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**Pragmatic Purism:
The Ideological Dedication of the Communist Party of the Philippines
after the Cold War**

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Abstract

Much of the current research on the 75-year-old communist insurgency in the Philippines suggests that the Communist Party of the Philippines's (CPP) efforts to overthrow the incumbent government stagnated after 1991. This view is based on two erroneous assumptions. The first stems from the once-popular 'end of history' view and is based on the idea that the end of the Cold War was synonymous with the collapse of global communism and thus with the decreasing decisiveness of insurgents that identify with this ideology. The second assumption is that the CPP's dedication to Maoism is as strong as the movement has claimed since it was founded in 1968. This study aims to challenge this limited and outdated view by examining the extent to which the Communist Party of the Philippines' dedication to Maoism and its accompanying military strategy has altered since 1991. It does so by making a distinction between the movement's public and private activities. Public activities are examined through the party's frequent and widely accessible publications. Private activities are represented by the ideas of founder and ideological leader Jose Maria Sison, who was interviewed for this research in March and December 2020. What became clear is that although the movement continued to affirm its strict ideological and strategical dedication after 1991 publicly, the private ideas during this period show an increasing tendency towards a more pragmatic, revisionist approach.

Keywords: *communism; Maoism; insurgency; Protracted People's War; revisionism; post-Cold War communism; end of history; Global South; The Philippines*

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A dear friend once introduced me to Sister Corita Kent's '10 Rules for Students and Teachers'. Among other things, Kent urges students to pull everything out of their teachers and fellow students and teachers to pull everything out of their students. I decided to live by these rules and believe that this has profoundly impacted my experiences as a student.

On 12 March 2020, one day after the coronavirus was officially declared a pandemic, I cycled home after what turned out to be the last 'offline' seminar of my bachelor's and I realized that following Kent's rules was to become a lot more challenging. It is therefore that when I look back at the past months, I am astounded by the inspiration and excitement that I felt during the entire course of this project. This would obviously not have been possible without the support of a handful of wonderful people, to whom I would like to extend my deepest gratitude.

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List of Abbreviations

AFP	Armed Forces of the Philippines; GRP's army
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CPP	Communist Party of the Philippines
GRP	Government of the Republic of the Philippines
KMT	Kuomintang; Chinese Nationalist Party under Chiang Kai-shek
NDF(P)	National Democratic Front (of the Philippines); CPP's united front
NPA	New People's Army; CPP's armed forces
PKP	Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas; the Filipino communist party that preceded the CPP
RA/RJ-split	The CPP's 1991 Reaffirmist-Rejectionist split
SPPW	Strategy of the Protracted People's War, as developed by Mao Tse-tung

Introduction

‘...if you have a little bomb, you are a terrorist, but if you have a big bomb, you are a peacemaker!’¹

Ever since its independence in 1946, the Philippines has been tormented by a conflict between the government and communist insurgents. Today, the most influential branch of the communist movement is led by the Maoist ‘Communist Party of the Philippines’ (CPP), founded in 1968 by Jose Maria Sison. During the conflict, which is considered the longest-running communist insurgency globally, around 40,000 combat-related deaths have been reported and 55,000 more people have been displaced.² The movement is believed to have peaked in the 1980s, when the infamous dictator Ferdinand Marcos ruled the country. After Marcos’ forced abdication near the end of the Cold War, the CPP faced difficulties on strategic and organizational levels. Their influence decreased and they never returned to their Cold War proportions. Peace negotiations between the movement and the Filipino government, which started in 1979, have so far been unfruitful. This seemingly stagnated situation sparks questions about the future of the movement, the conflict, and the many lives involved. By examining various CPP-publications and conducting and analyzing original interviews with Jose Maria Sison, this thesis offers an insight into the CPP’s internal conflicts on its strategy and future, as opposed to the information that the party makes available to the masses.³

Contributions and relevance

The body of literature devoted to the CPP and its perdurable attempt to topple the Filipino government is limited. Most publications stem from the 1980s and early 1990s, during which the movement reached its peak in size and international recognition. It was also during this time that the Cold War was nearing its end, which sparked widespread ‘democratic optimism’

¹ Jose Maria Sison, interview by author, 8 March 2020, Utrecht.

² Dahlia Simangan and Jess Melvin, “‘Destroy and Kill ‘the Left’’: Duterte on Communist Insurgency in the Philippines with a Reflection on the Case of Suharto’s Indonesia’, *Journal of Genocide Research* 21, no. 2 (3 April 2019): 214.

³ It does so on its various websites, for example: ‘National Democratic Front of the Philippines’, *NDFP*, accessed 7 January 2021, <https://ndfp.org/>; Its magazine: ‘Archive of Ang Bayan’, *Philippine Revolution Web Central*, accessed 7 January 2021, <https://cpp.ph/category/ang-bayan/>; and on various more general websites: ‘CPP-NPA-NDF’, *Redspark*, accessed 7 January 2021, <https://www.redspark.nu/en/tag/cpp-npa-ndf/>; ‘Communist Party of the Philippines’, *Banned Thought*, accessed 7 January 2021, <https://www.bannedthought.net/Philippines/CPP/index.htm>.

in the First World.⁴ Scholars like Francis Fukuyama viewed it as the ‘unabashed victory of political and economic liberalism’ and believed that it marked ‘the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government’.⁵ Today, this perspective naturally offers a credible explanation for the CPP’s seemingly stagnated status. As the Cold War ended and global communism collapsed, the movement seemed to have lost its international support and credibility, and therefore its momentum. The fact that the CPP chose to reaffirm their dedication to Maoism instead of taking a more pragmatic direction reinforced this assumption.⁶

While Fukuyama’s view gained a prominent position in the academic world and his book ‘The End of History and the Last Man’ became an international bestseller, his ideas were soon widely rebuked.⁷ Nevertheless, they still hold a hegemonic position within the body of literature on the communist rebellion. First, this is proven precisely by the limited number of publications on the CPP, which suggests that scholars assume that the movement has indeed lost its momentum and that revising this analysis is thus unnecessary. Second, it can be recognized in publications that appeared in the past thirty years. For example, Nathan Quimpo concluded in 2014 in one of the most recent publications on the movement that ‘the [CPP’s] fixation with Maoist strategy’ makes it ‘virtually impossible’ for them to be successful.⁸ This thesis claims that this limitedness resulted from the unilateral nature of the used sources. By introducing CPP-founder Jose Maria Sison’s perspective, this thesis contributes to a more nuanced history of the communist insurgency in the Philippines in particular and the influence of the end of the Cold War on insurgencies in the Global South in general.

Research question and design

The problem of the current body of literature is thus twofold. First is the persistent assumption that the prospects of communist movements in the post-Cold War era are heavily compromised.

⁴ Stephen Ryan, ‘The Evolution of Peacebuilding’, in *Routledge Handbook of Peacebuilding*, ed. Roger Mac Ginty and Oliver P Richmond, 2013, 27.

⁵ Francis Fukuyama, ‘The End of History?’, *The National Interest*, no. 16 (1989): 3–18.

⁶ See for example: P. N. Abinales, ed., *The Revolution Falters: The Left in Philippine Politics after 1986*, Southeast Asia Program Series, no. 15 (Ithaca, N.Y.: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University, 1996); Tom Marks, ‘Maoist Miscue II: The Demise of the Communist Party of the Philippines, 1968–1993’, *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 4, no. 1 (March 1993): 99–157; Bard E. O’Neill, *Insurgency and Terrorism: Inside Modern Revolutionary Warfare* (Washington: Brassey’s (US), 1990).

⁷ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992); for prominent critique, see for example: Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

⁸ Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, ‘“Revolutionary Taxation” and the Logistical and Strategic Dilemmas of the Maoist Insurgency in the Philippines’, *Journal of Asian Security and International Affairs* 1, no. 3 (December 2014): 273–82.

Second is the assumption that the CPP is still strictly dedicated to the Maoist ideology and strategy despite this. This thesis aims to look past this restricted narrative and unravel the true state of the military and political strategy of the CPP. The central question is therefore to what extent the Communist Party of the Philippines' dedication to Maoism and its Strategy of the Protracted People's War (SPPW) has altered since 1991.

To answer this question, this thesis is divided into three main chapters. The first chapter discusses the developments surrounding Mao's ideology and its accompanying military strategy before 1991. Central to this theoretical chapter is a selection of key communist publications. The second chapter then zooms in on the Philippines, analyzing the extent to which the CPP successfully implemented Maoism and the SPPW before 1991. It pays special attention to the historical, economic, and political context that gave rise to the communist insurgency and the obstacles that possibly challenged ideological determination. The final chapter examines the extent to which the movement has been following the Maoist ideology and strategy since 1991. It thereby provides an answer to the abovementioned research question.

