



LEFT FOR GOOD

Tragicomic Twists and Turns of the Philippine Far Left

Robert Francis B. Garcia

This article is a personal reflection on the trajectory of the radical leftist movement in the Philippines – from its influence on his youthful vision to his experience of human rights violation within the movement up to the excavation of the remains of its victims. The author's reflection on the Left's on crucial issues in the society like the elections and peace is only borne out of one's personal encounter with one of the most influential movements in the Philippine society.

The double-entendre in the title is deliberately intended. One meaning implies the nobility of purpose with which the Left has often been grudgingly associated. The other meaning suggests something quite irksome: like, embarking on a trip of destiny, one missed one's passage altogether. With the way things seemed to have turned out for the Left in the Philippines, that was the last trip – no other chance to rebook, no way to refund.

This paper attempts a critical look at how the Philippine Far Left has fared in recent history and how it has “behaved” in its striving to be a force in society. I am writing these reflections from the experience of a leftist that I have been, or, if the term has become confusing and vague nowadays, at least as someone who has been there. I also presume in this article that I am conversing with a Left-friendly readership that is keen on studying what it means to be of the Left in this country.

This account is by no means comprehensive. It is closer to being a set of raw observations and ruminations on the specific subject of the Far Left. I use the term Far Left because indeed there are other kinds: Moderate Left, Left-of-Center, Center Left, and all shades in between and beyond.



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But what does it mean to be of the Left anyway? I suppose the stereotype would be that of the placard-wielding activist who mouths off demands for change in a not-too-particularly endearing way. The operative word is *must*. Things must be this, government must do that, the people must have this, and therefore they must fight for that. Leftists are those who are not wanting for things to demand. They are the demanding type, you can say. This image and role have somehow changed in recent years, but we will come back to that later.

ORIGINS OF THE “LEFT”

Perhaps a little etymology backgrounder is in order. I was an activist in college when I first learned about where the term “left” came from and how it became associated with radicalism. I remember I was leafing through the eminently readable collection of booklets collectively titled *Issues without Tears* by Letizia Constantino.¹ From her article “Political Terms” in that collection, I learned with great amusement that the radical connotation of the term Left had literal roots – something related to the physical space occupied by members inside the chamber of the English House of Commons: to the left of the Speaker were members of the opposition, normally tended towards challenging the *status quo* and demanding change; and to the right of the Speaker were members of the ruling party, usually inclined towards preserving the status quo. As I was writing this paper I did further looking up into the subject to refresh and augment memory. Thus I (re)learned some small forgotten historical details: following the tradition set by the English Parliament, the revolutionary parliamentarians of the pre-Bastille French General Assembly occupied the left wing of the chamber while the nobility occupied the right, that is, to the left or right of the President of the Assembly, the presiding officer. They knew their place, and the divide was clear-cut. From then on, the association stuck, with the term “left” acquiring the irksome connotation of being radical and the term “right” acquiring the unpleasant, “reactionary” flavor –

¹ Letizia Constantino, *Issues without Tears: A Layman’s Manual of Current Issues* (Quezon City: Karrel, 1984-1985).



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unpleasant, at least, to those who advocated change and had radical demands to grind. Thus for the Left, the Right's thinking, "If the status quo ain't broke, why fix it?" was truly insufferable.

As I was looking up the subject, I also learned that *sinister* was the Latin word for left. That stung a bit, so I wanted to find out more. But I can only do so much etymology at this time. The deeper sinister probe can be for later.

Left. Radical. Revolutionary. Activist. These words are still very much part of our political vocabulary nowadays and, thus, of our daily discourse on national political life. For good or ill, what they mean and refer to still matter. One thing I noticed, though, in a lot of literature related to the notion underlying these words is the avoidance, or minimal reference, to one particularly relevant term: communism. I find the subterfuge on the word particularly problematic because it gives the entire discourse on the Left an unseemly flavor.

