as a doctor in Paris and Heidelberg, Germany. In 1884, his first novel “Noli me Tangere” was published and followed by the “El Filibusterismo” in 1891. In both of his books he criticized the Spanish colonial government in the Philippines. In 1892 he returned to the Philippines and founded the reformistic “Liga Filipina”. The “Liga” enunciated justified demands of partial autonomy but always abnegated violent means.

Still, the league was immediately dissolved by the Spanish Governor. The more radical and pro-violent “Katipunan”-movement tried to garner the support of the famous author several times but Rizal always spoke to the contrary. He always warned the people not to start a war and espoused a rapprochement.

Books as protest

Few novels had a wider influence on their country than the two main Novels of José Rizal. Equally few other writers had to pay a higher price for their writings: Rizal was executed mainly because of his books. The Spaniards obviously recognized the might of the truth, written between the two boards of a book and executed the author. The intention of the novels was to draw attention to the calamitous state of affairs in the Philippines in satirical ways. They both end on a note of failure and the triumph of evil over good. Especially the second book leaves no suggestion of redemption. By giving that example of failure, Rizal tried to warn his countrymen of a violent uprising. Thus there is promiscuous humor, mordant satire, romance and ethnographic description which unsettles the readers response to the narrative in many ways, structural aspects of the social organization of the native society are revealed by the sharp description of the author. The tension between official Christianity and native ritual and belief, the gendered nature of social relations in the Philippines at that time and cultural beliefs and practices are other topics of Rizal’s criticism. In flourish expression and apt description Rizal draws a cautionary tale of the cruel and unjust life in the colonial Philippines.



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Rapprochement and reforms: Rizal's successors

Amongst others, Manuel Quezon is considered by many as a successor of Rizal by function and by spirit. Quezon was the third President of the Philippines, after the short-lived time under Aguinaldo and Malvar. He held office from 1935 till 1944. Quezon was the first president using the newly granted freedom to start reforms and increase autonomy. He stood for rapprochement with the new colonial power - the USA - and tried to imply change through reforms. During his presidency, Quezon tried to tackle the problem of landless peasants in the countryside with partial success. In history there has always been a choice between violence and peaceful means. Often times they are interdependent, as the next example shows.

Clamped between Terrorism and dialogue: The Moros¹

The Moros of the southern Philippines have been fighting a four-hundred year war on autonomy. Sometimes they resorted in peace talks but for a long time they used violence. Among Muslims in Mindanao there have been many conflicts about which way to choose. The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) formed itself in the 1960s. Their goal was the autonomy of parts of the mostly Muslim inhabited parts of Mindanao. The MNLF took part in terrorist attacks and assassinations. Their sphere of action is restricted to Philippine territory. Alleged contacts to the terror network Al-Qaida have never been proven. The government in Manila sent troops to counter the insurgency. The bloody war between the Military and the Moro rebels caused countless deaths of soldiers, rebels and

Ahead of his time?

A good example of this in the Noli is the famous chapter on the sermon in which the mismatch between the arrogant and bullying pretensions of the preacher. The naive ignorance of the congregation is exploited to demonstrate the nature of the intellectual and physical tyranny of the clergy. Many parts of the second Novel are targeted at the easygoing political apathy of the students and the failure to react to the political constraints they had to face. The one possible answer, uprising and revolution is the one

which Rizal rejected through his refusal to engage in insurrectionary movements. So his decision to write his novels became his mode of political action. Unfortunately, Rizal was probably ahead of his time in two different ways. First, the Spaniards were not prepared to engage in rapprochement unlike the British Empire did in the post Second World War to India. Secondly, it seems the Philippine people were not ready to choose non-violent protest and resorted to war. Despite his failure in enforcing his opinion, Rizal has contributed to the case of nonviolent protest in many ways.

1) The muslim Moros are the most numerous non-christian demographic group in the Philippines. In 2005 the Moros represented about 5 % of the overall population in the Philippines.

civilians. Again and again the conflict flared up and still today new conflicts can start immediately because many weapons are in the convolution.

In 1976 a peace agreement was signed between the MNLF and the government of the Philippines in Tripolis. This agreement could only be signed because of the massive engagement of Muslim leader Nur Misuari. Misuari and others tried to end the violent conflict and establish a peaceful solution. Unfortunately the Marcos government made several concessions but did not fulfil the contract as hoped by Misuari and other moderate muslim activists. As a result of this, parts of the MNLF split off and formed the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The conflict is still going on today but most parts of the Muslim people have left the path of violence and are active in the organization of the Autonomous Muslim Mindanao.