The analysis makes a distinction between the CPP's "public" and "private" activities. Here, public activities refer to official and unofficial CPP-statements publicly available to followers, opponents, and the Filipino population. Examples are party programs and the magazine 'Ang Bayan', or 'The People', which operates as the movement's primary news outlet.⁹ Private activities are thoughts, plans, and tactics that are generally kept secretive from the larger population and sometimes even from followers and opponents. Here, the central sources are original, personal interviews with CPP founder Jose Maria Sison, conducted in March and December 2020. The results of this analysis should allow for an alternative perspective on the CPP's status, which many consider to be "stuck". It is suspected that even though the CPP still is very much attached to its original ideology and strategy in the public sphere, a more pragmatic perspective is slowly taking over the private sphere.

While Sison's ideas are obviously of undeniable value to the reconstruction of the complex history of the Philippines' communist insurgency, attention must be paid to the limitations of this type of research. Naturally, Sison's accounts are inherently biased and perhaps even strategically formulated. Also important is the extent to which Sison's statements can be regarded as representative of the CPP's contemporary private thoughts and activities.

⁹ For Filipino and English versions, see: National Democratic Front of the Philippines, 'Ang Bayan', *NDFP*, accessed 18 December 2020, <https://ndfp.org/ang-bayan/>.

While he founded and headed the movement from 1968 onwards, Sison has been in exile in the Netherlands since 1987 and stepped down as the party's chairman in the 2010s.¹⁰ To his saying, he is 'no longer the operational leader, but more of a spiritual leader'.¹¹ However, he remains influential. After Sison stepped down, Benito Tiamzon and his wife Wilma took over leadership. However, the couple was arrested in 2014 and sentenced to forty years in prison in November 2020.¹² Thus far, a new leader has not publicly stepped forward. Meanwhile, Sison remains the only party-related figure quoted in national and international media. More important is that he is still taken seriously by both CPP-members and their opponents. Ever since stepping down, he remained active in the party's political wing, the National Democratic Front (NDF). In December 2019, Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte sent his Labor Secretary to the Netherlands to resume the peace negotiations.¹³ During the talks, Sison led the group of NDF-representatives.¹⁴ In December 2020, Sison mentioned that he had recently spoken to this Labor Secretary in a 'Zoom call'.¹⁵ This thesis thus builds on the conviction that Sison's ideas are more representative of the CPP's contemporary thought than at first may seem.

¹⁰ Simangan and Melvin, "“Destroy and Kill ‘the Left’”", 215.

¹¹ Jose Maria Sison, interview by author, 10 December 2020, Utrecht.

¹² Benjamin Pulta, 'Tiamzon Couple Gets 40 Years for Kidnapping', *Philippine News Agency*, accessed 15 January 2021, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1123172>.

¹³ Pia Ranada, "“Last Card”": Duterte Sending Bello to Talk to Sison', *Rappler*, 5 December 2019, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/duterte-sending-bello-talk-sison>.

¹⁴ Carolyn O. Arguillas, 'Bello Meets with NDF Reps in Utrecht for Duterte's "Last Card" for Peace', *MindaNews*, 9 December 2019, <https://www.mindanews.com/peace-process/2019/12/bello-meets-with-ndf-reps-in-utrecht-for-dutertes-last-card-for-peace/>.

¹⁵ Sison, interview by author, 8 March 2020.

1.

**Communist Insurgent Strategies:
Maoism and the Protracted People's War**

‘Every communist must grasp the truth. Political power grows out the barrel of a gun.’¹⁶

Understanding the CPP's commitment to Maoist thought requires knowledge of what Mao's ideas were, where they came from, and what it means to implement them.

Communism and revisionism

Like all modern communist schools of thought, Maoism can be traced back to Karl Marx. Together with Friedrich Engels, Marx developed a ‘doctrine of historical materialism where human societies violently transform from one economic system to another’.¹⁷ In their 1848 ‘Manifesto of the Communist Party’, they claim that ‘hitherto, every form of society has been based [...] on the antagonism of oppressing and oppressed classes’.¹⁸ They believed that their society was divided into two camps: the oppressing bourgeoisie and the oppressed proletariat.¹⁹ For this inherently violent relationship to be abolished, the bourgeoisie had to be overthrown in an equally violent manner, after which the proletariat would prevail.²⁰

It is the emphasis on violence that is at the core of this thesis. As civil and labor rights improved in the early twentieth century and the social-democratic movement grew, some Marxist thinkers wondered if a non-violent alternative would be possible.²¹ This moderating interest in violence and growing interest in the use of parliamentary elections as other means of transformation is what came to be known as ‘revisionism’.²² It is this tendency, that became increasingly influential as the twentieth century unfolded, that leaders of violent revolutionary insurgencies like Lenin, Mao and Sison came to despise.²³

¹⁶ Mao Tse Tung, *Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse Tung*, 1st ed. (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1963), 272.

¹⁷ Mika Kerttunen, ‘A Transformed Insurgency: The Strategy of the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoist) in the Light of Communist Insurgency Theories and a Modified Beaufrean Exterior/Interior Framework’, *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 22, no. 1 (March 2011): 83.

¹⁸ Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* (Minneapolis, United States: Lerner Publishing Group, 2017), 14.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

²¹ Kerttunen, ‘A Transformed Insurgency’, 83.

²² Manfred B. Steger, ‘Friedrich Engels and the Origins of German Revisionism: Another Look’, *Political Studies* 45, no. 2 (June 1997): 248.

²³ Kerttunen, ‘A Transformed Insurgency’, 83.

Leninist insurgent strategy

Vladimir Lenin was one of the most outspoken proponents of a violent revolution.²⁴ He openly admired Marx's work and was forced to spend his days in exile in Western Europe because of it. During this time, Russia was ruled by the centuries old extravagant Romanov house. While most of Europe experienced unprecedented growth due to rapid modernization, Russian civilians were battling famine and poverty. Lenin realized that the government was severely alienated from the population. Backed by his Bolshevik followers, he decided that it needed to be replaced. The strategy he chose to realize this is considered to be of the 'computational' type. The objective of the revolutionary Conspirational Strategy is to 'remove the ruling authorities through a limited, but swift use of force'.²⁵ The masses have a subordinate position, as the plans are executed by a small, secretive, and strictly organized elite. This group exclusively operates in the urban spheres, specifically in those cities where economic and political power is concentrated. The violence, of which Lenin had been such a persistent advocate, was 'confined to the direct seizure of key government facilities', in this case located in the city of Petrograd.²⁶

Lenin's efforts culminated in the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, which turned out to profoundly influence the future of the Russian people. Because of this, and the simplicity of the attempt in particular and the strategy in general, many revolutionary insurgents aimed to follow his example.²⁷ However, what they often overlooked, is that the Bolshevik victory was not as prodigious as was propagated. When in April, Lenin returned from his exile to execute his plans, Russia's last Romanov Czar, Nicholas II, had already been forced to abdicate and imprisoned. Therefore, it was not the Romanov Dynasty, but a provisional government that had taken over power in the vacuum after the Czar's departure in March that Lenin finally overthrew in November.²⁸ Lenin's coup thus took place in an already unstable situation that offered little resistance.

Maoist insurgent strategy

During the same period, China was struggling too. Post-dynastic warlordism and foreign imperialism had resulted in severe disunification, economic misery, and military weakness.

²⁴ O'Neill, *Insurgency & Terrorism*, 34.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 32–33.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁸ Rex A. Wade, 'The Russian Revolution and Civil War', in *World Revolution and Socialism in One Country 1917-1941*, ed. Silvio Pons and Stephen Anthony Smith, vol. 1, *The Cambridge History of Communism*, 2017, 75–77.

