

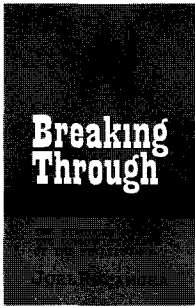
## Review Essay

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# The Antinomies of Petit-Bourgeois Radicalism

*Patricio Abinales*

*Breaking Through: The Struggle Within  
the Communist Party  
of the Philippines.*



BY JOEL ROCAMORA.  
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Jose Eliseo 'Joel' Rocamora came home in 1986 after spending over 10 years in political exile and helping oversee the work of the National Democratic Front's (NDF) international section branch. His return was a happy one. Exile was strenuous because of one's distance from the 'main arenas of struggle' and because international solidarity work was a complicated task. There were too many allies to deal with, too many ideological positions to contend against or make compromises with, and too many political nuances that demanded a certain diplomatic expertise and finesse. At least in the Philippines, the lines were clear: it was Marcos or the

revolution. Coming home thus afforded one the chance to reconnect with the struggle and reinvigorate a political disposition sustained only by hope and patience while being abroad.

His return, however, was also a difficult one, for the very arena that Rocamora wished to come back to had been profoundly altered. The NDF's mother organization, the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) was wracked by crises, marginalized by the Edsa uprising due to a 'tactical blunder' and its leadership facing widespread criticism from the ranks for its dogmatic decision-making practice. The CPP, so used to the polarized politics of martial law, was now confronted with the new state form that was the Aquino regime. All these spawned an unprecedented explosion of writings from the underground. Those who participated in them were cognizant of the crisis within the CPP but differed on the causes of the problem.

Disagreements ultimately led to factionalism and Rocamora was sucked

into the ideological struggle pitting defenders of the Maoist orthodoxy against splinter groups of anti-Maoist 'rejectionists' who were demanding a thorough assessment of 'where the party faltered'. Rocamora sided with the 'rejectionists' and was expelled from the NDF by the Maoist faction that gained control over the CPP in late 1992. Left out of the organization, Rocamora eventually drifted into the non-governmental organization (NGO) 'movement'. He linked up with the once-hated social democrats, the socialist coalition BISIG, as well as other expelled CPP cadres from the united front section of the CPP to try to re-engage a radical presence in Philippine politics.

#### **HAGIOGRAPHIC INTENTIONS**

It was in the midst of these internal struggles that the first chapters of *Breaking Through: The Struggle Within the Communist Party of the Philippines* took shape. As Rocamora writes in his introductory chapter:

This book started out as a project to try to understand the nature of the shift from the Marcos dictatorship to the Aquino regime, and to contribute to the debate that raged in 1986 about the implications of the shift for the Left. The flood of images, sights and sounds of re-encounter overwhelmed the project with the Philippines after ten years of exile in the United States. I could intellectualize about what I saw and heard, but in my guts I

was not comfortable with the conclusions I reached.... Several visits to the Philippines after I moved to Amsterdam only deepened my unease. I suspected that its roots could be traced back to this movement that I had supported with more than half of my adult life, so I set about writing about the NDF. I had already finished three chapters when the Reaffirm-Reject debate broke out. The debate sharpened issues. Returning to the Philippines to live and work forced me to go beyond supporting from a distance what others were doing here. (p. 6)

There were other reasons. Rocamora sees the book as an attempt 'to write a history of the national democratic movement that would honor its martyrs and keep faith with those, on all sides of the ideological divide, who continue to put their lives on the line. But I also wanted to critically examine the history that they lived.' (p. 1) While he wants the book to be 'up close and personal', he is also aware of its potential limitations: data deficiency, questions of security, and his own peculiar condition as a former exile. Thus Rocamora qualifies that while the book is a political history of the movement, it focuses 'on ideas because I work most easily with them'.

