

The Comprehensive Agreement on Social and Economic Reforms: An Alternative Vision of Philippine Development?

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Abstract: In the year 2017 communist revolutionaries represented by the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP) and the Philippine government were negotiating on a framework for implementing socio-economic reforms in the context of peace talks between the two sides that had been engaged in armed conflict for the last five decades. This transformative agenda pushed by the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), which had been at the helm of one of the world's longest-running communist insurgencies since 1968, is articulated in the Comprehensive Agreement on Social and Economic Reforms (CASER). While further progress in these discussions had been scuttled after President Duterte aborted peace talks and resumed counterinsurgency operations against revolutionary forces in 2018, I argue that the document nonetheless offers an alternative vision of Philippine development. Premised on the rejection of neocolonialism and elite domination diagnosed as the systemic roots of Philippine underdevelopment, CASER forwards state-led agrarian reform and national industrialization as stepping stones to attaining national development and safeguard the rights of marginalized sectors. CASER elaborates anti-imperialist intellectual currents that had germinated during the American colonial and subsequent post-colonial periods and which gained a truly mass dimension with the growing influence of the CPP during the resistance to the Marcos dictatorship from 1972 to 1986. Yet the ascendance of global capitalism's neoliberal phase, the general retreat of leftwing movements, and cultural turn in academia have resulted in the sidelining of serious scholarly consideration of important conversations on what might constitute a people-oriented development and socialist transition. My paper hopes to contribute to filling this gap by critically interrogating CASER's vision of rural progress and sovereign industrialization in the Philippines, with a focus on the potentials and blind spots of its elaboration of questions stemming from the neoliberal transformations of the Philippine economy and the worsening global climate crisis.

Keywords: Philippine Left, Industrialization, Agrarian Question, National Question, CASER

Introduction

In the year 2017 communist revolutionaries represented by the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP) and the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) were negotiating on a framework for implementing socio-economic reforms in the context of peace negotiations between the two sides that had been engaged in armed conflict for the last five decades. This transformative agenda pushed by the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), which forms the core of the NDFP, is articulated in its draft of the Comprehensive Agreement on Social and Economic Reforms (CASER).

Founded in 26 December 1968, on the birthday of Chinese revolutionary leader Mao Zedong, the CPP had been at the helm of one of the world's longest-running communist insurgencies in the world. The CPP's armed wing is the New People's Army (NPA), whose ranks are composed mainly of poor peasants, and which was established on 29 March 1969. The NDFP,

the CPP-led revolutionary coalition of underground organizations which subsequently represented the revolutionary movement in peace negotiations with the Philippine government, was created on 24 April 1973 (Caouette, 2004).

The CPP articulated its aims in terms of advancing a National Democratic (ND) revolution aimed at fulfilling the bourgeois democratic tasks of overthrowing foreign imperialist domination and implementing genuine agrarian reform to lay the ground for national industrialization and a socialist transition. These objectives were to be achieved by means of armed revolution through a Maoist-inspired people's war that mobilizes the poor peasantry in the countryside as its main force (Sison, 2021c).

The communist-led ND movement was a product of the upsurge of revolutionary contestations of the global sixties. In the Philippines, this global period of capitalist crisis and people's resistance saw the resurgence of anti-imperialist politics after its retreat with the defeat of the Huk peasant rebellion in the 1950s. This revolt was led by the first Philippine Communist Party, the Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas or PKP-1930. Inspired by the Cultural Revolution in China and the heroic Vietnamese resistance against US imperialism, the ND movement was initiated by radicalized intelligentsia who split with the PKP-1930 to build a new movement centered on the CPP (Mongaya, Karlo Mikhail & Raymundo, 2020).

The CPP would spearhead the armed resistance to the martial law regime imposed by the dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr. on 21 September 1972. The US-backed Marcos dictatorship will be forced out of power on 25 February 1986 by a popular uprising. Despite being sidelined from this last chapter of the anti-dictatorship struggle, the communist-led underground struggle played a pivotal role in weakening the dictatorship and paving the way for its eventual overthrow (Daroy et al., 1988; Quimpo, 2008).

The first peace talks between the GRP and the NDFP took place in 1986 in the months following the fall of the Marcos dictatorship. The negotiations were localized in different sites in the Philippines amidst a ceasefire between the NPA and the Philippine state's Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). The shooting by state forces of thousands of peasants who marched to the Presidential Palace on 22 January 1987 to demand agrarian reform led to the scuttling of these negotiations (Sison, 2021a). The return to bourgeois democracy after two decades of Marcos's turn to fascist rule was accompanied by the persistence of the CPP-led armed struggle. Yet the CPP was then already reeling from internal schisms that led to a split in the ND movement in 1992, the unrelenting counterinsurgency operations by succeeding post-Marcos administrations, and the general retreat of radical politics globally amidst the fall of the former Soviet Union (Caouette, 2015).

Learning from the failures of previous peace talks, communist revolutionaries put together the Hague Declaration in 1992 as the main framework for pursuing peace negotiations with government (Sison, 2021d). In this document signed by both the NDFP and GRP representatives, a set of stages for agreeing on various dimensions of the peace deal are put in place before the final laying down of arms and decommissioning of combatants. For the revolutionaries, this mechanism avoids their immediate disarming without securing any of their demands which is simply another term for capitulation. The first stage involves an agreement on human rights and international humanitarian law, which had been signed in 1998 under the administration of President Joseph Estrada. The second stage, which was the substance of talks during the term of President Rodrigo Duterte in 2017, revolves around socio-economic

reforms. The third stage is for the political, constitutional, and electoral reforms. The final stage discusses the final end of hostilities and disposition of armed forces.

