

Philippines: A history of colonialism and oppression

Fri, 24/04/2009 - 20:04

Josh Davies looks at the history of the Philippines, from its domination by the Spanish to its present day Maoist insurgency

The modern history of the Philippines has been defined by the domination of outside powers and resistance to them. The Philippines was a formal colony of Spain until 1899 and then de facto a colony of the US until the Second World War. Thereafter it suffered under semi-colonial domination - formally independent but with regimes that did the every bidding of the US. Nevertheless resistance to imperialism and its Filipino agents has been a prevalent feature of life. Sometimes this has taken the form of an armed struggle against military occupation, at other times as a mass movement against governments and regimes complicit in the domination of the Philippines. It is the question of how these resistance movements fight and for what aims that has shaped the course of events in the 20th century and will shape them in the years to come.

From Colonialism to Imperialism

The United States has exercised political and economic domination over the Philippines since the defeat of Spanish colonialism in 1899. Twice it has posed as the liberator of the Philippines from imperialist powers, first from Spain then from Japanese occupation in the Second World War, and both times it followed the same pattern: side with Filipinos who want to fight for independence, after victory take control of the country and then, when US economic domination been established and a pliable political tool has been found, gradually give back formal independence.

After posing as allies with Filipinos against Spain the US fought against the independence of the Philippines. In 1901 it captured General Emilio Aguinaldo who had been a leader in the struggle for independence and had declared independence from Spain. Resistance against the American occupation was widespread though gradually it got pushed back and by the middle of the 1910s was defeated. After the consolidation of American power in the Philippines there followed a period where the US gradually gave power to local institutions, although even after 1935 and the setting up of the Filipino Commonwealth (who's constitution was drafted and approved by the US government) the US maintained naval bases in the area as well as complete control over Filipino foreign policy. This was a shift from colony to semi-colony, the US had stopped ruling through governor-generals but had enshrined a political system in the Philippines that would continue to allow it economic dominance and allow it to use the Philippines as a military base against its rivals in Asia in pursuit of its imperial ambitions.

The US's actions during and after the Japanese occupation further demonstrated its use of the country as a pawn for use against other powers (the USSR and China) and its determination to establish a semi-colonial relationship and political system to carry it out. After the Japanese invasion in 1941, and during the fight between US and Japanese imperialism over the islands, the Communist Party of the Philippines

(PKP) set up a military organisation called the Hukbalahap which boasted tens of thousands of guerrilla fighters and was key to the defeat of the Japanese in central Luzon (the biggest and most economically and politically important island in the Philippines).

After the war the US granted independence to the country. This independence however was purely formal: the US got a 99 year lease on naval and military bases in the country, a trade agreement to facilitate US exploitation was the precondition for receiving aid for post-war reconstruction and in 1951 the Philippines and the US signed a "Mutual Defence Treaty" obliging it to support the US in war. The subservient relationship to the US was so total that the US High Commissioner Paul McNutt commented that the country was more dependent on US markets than any of the US states.

Immediately after the war the PKP formed a Democratic Alliance between itself and various bourgeois groupings and supported Sergio Osmeña and the Nacionalista party in the 1946 elections. It hoped to participate in a popular front government, such as the French and Italian CPs took part in in the first two years after the war. But the hopes of Stalin for a prolongation of the alliance with the USA were confounded as his former allies tried to reverse the gains Communist Parties had made in Europe and the Far East. In 1946-7 the USA and its British allies launched the Cold War. This meant ousting CPs from government and turning from collaboration to repression. In the Philippines the victor in the 1946 elections, Manuel Roxas and the Liberal Party, were urged by their US masters, to turn on the PKP and to subjecting the broader labour movement to severe measures. The party, now (correctly enough) characterised the Philippines government as a continuation of imperialist domination. In 1948 it was declared illegal and the Hukbalahap fought a prolonged insurgency till 1954, until its defeat by the Army, thanks to massive aid from the US.

The Marcos Dictatorship

From 1972-1986 the Philippines was under the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos. He was originally elected president in 1965 and started out with a programme of public works investments. However the ruling class in the country at this time was split, many seeing Marcos as too left wing. In addition Marcos embezzled huge amounts of money, which brought further economic and political instability to the country. In 1968 the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) was formed which waged an armed fight for independence for the Muslim south (who had suffered under Spanish colonialism, had been a bastion of resistance against the US until 1913 and suffered discrimination in Filipino society) and in 1969 the Maoist split from the PKP (the CPP) formed the New People's Army to conduct a "people's war". The combination of a weakening economy, growing political instability and the weakening of Marcos's power led him to declare a state of martial law in 1972 under the pretext of increasing lawlessness and the threat of communist insurgency (although the Maoists were small at this time, one of the effects of Marcos's dictatorship was that thousands of people joined them). The US was initially a supporter of Marcos, he was vehemently anti-communist and allowed the US to keep their military bases. A decade of strong economic growth in the 1970s also protected Marcos's relationship with the US.