At least one scholar, Patricio "Jojo" Abinales, does not sidestep the word (and therefore the issue). Thus I write in my Introduction to his book, *Love, Sex, and the Filipino Communist*:

Jojo is one of the few left scholars with the guts and ability to call a spade a spade. The word 'communist' has taken on a sinister implication in this day and age – it has indeed been a haunting specter as Marx manifested – no thanks to red scare as well as the dismal record of many a communist regime. Thus many writers, myself included, have taken to using euphemisms in referring to it – revolutionary movement, national democratic struggle, and so forth. In the back of our heads we know what it really is: a communist movement led no less by the Communist Party of the Philippines – with national democracy, national liberation, and even socialism as mere building blocks towards that ultimate aim. Much like Harry Potter calling Voldemort by his name, Jojo finds no need to revert to less-tainted vocabulary in referring to communists and communism. Thus his narrative remains characteristically pointblank.²

² Robert Francis Garcia, "Introduction," in Patricio N. Abinales, *Love, Sex and the Filipino Communist (Or Hinggil sa Pagpipigil ng Panggigijil)* (Manila: Anvil, 2004), xi-xii.



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My point is that many leftists then and now have in fact been in a state of denial. While all communists construe themselves to be revolutionaries, leftists and activists, not all activists, leftists or revolutionaries are communists. Nevertheless, it has been quietly acknowledged among activists, leftists and revolutionaries that the underground and illegal Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) is really the entity that has been orchestrating the actions and directions of the Far Left since the late sixties, including those of political organizations that the Party has created to take on open and legal personality. Those in the Far Right have rarely missed every opportunity to decry and point this out, for obvious reasons. But the broad Left's knee-jerk reaction has always been to dodge or downright dismiss such missives. Thus, full and open discourses on the Communist Party and disclosure of the communist agenda have been wanting.

In terms of the identity they project to the public, most communists refer to themselves as national democrats ("nat-dems" or NDs). Being national democrat in the open national democratic movement (or, simply referred to as "the movement") is the public face and branding they prefer, which also describes their goal once revolution is won: national democracy. In a nutshell, national democracy in their book means nationalization of industries and the implementation of genuine land reform – which, especially the latter, are not in themselves undesirable goals. Their means, and perhaps their underlying undeclared ideology, are really the problematic matters of concern.

I do not mean to sound negative altogether. After all I have been part of that (communist) movement myself, and, for all its shortcomings, I must acknowledge it to be the source of much of my current knowledge, my realizations, my way of thinking, and my behavior (good or bad), including my idiosyncrasies. I do believe that they, the communists, still play a significant role in shaping society, which makes it all the more imperative not to spare them from an honest-to-goodness critique.



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ELECTION FOR REVOLUTION

The Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) has always looked down on elections. Historically, it has never regarded elections as viable vehicle for true social transformation. This explains why, for example, the CPP took on the policy to boycott the snap election called by President Ferdinand Marcos to take place in February 1986. Some of its cadres, however, opposed the boycott position, because for them participating in an electoral exercise – even if it would not bring about revolutionary change – could bring about tactical gains. The boycott position prevailed, nevertheless; thus, consequently, the national democratic movement found itself totally isolated from the public that saw the snap election as an opportunity to get rid of the dictatorship through what it considered as viable and not-very-turbulent means.

With the toppling of Marcos and the ascendance to power of President Corazon Aquino, the nat-dem movement tried to recover from the slump. They then decided to no longer snub elections and so experimented on electoral participation in the senatorial elections of 1987 through the political party they had set up, the *Partido ng Bayan* (PnB). They were decidedly routed in those elections. Not one of the seven senatorial candidates of the nat-dems came even close to being significantly counted.

Finally, the nat-dems were able to taste electoral victory through the Party List system some time later. Their party list organization, *Bayan Muna*, was able to win seats at the House of Representatives, and it has managed so well to win in succeeding elections in the 2000s such that the NDs were able to increase the number of their party list organizations in Congress beyond *Bayan Muna* to new and specific ND sectoral formations, like *Gabriela*, *Kabataan*, *Anak-Papis*, *Migrante*, and ACT. By 2010 they were able to muster enough confidence to try and field senatorial candidates anew.