There had been on and off peace negotiations between every sitting government and the NDFP since 1992. The present administration of President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr., the son and namesake of the late dictator Marcos Sr., has just recently expressed its intention to revive the peace negotiations (Subingsubing, 2023). Some peace advocates, scholars, and state functionaries accuse the CPP-NDFP leadership of an instrumental view of the peace negotiations as a means to secure concessions from the GRP and gain advantages for its guerrilla war rather than as an honest to goodness means of ending hostilities (Quimpo, 2006; Santos Jr., 2016). Yet I argue that for the most part the real bottlenecks in the negotiations has to do with the GRP’s militaristic counterinsurgency framework which only seeks the surrender of revolutionary forces without substantially addressing the social roots of armed conflict, thereby making a just and real peace impossible.

Despite these blockages in the peace negotiations that led to the dashing of any agreement over socio-economic reforms in 2017, I argue that the NDFP’s CASER offers an alternative vision of Philippine development. As will be discussed in this article, CASER elaborates anti-imperialist intellectual currents that had germinated during the American colonial and subsequent post-colonial periods but which gained a truly mass dimension with the growing influence of the CPP during the resistance to the Marcos dictatorship from 1972 to 1986. Further discussion of these anti-imperialist alternatives have been stymied by the ascendancy of neoliberal globalization, the retreat of leftwing movements, and the cultural turn in academia in recent decades. This is reflected in the way media and scholarly coverage of the negotiations largely shunned any discussion of CASER’s substantive program.

My paper seeks to fill this gap by critically interrogating CASER’s vision of rural progress and sovereign industrialization in the Philippines. This discussion gains even more relevance today amidst the stated intention of both the NDFP and GRP panels to resurrect the peace talks in the coming days. In the first three contextual sections, I retrace the evolution of anti-imperialist articulations in the Philippine context which form the precursors of the vision embodied in CASER. It also provides in very broad strokes the historical context to the communist armed conflict and peace talks in the Philippines. The third to fifth sections offers substantive discussions on the contents of CASER. The last section shares my conclusions.

Retracing Philippine anti-imperialist articulations

The constellation of social forces, movements, coalitions, people’s organizations, intellectuals, and individuals that comprise the Philippine Left as broadly conceived has historically offered alternative visions of agrarian development and industrial transition in the Philippines. These ideas were premised on the rejection of neocolonialism and elite domination diagnosed to be the systemic roots of Philippine underdevelopment. The Philippine Left forwarded land redistribution and national industrialization as stepping stones to providing for the people’s needs towards the path of a socialist future.

The initial articulations of these anti-imperialist currents can be traced to the emergence of the workers and peasant movements under direct American colonial rule in the early decades of the 20th Century. Workers agitation for higher wages and better working conditions, which attained an initial organizational breakthrough with the founding of the labor federation Union Democratica Obrera (UOD) in 1902, had direct anti-colonial underpinnings (Scott, 1992). In

the following decades, the incipient labor movement in the Philippines will splinter between those adhering to notions of class collaboration and a more radical group of workers pressing for class struggle (Guillermo, 2009). The more radical working class leaders exemplified by Crisanto Evangelista were inspired by the example of the 1917 October Revolution and linked up with the Red International of Labour Unions (RILU) and the Far East section of the Communist International (Comintern). On 7 November 1930, Evangelista established the PKP-1930 (Richardson, 2011).

The American colonizers perpetuated the land monopoly by a few big landowners and furthered the subordination of local agriculture to the export imperatives of the world market and foreign monopoly capital (Borras, 2007). The erosion of the traditional subsistence guarantees among an increasingly landless peasantry and the brutal working conditions of farm workers in plantations producing export crops generated rural unrest. Peasant dissent gave birth to militant struggles for land rights, anti-colonial movements like the Sakdal in Southern Luzon as well as the persistence of millenarian peasant rebellions (Constantino & Constantino, Letizia, 1975).

The seeds of an anti-imperialist nationalism began to be articulated by the PKP-1938 as expressed in the program approved its 1938 congress (Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas, 1938). The emergence of a militant Marxist-inspired nationalism in the Philippines is often attributed in scholarly accounts to the appropriation by 1960s anti-imperialist youth activists of the nationalism of Filipino bourgeois politicians such as Claro M. Recto (Abinales, 2001). Yet as I discuss elsewhere, the call for economic nationalism, sovereign industrialization, and land reform as democratic demands towards the attainment of socialism is already featured in the literature of the PKP-1930 (Salomon & Mongaya, forthcoming).

The granting of nominal independence to the Philippines in 1946 did little to overturn the country's political, economic as well as cultural dependence on its former colonial master, the US. The PKP-1930 participated in the 1946 elections in a "Democratic Alliance" coalition ticket with the bourgeois Nacionalista Party. Six of their congressional representatives in Central Luzon districts won the polls but were impeached on trumped charges for their radical stances. This curtailing of democratic spaces as well as pressure from its restive peasant base sparked the Huk rebellion centered mainly in Central Luzon but also reaching the Island of Panay in the Visayas (Kerkvliet, 2014; Mongaya, forthcoming).

The Huk rebellion will be crushed by the middle of the 1950s, spurring a period of reaction and anti-communist witch-hunting against all forms of radical dissent (Simbulan, 2018). Yet this same period gave rise to nationalist assertions among a small but growing class of domestic bourgeoisie investing in manufacturing and light industry that produce commodity goods for local consumption (Rivera, 1994). The aspirations of this national bourgeoisie was consistently articulated by nationalist politicians like Claro M. Recto and occasionally even in the rhetoric of sitting governments like in the "Filipino First Policy" of President Carlos Garcia (Bello et al., 1982).