Finally, the book is an attempt to help clarify the CPP's internal crisis at a time when the threat of factionalism had become imminent, and as the movement tried to deal with the

demise of Eastern European socialism:

The book is at once celebration, expiation and exorcism. At a time of stunning setbacks for the Left in the Philippines and in most places in the world, I wanted to remind comrades that there is also much to celebrate from our past. For most of the last quarter of a century, the national democratic movement—our movement—has been in the forefront of the struggle against dictatorship and for democracy and justice. Our pantheon of heroes—Edgar Jopson, Lorena Barros, Lean Alejandro, Puri Pedro and many more, share a place of honor with Benigno Aquino Jr, Jose Diokno, and Lorenzo Tañada. Their supreme sacrifice has not been in vain. Much of what they shaped with their lives continues to reverberate in our present. (p. 2)

Rocamora's book is intended for a wide variety of audiences—from the cadres of the CPP and the national democratic movement, to allies of other Left groups, and, most of all, to those 'Filipinos who want to change, so they can understand what this highly public "inner party struggle" is all about. And for all audiences, so they can contribute to the new Left that is even now being shaped so that it is faithful to our movement's past and responsible for its future' (p. 4). Four chapters are thus devoted to the CPP's political

development while two others are contextual, focusing on the Aquino and Ramos governments and the opportunities and challenges that these regimes—as embodiments of a 'weak state'—had opened to the Left. The book concludes with Rocamora's reflection on the Left's future and a brief explanation as to why he, in his middle age, was still in the thick of the struggle.

*Breaking Through* is significant because it is one of the two self-evaluations by a CPP cadre that has seen print since the party split in the 1992. The other one is the gratuitously titled *Inside the Philippine Revolution: The Leader's View*, the quasi-autobiography of CPP eternal chairman Jose Ma Sison. Rocamora's *Breaking Through* is also important because it gives readers a glimpse into some of the views of cadres belonging to the 'rejectionist' camp. Rocamora tries to play holder of a big tent here by stating that the book is equally sensitive to the position of the Sison faction, but the book's bias against Filipino Maoists is clear. Listen to Rocamora:

Even as specific elements of the 'Maoist' line have been abandoned by the CPP through the years, some senior CPP leaders continue to believe in the inviolability of large parts of Marxist-Leninist doctrine as interpreted by Mao. This has made it difficult to integrate elements of the party's experience into its overall framework. (p. 23)

### **POLITICAL ELISIONS**

That said, the book is also notable for a fascinating number of elisions and its tendency to simplify the political development of a complex and dynamic revolutionary movement. The book gives an overview of the origins of the CPP, its ideological foundations (Maoism) and the break from the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP). It then examines the adaptations the CPP made under martial law (notably the application of Sison's remarkable essay, 'Specific Characteristics of our People's War', to revise the Maoist strategy conceived in 1968), and the experiences of revolution-building in urban areas like Manila and the Mindanao countryside. It then looks at the impact of the shift to the 'strategic counteroffensive', as the CPP tried to anticipate the last years of the Marcos dictatorship, albeit unsystematically. It closes with the split between the CPP and other anti-Marcos groups in the Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (BAYAN) First Congress, the fatal boycott of 1985 and the purges of anti-Sison cadres by the Filipino Ayatollah and his cabal after they seized the party leadership.

One immediately spots a number of missing elements in this story. One of this pertains to the author's own political work. There is nothing on the CPP's international solidarity work where Rocamora, beginning 1975, played a major role. Its exclusion may be justified because the revolution was ultimately a Filipino one. Yet, if one were to recall the initiatives of the first

CPP leaders to get arms from China, the frenetic effort to keep funds from sympathetic international foundations, support groups and NGOs flowing into party legal organizations, surely, outside help was as vital as the revolutionary taxes collected from the enlightened gentry and local supporters. External assistance particularly assumed major priority during the crucial shift to 'strategic counter-offensive' when the NPA saw the need to acquire more sophisticated weapons if the movement were to go into semi-conventional warfare. However, Rocamora does not talk about the complexities of international work where he is on more solid ground (15 years in exile), and this in itself is quite surprising.

Even if we limit ourselves to the realm of ideas (which Rocamora purports he is more comfortable with), international solidarity work remains an important episode in the CPP's history. In the 1970s and early 1980s, NDF-International cadres were involved in various ideological struggles that affected the Philippine revolution. Rocamora does not tell us, for example, of the splits in the United States over the priorities of Filipino-American radicals (solidarity to the Philippines, or concentrating primarily on reviving the revolution in the US), the views on the fall of the Gang of Four and 'capitalist restoration' in China, and the Sino-Vietnamese conflict in 1979. So vital were some problems that the CPP had to send emissaries and mediators to try to rein

in the warring parties and steer them back to their main responsibility of generating international support for the revolution.

