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Midlife Crisis of the Philippine Red Movement

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The New People's Army remains a potent threat to Philippine national security. The communist rebels perpetrated more than two-thirds of the attacks against government forces and private companies that took place in the Philippines in the first quarter of 2008. But the communist movement's ability to survive is increasingly in doubt.

ON 29 MARCH 2008, the New People's Army (NPA) celebrated its 39th anniversary. This achievement was met with military offensives from the Government of the Philippines. The NPA has carried out more than 25 attacks against government forces and private companies since the beginning of this year. This should not come as a surprise since the revolutionary movement wants to increase its force, although it has found itself confronted with evolving societal conditions that challenge its survival.

Running, not holding

One of the most critical factors for the NPA's longevity is the topography of the Philippines. The mountainous archipelago is ideal for guerrilla warfare; it provides a haven for communist rebels to hide, rest, and train. They are able to utilize the vast land to deploy forces in areas where they have maximum advantage. Taking advantage of this has been an explicit policy since 1974 when the party published its monograph, 'Specific Characteristics of Our People's War'.

However, this advantage has not proven decisive. Then, as now, the movement's infrastructure has to contend with the shifting and uneven development of guerrilla bases across the islands and mountain ranges. Unlike the Moro secessionist forces in Mindanao, the NPA has been unable to control territory long enough to build training camps, let alone build their alternative government. The rebels have remained in the perpetual state of motion, never being able to secure an area safe from government forces. The Armed Forces of the Philippines are regularly able to overrun guerrilla camps. Given the Arroyo administration's vow to crush the insurgency before her term ends in 2010, this situation should worsen for the NPA.

Failure to change with society

One reason the NPA may have a difficult future ahead is that the bases for their revolution are no longer viable. The communist-led agrarian revolution of the 1960s and 1970s has changed. While agriculture remains an economic staple in the Philippines, service and industrial sectors have also contributed to the growth of the country in terms of the share of the labour force and gross domestic product. The NPA and its political allies have failed to adjust to this changing economic reality.

The NPA continues to cast its arguments in the language of its revolutionary past, such as identifying feudal bondage as the critical problem. The old tenancy style of farming, where as much as 70 percent of produce goes to the landowner and 30 percent to the tenant, is shifting. Wage labour is becoming far more common in rural areas. The current reality for farmers is influenced by market forces such as the cost of fertilizers and insecticides and the selling price of farm products, rather than the feudalism of the past.

Furthermore, urbanization has spread to previously rural areas, raising the value of farmland and making it profitable for farmers to sell. This process has been accelerated with the growth of domestic retirement funds and foreign remittances. Domestic investments have turned the once peasant filled countryside into rustic tourist resorts, golf courses and housing estates for the new middle class.

Such societal changes are not helpful for a revolution based on the rural peasantry. The NPA has attempted to offset the diminishing rural support base by infiltrating urban areas, and attempting to reach out to the increasing number of urban poor by revitalizing its urban-based legal fronts. Thus far, the efforts have been met with only limited success.

The diminished popular base has been matched by a decrease in international support for the NPA. The international and domestic post-Cold War environment is unsympathetic to the cause and has made efforts to import arms an exercise in futility. The NPA now has to rely on arms seized from army and police armouries during raids, and from soldiers during ambushes. The inability to arm makes it difficult for the NPA to sustain large numbers of fighters.

The NPA leadership is in crisis. Diminishing resources, war fatigue, the unpopularity of irregular means to capture state power, and the fundamental shift in society suggest a need for the NPA leadership to rethink its overall strategy of armed struggle. The NPA will either have to surrender or persuade the government to go back to the negotiating table and sign a peace deal that allows the rebel movement to transition into a non-violent political movement.

Criminal gang or political movement?

A critical element in the survival of the NPA has been its ability to accumulate financial resources through illegal means. It has been successful in extorting “revolutionary taxes” from firms and companies legally engaged in transportation and telecommunications, and from illegal businesses such as illegal logging and gold panning. To compel payment from firms, the NPA has not been reluctant to use harassment and violence, including burning transportation and other equipment, and blasting of cellular towers.

The rebels also distort the political process. During elections, they collect “fees” from political candidates to be allowed to campaign in rural areas, thus causing another problem in an already dysfunctional electoral system. The Communist Party of Philippines’ anniversary call to build more guerrilla fronts in 173 congressional districts appears particularly skewed towards collection of more fees, rather than to win political office. CCP leaders have thwarted community initiatives unless these were done with their consent, and with their sharing in part of the proceeds. Their fundraising perhaps makes sense if they are indeed fighting a war, as armies need money. But if the struggle has changed,

or lost its relevance, is the extortion for political or personal gain?

The NPA does not engage in indiscriminate bombing operations. But civilians have been killed in the crossfire of operations. The NPA is also not shy about using violence to coerce support, and enforce its “law”. “Revolutionary Courts” impose punishment beatings, and worse, on those who run afoul of the organization. This activity further undermines its already diminishing support base.

Winning Hearts and Minds

The NPA has been able to pose a formidable challenge to the Philippine government for 39 years by exploiting government and societal failings. Corruption, incompetence, human rights violations and lack of social justice have all provided a fertile ground for the NPA in its propaganda and recruitment campaigns.

The Government of the Philippines now has an opportunity to reverse this situation if it fully implements a comprehensive counter-insurgency programme. A holistic approach in countering the NPA presence in urban and rural areas must be adopted. The government seems to recognize the need to address the legitimate grievances of the population, while at the same time trusting communities sufficiently to give them a role in defending themselves. The fight needs more than just military force, as the socio-political element is critical. Seeking to win hearts and minds and stomachs, the government has started to focus on development projects. This must continue.

The NPA has reached middle age. But if the Government of the Philippines is successful with its new strategy, the NPA will not successfully reach retirement age.

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