A more militant expression of this nationalist resurgence found a home among university-based youth who were radicalized by the wave of national liberation struggles then shaking much of the world. This radical intelligentsia also responded to the unresolved crisis of underdevelopment that enveloped the Philippine economy and pushed back against intellectual conservatism and anti-communist hysteria. Some important personages in this milieu include

Renato Constantino (1975) as well as the economist Alejandro Lichauco (1973) whose most important works were published by the radical Monthly Review Press.

One of the key figures from the Philippine global sixties is Jose Maria Sison, who founded the ND mass organization Patriotic Youth or Kabataang Makabayan (KM) in 1964. Then a member of the PKP-1930, Sison was instrumental in articulating the anti-imperialist nationalism of this time in various essays, speeches, and statements collected in the book *Struggle for National Democracy* (1972). He led a split with the PKP-1930 in 1968 over debates on revolutionary perspectives and went on to found the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). Sison, from a Maoist perspective, criticized the PKP-1930's alignment with the former Soviet Union and its promotion of peaceful coexistence with Western imperialism and a peaceful road to socialism (Sison, 2013).

The CPP found not only ideological but also material sustenance from Maoist China, whose revolutionary prescriptions for peasant wars in underdeveloped rural societies were adapted by Sison to Philippine conditions (Sison, 2017, 2021c, 2021b). There were two attempts by China, albeit failed ones, to smuggle arms to the NPA (Jones, 1989). The new party's rural-based armed struggle will enable it to take the helm of the resistance to the Marcos dictatorship, which succeeded in decimating legal activism and the bourgeois opposition. The PKP-1930's decision to collaborate with the dictatorship in 1974 meanwhile rendered it incapable of serving as a real platform for resistance (Bello, 1986).

Confronting the Marcos dictatorship and beyond

It was during the period of the anti-dictatorship struggle that alternative visions of people-centered economic development took on a truly mass dimension with the growing influence of the CPP amidst the resistance to the Marcos dictatorship from 1972 to 1986. From a few small firearms and combatants in secluded areas in Central Luzon, the CPP-NPA had expanded its armed presence in rural guerrilla bases nationwide and exercised considerable influence even in urban areas through underground networks that provide support to the armed struggle in the countryside (Caouette, 2004).

The success of the ND movement in adapting to fascist conditions, however, also spurred heated discussions and debates among its cadres and militants as it confronted circumstances that were not directly addressed in the foundational texts by Sison which serve as their ideological guidepost. One key flashpoint involved the characterization of the Philippine mode of production as either semi-feudal or semi-capitalist, which partisans of either side interpret as endorsing either the persistence of a rural-based guerrilla war or shifting to a city-based insurrectionist approach (Caouette, 2004).

Outside the CPP, intellectuals and academics associated with the PKP-1930 suggested that the Marcos dictatorship was in fact the representative of a Filipino national bourgeoisie who was breaking "feudalism" in the countryside and pursuing the industrialization of the Philippine economy (Matorres, 2023). At the onset of martial law, Marcos had promised to utilize the state for developmental aims and even launched 11 major industrial projects to build up the country's domestic manufacturing capacity. In truth, the dictatorship was an openly predatory state that facilitated the plunder of public coffers by a handful of cronies and the further opening of the economy to foreign capital (Bello, 2023). With the country's becoming one of the first recipients of the World Bank's neoliberal Structural Adjustment Program in 1979, all the

bombast about local industrial development were replaced with the imperatives of greater liberalization and export-led growth (Bello et al., 1982).

The 1980s saw a flowering of scholarship on the Philippine political economy and wider academic interest on the topic (Abinales, 2010; Bello et al., 1982; Constantino, 1979, 1982; Ofreneo, 1980). The work of activist researchers in independent research institutions and NGOs outside academia that provide service to mass movements also enriched different dimensions of the Philippine social condition (Africa, 2013; Mongaya, 2022).

The overthrow of the Marcos dictatorship in 1986 heralded the transition away from fascist dictatorship but without the more fundamental overturning of elite class rule. The CPP persisted in the revolutionary struggle, but its failure to take a commanding role in the final push that toppled the dictatorship, the simmering debates on strategy and social analysis, and growing confusion amid the global retreat of anti-systemic movements would lead to widening rifts within its ranks. Schisms in the CPP and the ND movement came into the open in 1992 with the launching of its key leadership of what was called a rectification movement to salvage itself from the decline of the previous decade (Liwanag, 2023b).

Those who heeded the call to “Rectify Our Errors, Reaffirm Our Basic Principles” (Liwanag, 2023a) were labelled the reaffirmists. They diagnosed the deviations from the strict adherence to the strategies laid down in the writings of Sison as the reason for the revolutionary movement’s weakening. The reaffirmists asserted the continuing validity of the description of the Philippine economy as semifeudal as well as of the rural-based people’s war strategy. Party groups and individuals who opposed this return to the organization’s founding doctrines were labelled the rejectionists. These currents that exited the CPP’s fold further fragmented into various factions with diverse readings of Philippine conditions and prescriptions for social transformation.

Some rejectionist centered in the national capital argued for a more “workerist” approach centered on organizing the urban proletariat to push for an insurrection. This current’s chief ideologue Ka Popoy Filemon Lagman, secretary of the erstwhile CPP Manila-Rizal Regional Party Committee, penned several “Leninist” critiques of Sison’s semifeudal thesis (Lagman, 1994). Other currents, such as the Rebolusyonaryong Partido ng Manggagawa-Mindanao [Revolutionary Workers Party-Mindanao] which originated from the CPP’s Central Mindanao Party Regional Committee, retained a politico-military framework but without adhering to the stageist formulation of the CPP founding documents. This latter group will eventually engage in localized peace talks and focus on development work and political organizing while retaining the armed capacity to defend its local bases.

