

‘Popoy’ Lagman: A Stalinist rival of the Communist Party of the Philippines

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In the course of its campaign defending the scholarship of Joseph Scalice against Stalinist slanders from the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its ideological leader, Jose Maria Sison, the *World Socialist Web Site* has corresponded with a good many workers and young people in the Philippines. A recurring question is about the political program of Filemon ‘Popoy’ Lagman, a former leader of the CPP, who broke from the organisation in the early 1990s to found a new party opposed to its perspective of “protracted people’s war” in the countryside.

Lagman, in a set of three counter-theses written in 1994, sharply criticized the program of Sison and the CPP, for its claims that the Philippine economy was semi-feudal, that the party should pursue a strategy of “protracted people’s war,” and for its failure to explicitly include concrete references to socialist revolution in the party program. Lagman called for an urban movement of an “independent party” of the Filipino working class.

On the basis of these criticisms, Lagman went on to organize a breakaway trade union federation, Bukluran ng Manggagawang Pilipino (BMP) or Movement of Filipino Workers, and a political party, Sanlakas, in the mid-1990s. Lagman was assassinated by four gunmen in 2001, under circumstances that have never been explained. The BMP broke up into a number of rival organizations at around this time, but none of the political offshoots has ever provided a public accounting for the split.

Did Lagman’s perspective, and the political organizations he led, constitute a revolutionary, working-class alternative to the CPP?

The CPP was founded in 1968 on the program of Maoism—the Chinese variant of Stalinism, which argued that in countries of a belated capitalist development, such as the Philippines, the tasks of the revolution were not yet socialist in character but national and democratic only. A section of the capitalist class, they claimed, would necessarily play a progressive role in this first revolutionary stage. A key task of the party was to find and ally with this progressive section, and the CPP sought to use the strategy of armed struggle in the countryside as a means of securing the support of workers and peasants for the formation of an alliance with the so-called national bourgeoisie in the struggle for national democracy.

Lagman came from an influential political family. He was the son of a judge, and his brother is now a multi-term congressman. Popoy Lagman was a journalism student at the University of the Philippines (UP) in 1971, and like an entire social layer, he was radicalized by the unrest of the times and after a year went underground with the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), when then President Ferdinand Marcos imposed martial law on the country.

The CPP formed an alliance with the bourgeois opposition to Marcos in the early 1970s. When the president imposed military dictatorship in 1972, the majority of the capitalist class, including Marcos’ opponents, embraced the dictatorship, which protected their profit interests against social unrest. It was not until the late 1970s, when they felt conditions had been adequately stabilized, that the bourgeois opposition began to

organize itself again.

Lagman was secretary of the Manila-Rizal Regional Committee (MRRC) of the CPP at the time. Because he led the urban sections of the party to participate in the 1978 Interim Batasang Pambansa elections, on a common platform with the bourgeois opposition to Marcos, the CPP leadership removed Lagman as secretary of the MRRC. With Sison in prison, Rodolfo Salas was leading the party and advocating a boycott and an exclusive focus on the armed struggle in the countryside. The function of the Manila committee, Salas and the majority argued, was to raise funds for the armed struggle and channel workers to the countryside.

Lagman did not oppose the majority of the CPP leadership from the perspective of the independence of the working class, but from the conception that the time for an open alliance with a section of the elite in electoral politics had returned. He correctly sensed that the bourgeoisie was beginning to turn against Marcos and that an alliance with the ruling class opposition was now possible.

The perspective of boycott, however, continued to dominate the central committee. This policy led the CPP to boycott the 1986 snap election, a strategy that they rapidly came to regret, as the People Power movement ousted Marcos in February of that year. Because of its boycott decision the party did not directly participate in the overthrow of Marcos, and was initially excluded from the political largesse of the incoming Aquino administration.

Lagman was seen as vindicated within the party and restored as head of the MRRC.