Though China was never officially colonized, the presence of imperial powers like Britain, Japan, and Russia made many Chinese people feel like they were.²⁹ Unlike in Russia, however, the engrieved people of China saw no role for communism in their efforts to reunify.³⁰ The reason for their initial indifference towards Marxist thought was its presumed lack of applicability to the Chinese situation. This perspective changed after the engrieved Chinese people took notice of Lenin's impressive success during the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917.³¹ Soon, key works by Marx, Lenin, and others were translated into Chinese and made available in bookshops throughout the country.³²

Its students turned into early converts, who started to recognize the two camps of the oppressor and oppressed in their own society. The weaknesses of their once great country and the suffering of the working class were framed as 'the outcome of imperialist, capitalist and landlord exploitation, and their monopoly of state power'.³³ The converts became convinced of the necessity of a revolution and in 1921, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was founded.³⁴ Unlike Russia, however, China did not have a large proletariat.³⁵ It also was not a fragile provisional government that the Chinese communists were facing. Instead, their direct opponents enjoyed obvious military superiority. On the one hand, they fought the Kuomintang (KMT), or Chinese Nationalist Party, led by Chiang Kai-shek. As both parties aimed to unify China, the CCP and KTM initially cooperated. In 1926, however, Chiang Kai-shek turned against the CCP, which resulted in a conflict between the two parties, known as the Chinese Civil War.³⁶ Besides each other, however, both parties also faced an even more significant threat from their overseas neighbor. In the early 1890s, the Japanese freed themselves from their Western oppressors. From that moment, the nation had started to expand its borders rapidly. By the 1920s, the Japanese Empire captured Korea and Taiwan and was making its way into China.³⁷ The Chinese resisted, and on 7 July 1937, a full-scale Sino-Japanese war had officially begun. Realizing that stopping the Japanese was now their highest priority, the CCP

²⁹ Peter Gue Zarrow, *China in War and Revolution, 1895-1949* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 10; Lorenz M. Luthi, *Cold Wars: Asia, the Middle East, Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 15.

³⁰ Jerome Ch'en, 'The Chinese Communist Movement to 1927', in *The Cambridge History of China*, ed. John Fairbank, vol. 12 (Cambridge University Press, 1983), 505–6.

³¹ Alexander V. Pantsov, 'The Chinese Communist Movement 1919-1949', in *World Revolution and Socialism in One Country 1917-1941*, ed. Silvio Pons and Stephen Anthony Smith, vol. 1, *The Cambridge History of Communism*, 2017, 594.

³² Ch'en, 'The Chinese Communist Movement to 1927', 513.

³³ *Ibid.*, 512–13.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 515.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 513.

³⁶ Odd Arne Westad, *Restless Empire: China and the World since 1750* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 286.

³⁷ Mark R. Peattie, 'The Japanese Colonial Empire, 1895–1945', in *The Cambridge History of Japan*, ed. Peter Duus, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 1989), 217–18

and KMT cooperated once more and formed a unified front against the Japanese Imperial Army. Despite this, the KMT's and CCP's grievances towards each other persisted. Therefore, both parties did not just aim to expel the Japanese but also to come out of the war stronger than their domestic opponent.³⁸

While remaining aware of the temporarily dormant KMT-threat, CCP leader Mao Tse-tung developed a CCP-specific strategy to free China of its Japanese occupier. Mao understood that compared to Lenin's, China's revolutionary struggle had 'its own specific circumstances' and therefore 'specific laws of its own'.³⁹ He developed what became known as the Strategy of the Protracted People's War (SPPW), which deferred radically from what Lenin had used in Petrograd. Mao realized he had to prepare for a long war, as the Japanese military superiority made a 'swift' revolution impossible. He focused on mobilizing substantial popular support, which he did not seek from the urban proletariat, but from China's voluminous rural peasantry. When it came to his ideas on revisionism and violence, Mao was even more hardened than Lenin. He famously stated that 'political power grows out of the barrel of a gun' and emphasized that 'anyone who seeks a compromise before the task of the anti-Japanese war is fulfilled is bound to fail, because even if a compromise were to occur for one reason or another, the war would break out again'.⁴⁰ To ensure that the Japanese obstacle was to be 'completely swept away', he provided incredibly detailed instructions on how the SPPW was to be executed.⁴¹

Mao believed that the road to victory passed through three stages, each characterized by the military positions of the revolutionaries and their opponents.⁴² Since the revolutionaries were militarily inferior at the start, he dedicated the first phase of the 'strategic offensive' to 'survival, political organization, and low-level violence'.⁴³ Mao emphasized that

[The Chinese] inferiority in weapons and other things is only secondary. The mobilization of the common people throughout the country will create a vast sea in which to drown the enemy, create the conditions that will make up for our inferiority in arms and other things, and create the prerequisites for overcoming every difficulty in the war.⁴⁴

³⁸ Pantsov, 'The Chinese Communist Movement 1919-1949', 609.

³⁹ Tse Tung, *Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse Tung*, 75-76.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 227, 272.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 210.

⁴³ O'Neill, *Insurgency & Terrorism*, 35.

⁴⁴ Tse Tung, *Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse Tung*, 228.

The main objective during this phase was to create a massive base of popular support. Party members set out to recruit people using extensive propaganda activities and, if necessary, pressure and coercion. To prove their sincerity and reliability, the insurgents actively engaged with the population by providing protection and joining in agricultural activities. This method proved to be incredibly successful; between July and December 1926, the movement grew from 400,000 to 1.3 million members.⁴⁵ To keep the growing base organized, local leaders were appointed and so-called 'parallel government structures' were created.⁴⁶ The movement itself was divided into three different branches: one responsible for overseeing and steering the movement, a military branch, and the 'united front', occupied with mobilizing all necessary forces.⁴⁷ During this phase, violence was limited to 'selective terrorism' as part of 'mobile warfare, to be supplemented by guerilla and positional warfare'.⁴⁸

After establishing a profound popular base, the insurgents entered the second phase, called 'strategic stalemate'. Mao warned his followers that this phase would be 'long', 'ruthless', 'devastating' and a 'very painful period for China'.⁴⁹ The idea here was that the revolutionaries had become strong enough to openly face their opponent, which induced a military stalemate. The objective was to turn the tables by forcing the opponent into assuming an increasingly defensive attitude. Large confrontations were, however, still actively avoided. Instead, small groups adopted tactics of 'guerilla warfare, supplemented by mobile warfare'.⁵⁰ During this, the insurgents profited from the roughness of the rural areas they were familiar with but that the opponent struggled to navigate. At the same time, parallel governance was ever improving. As hospitals and production facilities emerged, the insurgent government slowly started to replace the incumbent government permanently. Meanwhile, military bases were built in rural areas to create stability for the next phase.⁵¹

As the guerilla forces in the second phase grew bigger and stronger, they finally turned into full-scale conventional forces. Here, the third and final phase of 'strategic counter-offensive' commenced. The insurgents had become strong enough to consider the destruction of the opponent's forces through direct confrontation as their main objective. While the primary form of warfare was still mobile warfare, 'positional warfare [would] rise to importance'.⁵² In the

⁴⁵ Pantsov, 'The Chinese Communist Movement 1919-1949', 601.

⁴⁶ O'Neill, *Insurgency & Terrorism*, 36.

⁴⁷ Kerttunen, 'A Transformed Insurgency', 84.

⁴⁸ Tse Tung, *Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse Tung*, 211; O'Neill, *Insurgency & Terrorism*, 38.

⁴⁹ Tse Tung, *Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse Tung*, 212-13.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 212.

⁵¹ O'Neill, *Insurgency & Terrorism*, 37-38.

⁵² Tse Tung, *Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse Tung*, 214.

meantime, the insurgents' political structures adopted the ability to take over immediately after military success had been reached.⁵³

Mao's strategy granted him success against the Japanese. In 1945, with help from the Allies, the CCP and the KTM finally defeated Japan. After this victory, however, China was still heavily divided. In 1946, the CCP and KTM turned on each other once more and the Chinese Civil War entered its second phase. The KMT, backed by the US, had 4.3 million people on its side, while the CCP had "only" 1.2 million troops left. Fortunately for Mao, the KMT failed to properly handle the Chinese economy, which cost them substantial parts of their popular base. Due to Mao's effective strategic choices, the CCP was also able to quickly weaken the KMT on a military level. On 10 December 1949, Chiang Kai-shek fled to Taiwan. For a second time, Mao had faced a military superior opponent. Again, he trusted in his strategy, and again, it granted him victory. It had cost eight years to expel Japan and four more to defeat the KMT, but the CCP had won its revolution. In 1949, the People's Republic of China was born, with Mao as its leader.⁵⁴

Implementation and variation

Mao's success did not go unnoticed. For colonized areas seeking autonomy and independence, the end of the Second World War brought two interesting developments. First, the war had severely weakened many European imperial powers, which reduced their power to suppress the increasing resistance of their overseas territories.⁵⁵ Second was the growing division between the Soviets and the West, which would eventually result in the global Cold War.⁵⁶ The two powers were working hard to increase their own political, ideological, and military influence, preferably at their opponent's expense. As the first development increased the likelihood of the anti-colonial movements to be successful, hope emerged among the weaker movements. The second development then further empowered these weaker movements, as both Soviet and Western powers were very much interested in supporting any efforts that would weaken their opponent militarily and politically. The result was a global wave of decolonization efforts, in which the East-West rivalry was gratefully employed.⁵⁷

To many of those seeking independence from their overseas oppressors, Maoism and the SPPW were particularly interesting for three reasons. First was Mao's own success against

⁵³ O'Neill, *Insurgency & Terrorism*, 38–39.