Other rejectionists will coalesce with reformist social democratic formations outside the ND movement to propose a more civil society and electoral approach to push for reforms. Some of the ideas of this latter current were given articulation in the 1993 Conference of the Forum for Philippine Alternatives (FOPA) held in the San Francisco Bay Area, California. Walden Bello (1993) asserted in this convocation the most consistent alternative vision of development that combats neoliberal structural adjustment and prioritizes state-led agrarian reform, rural-urban synergy, and sustainable national industrialization. However, other contributors to the forum had expressed more openness to neoliberal globalization and an ambivalence to the project of autocentric development (Bello & Gershman, 1993). This period also saw the emergence of open peasant mass movements agitating for land reform outside the ambit of the Maoist guerrilla war framework as well as vigorous scholarship and debates on the Philippine

government's agrarian reform experience (Aguilar, 2005; Borras, 2007; Franco & Borras, 2005, 2009; Morales & Putzel, 2001; Putzel, 1992).

The wider cultural turn in academia, the general retreat of Left movements, and the Philippines' intensified neoliberal integration into globalized value systems, however, have accompanied the waning of serious scholarly consideration of these important conversations on what might constitute a socialist-oriented agrarian and industrial transition. The hegemony of neoliberalism among policy-makers was partly encouraged by the false equating of an activist development state with the corrupt rule of the Marcos dictatorship (Bello, 2009). At the same time, nationalist and indigenization currents in scholarship took a turn to culturalism at the expense of more intensive study of political economic questions (Guillermo, 2008).

A blueprint for delinking and autocentric development?

Fast forward to 2016, the continuing absence of structural change has meant mass disillusionment with the bourgeois democratic order. Yet the inability of the Philippine Left to provide a counterhegemonic alternative has led to Mindanao-based warlord Rodrigo Duterte to win the presidential polls on the back of populist promises to end criminality, prioritize the masses, and go after corrupt oligarchs (Mongaya, 2023). Borrowing the rhetoric of the ND movement, Duterte talked of governing "from the masses, for the masses" and vehemently criticized US imperialism. Duterte freed political prisoners, appointed ND personalities as ministers in his cabinet, and restarted the stalled peace talks with the NDFP. It is this conjuncture that saw important discussion between the GRP and NDFP panels on socio-economic reforms as a key handle towards ending the armed conflict in the Philippines.

The first version of the NDFP draft for Comprehensive Agreement Social and Economic Reforms (CASER) was crafted in 1998 (NDFP Reciprocal Working Committee on Social and Economic Reforms, 2018, p. 1). In the face of capitalist triumphalism over the "end of history" and the steamrolling of a number of neoliberal measures by the Philippine government, the NDFP asserted the importance of an interventionist state that will work for a self-reliant economy centered on providing for the people's needs and welfare. Towards this end, the revolutionary coalition described in the document the socio-economic reforms needed to uphold the Filipino people's national aspirations and democratic rights.

The version of the CASER that was presented in the peace negotiations that was resumed after over a decade of on-and-off negotiations with government included revisions made by the NDFP's Reciprocal Working Committee on Social and Economic Reforms (RWC-SER) in the middle of 2016. This body refined and added provisions on the document based on consultations with its constituents, including organized masses in NPA guerrilla zones as well as progressive mass organizations representing different sectors. The RWC-SER also consulted with economists, academics, NGOs, industrialists, businessmen, landowners, and reformers in government (NDFP Reciprocal Working Committee on Social and Economic Reforms, 2018, p. 2).

The CASER more or less follows the CPP's foundational texts in locating the roots of widespread poverty, inequality, and underdevelopment in the Philippines' colonial history and continuing unequal relations with foreign powers. The document emphasizes the capacity of the Philippine labor force, what it calls the country's "managerial and entrepreneurial forces," and rich natural resource base to provide the foundation for building a self-reliant economy that can provide for the needs of the people. Yet in order to achieve these aims, the document

argues that the country must break away from “semicolonial and semifeudal” conditions by carrying out agrarian reform and national industrialization to build a self-reliant and independent economy. CASER highlights the importance of finding an alternative economic model to ensure the rights of workers, peasants, women, children, national and ethnic minorities, the Bangsamoro people, and all other disadvantaged sectors, including what it calls “national entrepreneurs.” To achieve this goal, the document stresses the role of these classes and sectors, as brought together in their movements and organizations, in seeing to it that its alternative vision of people’s development is realized.

The second version of CASER has six parts. The first consists of declaration of principles. The second outlines its bases, scope, applicability and outcomes. The third part has the heading “developing the national economy” with three items under it on “agrarian reform and rural development,” “national industrialization and economic development,” and “environmental protection, rehabilitation and compensation.” The fourth part is labeled “upholding people’s rights” and includes three items on the “rights of working people,” “promoting patriotic, progressive and pro-people culture,” and “recognition of ancestral lands and territories of national minorities.” The fifth part discusses “economic sovereignty for national development” with two sections on “foreign economic and trade relations” and “financial, monetary and fiscal policies.” The last part outlines the final provisions.