It was then that their credibility and image got another beating. By 2010 President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo had become so extremely unpopular such that the question simply became: Who among the opposition candidates would most likely win against those endorsed by the Arroyo administration? That was the time Benigno



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“Noynoy” Aquino III emerged as the most viable presidential candidate, especially as a big wave of sympathy votes for him was widely expected in the elections that were to take place shortly after the death of his mother, former President Corazon Aquino.

The NDs, however, were unable to forge an alliance with Noynoy’s camp. They then decided to side with Manny Villar instead. Villar, running for president as well, accepted into his senatorial slate two ND candidates, Satur Ocampo and Liza Maza. Many, including the media and political observers, were bewildered by such unholy alliance. Rina Jimenez David wrote in her column:

... I was kind of taken aback that Bayan Muna’s Satur Ocampo and Liza Maza chose to run in the senatorial lineup of Manny Villar, not previously known as a supporter of progressive causes.”³

One of those who strongly defended the position was Kabataan Party List representative Raymond Palatin who wrote thus:

“But why Villar? Why not Noynoy?”

“The analysis of the left about the character of the Philippine political party system has not changed. The left continues to assert that politics in the country is dominated by the traditional elite. Villar and Noynoy are both members of the ruling class. If the left will endorse one of them, it should be based on the willingness of the candidate to promote a reform agenda. It was Villar who took the time to draft a document in response to the challenge of leftist groups to advance a people’s agenda in 2010. It was Villar who invited Ocampo and Maza to join his senatorial lineup as adopted candidates. Noynoy was never interested in seeking the support of the left.”⁴

³Philippine Daily Inquirer (18 July 2010).

⁴ Raymond Palatin, “Misunderestimating the Philippine Left,” in <http://bulatlat.com/main/2010/01/04/misunderestimating-the-philippine-left/> (accessed 08.07.2014).



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In short, to the Nat-dems' mind, all traditional politicians are the same, and it was just a question of who would be willing enough to join hands with them or would risk enough to be publicly perceived as collaborating with them. Not everyone bought this argument, however, not even their erstwhile loyal allies. US-based writer Ninotchka Rosca, for one, (she wrote Jose Maria Sison's biography and was one of the movement's staunchest defenders) was unimpressed:

[I]t had been painful watching her [Liza Maza] try to deal with the gross impositions of the Villar campaign, from Marcos to the Kembot Girls and the self-back-slapping of that lurid guy Willie whatshisname. As painful as watching guerrillas try to give substance to the 'failure-of-elections' hysteria – a Plan B, I suppose, in case the Villar alliance crashed and burned, a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy..."⁵

I myself could not imagine how, for example, NPA guerrillas campaigned during that election period. How did they carry Villar as their candidate, him who was hounded by accusations of grabbing lands from indigenous peoples and raking windfall profits from infrastructure projects he undertook from his pork barrel as legislator? How, for example, did the NPAs conduct themselves in Davao, where Mayor Duterte (their ally) supported President Noynoy Aquino?

Even if Villar had won, the justification would have still been hard for many to swallow. More than Rina David's characterization of him as "not being a known supporter of progressive causes," the glaring fact was that the man was "reactionary through and through," to borrow the movement's own phraseology in neatly categorizing such a political persona.

⁵ Ninotchka Rosca, "Post-Election Burp," in <http://ninotchkarosca.blogspot.com/2010/05/post-election-burp.html> (accessed 08.07.2014).



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The irony, however, was that Villar was resoundingly defeated, anyway. The tactical alliance was all for naught. This time, however, the NDs seemed to have learned their lessons, and so for the next senatorial election of 2012 they have decided to focus their energies on a single senatorial candidate, Teddy Casiño. He possesses the requisite charm and youthful deportment that promise to fetch votes. He is an old, old friend of mine but his politics and my politics differed radically from one another. His party still continues to flirt with possible alliances, chiefly with Vice President Jejomar Binay's UNA.

THE FAR-LEFT AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Historically, the issue of human rights has significantly figured in revolutionaries' struggle for radical social change. When there is dissent or civil strife, violations of human rights are likely to be on the increase. Activists and revolutionaries are often on the receiving end of the State's brutal and violent acts of repression. Thus, from their historical experience, activists are completely justified when they raise a howl for every incidence of human rights violation. Their own historical experience validates the fundamental principle that torture, enforced disappearance, and summary executions have no place in society and every instance of violation must be exposed and condemned.