By the mid-1980s Marcos's regime looked weak and he had lost US backing. A sharp recession in 1984-85 saw the economy declining by around 10 per cent. In addition Marcos's regime was becoming increasingly unstable, in 1981 under pressure from the Catholic Church Marcos lifted martial law (whilst keeping a lot of power for his regime), in 1983 opposition leader Ninoy Aquino was assassinated and in 1986 Marcos's attempts to rig the Presidential election and steal the victory from Aquino's widow Corazon proved the final straw. Massive demonstrations of millions of people took place on the EDSA highway, sections of the military revolted, the US abandoned its support for Marcos and the regime was finished.

The Two "People Power Revolutions"

The huge popular revolt, which together with military rebellions, brought down the Marcos regime has come to be known as the "People Power Revolution". Whilst Aquino's presidency did include many progressive moves including some agrarian reform, the granting of autonomy to some of the Moro areas in Mindanao, the removal of US bases her presidency only gave in to "People Power" insofar as this did not challenge the fundamental pillars of capitalist rule. For instance, the agrarian reform contained a get-out clause that allowed Aquino's own family as well as other big landowners to avoid redistributing their land. She failed too to break the power that the military had over politics, as can be seen in the several military coup attempts against her. Additionally whilst ending the presence of US military bases in the Philippines she remained in all else a strong ally of the US, paving the way for the expansion of US exploitation in the 1990s. The first "People Power Revolution" in 1986 did bring down Marcos but it failed to get rid of the economic and political system which gave rise to him. The most damning evidence of the failure of the 1986 struggle is the fact that in 2001 another "People Power Revolution" occurred. Not only is this damning because it was necessary, through the same tactics and political leadership it brought to power one of the Philippines most unpopular, pro-capitalist and pro-American presidents in its history.

Arroyo's Presidency

The "Second People Power Revolution" in January 2001 came after evidence emerged that president Joseph Estrada had embezzled hundreds of millions of Pesos from illegal gambling and tax money. There were moves in parliament to impeach him and huge demonstrations on the EDSA highway calling for Estrada's resignation and new elections. Millions of people were disillusioned with Estrada and the whole political system.

The levels of resistance had echoes of 1986. Unfortunately though the echoes went beyond the scale of protest, also parallel was the ability of sections of the ruling class to contain the mass movement and co-opt it to meet its own interests. The army and police withdrew support for Estrada, Estrada announced there would be new elections in which he would not stand. The next day, after a Supreme Court ruling which declared the presidency to be vacant, Estrada's vice-president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo assumed the Presidency unelected, after this the protests subsided - the Church and liberal organisations placated by Estrada's exit from power.

At first the US was wary of Arroyo, feeling that a mass movement had unseated one of its allies and many parts of the press condemned the events as "mob rule". But the curtailing of the struggle and the policies pursued by Arroyo soon put them at ease.

Arroyo has always been a staunch ally of US imperialism. In 1995 as a Senator she was partly responsible for passing a mining act which allowed for 100per cent foreign ownership of mines in the Philippines. She has recently said in public that she has given permission to several large electronics firms (electronics makes up a large part of Filipino exports) to pay half of the minimum wage to their workers. She supported the Iraq war and sent non-military personnel to aid the occupation until mass protests in 2005 after the kidnapping of several Filipinos in Iraq forced her to pull out. In addition her government was responsible for transferring to the US embassy an American soldier convicted of raping a Filipino woman in an event that sparked demonstrations against the government's close ties with the US and Arroyo's refusal to repeal the Visiting Forces Agreement that protected the US troops from Filipino law using the \$30 million Foreign Military Financing and \$140 million Excess Defense Articles received by the government from the US as an excuse. There are also widespread reports that link her government to the murders of trade unionists and left-wing activists, over 70 trade unionists have been killed by death squads since 2001.