The CPP and the ND movement had by 2016 adopted a posture of engaging the Duterte government to pressure it from the left towards enacting some of its populist promises (Casino, 2016). Duterte freed over 20 top-ranking communist officials who were political detainees in Philippine jails (Gavilan, 2016). He also selected ND personalities to lead the Department of Agrarian Reform, Department of Social Welfare and Development, and the National Anti-Poverty Commission, and a set of other lower positions (Salaverria, 2017). There were five rounds of talks between the NDFP and the GRP, with the latest sequence dealing specifically with the CASER (Villanueva, 2020). The NDs have a relatively high level of confidence in dealing with Duterte given a long history of local alliances made by their local formations with him when he was mayor of Davao City in Southern Mindanao (Parreno, 2019). But the neo-fascist turn under Duterte’s term, with a bloody anti-drug campaign that killed tens of thousands and the martial law imposition in Mindanao, eventually compelled the CPP and the wider ND movement to disengage with his administration (CPP Central Committee, 2017).

Further progress in the NDFP-GRP peace negotiations reached a dead end in 2018 as President Duterte adopted what it called a “whole-of-nation approach” to counterinsurgency which subordinated civilian agencies to the imperatives of a militarist campaign to quash all forms of dissent. Duterte targeted the underground movement, civil society, the bourgeois opposition, mass media, and enacted a draconian Anti-Terror Law, amidst the pandemic lockdown. Duterte’s increasingly belligerent rhetoric against the communist movement was accompanied by mounting extrajudicial killings of unarmed activists and state terrorism against insurgents and their mass bases (Imbong, 2023).

The unfortunate consequence of the ND attempts at forging a broad alliance with the Duterte administration in its first years in power had sparked criticisms and recriminations from other left currents and those of liberal bourgeois political persuasion (Claudio & Abinales, 2017; Docena & Hetland, 2016). The heated discussion ranged from accusing the ND movement of failing their mass constituency by “giving Duterte the benefit of the doubt” (Makalintal, 2018). Others push the issue further towards a “leftist” conclusion that any form of alliance with any

fraction of the bourgeoisie is already in-itself automatically a betrayal of the working class (World Socialist Website, 2020).

I believe that at the fundamental level, there is nothing wrong with critically engaging with a sitting government in peace negotiations and other initiatives to exhaust all avenues to forward a transformative agenda. To forgo seizing the “cracks” in the ruling bloc is an easy but ineffectual move for subaltern classes, warns Samir Amin (1977, p. 12), since they “would not have to take account of the contradictions between the bourgeoisies.” The issue is a conjunctural one: was there an overestimation of the “progressive” aspect of Duterte and an underestimation of the extent that gaining power at the national level would transform the nature of any tactical alliance with a local strongman?

Unfortunately, the relevance of CASER’s provisions as an alternative blueprint for a more people-oriented development has been lost in all the impassioned discourse focused on the stigmatization of the ND movement’s erstwhile liaison with the Duterte administration. Even during the height of the peace negotiations, media coverage have largely shunned any substantial discussion of CASER’s contents (Mongaya, 2017a, 2017b).

Re-envisioning rural and industrial development

For the framers of CASER, developing the national economy means building its capacity to harness the country’s rich natural and human resources and transcending conditions described as “backward, agricultural, and with an insignificant Filipino industrial sector.” The Philippine economy is defined as a neocolonial one aimed primarily at “supplying foreign capital and economies with cheap labour, exporting agricultural and extractive raw materials, re-exporting resassembled or repackaged imported manufactures, and importing industrial inputs, capital equipment, finished goods, and agricultural commodities.”

The document emphasizes that this fundamental structural imbalance was reinforced by the full-throttled embrace by succeeding governments of neoliberal globalization, making the economy “disproportionately dependent on cheap labour export to boost domestic demand and to raise foreign exchange.” The Philippine economy is described as “a shallow service and trading economy more than a producing economy.” These factors are diagnosed to be at the root of extreme poverty, joblessness, and widespread landlessness among the peasantry, as well as the degradation of the environment.

What is to be done? The CASER proposes a “systematic responsible state intervention and the democratic participation of the Filipino masses within the framework of a strategic economic program of self-reliant Philippine development.” The resolution of the agrarian question, with the implementation of genuine land reform as the immediate task, is understood to be the key lever to overcoming imperialist-imposed underdevelopment. Agrarian reform not only clears the ground for liberating and empowering the peasant class, which while a contentious claim the document describes as “the most numerous class in Philippine society.” It is also seen as “a precondition for releasing productive forces in the countryside and for achieving rural and national industrialization.”

The part on “agrarian reform and rural development” is divided into twelve articles dealing with “governing principles,” a “definition of terms,” “scope and coverage,” the “distribution and sale of land,” “compensation and land use,” “marine and aquatic reforms,” “protection of

rights and welfare,” “cooperatives, credit and support services,” “Prohibited acts and practices,” “rural industrialization,” “other provisions,” and “implementation.”

CASER claims as deceptive government claims of massive land redistribution to farmers under its Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program, citing reversions and the reconcentration of land by means of exemptions, land conversions, and other schemes like agribusiness venture arrangements. The document criticized Philippine entry into the World Trade Organization-General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs in 1995 for aggravating underdevelopment in agriculture. Neoliberal policies are faulted for the country’s increased reliance on food and agricultural imports, the abandonment of state subsidies for food production, the intensification of land-use conversion, and real estate speculation on land.

Some of CASER’s key agrarian reform provisions includes the call for the free redistribution of expropriated agricultural land to farmers, the outright confiscation of lands owned by despotic big landlords, and allowing for the compensation of landowners who have a strong track record of supporting land reform. The document also stipulates the recognition for the ancestral lands and territories of ethnic and national minorities, indigenous peoples, and the Bangsamoro people.