⁵⁴ Pantsov, 'The Chinese Communist Movement 1919-1949', 611–13.

⁵⁵ Luthi, *Cold Wars*, 13.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 13–14.

⁵⁷ O'Neill, *Insurgency & Terrorism*, 112.

his militarily superior oppressors, through which his ideas gained international recognition. Second was the specific nature of the strategy and ideology. Mao characterized the society he emerged from as semi-colonial and feudal. By focusing on the rural peasantry and agrarian reform, he designed his theories to specifically address these characteristics. As Arif Dirlik mentions, it was precisely these

twin oppressions of colonialism (or “semi-colonialism”) and “feudalism” (or “semi-feudalism”), [that characterized] the societies that would come to be known as the Third World.⁵⁸

Mao’s ideas thus inherently resonated with the grievances of many seeking independence, meaning that Maoism and the SPPW formed an attractive, tangible military manifestation of the popular anti-colonial ideas that were being expressed during this time by Third World thinkers like Franz Fanon and Raúl Prebisch.⁵⁹ It was the high level of detail that Mao provided his strategic instructions with that, thirdly, made application obtainable.⁶⁰

As a result, the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s saw applications of Maoism by Third World revolutionaries all over the world, in e.g. Algeria, Cambodia, India, Mozambique, Nepal, Oman, Peru, Sri Lanka, Turkey, and Vietnam.⁶¹ According to Dirlik, this ‘tidal wave of Maoism was to recede as rapidly as it had surged, leaving behind little by way of social or political accomplishment’.⁶² There were, however, a few exceptions. It is to the most protracted and arguably the strictest example of this that we now turn.

⁵⁸ Arif Dirlik, ‘Mao Zedong Thought and the Third World/Global South’, *Interventions* 16, no. 2 (4 March 2014): 235.

⁵⁹ Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People’s History of the Third World* (New York: New Press, 2007), 63–74, 121–23.

⁶⁰ O’Neill, *Insurgency & Terrorism*, 35.

⁶¹ Dirlik, ‘Mao Zedong Thought and the Third World/Global South’.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 234.

2.

The CPP's Protracted People's War until 1991

‘...whenever we set up a military training camp, for example in the Isabela province, we used the hard way. We compared it to the Via Crucis of Jesus Christ. There was actually an easy way, but the students had to be broken into rural life.’⁶³

Now that we understand the ideological and strategic context in which the CPP's story is situated, we are ready to investigate the CPP's own ideological stance. To shed light on how the ideological and strategical determination of the movement developed until 1991, this chapter first looks at how and under which circumstances the CPP emerged and what obstacles it faced along the way that possibly influenced its dedication to the Maoist ideology and strategy. It then moves on to the core analysis, in which a division is made between the movement's public and private activities. The public sphere analysis is primarily based on the CPP's available party programs and public statements. A key document here is a pamphlet entitled ‘Rectify Errors, Rebuild the Party!’, which is considered the founding document of the CPP. To examine the private sphere, the limited existing body of analyses of personal records is used. In addition to this, original interviews with CPP-founder Jose Maria Sison are used, which were conducted in March and December 2020.

Historical, political, and economic context

In 1942, the same Japanese Imperial Army that had invaded China overwhelmed the Philippines. By then, the Philippines already had a long colonization history. Since 1543, the territory had been under Spanish rule. After winning the Spanish-American War in 1898, the United States took over.⁶⁴ The Filipino's met these latest oppressors with substantial resistance. The most prominent organization within this anti-Spanish movement was that of the People's Army Against Japan, or ‘Huks’, who used guerilla tactics, were inspired by Marx and Lenin, and received support from the CCP.⁶⁵

⁶³ Sison, interview by author, 10 December 2020.

⁶⁴ Matthew G. Stanard, *European Overseas Empire, 1879-1999: A Short History*, 1st edition (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2018), 26.

⁶⁵ Ricardo T. Jose, ‘The Philippines During the Cold War: Searching for Security Guarantees and Appropriate Foreign Policies, 1946-1986’, in *Cold War Southeast Asia*, ed. Malcom H Murfett (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2012), 86–87.

On 4 July 1946, the Philippines officially gained independence from the US. Like China, the Philippines were left severely weakened and heavily divided. Manuel Roxas, the first official Filipino president, saw an opportunity in the US, who had remained close during the Japanese invasion. Because the US had colonized the Philippines for many years, the Filipino's claimed that America had an obligation to support them during their recovery after the Second World War. Establishing a close relationship with the US thus became Roxas' highest priority. It turned out to be a simple task. The Philippines had been the only US colony in Asia, and the Americans were already determined to remain present, especially amidst the increasing Soviet influence in the region.⁶⁶ In 1947, Roxas signed an agreement that allowed the US to use a dozen Filipino military bases for the next 99 years. Just like that, the Philippines opened its door to increasing US presence, and its position in the Cold War context was fixed.⁶⁷ Apart from receiving US weapons, Roxas also adopted their anti-communist stance. He declared war on the Huks, who had strongly opposed America's increasing influence and now counted at least 11,000 armed guerillas.⁶⁸ Roxas defeated the Huks in 1950. This was, however, not the end of communism in the Philippines. Instead, it merely marked the beginning of a conflict between US-backed Filipino regimes and communist insurgents that would persist for decades.

Though American presence provided the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) with military security, its cities and economy remained in ruins and its people lived in extreme poverty. These were problems neither Roxas nor his early successors were able to eradicate. Meanwhile, the defeated Huks had fallen apart into different factions, based on their ideas on what was to be done next. Most of them were still carrying arms but had no direct revolutionary intentions. A more determined faction was one called 'Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas' (PKP), or 'Communist Party of the Philippines'.⁶⁹ According to its leaders, the country's economic weakness resulted from its feudalistic system, which was imposed during the European occupation and had been able to persist due to a combination of American, capitalist presence and a corrupt government.⁷⁰ Like China's early converts, the PKP leaders recognized the two camps of the oppressor and oppressed in their own society. To

⁶⁶ Ibid., 85–92.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 91.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 95; Ben Kerkvliet, 'Contemporary Philippine Leftist Politics in Historical Perspective', in *The Revolution Falters: The Left in Philippine Politics After 1986*, ed. P. N. Abinales, Southeast Asia Program Series, no. 15 (Ithaca, N.Y.: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University, 1996), 9–27.

⁶⁹ Kerkvliet, 'Contemporary Philippine Leftist Politics in Historical Perspective'.

⁷⁰ Congress of Re-Establishment of the Communist Party of the Philippines, 'Rectify Errors, Rebuild the Party!', 26 December 1986, 1, <http://www.bannedthought.net/Philippines/CPP/1960s/RectifyErrors-RebuildParty-681226.pdf>.

overthrow this 'rotten' structure, abolish the feudalistic system, and eliminate US 'imperialist' influence, the PKP aimed to continue the violent, protracted struggle in the countryside that was started by the Huks and combine it with 'legal tactics'.⁷¹

Among these PKP members was a university professor called Jose Maria Sison. Like his fellow party members, Sison noticed the misery around him. He too blamed the feudalistic system that was kept intact by a combination of US presence and a corrupt government. As a historian, he argued that these problems were rooted in his country's history of oppression and colonialism. The way he saw it, was that after the Huks had overthrown their Spanish oppressor, the US immediately 'launched its war of conquest'.⁷² In his years with the PKP, Sison grew increasingly frustrated with the party's failure to tackle the problems it had identified as the roots of Filipino grievances. As an experienced student of Marxism, Leninism, and Maoism, Sison had very specific ideas about the reasons behind his party's incompetence. In a pamphlet entitled 'Rectify Errors, Rebuild the Party!' he set out to identify its weaknesses and failures, to inspire their rectification.⁷³ As one of the concrete weaknesses of the PKP, he pointed at this tendency towards legal, peaceful tactics. He criticized the 'overconcentration on urban political work because of the subjectivist and opportunist desire to compete or collaborate with bourgeois parties and groups and beg for "democratic peace" from the US imperialists'.⁷⁴ The opportunities for the party in the countryside, he stated, were 'grossly underestimated'.⁷⁵ He considered Maoism to be the 'highest development of Marxism-Leninism' and claimed that following its ideas strictly was the only way to liberate the Philippines from US imperialism and feudalism.⁷⁶ 'The continuing failures of old parties that are not guided by Mao Tse-tung Thought', he stated, 'only prove that without its guidance and faithful application the revolution cannot be won and consolidated'.⁷⁷ Like this, he combined communist thought and the Filipino past and turned them into narratives justifying violent collective action.