The problem arises when they get to see only the violations committed by one side, and refuse to acknowledge that violations are also committed by them. Human rights advocacy cannot be a partisan exercise; otherwise its universal character is undermined.

On account of my personal experience of having been detained and tortured by my own comrades within the movement, as I have so written about extensively, it is understandable that I should feel strongly about this issue.

When I wrote *To Suffer thy Comrades: How the Revolution Decimated its Own*⁶ a decade ago now, I had no intention of forming an organization or advocacy group, let alone visiting old guerrilla camps to search for bodies of missing cadres purged by the Communist

⁶ Robert Garcia, *To Suffer thy Comrades: How the Revolution Decimated its Own* (Manila: Anvil, 2001).



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Party of the Philippines-New People's Army (CPP-NPA). However, that became, as it were, one of the "unintended consequences."

Perhaps it was inevitable.

The book was launched on December 10, 2001, Human Rights Day. The following year a woman lawyer contacted me. She said she read Eric Caruncho's review of my book in a February 2002 issue of the Sunday Inquirer Magazine. According to her, the things I revealed got her thinking, "My brother was an activist too, and he was also declared missing in 1984. He was one of the so-called 'Lakbayani Four'. Could it be that he was also a victim of this so-called anti-infiltration purge of the CPP-NPA?"

The "Lakbayani Four" (a name created from a play with words that roughly translates to: the Four Lakbayan Heroes) were activists who suddenly disappeared in the middle of a massive rally, called "Lakbayan" (people's march), against Marcos in Southern Tagalog. Indignation and protest actions were subsequently held to condemn the military (which was largely assumed to be responsible for their abduction and disappearance) and demand that they surface the four. It later turned out that the four were indeed arrested, tortured, and executed, but not by the military but by the CPP-NPA. The four had been suspected of being spies or "deep-penetration agents" (DPAs). This fact was kept under wraps for a long time.

The woman lawyer's worst fears were confirmed, needless to say.

There were other countless cases of this sort, building up to the realization of a certain need: that somehow people must come together and find ways to deal with this issue of the purge, which the movement had for so long denied carrying out and swept under the rug with arrogant impunity. I must insist it was as much a human rights concern as those violations committed by the military. The purge included activists who simply disappeared, thus leaving their families without any clue about their fate and whereabouts for so many years, or who survived but were left so traumatized that they needed therapy for much of the scant and meager life left in them, or whose orphans grew up not knowing where in some jungle or mountain their parents' mangled remains could have been dumped, as was the case with the children of couple Luz and Lando Laguna. We eventually found their remains in one of our "missions."



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REMAINS TO BE SEEN

On that particular mission it was the remains of Luz “Neneng” Añasco-Laguna that we first managed to locate. The skeleton, buried six feet beneath the porous mountain soil of Cebu, bore all the tell-tale signs of torture and suffering that by then we had already learned to expect. We were, however, quite unprepared for the distress of having to find a huge piece of rock lodged on top of her body. Immediately, it indicated to us the final stroke of cruelty dealt on her by her executioners.

Shortly thereafter, we found the remains of Herculano “Lando” Laguna, Luz’s husband. Buried some 20 meters from his wife’s gravesite, Lando’s skeletal remains bore the same lurid signs, particularly the strange signature rock that crushed his head and ribs.

That was September 11, 2006. It was the third day of our mission to search for the bodies buried deep in the mountains of Sitio Amaga, Barangay Bonbon, Cebu City. We came with adequate information for the search as we were accompanied by experts. Thus, our mission was relatively easier to undertake.