In the document’s definition of terms, farmers and peasants are treated as synonymous categories. The document defines the farmer as someone whose primary means of livelihood involves the cultivation of land regardless of who owns the land. Enumerated under the category of the farmer are “agricultural workers, fisherfolk, indigenous peoples, rural women, workers in cattle and livestock farms, aquaculture and pasture lands.” A separate entry for the peasant simply enumerates their differentiation, based on the class analysis of Chinese rural society by Mao Zedong (1965), into the poor peasant, middle peasant, and rich peasant.

CASER asserts that agrarian reform must not be limited to land redistribution but should also include the “provision of more farm technicians, agricultural credit to the tillers, post-harvest facilities, marketing agencies, irrigation systems, and farm-to-market roads.” The document conceives of rural industrialization as involving measures to develop agricultural production, provide financial, marketing, and technical assistance for food processing and non-farm rural industrial enterprises, and the manufacture of agricultural inputs like fertilizers, herbicides, machinery, tools, and implements. It also means the development of science and technology to raise agricultural and rural industrial productivity. Some key rural infrastructure that the document recommends to be prioritized includes rural roads and transportation, agricultural produce storage and processing facilities, drinking water facilities, flood controls, soil conservation, and fishing harbors.

It is important to point out that this is a document crafted by an insurgent group for negotiations with a ruling power which in more ways than one do not subscribe to its ideological and political perspectives. CASER thus reflects the program of the revolutionary movement as articulated in its foundational texts such as the CPP’s *Program for a People’s Democratic Revolution* (2013a), *Revolutionary Guide for Land Reform* (2013b), *Philippine Society and Revolution* (2021c), and the NDFP twelve-point program (2017), among others. But a cursory reading of the document also reveals a certain modification of its language, unevenly mixing Marxist categories with more conventional terms. Thus we read passages where the Philippines is branded as mired in “semifeudal and semicolonial backwardness.” Yet in other passages the document also refers to “national entrepreneurs” as a substitute to the national bourgeoisie and the “semi-worker” as a substitute to the semi-proletariat.

Unfortunately, many of these terms are left undefined. Feudalism is used loosely to refer to the land monopoly by a landowning elite, thus describing the reconcentration of land in the hands of the few as “refeudalization.” More than the language, however, it is the matter of substantial issues that should prove more contentious in the negotiations. For example, the document makes use of the terms neoliberalism and globalization to refer to free market policies of the past few decades, which are blamed for intensifying the underdeveloped state of the Philippine economy. Yet the Philippine government very much subscribes to neoliberal doxa as the key to attaining mainstream visions of development.

Surprisingly, the issue of ensuring the basic food needs of the people as part of building a self-reliant economy, whether framed as realizing food security or the more activist concept of food sovereignty, is not highlighted in the document. There is mention in the document’s next section on “national industrialization and economic development” of agriculture providing the food needs of the rural and urban population. But this passage is but one detail rather than a central unifying theme in its vision of rural and industrial development. In the face of the global food and climate crisis, food sovereignty deserves the same emphasis as the dimensions of agrarian reform facilitating land redistribution to farmers and supporting a domestic industrial transition.

Laying the ground for national industrialization

National industrialization in CASER is conceived in terms of “Filipino producers engaged in the large-scale production of capital, intermediate and consumer goods and about breaking the current distorted pattern of production.” The document emphasizes the necessity of industrialization as the key link in allowing the Filipino people to benefit from the national patrimony and resources of their country. National industrialization is seen as a way to remedy the absence of a significant heavy industrial sector producing capital goods, a process that CASER notes requires active state intervention and protectionism but is actively prevented from happening by imperialism and their compradors.

The part on “national industrialization and economic development” has nine articles: first is the “general provisions for national industrialization,” followed by the contextual discussion “break imperialist and comprador domination of the economy,” and substantive provisions on “modes of ownership and participation of mass organizations,” “integrated regional and sectoral development,” “developing Filipino industrial science and technology,” “financing national industrialization,” the “role of the NPA and the progressive and revolutionary mass organizations,” the “role of demobilized GRP military personnel,” and “related legislative and policy reforms.”

The way the different sectors are given weight and prioritized in the NDFP proposal for national industrialization is classic Maoist, as prescribed in the Mao (1977) speech “On the Ten Major Relationships.” A “well-balanced growth” is envisioned “with heavy and high-technology industry as the leading factor, agriculture as the base of the economy, and light industry as the bridging factor.”

Heavy industry is envisaged as developing the domestic capacity to produce capital goods from base metals, basic chemicals, petrochemicals, pharmaceuticals, machinery, precision instruments, electronics, and consumer durables. Light industry meanwhile is developed as a means to provide for the immediate basic consumer goods for the people as well as rural

productive means like farm machinery and equipment, post-harvest storage and processing facilities.

Agriculture's position as the base of national industrialization is billed as a key factor in unleashing what the document calls "a virtuous circle of expanding demand and growing productivity." This role is centered on four main tasks enumerated in the document. First is to "provide food for the rural and urban population." Second is to "provide raw materials for Filipino industry." Third is to "create a vast market for domestically-produced consumer and producer goods especially amid the protracted global crisis and tighter export markets." And last is for agriculture to "become a source of investible surplus resulting from the increased productivity of the peasants and other rural workers."

The emphasis on balances between agriculture, heavy industry, and light industry in China's socialist transition is founded on correcting what is taken to be a one-sided emphasis in the Soviet experience on heavy industry at the expense of the two other sectors (Mao Zedong, 2020a). This focus on equilibriums is a rebuke of Preobazhensky's conception of a socialist primitive accumulation process that prioritizes urban industrial growth by imposing a tribute on the peasantry, a framework subsequently adopted by Stalin to the exigencies of building "socialism in one country" (Carr, 1959).

