

# **Onward the Struggle for Genuine Agrarian Reform; Resist Imperialist Plunder and War**

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Journals: Volume 13 December 2005

30 Dec 2005

Source: <http://www.aprnet.org/>

Agriculture is still the cornerstone of the Philippine economy. It contributes 18% to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the Philippines and agriculture-based industries account for another 10% of the GDP. More than 75% of its labor force is employed in the agricultural sector. The Philippine agriculture is export-oriented, import-dependent and foreign-dominated. Moreover, it is characterized by backward methods and feudal and semi-feudal relations of production.

The Philippines supplies the industrialized countries, especially the United States, with the raw materials they need. Our country does not have any basic industries and it has to import most farm inputs like fertilizers and pesticides, tools and machines for semi-processing. This makes agriculture heavily dependent on and dominated by foreign TNCs and MNCs, where some are also engaged in agricultural production and own or control vast tracts of land.

Methods and relations of production are backward. The majority of Philippine farmers still till the land like their forefathers did. They use simple tools like plow, sickle, harrow, cutlass etc. and draught animals like carabaos. Mechanization is limited and in many places almost non-existent. Most farms are very small, only 0.5 – 1.5 hectares on the average. Moreover, the majority of the farmers do not own the lands they till and are bound by feudal and semi-feudal relations of exploitation as tenants, farm workers, or lease-holders.

The major problem of farmers is landlessness. According to government data, out of every 100 farmers, 21 are agricultural workers, 28 are unpaid family workers, 26 are under some form of tenancy relation and only 25 own land. In short, more than 7 out of 10 farmers do not own the land they till. On the other hand, only a few families are controlling vast tracts of lands. Sixty percent of the agricultural lands are owned by 13 % of the landowners. The biggest landlords, only 9,500 people, own more than 20 % of all agricultural land.

## **Bogus Land Reform in the Philippines**

Because of the major problem of landlessness and the peasants' unrelenting clamor for land and rural justice, the Philippine government has been implementing bogus agrarian reform programs since the 1930s. In line with the agenda of the United States in the Philippines, most of these programs encouraged modifications in tenancy relations, and resettlement in Mindanao and Palawan where land was still abundant. Such programs had

to boost productivity and expand the area planted to export crops that were needed for the US market.

Former President Diosdado Macapagal launched in 1963 the “Land Reform Code” that promoted leasehold tenancy but obviously had no intention of breaking up the landlords’ land monopolies. Complementing feudal with more “modern” semi-feudal forms of exploitation, the law only provided the framework for an increasingly export-oriented, import-dependent and foreign-dominated rural economy.

Some “liberal” US advisers advocated land reform in order to avert a resurgence of massive peasant uprisings yet U.S. and World Bank programs were dominantly geared towards productivity-enhancing interventions in the Philippines’ backward agriculture; hence, their enthusiastic support for the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) and the application of “Green Revolution” technology.

Ferdinand Marcos’ bogus agrarian reform program Presidential Decree (P.D.) 27 that started immediately after the imposition of martial law in 1972, similarly intensified exploitation and strengthened his feudal power base in the countryside. P.D. 27 only covered rice and corn lands in order to immediately exempt large corporate farms and lands devoted to the production of raw materials for export such as sugar, abaca and rubber. However, these rice and corn lands covered under Marcos’ land reform were eventually taken back. Unsurprisingly, P.D. 27 did not address the peasantry’s clamor for land.

### **CARP: The Precursor of Market-Assisted Land Reform**

After Marcos’ ouster in 1986, the Aquino government was compelled by the strength of both the armed and legal movement for genuine land reform to come up with its own agrarian reform program. However, Aquino’s Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP) was never meant to distribute land to the poor and landless peasants, let alone shatter feudal rule in the countryside.<sup>1</sup> The provision to provide the landowners with just compensation already reveals the intention to implement agrarian reform without disturbing the status quo.

CARP’s distorted definition of agrarian reform<sup>2</sup> and the law’s actual provisions reveal its unmistakable bias in favor of landowners and agribusiness. CARP includes non-land transfer schemes like leasehold arrangements, production or profit sharing and the infamous stock distribution option (SDO). The non-land transfer programs provide the landlords with elegant options to implement agrarian reform without distributing a morsel of land but retaining full control over their landholdings and the lives of their farm workers. For landowners who want to get rid of some less productive farm lots anyway, the law provides incentives for voluntary offers for sale or the voluntary land transfer scheme that lets them negotiate the price directly with the farmers.

Since the mid-1990s, the World Bank and other foreign donors support CARP’s so-called support programs like the Agrarian Reform Communities (ARCs). In the ARC program, clusters of small farms are encouraged to venture into cash crops and subsequently

integrate with agribusiness corporations. Much like the nucleus estates, ARCs have nothing to do with land reform as they are providing landlords and TNCs with business opportunities and increasing control on the rural economy. The ARC concept is also a face-saving measure of the government to divert the attention from CARP's failure to provide land to the landless through the establishing of a few showcase communities.