We had done a preliminary visit of the area a month before we did the exhumation of the bodies. With us on the team were Stella of the Freedom from Debt Coalition in Cebu and Helen Caraca of the Families of Victims of Involuntary Disappearances (FIND). Helen was an old hand, so to speak, in this kind of work, a forensic assistant who had had training and experience in the exhumation of *desaparecidos*’ remains. Before the actual exhumation, we made an initial climb to mark the exact site indicated to us by our informant. The climb proved tougher than the exhumation itself. Our local guide picked a complicated route that was covered with thick shrubbery. Perhaps he was not quite trusting of us yet and must have assumed that his safety and security lay in his mastery of the local terrain. I sustained a few scratches on my legs on the way up, though none was particularly life-threatening. The site that we finally marked was a steep slope that was planted to an upland corn variety. It rained when we reached the top. Drenched as we were, the trail became muddy and slippery. And so we had to traverse the route on our bare feet. Even as the mud caked on our feet, it was not really an



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unpleasant experience altogether. It was actually sort of soothing and, looking back, I can say it even made for a cathartic experience.

Helen scooped up some soil from the spot and marked it with a stick. “Why don’t we start digging now and try to find if the remains are indeed here? That would save the team a lot of time and effort.”

I considered her suggestion for a moment. Then I replied, “No, let’s just wait for the rest of the forensic team and of the PATH contingent.” I decided that we needed to follow the procedures in this undertaking even as I could sense Helen’s eagerness to shovel away and find what we were looking for right away.

I first met Helen the year before, in November 2005, when we did our first exhumation in Barangay Pamutan, also in Cebu. We found three bodies then: those of the revolutionary couple Jessie and Nida Libre and youth activist Ben-Art Valmorira. The Libres were found locked in embrace in a single gravesite. We found Ben-Art’s remains much later, a few meters away. Among others, his hyoid bone in the neck area was shattered, indicating some brutal infliction prior to execution.

Helen and the other forensic assistants were the exemplar of patience and method. Using small trowels and bamboo sticks, they would meticulously dust the dirt off the remains with gentle strokes so as to avoid any damage to them (in stark contrast to the bulldozing backhoe method of more recent exhumations). When the remains had been lifted from under the soil, they would brush-clean the individual pieces of bones with water and handle each minute piece delicately.

Helen joined all our other exhumation missions such as in Fimagas, Dipolog, and finally in Bukidnon in June 2010. Bukidnon was to be her last mission. She succumbed to cancer a few months later. I cannot describe enough her great contribution to all our missions.

To go back to that mission I was earlier describing, it was just a half-day uphill trek towards the corn and banana fields in Sitio Amaga. As I said, the climb was not particularly difficult; however, many in our team were not in their best shape for the mountain trek and some – invariably weighed down by gout, nicotine, and sedentary urban living – were simply huffing, puffing and cursing along the way.



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“Did I really sign up for this?” wondered Hera Sanchez of Probe Productions who seemed, by apparent indications, was one of the fitter ones. She was with her production crew to cover what promised to be an important, dramatic find.

I myself had it relatively easier this time, given the gentler terrain. I also actually had lots of “practice” negotiating killer terrains before, in the mountains of Bondoc Peninsula and Sierra Madre. (Just don’t have me navigate or lead the way; with my hopelessly undeveloped spatial skills, we’d all be lost in no time.)

Assisting us in the laborious and intricate task of finding and exhuming remains were scientists led by renowned forensic anthropologist, Prof. Jerome Bailen and medical forensic expert, Dr. Benito Molino.

THE FORENSIC EXPERTS

Dr. Molino was a veteran in this line of work, having worked with FIND in numerous exhumations for the past several years. Similarly, Doc Ben was a field-work type of an expert, one who had developed a sense for the signs of the environment: he knew the look of “disturbed” soil, the kind of questions to ask informants – he had the sense of knowing whether or not his informants were forthcoming in their responses. He had helped exhume remains of many victims of enforced disappearances committed by the military.

He had also exhumed remains of victims of the NPA; thus, he had come to realize that brutality was not a monopoly of the State and its agents. As he hovered around the freshly-dug gravesite of Luz Laguna, he began describing what was inflicted on the body of a victim of the CPP-NPA’s interrogation method, of one suspected of having been an enemy agent. His calm, clinical demeanor made the process even more chilling.

“We noticed a horizontal cut,” Molino said as he pointed towards Luz’ ribcage. “The knife hit the eighth rib at the back going up and in front. Because of the direction, the knife could have also pierced the heart... We also saw round fractures that indicated bullet injuries.... She was pushed to the grave, landing on the ground face down... The right side of the temporal bone and the left side of the face



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were crushed by this boulder which damaged her vertebra from the neck to the back near the waist...”