National industrialization in CASER means breaking with the foreign monopoly capitalist and domestic comprador bourgeois domination over the economy. Some of the measures being proposed in the document includes the nationalization of American, Japanese, and other foreign monopoly capitalist firms as well as the strict regulation of foreign direct investments to make them serve a national industrialization framework. According to the document, nationalized enterprises shall be ideally 100 percent state-owned but also allowing for up to 40 percent minority private stake. The document expresses preference for Filipino investors but is open to allowing foreign capital given "safeguards."

CASER's priority industrial projects are those that can meet the most immediate and basic needs of the population, form a foundation for long-term strategic development, already possess or have the potential to easily realize "significant forward and backward linkages," and "build on existing labor power, skills, natural resources, technology and capacity." These priority industrial projects comprise of metal industries such as mine, steel, engines, equipment, shipbuilding, transport, coconut industries including lumber, coco-chemicals, oil, buko juice, as well as textiles, clothing, and footwear industries.

The provision for an integrated regional development talks about spreading industries across various regions based on "the availability of natural resources, agglomeration economies, and other relevant local economic circumstances." The document frames this spatial dispersal as a way to "ensure that cities are not overly congested." Rural industrialization in this context is based on expanding rural markets and ensuring agricultural modernization "to increase manufacturing activities and generate employment opportunities in the rural areas."

Another provision stipulates the need for developing science and technology as a way of breaking "foreign monopoly capitalist' exclusive control over key industrial technologies" which contributes greatly to keeping the domestic economy backward. At the same time, following the Maoist dictum of "walking on two legs" (Mao Zedong, 2020b, p. 155), the document also proposes exploring the use of indigenous technologies in industrial processes, especially for processing of agricultural and industrial inputs.

The document also emphasizes the need for state support, incentives and protection for the national bourgeoisie and smaller private owners, where it lumps together the categories of start-ups and the micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) as used by international multilateral institutions and the state. It also encourages the organization of cooperatives by workers, farmers, MSMEs as well as the institution of workers councils in capitalist enterprises with representatives sitting in the board of trustees.

CASER warns against industrialization resulting to the accumulation of capitalist profit at the expense of the working class and the peasantry. It also underscores the necessity of taking “due consideration” of the health and environmental impact of industrial processes and sustainability in terms of the efficient use and protection of the country’s resources.

How is this national industrialization to be financed? The document provides for nine general sources: first is from the confiscated assets of foreign monopoly capital and local elites; second is through state industrial bonds; third is from the surpluses of government enterprises; fourth is from farmers surpluses; fifth is from landlord investments of their compensation in industrial projects; sixth is via wealth and inheritance taxes on wealthier clans; seventh is the levying of higher taxes on alcoholic drinks, tobacco, and other luxuries; eighth is from the renegotiation of debts; and last is from reduced spending on the military.

The last part on “economic sovereignty for national development” also discusses the need for an independent foreign trade and investment policy, economic protectionism vis-à-vis foreign capital, the diversification of trade and investment relations by building closer economic ties with neighboring countries as well as with the emerging bloc of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa or the BRICS and other countries in the Global South that assert their sovereignty and independence. This trajectory means breaking the economic dependence on the US and establishing foreign relations based on the needs of the nation.

Understandably not spelled-out in the letter of the document are some real politico-military and economic consequences of de-linking: the real threat of imperialist encirclement, sanctions, embargo, and hybrid wars. Yet this context is important. If foreign monopoly capital assets are to be expropriated to finance national industrialization, it would be foolhardy to believe that multilateral institutions based in the imperial centers will agree to the repudiation of debt. Nor can one expect any real reduction in military spending as a nation asserting its sovereignty, having repudiated neocolonialism, prepares to face the wrath of its former imperial masters. In other words, the building a strong military that is amply funded and schooled in anti-imperialist principles cannot but be part any viable vision of self-reliant, sovereign industrialization.

Responding to changing conditions

Like the CPP’s revised *Program for a People’s Democratic Revolution* adopted in its Second Congress in 2016, the CASER has made notable modifications in the articulation of the ND program to account for changing social conditions. CASER makes significant interventions on themes that were not substantively articulated in the communist movement’s original foundational texts that were crafted in the 1960s and 1970s. These changes and adjustments in language are in the main driven by the more widespread adoption of rights discourse, the growing awareness of the ecological dimension of capitalist-imperialism, and the politico-economic transformations brought about by the offensive of neoliberal globalization since the 1980s.

This evolution is reflected on the expansion of the scope of the people's democratic rights elaborated in the document. The section on the rights of the working people has articles centered on social actors such as "the rights of peasants, farm workers and fisherfolk," "rights of workers and private and public sector employees," "rights of semi-workers," "rights of working people of various professions and occupations," "rights of overseas workers," "women's rights and gender equality," "rights of children," "rights of the elderly," and "rights of the disabled." The section also has articles for basic rights like "providing social services and public utilities," "right to education," "right to health," "right to housing," "right to water," "energy services," "mass transport system," "telecommunications services," "waste management," and "disaster preparedness and response."

Having a separate part dedicated entirely to the "recognition of ancestral lands and territories of national minorities" speaks of the importance attached by the document on the subject. This part on ethnic or national minorities contains three articles: one on their right to self-determination, the second on their participation in economic development, and finally on their protection from different forms of rights violations and discrimination. It is important to note how the document uses the language of national oppression in classical Marxist-Leninist terms but also incorporating into this base legal discourses on indigenous rights and ancestral domain that came of age in the 1990s (Ferrer, 2020).