⁷¹ Kerkvliet, 'Contemporary Philippine Leftist Politics in Historical Perspective'.

⁷² Sison, interview by author, 10 December 2020.

⁷³ Congress of Re-Establishment of the Communist Party of the Philippines, 'Rectify Errors, Rebuild the Party!', 2.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

The conflict until 1991 and the role of ideology

Sison's ideas caused him to quickly gain a large following within the PKP. On 26 December 1968, Mao's 75th birthday, Sison split from the PKP and founded the Communist Party of the Philippines.⁷⁸ The event became known as the First Great Rectification Movement. Sison's pamphlet is considered the founding document of the CPP.⁷⁹ In it, he is clear about the direction that the new party is going to take:

As a proletarian revolutionary party, the Communist Party of the Philippines comprehensively differentiates itself from bogus and revisionist parties and groups by adopting Mao Tse-tung Thought as its supreme guide and by applying it in revolutionary practice. [...] The central task of a revolutionary movement is the seizure and consolidation of political power. [...] The people's democratic forces should develop and accumulate their armed strength in the backward areas in the countryside and turn them into the most advanced political, economic, military, and cultural bastions from which a protracted struggle can be waged by the people's army in order to win over-all victory over the counter-revolutionary army.⁸⁰

In this publicly available document, Sison's statements about the new party's stance are unambiguous. The movement is to strictly follow Maoist thought. It differentiates itself from revisionist tendencies and aims to fully overthrow the incumbent government through a violent, protracted people's war in the countryside. As Eva-Lotta Hedman explains, this 'rejection of the cities in favor of the countryside' even led the movement to 'equate urban struggle with parliamentary or legal struggle, and hence with revisionism'.⁸¹ The many similarities between China's and the Philippines' situation allowed the application of Mao's theory and strategy to be considerably easy for Sison compared to many of his international colleagues. Like Mao, Sison was to face a militarily superior oppressor that was both indigenous and foreign. If he wanted to eliminate this oppressor, he too had the biggest chance of succeeding if he focused on finding support among the Philippines' voluminous rural peasantry rather than the urban proletariat. And finally, like China, the Philippines' landscape consists of large, rough rural areas where the government's influence is scarce, allowing guerillas to reside comfortably.⁸²

⁷⁸ Simangan and Melvin, "Destroy and Kill 'the Left'", 215.

⁷⁹ Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Philippines, 'Constitution and Program', 2018, 11.

⁸⁰ Congress of Re-Establishment of the Communist Party of the Philippines, 'Rectify Errors, Rebuild the Party!', 28–33.

⁸¹ Eva-Lotta E. Hedman, 'Beyond Boycott: The Philippine Left and Electoral Politics after 1986', in *The Revolution Falters: The Left in Philippine Politics After 1986*, ed. P. N. Abinales, Southeast Asia Program Series, no. 15 (Ithaca, N.Y: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University, 1996), 95.

⁸² Sison, interview by author, 10 December 2020.

Like Mao, Sison organized his party into three different branches. The CPP itself was to oversee and steer the movement. In 1969, Sison teamed up with Bernabe Buscayno, also known as Commander Dante. Together, they founded the New People's Army (NPA), which served as the movement's military branch. Among the first to join were many of the previously defeated Huks, of whose mobilization experience the CPP gratefully profited.⁸³ In 1973, the National Democratic Front (of the Philippines) or NDF(P) was added to this, which was to unify and mobilize all necessary forces.⁸⁴ The decision-making within the growing movement was, as Sison remembers, characterized by freedom. 'Every decision was made democratically; everyone had the right to speak. But when the voting was done, everyone had to follow. Even the ones that did not agree'.⁸⁵ During these first days, the CPP is believed to have counted only sixty fighters and thirty-five rifles. The party leadership acknowledged their military inferiority and set out to increase popular support. While Sison claims that 'all this time, our struggle was defensive, [...] we did not show any kind of offensiveness, any kind of violence' and that 'even after the establishment of the NPA, it was not immediately violence all the way', US sources state that clashes with the AFP started immediately.⁸⁶

In the meantime, the Filipino people had been introduced to Ferdinand Marcos, their sixth and most notorious president since becoming independent. His ruling, which was famously corrupt and extravagant, supposedly 'plundered the nation's wealth' and created widespread grievances among the deprived population.⁸⁷ The CPP skillfully turned these sentiments into rapid growth of their own numbers.⁸⁸ Like his predecessors, Marcos aimed to maintain a close relationship with the US government. To the US, now in the middle of the Cold War, the feeling was mutual.⁸⁹ As Marcos saw the CPP grow into a serious threat, he looked at his American allies, hoping for their support in his own anti-communist struggle. The US, however, was primarily invested in Vietnam. In an attempt to restore stability on his own, Marcos declared martial law in 1972, a move that enabled him to rule the Philippines like a

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Liberation: The Official Publication of the National Democratic Front of the Philippines, 'About NDFP', *Liberation*, 22 August 2017, <https://liberation.ndfp.org/about-ndfp-2/>.

⁸⁵ Sison, interview by author, 8 March 2020.

⁸⁶ Ibid.; 'Mapping Militant Organizations: Communist Party of the Philippines–New People's Army', *Stanford Center for International Security and Cooperation*, 2015, https://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/print_view/149.

⁸⁷ Luzviminda Tancangco and Roger Mendoza, 'Elections and the Crisis of Legitimacy in the Philippines: A Comparative View of the Marcos and Aquino Regimes', *Philippine Journal of Public Administration* 32, no. 3 (1988): 273.

⁸⁸ 'Mapping Militant Organizations: Communist Party of the Philippines–New People's Army'.

⁸⁹ Jose, 'The Philippines During the Cold War', 116.

dictator for fourteen years.⁹⁰ During this period, poverty and inequality reached unprecedented levels, like in the province of Quezon, where ‘44% of [the] most productive land was owned by only 1.1 % of the population, while tenants [received] only 30-40%, and in some instances only 20% of the gross produce’.⁹¹ As Marcos’ oppressive behavior increased, support for the CPP did too, granting him the reputation of the CPP’s ‘biggest recruiter’.⁹²

According to the GRP and US newspapers, the number of active NPA fighters had grown to 25,000 by 1981.⁹³ Sison, however, denies this. ‘They like to say that it was 25,000 in the mid-1980s, but that it has gone down. [But] no, in 1985, the NPA was 5,600, [and as Marcos started] sinking rapidly, another 600 joined, so 6,100 in 1986’.⁹⁴ Despite these contradictory accounts and Sison’s miscalculation, it remains a fact that both the US and the GRP considered the CPP to ‘be able to challenge the government by 1984’, as becomes clear from a 1981 declassified CIA report.⁹⁵ Despite believing that their numbers were much lower, the movement’s party leadership too considered their victory to be impending. In 1981, they announced that their revolutionary struggle had entered ‘the advanced sub-stage of the strategic defensive’, and that the next phase of the SPPW would soon commence.⁹⁶ When Sison is asked in 2020 about the party’s potential overthrow of the government, he recalls that ‘during Marcos [in the early 1980s], we definitely considered that a possibility’.⁹⁷

What becomes clear from this is that the CPP’s ideological and strategical determination to Maoism from its foundation in 1969 until well into the 1980s was strong in both public and private spheres. From the very start, in the publicly available founding document ‘Rectify Errors, Rebuild the Party’, the party leadership marked the PKP’s tendencies towards more peaceful, legal, urban approaches as ‘revisionist’ and condemned the lack of application of Maoist thought. In response to this, they unambiguously devoted themselves to Maoist thought and the SPPW. The way the movement was then expanded and organized clearly shows the influence of the SPPW. The unit was divided into three branches, and popular support was effectively mobilized in the rural areas. When explaining the movement’s status, the leadership refers to the SPPW phases of strategic defensive, stalemate,

⁹⁰ Ibid., 117–18.