Small and reed thin, Prof. Bailen sported longish white hair and a perennial smoking pipe like nobody else did on the halls of UP or on the camps in the mountains. With his Ilocano-accented King’s English, he articulated his musings with the air of a no-nonsense, German academic.

“This was a vicious death... there was an element of malice. So much rage, so much hatred and so much aggression are indicated,” Prof. Bailen sighed as he mused over the extraordinary cruelty inflicted on the couple. Then his erudition plumbed deeper as he drew in from his pipe. “The killing of humans is a highly symbolic act representing personal relationships, group loyalties betrayed or imagined to have been betrayed.”

And then in the next instance, Prof. Bailen would turn to his forensic student protégé and exclaim, “@#%! *Ukin-nam*, Richard, wake-up! It’s already high noon!” Or, from out of the blue he would ask, “Bobby, why did we eat hogwash?” as indeed some of our food at the exhumation site, at certain times, was not easy to describe, much less ingest. But Prof. Bailen’s often funny outbursts kept us in high spirits as we spent days in the mountains.

THE UNEXPECTED PATH

I had had an intimate knowledge of that kind of “hatred, rage and aggression” Prof. Bailen was describing, having survived a similar CPP-NPA purge in Southern Tagalog in 1988. The entire episode made for a mind-numbing experience but when I started reconstructing the details of it almost a decade later, images came back to me as vivid as when it happened. In the attempt to chronicle that experience, I sought closure; instead I opened a can of worms. Like the sister of one of the Lakbayani martyrs, many comrades or their relatives started to seek me out and to ask about the whereabouts of their missing kin or propose ways to “deal with” or “come to terms” with this issue.



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Having to form a group became the next logical step, which included choosing a name for it.

Following the Filipino penchant for creative titling with the use of double entendre⁶ acronyms, we chose a name that would quite literally capture what we were and what we wanted as a group: Peace Advocates for Truth, Healing and Justice, or PATH. (Don't look for where the J could be squeezed; we could not find it, either.) We did get considerable support and good wishes when we began. However, we were not wanting in detractors, either.

"Peace Advocates for Truth, Justice and Healing (PATH) is not worthy of the generalities in its verbose name," declared Fidel Agcaoili, Chairperson of National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP) Human Rights Committee.⁷

"The PATH is an imperialist-funded NGO, with the sole obsession and objective to discredit and destroy the CPP and the revolutionary mass movement of the Filipino people for national liberation and democracy against US imperialism, bureaucrat capitalism...."

Agcaoili further claimed that we favored "the preservation of US imperialist domination and the domestic ruling system of big compradors and landlords..."⁸

Talk about verbosity.

Agcaoili, however, was completely mistaken. Yes, some of us liked such colonial stuff like jazz and rock & roll. We sometimes wore suits, too, although some of us, like me, were more partial to Levi's. But we were not an "imperialist-funded NGO" even as we would welcome funds from "imperialists" (or, for that matter, from bureaucrat-capitalists, *trapos*, or party list Congressmen.) We were not selective. Our group had many objectives, and our members did have their individual "obsessions" (some of them may even be too 'obscene' to mention), but none among these objectives was to discredit, much less "destroy," a 40-year old movement that boasted of having thousands of high-powered weapons.

⁷ Fidel Agcaoili, "Reply to the Lies of PATH Against the Philippine Revolutionary Forces," in <http://www.ndfp.net/web2014/index.php/news/statements/463-reply-to-the-lies-of-path-against-philippine-revolutionary-forces> (accessed 08.07.2014).

⁸ Ibid.



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But seriously, we did take exception to the labeling, especially the kind coming from the leadership of the movement that had committed (and admitted committing) these deadly purges.

The Party further claimed that it had already done everything that needed to be done to fix the damage created by these purges, such as informing all the victims' families and apologizing for the mistake.

Had they, really?