When CARP was due to expire in 1998, the government claimed a 57 percent accomplishment rate (4.6 million hectares) and extended the program for another 6 years, purportedly to process the remaining balance. Yet closer scrutiny of government data reveals that this figure refers to the number of certificates processed by government agencies and does not reflect actual ownership of the land by the alleged "beneficiaries."

Moreover, the bulk of the lands supposedly distributed were government-owned and public lands. The reported accomplishment of distribution of private agricultural lands stood at less than 50% of the total target of 2.9 million hectares. Actually, only 4% of these private agricultural lands were "distributed" through compulsory acquisition while the rest was bought from the landlords at market value.

#### **CARP Under Estrada: "Land to the Landlords"**

Apparently, Horacio Morales, who was appointed Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) Secretary by former President Joseph Estrada in 1998, had a ready ear for the World Bank's recommendations. Although he was anxiously avoiding any reference to market-assisted land reform, his administration turned CARP into its local variety.

Morales opted to make use of CARP's market-friendly provisions. Since 1998, land distribution through compulsory acquisition has become almost non-existent. Instead DAR advocates negotiated settlements in the context of a "demand-driven" approach.

Administrative Order No. 9, issued in December 1998, gives guidelines for CARP coverage of commercial farms. Instead of land distribution, AO 9 provides for so-called Agribusiness Venture Arrangements including contract growing, lease arrangements, management contracts, build-operate-transfer schemes, and joint venture arrangements, all of which involve negotiated settlements and result in the continuation of feudal and semi-feudal, exploitative relations of production.

The joint venture arrangement, also known as "corporative scheme," was further outlined in Administrative Order No. 2 of 1999 and gained notoriety through its application on 4,361 hectares of land in Negros, supposedly owned by Eduardo "Danding" Cojuangco a known crony of both ex-dictator Marcos and ex-president Estrada, and collaborates with current President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. Cojuangco negotiated the arrangement with some handpicked farm workers who established a so-called cooperative for the occasion. Although the "beneficiaries" were promised their parcels of land, the management of the land was brought under a joint venture wherein Cojuangco is the majority stakeholder.

All these schemes – especially the joint venture/corporative scheme – only strengthened landlord control over the lands and the whole process of agricultural production. The

landlords and agri-corporations now dictated everything from who would plant and what to plant to who they would sell the products to and for how much. In other words, the distribution of titles has become a mere formality as feudal relations are justified and even strengthened by this so-called land reform program.

In the meantime, evasion of land reform became the rule instead of the exception. Vast tracts of land were converted from agricultural to other uses in order to exempt them from CARP coverage. While Morales was heading DAR, he approved 518 applications for land use conversion covering 11,650 hectares while turning a blind eye to many more illegal conversions.

### **Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo (GMA): “Chief Political Representative of the Landlords”**

It is not surprising, therefore, that the peasants joined the people’s movement against the Estrada presidency in droves. The KMP and other non-co-opted peasant organizations were at the forefront of the people’s struggle that successfully ousted Estrada and his minions, including Secretary of Agriculture Angara and Agrarian Reform Secretary Morales.

The ouster of this rabid anti-peasant faction of the ruling classes was surely a victory for the Philippine peasant movement. Moreover, it enabled KMP to submit the 10-point peasant agenda, with the implementation of genuine land reform as its centerpiece, to the new administration of GMA as early as January 22, 2001, her first day in office.

However, after being launched into power by the Filipino people, GMA only proves she has no intention of breaking up land monopolies but instead plans to fully implement the dictates of imperialist globalization.

The CARP itself is continuously being used as an instrument to dispossess the farmers of their lands under the GMA administration. GMA has paved the way for massive land use conversion and the intensified landgrabbing of local elites and TNCs through the loopholes and deceptions of the CARP. In Southern Tagalog region, a total of 129,467 hectares of land were converted into commercial and industrial zones displacing over 100,000 peasants. And in Cagayan Valley region, around 442,648 hectares of land were covered for land-use conversions in the guise of national development. Farmers, who already had received land certificates from the DAR were driven away and the documents canceled by the very agency that had issued them.

GMA also continues to promote the joint venture arrangements under CARP; and once again, Cojuangco is a major beneficiary of this. Not only did GMA compromise and collaborate on the P130-billion controversial coco levy fund, she also supported Cojuangco with the latter’s activities in Isabela, Cagayan Valley, Quirino, Southern Tagalog, Negros and Mindanao provinces. With the blessing of GMA, Cojuangco launched the San Miguel Corporation (SMC) Cassava Plantation Project, another contract-growing scheme, in Isabela and Cagayan provinces and managed to obtain more

than 300,000 hectares from the farmers there. In the province of Isabela alone, over 150,000 hectares of land covering 14 towns went to the project.