A significant addition relates to the articulation of an incipient environmental politics in response to the destruction and rape of the country's resource rich and biodiverse environment as a result of unfettered capitalist accumulation and a neocolonial export-led economic growth strategy. The ecological dimension has become more prominent as Filipino working people engaged in mass struggles find themselves on the side of environmental protection and conservation against rapacious corporate resource and land grabs (Broad & Cavanagh, 1993). CASER's provisions on "environmental protection, rehabilitation and compensation" are centered on providing "measures for managing the environment and ensuring resilience," ending "environmentally destructive practices," regulating "mining and marine wealth extraction," and bans "on alienation of natural resources and patent control."

The framers of the NDFP CASER draft believe that neoliberal globalization has only worsened the agricultural, semi-feudal, and backward character of the Philippine economy. One of the developments cited in the document to support this argument is the unprecedented systematic opening up of the economy to foreign monopoly capital, their plunder and exploitation of the country's resources, labor, and the environment. The decline of the agricultural and manufacturing sectors on one hand and the growth of the service sector on the other hand is attributed to neoliberal reforms. Related to these shifts are the chronic and massive migration of people from the countryside to urban centers, where they find no decent employment due to the absence of national industries. These rural migrants are described as the "urban poor" and the "semi-proletariat." Another dimension to the neoliberal offensive is the cultural one: the worsening of what is called a backward, colonial, feudal, unscientific, and elitist culture through the propagation of more foreign worship, consumerism, individualism, apathy, and submission.

The CPP conceptualizes semi-feudalism as a particular mode of production defined by the subordination of a principally agricultural economy to the profit imperatives of foreign monopoly capital, the ascendancy of a comprador bourgeoisie as the ruling class, and the persistence of feudal tenancy relations in the countryside (Sison, 2021c; Sison & De Lima,

1998). Semi-feudalism, following this logic, blocked the birth of “domestic capitalism” by keeping the economy agricultural, backward, and subservient to the interests of the industrial capitalist countries. Further discussions can be made whether this extroverted form of economy should be analyzed at the level of the mode of production or be conceptualized as a social formation where pre-capitalist agrarian modes of production interlock with comprador capital and international capital.

Yet, there seems to be a disjuncture between the theoretical edifice underlying the document’s semi-feudal analysis and the recent general trends that are presented as its confirmation. The remarked upon driving out of the peasantry to cities that lack the industries to absorb them does not speak of the deepening of residual feudal relations but precisely of the spasmodic and uneven character of capitalist relations in peripheral societies. Meanwhile, the farmers’ problems shared in the document’s provisions highlighting the underpricing of farmers’ labor and produce and the overpricing of farm inputs all point to the predominance of capitalist dynamics in the agricultural sector.

In my view, this confusion is reflective of a broader conundrum which is the document’s resurrection of a “backwardness/industrialization” binary that has at its core the realization of industrial modernity embodied by the Global North without transcending this vision’s essential Eurocentric heritage (Moyo et al., 2013, p. 95). It is telling how the agricultural character of the economy is equated with backwardness rather than as a sector that can also be a marker of development in synergy with the rest of the economy.

Such valuation presents the picture of an unchanging and stagnant economy marked by “a hundred years” of peasant suffering under the yolk of an “imperialist-feudal” class alliance. The quality of backwardness or underdevelopment “as a dynamic process intrinsic to imperialism” is thus lost in this account (Moyo et al., 2013, p. 96). This negative view of being “agricultural” easily tumbles down the “myth of industrialization” that views societies in the Global South as innately backward and thus requiring industrialization as the end goal.

Inheriting the conceptual armory of the Chinese Revolution, the CPP following Lenin has continually asserted the role of peasant mobilization as a key factor in ensuring revolutionary victory for the proletariat. But this recognition of the peasantry as the motive force in Third World revolution seems to me to have not pivoted towards holistically “embracing the peasantry, intellectually and organizationally, as in Mao, Fanon and Cabral” (Moyo et al., 2013, p. 105), pointing towards the persistence of an approach where the vanguard assumes the role of custodian “managing the main force” (Putzel, 1995).

I believe that disentangling the term “agricultural” from the signifier “backward” is imperative to be able to firmly grasp the challenges of reagrarianization or actually rebuilding the agricultural base as a central component in any redirecting of the economy towards a sovereign industrial transition in the wake of decades of the neoliberal destruction of agrarian productive forces. Such a vision entails the shunning of a teleological narrative of industrial modernity overcoming a backward agricultural past but of the national-popular planning and organization of a scientifically and industrially-grounded “planet of fields” (Ajl 2021).

Conclusion

The recent pronouncements by the Marcos Jr. administration to the possibility of reviving the peace talks after its doors were closed by the previous administration may yet reopen a path

towards a more significant conversation of alternative futures for the Filipino people beyond the permanent politico-economic crisis and ecological catastrophe represented by neoliberal capitalism. If the peace talks does resume in the coming months, negotiators from both sides will have to iron out significant divergences in their visions of social justice and economic progress. Yet regardless of whatever conceptual differences one may have with the document, it is clear that CASER is a program of delinking, as prescribed by Amin (1990), to initiate an autocentric development process. However conceived, such breaking away from the rapacious and destructive capitalist-imperialist world system is not only a viable but the only real way forward to provide for the people's needs in a way that is socially just and ecologically sustainable. The road to resolving the socio-economic roots of armed conflict in the Philippines is a long and uphill one but one that must be given by different stakeholders a chance to prosper.

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