The period from 1986 to 1991 was one of upheaval in the party. It expressed the crisis of global Stalinism, which in the face of the globalization of production, led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union and capitalist restoration in China. Sison, released from prison in 1986, went into political exile and sought to restore his control over the party from the Netherlands. He attempted to establish relations with Gorbachev and abandoned all of the Maoist criticisms of “modern revisionism” that he had once directed at the Soviet Union. He hailed Gorbachev’s policies just as Gorbachev was in the act of dissolving the Soviet Union. The party in the Philippines, meanwhile, published a statement praising the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime for its brutal crackdown on the Chinese working class and youth in Tiananmen Square.

The disorientation that gripped the party led to acrimonious debates. In what would emerge as a pattern over the next decades, layers of the party, which, as a result of the party’s support for Aquino, had tied themselves closely to her administration, broke away from the party when, in 1987, it reluctantly denounced Aquino as reactionary after she oversaw a massacre of peasant protesters.

Lagman emerged as the leading voice in the party advocating a shift from the armed struggle in the countryside to a more urban movement based in the working class as a means of participating more directly in establishment politics. The party imploded in 1991 and one of the fragments retained the name. This fragment was tied to the restored

leadership of Joma Sison, who denounced his opponents as “Gorbachevites”—having buried his own recent praise of the Stalinist leader—and “Trotskyites.”

Lagman broke from the CPP in 1991 and founded Bukluran ng Manggagawang Pilipino (BMP) and the political party, Sanlakas. As a result of Lagman’s political ties to the urban working class and the opposition which he expressed to the protracted people’s war of Sison and company, his perspective has long been depicted as representing an orthodox or genuinely Marxist conception in opposition to the Maoism of the CPP. What precisely did Lagman argue?

A variant of Stalinism

Lagman’s most important writings are his 1994 Counter-Theses, a set of three documents criticizing the political platform of Sison and the CPP. In these documents, Lagman presented himself as a “Leninist,” and used passages drawn from the writings of Lenin, without any reference to their historical context or the development of Lenin’s thought, as a means of refuting Sison.

Lagman approached Sison and his politics in the same manner that Sison had approached his own Stalinist rivals in the 1960s—as the great misleaders of the movement, rather than as representatives of Stalinism. Despite all of his criticisms, Lagman shared the core tenets of Stalinism with Sison. Their disagreements were over how best to implement this program.

Lagman, long engaged in political work that put him in direct contact with working class of Metro Manila, sought to elaborate a strategy that would retain the support of this class and mobilize it behind the Stalinist first stage and its necessary alliance with the national bourgeoisie.

While Lagman himself might have denied it, his criticisms amounted to an attempt to turn the CPP away from the Maoist variant of Stalinism which it upheld, back toward the Soviet Stalinist perspective: a two-stage revolution and an alliance with the capitalist class, but a party based predominantly in the urban working class and with a program that made explicit references to socialism.

Drawing on Lenin’s 1899 work *The Development of Capitalism in Russia*, Lagman attacked Sison’s argument that the Philippine economy was semi-feudal. The Philippine economy, however distorted, was a capitalist economy. It was for this reason, he argued, that the strategy of protracted people’s war and its orientation to the countryside and the peasantry was fundamentally incorrect.

In one of his three documents, *PPDR: Class Line vs. Mass Line*, Lagman criticized Sison’s Program for a People’s Democratic Revolution (PPDR), for not articulating the class perspective of the proletariat. It was necessary, he insisted, to speak openly of socialism, the supposed second stage of the revolution. Only in this way could workers be won to the so-called national democratic struggle.

“How does Sison intend to arouse the working class, not only to join the people’s revolution but to play a leading role, when he does not even talk about the workers’ own revolution—the socialist revolution—and all he talks about is the peoples’ revolution!” he wrote.

In a similar vein, Lagman criticized Sison for never denouncing the evils of capitalism, but only of feudalism and imperialism. If the party did not denounce capitalist exploitation, it would not secure the support of workers, he stated.