⁹¹ Danilo Carranza, ‘Agrarian Reform and the Difficult Road to Peace in the Philippine Countryside’ (Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre, December 2015), 7.

⁹² Sison, interview by author, 8 March 2020.

⁹³ ‘Philippines’ Leader Wants Legalization of Communist Party’, *The New York Times*, 28 July 1992, sec. World.

⁹⁴ Sison, interview by author, 8 March 2020.

⁹⁵ ‘The Communist Party of the Philippines: Organizing for Revolution’ (Central Intelligence Agency, 1982).

⁹⁶ Quimpo, “‘Revolutionary Taxation’”, 266.

⁹⁷ Sison, interview by author, 8 March 2020.

and offensive. The mobilization efforts combined with the increase of oppression after Marcos' declaration of martial law granted the movement the growth that consolidated its international recognition as a credible opponent of the GRP. Not just the party leadership but also its opponents believed that they could overthrow the GRP and establish a New People's Democracy by the end of the 1980s.

However, the 1980s did not end as the involved parties expected. While the CPP may have been the GRP's most dreaded opponent, they were not alone. During Marcos' rule, more revolutionary movements were formed, like the still-active Moro Islamic Liberation Front in the South of the Philippines.⁹⁸ More importantly, however, were the more general uprisings that resulted from Marcos' oppressive ruling. In fact, when the nationwide grievances in 1986 finally led to the 'People Power Revolution' that removed Marcos from power, the CPP is believed to have had little influence.⁹⁹ When Sison called for a boycott of the elections that followed Marcos's departure, it was widely ignored, even among his own followers. The Filipino people elected President Aquino and the CPP failed to gain any influence in the new political situation.¹⁰⁰ Many believe that these events, in combination with the CPP's way of reacting to them, marked the beginning of their irreversible demise. It is the perceived durability of this conviction that is challenged in the next chapter.

⁹⁸ Thomas M. McKenna, *Muslim Rulers and Rebels: Everyday Politics and Armed Separatism in the Southern Philippines*, Comparative Studies on Muslim Societies 26 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 3.

⁹⁹ 'A History of the Philippine Political Protest', *Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines*, accessed 13 November 2020, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/edsa/the-ph-protest-appendix/>.

¹⁰⁰ Tancangco and Mendoza, 'Elections and the Crisis of Legitimacy in the Philippines', 285.

3.

The CPP's Protracted People's War after 1991

Now that we have proven the strong dedication of the early CPP to Maoist thought and the SPPW in both the private and public spheres before 1991, we are ready to look at how this dedication developed after 1991. First, this chapter looks at the circumstances and obstacles that the movement faced during this specific period. It then turns to an analysis of the movement's dedication to the Maoist ideology and strategy by looking at both public and private activities. Again, primary sources are used that were published by the CPP itself, like the *Ang Bayan* magazine and party programs. The original interviews with CPP founder Jose Maria Sison have a more prominent role this time.

Changes in historical, political, and economic context

For the CPP, the year 1991 marked two defining developments that tested the dedication of its members and altered the movement for good. The first was the end of the Cold War, and the second was the 'Reaffirmist/Rejectionist-split'. In 1989, three years after Marcos fled the country, the Berlin Wall fell. When another two years later, the Soviet Union collapsed, the global communist movement started to erode too. In the Philippines, the familiar widespread grievances had slowly started to decrease, along with the general appeal of communism as a potential solution. The People's Power Revolution had removed Marcos, and as the Cold War neared its end, US interest and influence in the Philippines weakened. During the same period, the Philippine Senate rejected the proposition to renew the US bases, 'prompting the withdrawal of the majority of US troops from the country and the closure of the largest US military base outside the United States'.¹⁰¹ From the way the CPP's Central Committee reflects on this period, however, it becomes clear that their grievances persisted:

The replacement of the US-Marcos regime by the series of pseudo democratic regimes that started with the US-Aquino regime has not solved the fundamental problems of the persistent semicolonial and semifeudal ruling system but has only aggravated them. The same oligarchy of big compradors and landlords servile to the US and other imperialist powers continue to rule the Philippines.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Adam Taylor, 'The Philippines' Duterte Is Trying to Trump Trump', *Washington Post*, accessed 3 December 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2020/02/13/philippines-duterte-is-trying-trump-trump/>.

¹⁰² Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Philippines, 'Constitution and Program', 46.

The regime, they concluded, was still rotten and the US was still present. And so, the protracted struggle had to continue. Not all CPP members, however, agreed with this unaltered diagnosis. In fact, by the end of the 1980s, the radical national and international changes caused intense dissonance within the movement, resulting in a division between a ‘Rejectionist’ (RJ) and a ‘Reaffirmist’ (RA) camp. The reaffirmists remained loyal to Sison and agreed that the problems had not changed, despite the many national and international changes. The rejectionists, on the other hand, believed that Sison’s diagnosis had become obsolete. They thought the conditions in the Philippines and the rest of the world had changed drastically and that the original tactics adopted two decades ago should therefore make way for a more urban and preferably more peaceful approach.¹⁰³

However, these recent developments failed to impress Sison, and he decided not to take the rejectionist tendencies lightly. Parallel to this ideological turmoil, the NPA was also experiencing an internal military crisis. Whether it contained just over 6,000 or nearly 25,000 fighters, it is clear that its cadres had become bigger than the CPP’s organization could manage. According to Sison, this ‘fault in the military line’ made it easier for the AFP to spot them. Instead of moving confidently through the rugged area, they started being ambushed. The impact of this on the movement numbers is, again, disputed. Benedict Kerkvliet, however, claims that during the 1980s and the 1990s, the NPA’s number of fighters dropped from 20,000 to 10,600. The result of this was, according to him, that the CPP went from controlling 20% of the Philippines’ villages and neighborhoods to a mere 3%.¹⁰⁴ Within the movement, these unprecedented losses raised suspicion of ‘deep penetration agents’.¹⁰⁵ When asked in 2020 about the resulting internal ‘hunt’, Sison recalled, chuckling as if remembering some foolish, innocent mischief:

[It is estimated that 1,500 suspects were arrested and 500 to 800 were punished]. They were executed without a process. And torture was used. [...] It would be a crime for any NPA personnel to beat up or torture, but then there is this stupid notion that when someone is a spy, he has no rights against torture.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Kerkvliet, ‘Contemporary Philippine Leftist Politics in Historical Perspective’.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Sison, interview by author, 10 December 2020.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

Sison figured that something had to change. He launched the ‘Second Great Rectification Movement’, which served to ‘identify, repudiate and rectify the errors of urban insurrectionism, premature big formations of the NPA and anti-infiltration hysteria’.¹⁰⁷ Like the one before, the Second Great Rectification Movement was accompanied by the publication of a rectification document. This time, it was called ‘Reaffirm Basic Principles and Rectify Errors’. It appeared on 26 December 1991, the CPP’s 23rd birthday and the day Mao would have turned 98.¹⁰⁸ Unsurprisingly, it contained an attack on the ‘revisionist’ tendencies of the ‘wrong line’ and reminded its followers of the importance of the ‘theory of the people’s war’ and the crucial position of the countryside.¹⁰⁹

These struggles finally resulted in the RA/RJ-split, in which the reaffirmists claimed victory and carried on under the CPP name. The rectification document again contains the unambiguous picture of the path that Sison wanted the movement to take from 1991 onward. It confirms the validity of the basic principles that were set forward in ‘Rectify Errors, Rebuild the Party’, and underscores

adherence to the theory of Marxism-Leninism, repudiation of modern revisionism, the class analysis of Philippine society as semicolonial and semifeudal, the general line of the national democratic revolution, the theory of people’s war and strategic line of encircling the cities from the countryside.¹¹⁰

One might notice that a specific reference to Maoist thought is missing from this central excerpt, which could indicate a decrease in dedication to the ideology. In a later section, however, it receives great attention. The author, which is believed to be Sison himself, identifies the ‘widespread low level of theoretical knowledge among Party cadres and members’, and the decreased attention that is given ‘to the works of Mao’ as the problem behind the party’s troubles.¹¹¹ This, it becomes clear, is one of the primary errors that the party leadership thought had to be corrected.¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ Luis Jalandoni, ‘The Revolutionary Struggle of the Filipino People’, *Jose Maria Sison*, 8 February 2016, <https://josemariasison.org/the-revolutionary-struggle-of-the-filipino-people/>.