There were also the tenacious fights against 'anti-Marcos reactionaries' in the United States over Filipino-American support for the anti-dictatorship struggle. That Rocamora et al, were not entirely successful in undermining the popularity of *politicos* like Raul Manglapus, Heherson Alvarez and Ernesto Maceda among Filipino-Americans suggested the existence of difficulties in united front work at the NDF's international section. Similar problems occurred when Rocamora moved to Europe. Rocamora chose not to tell us of the tensions that developed between the Philippine solidarity network which had a broader constituency (from French-Dutch Trotskyists to German Methodist ministers), and the incessant demands by CPP leaders that the party groups in Europe toe the 'correct line' regarding coalition-building (vanguardism, no deals with Trotskyists and other renegades, and the application of the *pera-bahay-prente* philosophy in dealing with allies). Why Rocamora is reticent in sharing with us this part of the CPP's history is one of the major puzzles of the book.

#### **MISSING CONJUNCTURES**

However, let us assume that the book wants to remain local and that external matters are secondary to its main concern—detailing what happened 'within the communist movement'. Alas, the elisions persist. There is

nothing on the 1974-1978 debates between the creative but also rambunctious CPP Manila-Rizal regional committee and the Party leadership despite the availability of many of the documents and related literature surrounding this debate (Gregg Jones' book, *Red Revolution*, for example). From an ideational perspective, the debates were important for they did not only manifest growing differences within the CPP over strategy (urban *vs* rural struggle; insurrectionism and electoral alliances *vs* protracted people's war and a worker-peasant 'basic' alliance), and tactics (limited electoral victories and democratic spaces *vs* gradual accumulation of armed capacities and slow constriction of the cities from the countryside), but also over ideological perspectives (Leninist and pro-proletarian *vs* Maoist and pro-peasant).

This is not just mere historical quibbling, for the debates of the 1970s prefigured the quarrels of the 1980s. Embedded in many of the documents that came out of the factional battles, what Rocamora talks about are invocations of historical precedents as well as realizations by many cadres that the adversities of the post-Marcos period were both the product of tactical oversights and the lack of an overall assessment of past experiences. Any serious reconsideration of the CPP's decline starting 1986, of which *Breaking Through* seems to suggest it is one, cannot ignore past conjunctures. We expected the book to be alert to this; instead, we are treated to an uncritical

and very inadequate account of the urban struggle, as if it were a smooth process that stalled only when the CPP failed to develop a coherent strategy in the 1980s.

We read nothing about the ideological impact of religious radicalism on the CPP. Rocamora credits church radicals for having provided a critical boost to the CPP during martial law, but says nothing about the extraordinary amalgamation of the theology of liberation and Filipino Maoism. This is again unfortunate because radical clerics like Edecio de la Torre, Karl Gaspar, Brendan Lovett and many others have written extensively on the issue. Scholars like Reynaldo Ileteo and the late Mario Bolasco have also excellently explained the importance of religion in the radicalization of the masses to us. Rocamora, who is concerned with ideas and their impact on the revolution, missed an opportunity to push these explanations to the next level, i.e. to show readers why the combination worked and how it came undone. For example, one wished that the book had examined the unusual affinity between Catholicism and Maoism for cut-and-dried moralism and a simplistic view of the world as seen through the former's catechisms and the latter's Basic Mass Course. Instead, like his opponents, Rocamora is content to view this interaction on utilitarian grounds: the Church providing cadres, institutional and financial support to a growing revolution (we are back to the instrumentalism of the CPP's *pera-bahay-prente* philosophy).

These two issues are particularly significant in the light of Rocamora's evaluation of the CPP in Mindanao. In the first place, Rocamora is wrong to say that 'new ideas on urban organizing came out of experiences outside Manila' (p. 27) since he seems to have forgotten that many of the second and third generation of CPP cadres sent to Mindanao received their training from or were exposed to the rebellious Manila-Rizal committee (Rocamora should recheck Ed Jopson's biography, for among the responsibilities Edjop had to attend to before leaving for Mindanao was to settle the Manila-Rizal case). While Nicaragua was the symbolic inspiration for the *welgang bayan* and the armed city partisan operations, the operational dynamics of the Mindanao revolution also had Manila-Rizal's imprint. Though this is an area that remains largely unexplored, one can still confidently argue that the connections are there.

Second, the active involvement of Church radicals in the Mindanao revolution (the Mindanao NDF had a strong clerical presence) showed the extent to which the union between radical theology and Filipino Maoism was a political success. The CPP in Mindanao became the fastest growing regional body of the revolution partly because these two ideologies—mutually contentious in other settings—found the proper blend. Yet, the swift decline of the Mindanao CPP could also be possibly explained by the antinomies of such ideological fusion where exhortation and emotional

appeals ('sloganeering') had displaced rigorous and well-thought explanations. That *Breaking Through* does not talk about this is quite unfortunate for an explanation could have gone far in making us understand just how indigenized the revolution had become.