As well as continuing and deepening imperialist exploitation of the Philippines Arroyo has also continued the traditions of corruption and curtailment of civil liberties that so many of the country's rulers have carried

out. In 2004, three years after assuming the presidency, Arroyo finally allowed elections. However, video evidence emerged of her asking election officials to increase her votes (this sparked massive protests but nothing on the scale of 2001). In 2005 she issued a decree saying that all government officials would have to get presidential permission to speak at independent inquiries. In the same year she instituted a policy of pre-emptively repressing demonstrations that had no permits. From February 24th to March 3rd 2006 she declared a state of emergency under the far-fetched pretext of a coup attempt that was going to be carried out by communists, sections of the military, fascists and anarchists - you know a Filipino president is unpopular when she copies Marcos's tricks!

The Struggle Today

The world economic crisis is already taking a toll on the Philippines and is likely to be a source of continuing social struggle. Eight of the top ten destinations for Filipino exports are now in recession and the government is already taking measures aimed at placing the burden of the recession onto the working class and the poor. In addition unemployment rates are going up with many electronics firms making big jobs cuts, official unemployment figures are 7.4 per cent although this figure includes people doing unpaid housework and street vendors and the actual figure is 27.9 per cent (according to Social Weather Stations). In addition, recession in countries with high numbers of Filipino migrant workers is also likely to have a damaging effect on the economy as remittances decrease. Whilst the Filipino economy is not in recession growth has fallen from 7.3 per cent in 2007 to 4.6 per cent in 2008 - this slowdown will no doubt deepen with the decline in exports. As the economic crisis continues a combination of cuts in wages and job losses will hit the working class hard.

Also coming up in 2010 are presidential elections. Constitutionally Arroyo isn't likely to stand. However should the ruling class decide that they want her in power there is the potential for the re-emergence of another "People Power" struggle against any attempts to prolong her unpopular presidency.

Whatever the struggles that emerge it will be vital that the lessons of past struggles are learned. The "People Power Revolutions" have all resulted in betrayals to the people that made them, resulting in the replacement of one pro-capitalist, pro-US politician with another and serving to entrench the strength of the military and corruption in Filipino politics. It may not seem that the strategy of mass peaceful demonstrations embodied in the "People Power" struggles has anything in common with the Maoists' strategy of "People's War" but it does. The Maoists, in their rejection of building mass movements are just as disengaging to the workers and poor as the leaders of the "People Power" movements, only the capitalists are cleverer in that they recognise that mass action (Aquino even called for strikes against Marcos in 1986) can change society.

When the next mass movement erupts it is essential that a clear break is made with the politics and the leadership of the next Arroyo or the next set of disgruntled army officers. A movement must be built that seeks to mobilise the workers and poor not for someone else's interests but for their own, there must not be another Arroyo. Instead of relying on the corrupt capitalist democratic facade that is constantly offered the mass movement must create its own democracy of elected representatives in workplaces, farms and poor communities that can both organise the movement and lay the basis for a workers and peasants government. This means rejecting once and for all the Stalinist strategy of seeking popular fronts with ?progressive? bourgeois parties or populist politicians or generals. It also means a break with the Maoist two-stage revolution: first the National Democratic Revolution through a Protracted Peoples War and then the Socialist Revolution.

Certainly a revolutionary movement in the Phillipines, militant activity by the trade unions and the peasants? organisations will on a daily basis, face repression, landlords death squads, etc. Therefore it

cannot long remain a disarmed movement. Nevertheless the idea that the road to power is through a rural guerrilla war, either on the Maoist or Guevarist model, is also an illusion. The peoples power ?revolutions?, despite their fraudulent endings, at least demonstrated that it is the power of the masses, led by the working class that can overthrow governments and break the discipline of the army. But any revolutionary movement must always be able defend itself against repression, to rouse the masses against coup attempts, protect strikes or land occupations. For this militias rooted in the masses are necessary. But ?armed struggle? must be subordinated to the revolutionary struggle as a whole and every arena offered by bourgeois democracy utilized to mobilize the masses.

In order to do this it is necessary for workers in the Philippines to build their own revolutionary party capable of consistently fighting for this strategy and against all attempts whether in the guise of "democracy movements" or popular fronts against US imperialism to bring the working class and the poor under the wing of the capitalists. It must fight too against Maoism's dismissal of the mass working class movement as the primary agent of change in society and f against all forms of social oppression, building a strong women's movement and fighting for the right of the Moros in the south to self-determination up to and including secession if they so desire. In the context of a world capitalist crisis that is hitting the Philippines with ever greater severity, the development of a pre-revolutionary and even a revolutionary situation is extremely likely. The task of creating a revolutionary party is thus a burning necessity in the period ahead.

Source URL: <https://fifthinternational.org/content/philippines-history-colonialism-and-oppression>