Attacking Lagman, Sison wrote: “It is dishonest, demagogic and utopian to insist that socialism is the immediate goal under conditions that [sic] the people are still dominated and exploited by US imperialism and domestic feudalism.”

In a very revealing response, Lagman exclaimed: “But who is insisting?” Certainly Lagman was not. Like Sison, he told workers that the tasks of the revolution were not yet socialist, but he sought to secure their support by denouncing capitalism and dangling the promise of socialism before them as a future goal.

Lagman likewise agreed with Sison that in the first stage of the revolution an alliance with a section of the capitalist class was essential. “True, the character of the democratic revolution is, that it is a struggle of the ‘whole people,’” he wrote.

In his second document, “PSR [*Philippine Society and Revolution*]: The Semifeudal Alibi for Protracted People’s War,” Lagman insistently concluded:

“After bringing into the forefront and emphasizing more strongly the bourgeois, capitalist basic economic process in the socio-economic evolution of Philippine society, does it mean that the necessity for a people’s democratic revolution is henceforth undermined, bypassed and sublimated, and a socialist revolution proposed as the immediate historical task? Nothing of this sort.”

In his final document from the 1994 Counter-Theses, “PPW [Protracted People’s War]: A New Type of Revolution of the Wrong Type,” Lagman was so determined to uphold the Stalinist two-stage theory that he attacked Sison for supposedly combining these stages. Sison and the CPP, he claimed, were being deceptive—they were attempting to seize power under the banner of national democracy but they intended to secretly use this to immediately implement the socialist stage. Lagman maintained that a protracted period of capitalist development was necessary before a socialist revolution was possible.

The majority of Lagman’s quotations from Lenin are drawn from the earliest stages of Lenin’s political development, in particular his writings in 1899. The two-stage theory and the progressive role of the national bourgeoisie, the perspective shared by Lagman and Sison, was the program of Plekhanov and the Mensheviks. In his examination of the suppressed 1905 revolution in Russia, Lenin put forward the perspective of the Democratic Dictatorship of the Proletariat and the Peasantry. While Lenin at this point still argued that a first stage was necessary, he explicitly repudiated the notion that the capitalist class could play any progressive role. It had become a counter-revolutionary class.

Leon Trotsky agreed with Lenin that the bourgeoisie could play no progressive role. However, in his program of Permanent Revolution, elaborated at the same time, he argued that the working class in carrying out national and democratic tasks of the revolution would be compelled to take socialist measures. The revolution could not be divided into first and second stages. The task of the party was to organize workers for the seizure of power on the basis of a socialist and internationalist program.

Lenin returned to Russia in 1917 and issued his April Theses, rejecting any support for the bourgeois provisional government and calling for all power to be transferred to the Soviets, which signified the seizure of power by the working class with the support of the peasantry. Lenin abandoned his earlier perspective of the Democratic Dictatorship. Trotsky’s program of Permanent Revolution became the guiding principle of the October Revolution. Lenin strongly opposed Stalin and Kamenev who had given “critical support” to the provisional government.

For all Lagman’s talk of an “independent party of the working class,” his program was not that of Lenin but of the Mensheviks. His explicit call for an alliance with a section of the capitalism class, meant the political subordination of the working class to the bourgeoisie and the rejection of any fight for its political independence. Where Sison sought to secure the support workers of with reference to a protracted people’s war, Lagman sought to do so by abstract denunciations of capitalism and pie-in-the-sky promises of socialism in some political future. Both were Stalinists; their differences were purely tactical.