¹⁰⁸ Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Philippines, ‘Reaffirm Our Basic Principles and Rectify Errors’, 26 December 1991, <http://www.bannedthought.net/Philippines/ CPP/Rebolusyon/1993/R1993-01en.pdf>.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*

Before we look at the result of this promise of ideological and strategic rededication on the actual dedication in the years that follow, it is necessary to consider the effect of the promise on how the international community came to view the movement. As was mentioned in the introduction, the end of the Cold War sparked widespread ‘democratic optimism’ within the First World, causing scholars like Francis Fukuyama to announce ‘the end point of mankind’s ideological evolution and the universalization of Western liberal democracy as the final form of human government’.¹¹³ In this light, scholars considered the fall of communism to be a death sentence for smaller organizations like the CPP. As these movements lost their larger, international frame and potential external support, their future became increasingly insecure. The fact that Sison chose to renew the movement’s dedication in 1991 despite the unfavorable global developments destroyed the international recognition as a credible opponent of the GRP they enjoyed in the early 1980s.

While Fukuyama’s ideas were widely criticized in the years that followed, they have barely been challenged in the context of the communist insurgency in the Philippines. In 2014, Nathan Quimpo concluded in one of the most recent works on the matter that

the CPP-NPA’s fixation with Maoist strategy [had] dire consequences for the revolutionary movement [and] it will be virtually impossible [for] the CPP, with its outdated strategy, logistical incapacities, plus an inhospitable global environment to be able to advance to regular warfare or to strategic stalemate.¹¹⁴

Quimpo’s conviction that the CPP is stuck is based on the two assumptions mentioned above: that communism is no longer to be taken seriously and that the CPP is, nevertheless, still dedicated to it.

Continuation of the conflict and the development of ideological dedication after 1991

When we look at the development of the movement’s dedication to Maoism and SPPW in the public sphere since 1991, this rigid scholarly view becomes understandable. Sison may have succeeded in addressing what he perceived as the party’s errors and laying out the future path, but the troublesome years that preceded had left the movement battered. Its base had stopped increasing, the government’s counterinsurgency activities had cost many CPP leaders their

¹¹³ Fukuyama, ‘The End of History?’

¹¹⁴ Quimpo, “‘Revolutionary Taxation’”, 273–82.

freedom or their lives, and Sison himself had been in exile in the Netherlands since 1987.¹¹⁵ While a small increase in members and activity was recognized in the early 2000s, the numbers have remained roughly the same since the 2010s. Today, the GRP claims that the NPA consists of 4,000 fighters, while the Sison argues that the number lies ‘somewhere between 8,000 and 10,000’.¹¹⁶ Despite this undeniable decrease, however, the CPP seemed to remain remarkably optimistic about their military position. On 26 December 2009, they claimed in an issue of *Ang Bayan* that they had reached

the sufficient strength and critical mass to carry out the tasks and plans for advancing from the strategic defensive to the strategic stalemate of the people’s war within the next five years.¹¹⁷

In 2013, however, this advancement was nowhere in sight. Nevertheless, the party stayed true to the SPPW path, although the formulations of their prospects became increasingly vague. On 26 December of that year, an *Ang Bayan* issue stated for example that ‘to reach the strategic stalemate, we must strive to reach the goal of more or less 200 guerrilla fronts’.¹¹⁸ To their own estimates, the NPA was at that point ‘a nationwide revolutionary force operating in more than 110 guerrilla fronts’.¹¹⁹ In the issue of 26 December 2018, the movement celebrated its 50th anniversary. This time, it no longer mentions years or fronts but simply states that

in line with the strategy of protracted people's war, we continue to wage revolutionary armed struggle, carry out land reform and build political power in the countryside, until it is capable of seizing political power in the cities and national capita.¹²⁰

Nevertheless, their dedication to the ideology and strategy remains imminent, as well as the dedication to their original diagnosis:

¹¹⁵ Simangan and Melvin, “‘Destroy and Kill ‘the Left’””, 215.

¹¹⁶ Sison, interview by author, 8 March 2020; Quimpo, “‘Revolutionary Taxation’”, 280.

¹¹⁷ Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Philippines, ‘Strive to Make a Great Advance in the People’s War for New Democracy’, *Ang Bayan*, 26 December 2009, 2, <https://www.bannedthought.net/Philippines/CPP/AngBayan/2009/20091226en.pdf>.

¹¹⁸ Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Philippines, ‘Advance the National-Democratic Revolution through People’s War amid the Worsening Global and Domestic Crisis’, *Ang Bayan*, 26 December 2013.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Philippines, ‘Celebrate the Party’s 50th Anniversary and Lead the Philippine Revolution to Greater Victories’, *Ang Bayan*, 26 December 2018.

Inspired by its achievements of the past 50 years, the Party continues to firmly uphold the Marxist-Leninist-Maoist stand, viewpoint, and method and the line of people's democratic revolution through protracted people's war to end the oppressive and exploitative semicolonial and semifeudal system and create the conditions for socialist revolution and its ultimate goal of building a communist future.¹²¹

Despite this optimism, until now, the CPP has still not been able to advance its military activities and move to strategic stalemate. When looking solely at these public sources, the movement does indeed seem stagnated.

Sison himself, however, does not appear to be bothered by this. His faith appears to be unaffected:

The CPP is unique. [It has been] running for fifty-two years, [while China lasted] twenty-four. Sometimes I joke; the Philippines has already surpassed China in terms of protractedness of the people's war!¹²²

When asked if this unprecedented “protractedness” never caused him to doubt the SPPW, he answered resolutely:

No. I stucked [*sic*] to the revolutionary line, to make socialist revolution. There has to be a change of power. Short of that, it is reformism. And reforms are good, but systematic reformism prevents you from taking the revolutionary step.¹²³

That reforms have taken place becomes apparent when he explains the current direction of the NDF:

Even though there is a people's war going on, with all the precautions taken by the revolutionary movement against the military superior enemy, especially in the time of the strategic defense, which is to continuing fact, we also have a legal struggle in the urban areas. And those are peaceful operations. [...] And of course, they avoid saying that they are linked to the revolutionary movement. Because the legal organizations have their own way of aligning

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Sison, interview by author, 8 March 2020.

¹²³ Sison, interview by author, 10 December 2020.

themselves with each other; the NDF is the underground alliance formation and it has its own organizations.¹²⁴

Nevertheless, while these actions show a more peaceful and urban approach, they are taking place alongside the NPA's armed struggle in the countryside. This approach can thus only be one of the means to reach the revolutionary end. Nevertheless, as we go deeper into this, the current direction of the party and Sison's thoughts on its future appear less resolute than he initially indicated. When he is asked to what extent the CPP still considers overthrowing the GRP to be a direct objective, he answers:

How far the revolutionary movement can go in terms of overthrowing the state is difficult to say. [...] One possibility is to overthrow; [that] the regime is so rotten [that it] brings down the system with it. In the time of Marcos, we used that possibility. [What is also possible is] that we have done so much political and ideological work in the country that we practically [already have] a democratic culture. It [would not be] surprising if someone would then rise up through elections. Maybe not a real communist, [but someone that is] open to alliance with the communist party.¹²⁵

When nine months later, when asked to elaborate on this remarkable perspective, he adds:

Well, you know, you can have a Chávez without an armed revolution. Or a Morales. [...] In the process of revolutionary struggle, you do not only mind the most strategic aims. You also have to know the tactics. The strategy can only be realized if you have a mastery of the tactics, you know, the twists and turns.¹²⁶

By Chávez and Morales, Sison refers to Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales, former elected presidents of respectively Venezuela from 1999 to 2013 and Bolivia from 2005 to 2019. Like the Philippines, both countries are characterized by their dependence on raw materials and a history of Spanish oppression, US presence, and revolution. Chávez and Morales are both known for their socialist background and the influential economic and social reforms they

¹²⁴ Sison, interview by author, 8 March 2020.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Sison, interview by author, 10 December 2020.

launched during their terms.¹²⁷ Naturally, Sison's surprising view does not suggest a willingness of the CPP to become actively involved in elections. Besides that, he claims that taking this direction would be a mere tactic and not an alteration of the overarching SPPW. What it does show, however, is a willingness to adopt a more peaceful approach; to align with a structure he once opposed so vehemently, be it after the election of a socialist president.