In 2005, journalist Earl Parreno was able to track down one of the children of victims of the communist purge, Jesse Marlowe "Weng" Libre, in Davao. Weng was then teaching at St. Peter's College in Toril. He also preoccupied himself with other things, such as training in boxing and martial arts. He lifted weights. He prepared himself physically and mentally for that opportunity in the future when he could finally avenge the murder of his parents. He grew up harboring deep hatred against the military, the supposed perpetrators, as he was told so by his adoptive aunts and his comrades in the movement. Yes, they became his comrades, because in college they made him the Chair of *Anakbayan*, a youth organization affiliated with the radical left.

Thus, when Weng finally learned of the earth-shaking truth, he was aghast and incredulous. It was a complete shock. Earl told him, however, that he needed not believe this revelation at once, or at all. After all we at PATH were virtually strangers to him as yet, suddenly appearing in his life with information that could overturn his personal history as he knew it and his view of reality. Earl suggested he could do his own research first, ask around, Google our backgrounds, whatever. More importantly, perhaps he could join the exhumations we were then planning to undertake.

Thus, on September 2005, our first exhumation in Barangay Pamutan in Cebu yielded the remains of Weng's parents, Jess and Nida Libre, plus those of youth activist Ben-Art Valmorira. After the completion of all requirements of the mission, including laboratory work, Weng personally brought his parents' remains back to his hometown in Iligan. From then on, he had been a most reliable hand in subsequent missions. He proved in fact to be a natural, demonstrating keen observation skills and attention to details on the field.



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At PATH today – with Weng, Earl, the forensic doctors and their dependable assistants, our volunteers and our diggers – we continue to search for the bodies. We have so far found nine, which is not anywhere near the total number of people killed during the purges (estimated to be from 2,000 to 3,000). Also, with each new find we become more painfully aware of the improbability for us to find all, or even at least those we knew. The entire family of Jose Marie “Kristo” Enriquez, for example, has been most active in the search for Kristo’s remains. A well-respected young activist from the University of the Philippines, Kristo disappeared on July 27, 1988. The Party admitted that he had been falsely accused of being a DPA during the anti-infiltration campaign it dubbed Olympia. He died in the course of interrogation – of what exactly remains a mystery. The accounts only differ in degrees of severity. All attempts by Kristo’s family to locate his remains have led to dead-ends.

There are still thousands, like Kristo, all over the Philippines, crying, as it were, from the depths to be found. We at PATH have tried to start the process of filling this gap, and have shown that positive results are possible, though not altogether assured. We believed then as we believe now that a far bigger, more encompassing, more thorough undertaking is needed if all the victims of this injustice – still barely considered by the human rights community as a worthy undertaking – are finally to be given their due. There has to be some kind of formal and institutionalized project to exhume the remains, identify and name all the victims, and thus recognize them. Personally, I think this is possible and doable under the current dispensation, but more probable and feasible if a successful peace negotiation with the rebels is finally concluded.

THE PEACE QUESTION

This is why we look at the renewed peace talks between the government and the CPP-NPA-NDF with high hopes. It is difficult to find real closure if the insurgency continues to wage its war: formal, institutional work is disrupted; propaganda is injected into human rights initiatives; messages get confused. In the experience of other countries like El Salvador and Guatemala, a thoroughgoing



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investigation of atrocities committed by both sides of the armed conflict was made possible only after a successful peace settlement. Their truth commissions have become viable vehicles for accountability, redress, and closure. The same can be done here.

That, however, remains a specter in the distant horizon. Alex Padilla, the chief negotiator, cannot help but scratch his head over the mind-numbing machinations by war-fixated quarters to derail the talks and justify continued fighting. Be that as it may, as they navigate the tedious process towards peace, we will just have to continue doing our work the tedious way ourselves – trekking mountains with our backpacks, tents, and portable stoves, following every lead for one body at a time, inch by inch. Our team may be one person less now with Helen gone, but the legacy of her method lives on. Our trowels have not rusted yet and the irascible Prof. Bailen, with his billowing white hair *a la* Gandalf still smoking away on his pipe and perhaps needing the exercise, is yet again asking impatiently, “Goddamit *lakay, anubayan?! When is the next hike happening?*”

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