Political Legacy

Sanlakas, the political party founded under the leadership of Lagman, threw itself into electoral politics and in 1996 secured a seat in the House of Representatives. The speeches delivered by Renato Magtubo, the Sanlakas congressman, reveal the class character of Lagman’s party. On November 8, 1999, Magtubo delivered a privilege speech in which he told

the assembled legislature:

I appeal to your sense of justness and fairness: not for a just wage or a fair price for the labor of an ordinary workingman which, I grant, is a luxury our country cannot afford. All I am asking is to pay the average worker the value of his labor power and redeem for all workers the lost value of their wages eroded by price increases ... I am aware that I have antagonized the sensibilities of many of you in my prior privilege speeches. I extend my sincere apologies. But I pray and I plead.... [A]mid the complexity of economics, one simple truth stands out: A happy worker is a hard worker. This is the key to economic progress and social justice. Let us give our workers a Merry Christmas, and they will work hard for our country in the coming millennium. *Mabuhay ang Uring Manggagawa!* [Long live the working class!] Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Sanlakas and the BMP engaged in precisely the same class collaborationist politics as the CPP. Sanlakas came to national prominence for its radical rhetoric demanding the removal of President Joseph Estrada in 2000. Alongside the CPP and its various front organizations, Sanlakas facilitated the constitutional coup carried out by the military brass that replaced Estrada with Vice President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. When relations with Arroyo soured, Sanlakas along with the various groups that broke away from Lagman's BMP all took part in the plotting to remove her from office. In 2010, Sanlakas buried all of its anti-Estrada rhetoric and ran for office on Estrada's presidential slate. A leading member of Sanlakas served as Estrada's spokesperson.

While Lagman's political organization fragmented into a number of rival political tendencies, all of the offshoots shared his Stalinist program of nationalism and orientation to a section of the capitalist class. All shared Lagman's orientation: using references to the working class, to capitalist exploitation, and to the need for socialism as a means of once again chaining the working class to their capitalist oppressors.

This is the program of Stalinism and it is political poison.

Trotsky's theory of Permanent Revolution remains as relevant today in the Philippines as it did in 1917 in Russia when it became the basis for the seizure of power by the working class, leading the peasantry and urban poor. In opposition to the nationalist class collaboration of Stalinism, Permanent Revolution argues for the genuine independence of the working class and the repudiation of every form of nationalism.

The national and democratic tasks, above all the solution to the agrarian problem, in countries of belated capitalist development such as the Philippines require an assault on the capitalist property relations. The capitalist class has demonstrated over the course of a century, precisely as Trotsky argued that it would, that it is incapable of these democratic tasks. It is not a separate class from the landowners, but emerges out of, and is tied to, the landed elite; nor are its interests hostile to imperialist monopoly capital, but are inextricably bound up with it by finance, the world market and production supply chains. They will suppress, with military might and authoritarian rule, any serious revolutionary stirrings from the working class in the Philippines. The history of the last hundred years bears this out in spades.

The allies of the Filipino working class are not the so-called national bourgeoisie, but the international working class and the Filipino peasantry. The majority of the peasantry is deeply impoverished but seeks to resolve their economic straits through the expansion of property ownership. They cannot articulate an independent political program, but will either follow the leadership of the working class to put an end to their poverty through the overthrow of capitalism, or remain tied to the capitalist class in the

vain hope that it will secure and expand their property rights. The working class wins over the peasantry, not through an armed struggle in the countryside in alliance with capitalist interests, but by taking up the fight for socialism that will end the oppressive domination of the countryside by landlords and usurers.

The success of a socialist revolution in the Philippines, as in any country, depends on the expansion of the revolution into other countries. The Stalinist perspective of "socialism in one country" is a reactionary utopia. As Trotsky famously wrote in *Permanent Revolution*, "the socialist revolution begins on the national arena, it unfolds on the international arena, and is completed on the world arena." To build a revolutionary movement in the Philippines, workers must turn to their class brothers and sisters around the globe. This does not mean empty phrase-mongering about international solidarity that is the stock-in-trade of Stalinist demagogues. The international perspective of Trotskyism is the bedrock principle for the formulation of the political program and tasks of the Filipino working class.

Only on the basis of an internationalist and socialist perspective can the Filipino working class defend its interests. This is the program of the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI). All those who are looking for a genuine political alternative should study this program, contact the *World Socialist Web Site* and take up the fight to build a section of the ICFI in the Philippines.



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