#### **REWRITING THE REVOLUTION**

This superficial treatment of the revolutionary development before 1986 reflects a habit of top CPP cadres and ex-cadres to ignore the regional and local dynamics of the revolution (strange in the light of the invocations of 'Specific Characteristics of our People's War'). Rocamora shares with Sison a penchant to look at the revolution from above. Themes surrounding the history of the CPP were to be explained through documents coming mainly from the leadership. (It is ironic that a book which wants to give us an 'up close and personal' insight into the crisis of the revolution does not have a single interview of the author's comrades.) The discussion of the debates gives one a sense of warring factions, all holed up in Manila or the 'central guerrilla base' somewhere in northern Luzon, sending documents to each other. Outside party cells, guerrilla formations and legal organizations all over the Philippines floundered as they searched a way out of the movement's crisis.

There is very little on the experiences of regional and local units of the CPP. In the chapter on the debates, Mindanao cadre Marty Villalobos and the Manila-Rizal group are cited as a

way of showing differences in strategy and tactics. However, their views were more than that. Villalobos and the Manila cadres also represented different ideological currents within the party that emanated from their respective concrete local revolutionary experiences: Mindanao vis-à-vis the metropolitan capital. The book fails to appreciate the bottom-up dynamics because, for Rocamora, Villalobos and the Manila cadres were only significant in relation to the debates on strategy conducted at the top level. Had the book devoted considerable attention to these 'provincial affairs' and determined how they made an impact on the national revolution and its crisis, one would have appreciated the debates much better.

However, even if we look at how 'national' processes are treated, the book continues to show certain failings. Let us cite two examples. Rocamora notes that Sison's auto-hagiography is a good source of detail, and thus misses the opportunity to closely re-examine Sison's orthodoxy and the manner in which he tried to rewrite the CPP's history from his niche in Utrecht. This Maoist restoration and the Filipino Ayatollah's vain attempt to revise his hitherto marginal role throughout most of the CPP's development are found all over the chairman's book. *Breaking Through's* explanation of the BAYAN split, perhaps the second major mistake the CPP had made after the boycott decision, is also inadequate. Rocamora rehashes the old left-wing explanation of an American hand orchestrating the

moves of conservative and liberal forces during the BAYAN congress. He barely acknowledges the intense fights inside the ND movement between those who earlier brokered a deal with the non-CPP forces over apportionment of seats in the coalition leadership and those who insisted that the party must dominate BAYAN's leadership. The latter won and consequently ND forces overwhelmed the other forces with the strength of their 'votes'. The internal struggles among CPP cadres during the BAYAN congress already anticipated some of the issues that emerged out of the 1992 rift. One can excuse Rocamora because 'he was not there' at that time, but having returned to the Philippines a year later, he could have easily recreated the story of that internal struggle.

The best part of the book is Rocamora's critical evaluation of the political personality and philosophy of his rival Jose Ma Sison a.k.a. Armando Liwanag. Here Rocamora tries to explain why Sison was so earnest in showing not only revisionist linkages between his enemies, past and present, but also in putting into context the usual political bile Sison heaps on his opponents. His description of Sison's dilemma as 'the leader' of a party in crisis is one of the most trenchant dissections of 'the Chairman', revealing not only a familiarity of the latter's thinking, but also an intimate knowledge of a contemporary's persona.

If we start with Liwanag-past, with Amado Guerrero, we can imagine his

extreme anxiety over what would happen to this Party he founded. It had lost a lot of ground and stood to lose more because of intensifying disagreements at the very top of the organization. Debates over strategy had been raging since the early 1980s. The Politburo had been decimated by arrests and stalemated by dissension. The Soviet Union had collapsed, and socialists the world over were in a state of shock and disorientation. The CPP could be caught in the ideological claws of debates not only on strategy but now on the very nature of socialism and the Marxist-Leninist party itself. Finally, whatever Liwanag may have written or said for public consumption, he knew that neither conditions at home nor abroad were conducive to a revolutionary upsurge in the immediate future.