In 1986, after the People Power Movement and the fall of dictator Marcos, the new President Corazon Aquino followed a more active politics with the goal of ending the lethal conflict. Since these days the number of violent conflict has decreased drastically. Only hardliners still fight in the MILF nowadays. On August 1 in 1989 the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) was founded with Republic Act Nr. 6734. Elections in all concerning areas were held and most people voted for the joining to the ARMM. In 1996 the MNLF and the government signed the final peace contract and Nur Misuari became the first Governor of the ARMM. For him, it was a long way from being a military leader to becoming a peaceful and respected politician. Most Moros are satisfied with the ARMM but some others still press for complete liberation from the Philippines. There are still many conflicts going on in the ARMM, but the example of Nur Misuari gives hope that one day the violent conflict will be ending.

The triumph of peaceful protest: People Power

In 1986 the Philippine people formed a strong non-violent movement, which became known as "People Power Revolution", also known as "EDSA Revolution". The Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines supported the revolution and millions of Filipinos were mobilized by civil

society groups. It marked the fall of Marcos dictatorship which lasted for two decades. Marcos committed extensive human rights violations. Globally, Marcos leadership was known for its unimaginable extent of political corruption. During the time of Marcos, his family confiscated the biggest media, utility services and manufacturing companies.

The Revolution consisted of a series of demonstrations which started in 1983 and culminated in 1986. Most of the demonstrations took place on the Epifanio de los Santos Avenue, better known as "EDSA" in February 1986. More than two Million Filipinos were involved: Several political, military and religious groups showed the discontent of wide parts of the population. The protests were fuelled by the opposition to many years of corruption and mismanagement by the Marcos Government. In 1983 Benigno Aquino, leader of the opposition, came back to the Philippines after living in exile. Right at the airport he was killed. The assassination of Benigno Aquino, served as a catalyst for the revolution. Despite warnings and threats from pro-Marcos-groups and the military Aquino had decided to go back to the Philippines. When he was asked about his thoughts of the death threats, Aquino stated „The Filipino is worth dying for.“ By saying this and by being executed like Rizal before him, Aquino became the symbol of the People Power Revolution for many Philipinos.

Financial problems and reports about corruption fueled the discontent of the masses even more. After being pressured by the US-Government Marcos surprisingly announced that elections should be held in February 1986. The widow of Aquino, Corazon Aquino became candidate for the presidential office. After a controversial vote count with more or less open manipulation Marcos was declared the winner. But the Filipino people refused to accept this result and went on the streets. The embankment was broken and Marcos could not sustain office. As a reaction the "Reform the Armed Forces Movement" started a coup attempt against Marcos. In a radio message aired over Radio Veritas, Cardinal Sin called all Filipinos to help the rebels by going to EDSA and give emotional support, food and other supplies to the rebels. Many people followed his call despite threats from pro-Marcos-

groups. Overall, Radio Veritas played an important role during the mass uprising.

At the climax of the rebellion around three million people filled EDSA. One morning, government troops arrived to stop Radio Veritas from reporting, but the radio station switched to another transmitter and kept on sending. The mood in the streets was festive; many people brought their families with them. On several occasions military forces tried to dissolve the gathering, but on every occasion they hold their fire. The military did not shoot on their own people. The pressure of Marcos

increased more and more. Finally, he left the country.

The peaceful downfall of this dictator can be considered as one of the biggest victories of non-violent protest in the history of humanity. The peaceful rebellion served as a role model for later revolutions, for example in Eastern Germany and Eastern Europe.

What is going on today?

Today there are still many unsolved conflicts, social imbalances and injustices in the Philippines. The new political system still has not provided social welfare and corruption is still spreading. But many

things have changed for the better. Many people use different forms of non-violent protest: Farmer-groups who go on hunger strike to take possession of their land, journalists who face threats and try to write the truth about corrupt politicians, unionist who peacefully fight for better wages, indigenous people who resist the interest of multi-national-companies which want to exploit the natural resources, and all the activists and politicians who work on social issues. They all have one in common: They all are the successors of Rizal and they keep the long tradition of non-violent protest in the Philippines alive. ■



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