When Sison starts recalling the history of Mao's struggle for independence, it becomes clear that he does not even consider the election of a socialist like Chávez or Morales to be required for a CPP-GRP alliance to be established. He tells the story of how the Chinese Communist Party and the Kuomintang initially cooperated against their common Japanese enemy and suggests that this could also work for the CPP and the GRP:

Together, [the KMT and the CCP] were at peace in the united front, against a third party. And I have put this forward to the [GRP], that we can unite against the common enemy, which is poverty. And they liked it, at least the most reasonable ones. [...] But you know, there would be critics, from a Marxist-Leninist viewpoint. [They would say] "Oh, so you are for the bourgeoisie", because without a revolution overthrowing the bourgeoisie in such a situation, [...] it is the bourgeoisie who would benefit. But you know, we are now in a situation quite different from what used to be the trend until 1991.¹²⁸

This perspective is more fundamental and must have required more thought than may initially seem. Like he first used the Filipino history of oppression and colonialism in the CPP's early days to create narratives justifying violence against the corrupt regime and US presence, he now uses the same method to justify alignment with the regime, despite ever ceasing to define it as "rotten".

Various interesting developments in the private sphere have thus come to light in these conversations with Sison. First are the activities of the NDF. Following Sison's statements, it seems that the CPP, through the NDF, has been adopting peaceful tactics in the urban areas alongside their armed struggle. While Sison's claims about NDF alliances with legal organizations are impossible to verify, we do know that the NDF is involved in more general

¹²⁷ See for example: 'Venezuela Country Profiles', *BBC News*, 25 February 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-19649648>; 'Bolivia Country Profile', *BBC News*, 12 November 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-18727507>.

¹²⁸ Sison, interview by author, 10 December 2020.

peaceful activities, such as the peace process with the GRP.¹²⁹ Again, however, these activities exist alongside the NPA's armed struggle. It remains likely that they are merely being applied for subordinate, strategical goals, instead of indicating a general, more peaceful approach.

Second, despite clearly underscoring his unaltered loyalty to Maoism and the SPPW, it is evident that Sison himself is open to more legal, peaceful, urban activities. Though he labels these activities as mere 'tactics', we cannot deny that they differ dramatically from the dominant perspectives we saw in both public and private spheres from 1968 until 1991. During this period, the CPP leadership actively differentiated itself from the legal, urban tactics favored by the PKP leadership. A strong emphasis was put on the importance of the countryside, on the Marxist-Leninist idea that violence was crucial, and the Maoist idea that the opponent had to be 'completely swept away' for the revolution to be successful.¹³⁰ More peaceful tendencies were immediately dismissed as 'revisionist', and the CPP itself even went as far as equating any form of urban struggle with revisionism.¹³¹ Now, he justifies alliance with the government, irrespective of whom it is led by. This drastic ideological development finally turns irrefutable as Sison himself acknowledges that Marxist-Leninists would object to these ideas, but that he nevertheless believes in their legitimacy because 'we are now in a situation quite different from what used to be the trend until 1991'. This remark becomes almost ironic when we remember that the 'revisionist' request for more peaceful means by his younger followers was the primary reason for the movement to reaffirm their dedication to Maoism and the SPPW in 1991. While it is impossible to predict its effect on the movement's future, we can conclude that the CPP's seemingly rock-solid ideological dedication is fundamentally altered.

¹²⁹ Christine Bell and Helia Farahnoosh, 'Chronology of Peace Processes and Peace Agreements: The Philippines and the National Democratic Front' (Political Settlements Research Programme, 2015), https://www.politicalsettlements.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/2015_BP_3_Bell_Farahnoosh_PA-X-Philippines-Chronology.pdf.

¹³⁰ Tse Tung, *Selected Military Writings of Mao Tse Tung*, 227.

¹³¹ Hedman, 'Beyond Boycott: The Philippine Left and Electoral Politics after 1986', 95.

Conclusions

Whoever aims to learn more about the Communist Party of the Philippines will likely conclude that even though the party is still active, it is severely stagnated. The fact that the existing body of literature presents this image is due to two erroneous assumptions. The first stems from the once-popular ‘end of history’ idea, which claimed that the end of the Cold War was synonymous with the collapse of global communism and therefore with the decreasing decisiveness of insurgents that identified with it. The second assumption is that the CPP’s ideological dedication is as strong as the movement has claimed since its foundation in 1968. As these assumptions took away much of the incentives to further study the communist insurgency in the Philippines, the number of new publications on the CPP decreased after the 1990s. As a result, the academic perspective on the CPP grew limited and outdated. To challenge it, this thesis aimed to examine the extent to which the Communist Party of the Philippines’ dedication to Maoism and its Strategy of the Protracted People’s War changed since 1991. It did so by making a distinction between the movement’s public and private activities. Public activities were examined through publications by the movement that are available to any interested party. Private activities were investigated using two interviews with CPP-founder and ideological leader Jose Maria Sison, conducted in March and December 2020. In an extensive qualitative analysis, the pre-1991 private and public activities were then compared to those after 1991 to shed light on potential continuities or discontinuities.

Throughout the entire analysis, CPP-activities were compared to the ideas developed by Karl Marx and Mao Tse-tung. Both men emphasize the crucial role of violence in revolutionary struggle. Those who seek fundamental change but aim to do so by peaceful means are consistently dismissed as ‘revisionist’. Mao additionally developed the Strategy of the Protracted People’s War, which does not merely advocate a violent approach but also a struggle based in the countryside and focused on raising extensive popular support among the working class. It is these ideological and strategical ideas that the CPP has publicly claimed to follow since its foundation in 1968. The movement went even further by combining the ideas of both men and concluding that urban struggle is equal to parliamentary or legal struggle, and therefore to revisionism.

What became clear from the analysis is that even though the CPP keeps publicly affirming its strict dedication to Maoism and the SPPW after 1991, the private ideas during this period show an increasing tendency towards a more moderated approach. In 2009, 2013, and 2018 anniversary editions of its magazine ‘Ang Bayan’, the CPP claims to be following the

Maoist ideology and emphasizes the importance of raising popular support in the countryside. The rhetoric in these documents additionally demonstrates an unambiguous dedication to Mao's Strategy of the Protracted People's War. When Jose Maria Sison was interviewed in 2020, however, several of his statements indicated that recent ideas on the struggle's future are not as strictly violent and rural as the movement likes to claim. First, he states that the movement's political branch, the NDF, is already involved in a 'legal struggle in the urban areas', which he labels 'peaceful operations'.¹³² Second, he mentions the possibility of the election of a non-communist that would be willing to form an alliance with the CPP, like he said happened in the case of Hugo Chávez and Evo Morales. He introduces this as an alternative to the original objective of overthrowing the incumbent government. Third, he expresses his willingness to form an alliance with the incumbent government to fight poverty. He justifies this controversial idea by referring to the collaboration between Mao and Chiang Kai-shek, just like he used the Philippines' history of oppression to justify the CPP's violent struggle.

It has thus become clear that the various discussed events caused the movement to adopt an approach after 1991 that is much more pragmatic than their ideologically purist public statements suggest. Judged by his own standards, Sison's statements could even be labeled 'revisionist'. While this late revisionism is, strikingly, a phenomenon that can also be recognized in Engels', Marx' and Mao's thinking, the nature of this research does not allow us to consider Sison's statements representative for the entire movement.¹³³ It therefore lies beyond the scope of this study to make suggestions on the extent to which this newly discovered stance holds the potential to lift the military and political deadlock between the CPP and the GRP. Therefore, further research should seek a more complete representation of the CPP's willingness to cooperate, beyond Jose Maria Sison's ideas.

On an academic level, this thesis proved that the 'end of history' view remains influential in academia, despite being considered outdated. While the impact of the end of the Cold War has undoubtedly been fundamental to many communist insurgents, it became clear that assuming it marked an 'unabashed victory' on global communism is untenable. Furthermore, it showed that efforts to look past insurgents' statements and self-imposed labels can offer interesting insights. Here, especially the private/public dichotomy proved to be useful. In doing all this, this thesis contributes to a more complete body of literature on the communist

¹³² Sison, interview by author, 8 March 2020.

¹³³ See for example: Samuel Hollander, 'Marx and Engels on Constitutional Reform vs. Revolution: Their Revisionism Reviewed', *Theoria* 57, no. 122 (1 January 2010); Lowell Dittmer, 'Chinese Revisionism in Comparative Perspective', *Studies in Comparative Communism* 13, no. 1 (1980): 3–40; Steger, 'Friedrich Engels and the Origins of German Revisionism'.

insurgency in the Philippines in particular and post-Cold War communist insurgencies in the Global South in general.

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