I leave the chapters on Aquino and Ramos to reviewers who are more competent in evaluating radical analyses of the 'weak' Philippine state. However, there is one thing worth noting in Rocamora's discussion of these regimes. It is the hint he gives readers as to the openings these regimes had provided radicals. Rocamora argues that political options have considerably expanded after the fall of the Marcos dictatorship and, in the era of resurrected 'cacique democracy', pathways hitherto unexplored by revolutionaries have opened, notably electoral and single-issue politics. Rocamora must be credited for being one of those who have consistently advocated for a more



ingenious use of these options by Filipino Leftists.

**EXCLUSIONS OF PRAXIS**

For all its promise to write about people's resistance and debating communists, the book is oddly petit-bourgeois in its perspective. The pantheon of dead revolutionary heroes mentioned in page 2, for example, does not include leaders of the Filipino proletariat. We do not see the names of prominent worker leaders such as Alex Boncayao, Felixberto Olalia (whose weakened condition was brought about by his imprisonment) or his son Rolando Olalia who was brutally assassinated by fascists. They all appear to be relegated to the category 'and many more'. Is this memory lapse or does it suggest that, for Rocamora, the revolution's proletarian component was not that determinate nor distinct? Does it hint that, deep inside, Rocamora admits that the CPP was ultimately presided over by children of the petit-bourgeois, himself and his rival Sison included? We can only speculate.

A predisposition toward petit-bourgeois sentimentalism is likewise noticeable in the book's last pages. When asked by his mother why he still continues 'to do political work', Rocamora's reply was peculiarly mawkish (and, shall we say, 'un-Marxist?') To wit: 'Because there are 30,000 child prostitutes in the Philippines' (p. 223). It is not capitalism and its inexorable march toward more progress and class marginalization, nor the State and its inherent violence, nor

the rapaciousness of the Filipino ruling bourgeoisie. All these actors and processes—in the final analysis—have been responsible for creating a system that, among other things, transforms children into prostitutes. It is this vague thing called 'society'. There is no glimpse of the CPP (and Marxist?) cadre or even the former academic schooled in 'concrete analysis of concrete conditions' in these concluding remarks.

More importantly, one notices this slide in the way Rocamora devotes space to various experiences of revolutionary praxis. There is a chapter on the united front which was Rocamora's forte. But there is little or no space given to the so-called 'mass' and 'sectoral' struggles that, in the first place, represented the essence of the revolution and perhaps also constituted part of the structural foundations of its crisis. There is no discussion of the transformation of the NPA as a political and a military organization. There is scarcely any reference to such vital components of the revolution as the struggles of the urban poor (the most vital 'sector' in urban area protests and working class resistance) and the Filipino proletariat (where is the *Kilusang Mayo Uno*?). These organizations of the masses are instead subsumed under the general category 'urban mass movement', as if suggesting that their class dynamics were only of secondary import.

The peasantry is overlooked despite the fact that this was only the second time in postwar Philippine

history that the peasantry had acquired a potent mobilizing capacity with the formation of the Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas. The student movement—the prime source of CPP cadres and NDF activists and, throughout most of the 1970s, the lifeblood of the revolution in the cities—is only mentioned in passing. Finally, Rocamora talks very little about the revolution's troublesome relationships with indigenous communities in the Cordilleras and Mindanao. The emergence of Conrado Balweg in the 1970s and the revolt of Nur Misuari and the Moro National Liberation Front are disregarded, despite the fact that had these actors not revolted—either as part of the NPA or parallel to it—the revolution's success in northern Luzon and Mindanao would have been limited.

Despite its lapses, the book remains a useful informative piece for novice observers of the CPP and its revolution, and a revelation to activists and fellow travelers for its attempt at personal catharsis. The latter, in itself,

is not unique if we go by the countless memoirs written by fallen or expelled communists since the advent of Stalinism. *Breaking Through* does not have the analytical sophistication and historical breadth of Leon Trotsky's *My Life*, the penetrating insights of Milovan Djilas' *Memoir of a Revolutionary*, and the extraordinary detail of Colonel Bui Tin's *Following Ho Chi Minh*. But it definitely belongs to the same genre. Within Filipino communism, however, this mode of memoir-writing and personalized reflections of past struggles is a novelty, in part because the phenomenon of large numbers of cadres expelled or separated from the CPP is a more recent experience. Given the penchant of cadres—active, expelled or splitting—to write (and Filipino communists do produce a lot of documents), one expects others to follow what Rocamora and Sison have started. If they do start working on their life stories, *Breaking Through*, alongside Sison's self-hagiography, are good guidebooks to have on the side.