These “benefits to landlords” under CARP also favored the former President Corazon Cojuangco Aquino-owned 6,000 hectare Hacienda Luisita in Tarlac province. Through the Stock Distribution Option (SDO) scheme, the farm or sugar workers are supposedly recognized as co-owners of the Hacienda Luisita and received shares of stock. However, these shares only account for 33% of the company’s total assets, or the minority shares, to be distributed over a period of 30 years to the workers. Stocks and production shares are distributed on the basis of the number of man-days or the number of days worked. Such a deceptive arrangement leaves the farmers landless and exploited considering that they are only allowed to work a maximum of 2 days out of the 7 days in a week. Thus the farmworkers only receive a net pay of P9.50 per day – not even enough to buy a kilo of rice.

GMA’s alleged use of the P728 million fertilizer fund for her election campaign last year, not only cost the Filipino nation 394,334.2 MT of rice but also cost the farmers P682,501,500 which was the debt they incurred (the amount is obtained by multiplying the target area of 151,667 hectares by P4,500 per 0.5 hectare). Also the normal rice consumption of the Filipino nation is 29,000 MT of rice per day, if we divide this by the 394,334.2 MT then this would amount to 14 days. The fertilizer scam is part of the amended impeachment complaint against GMA. Not only did GMA steal the election results, she also stole from the mouths of the farmers.

Unsurprisingly, landlessness is still the major problem for the Philippine peasants. For example, according to research of KASAMA-TK, the regional chapter of KMP in Southern Tagalog, only 307 landlords control 71,898.50 hectares of coconut lands in the province of Quezon alone. Their landholdings average 234.20 hectares while majority of the coconut farmers are either tenants on a 3-hectare farm on the average, or farm workers. In San Francisco town in the same province, 48 landlords control 28,000 hectares while Don Domingo Reyes, owns 13,000 hectares in the town of San Narciso alone.

President GMA took as cue the US War on Terror and intensifying US intervention in the Philippines to worsen the blatant attacks against the farmers and peasant movements. The US-directed All Out War Policy of the GMA regime further aggravates the problem of landlessness and undermines the peasants’ struggle for genuine agrarian reform.

There is a massive deployment and concentration of Philippine troops in the countryside that resulted to an alarming increase in cases of human rights violation (HRVs). In Southern Tagalog region in 2004, they have documented HRVs in 8 provinces with 77 incidents and 290 cases of summary execution, strafing, torture, denial of medical attention, unlawful detention, unjustified detention, force/fake surrender, violation of domicile, destruction of properties, harassment, exploitation of children, landgrabbing and land use conversion. From these HRVs, the victims are 814 individuals, of this 164 are farmers (245 are men and 569 are women).

Peasants and their families are massacred – not even their children are spared. Recent example is the Hacienda Luisita massacre in November 16, 2004.

In 2003 in Negros island alone, some examples of agrarian-related violence include: the killing of 3 farmer-beneficiaries by goons of former landowners; shooting and mauling of 11 farmers; eviction of 22 farmers, based on court decisions favoring landlords; arrest and detention of 8 beneficiaries; filing of 35 criminal and civil complaints against 600 farmers before regular courts; dismissed from jobs of 6,000 farm workers supporting CARP; hunger threatening 39,000 jobless and landless farm workers and families this off-harvest season; and preventing 500 school-age children of Certificate of Land Ownership Award (CLOA) holders from going to school.

Another ploy used by big landlords and the government to squash farmers' resistance and grab their lands is the criminalization of agrarian cases. Farmers, who are involved in land disputes, are falsely charged with criminal cases such as robbery, drug and fire arms possession, or even murder. The court system itself is used to undermine land reform and further concentrate lands into the hands of landlords.

The case of the Mamburao 7 is a concrete example of how agrarian cases are criminalized. Engaged in a land struggle against the landlord Ricardo Quintos in Mamburao, Mindoro Occidental, the 7 peasant political prisoners were harassed, tortured and wrongly imprisoned for nearly 8 years for the 'killings of Quintos' sons Paul and Michael.

Amidst this adverse situation, the government which was supposed to uphold the farmers' rights under the Constitution and the universal charter of human rights became their tormentor instead, protecting despotic landlords and paving the way for the criminalization of agrarian cases.

### **Pushing the Imperialist Agenda**

The GMA regime has also taken an unquestioning stance on the full-on implementation of globalization policies that will further displace and exploit farmers in the interests of foreign investors and TNCs.

Despite the fact that the Philippine's membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO) is adversely affecting the economy and destroying the livelihoods of millions of Filipinos, particularly the peasantry, President Arroyo is still hell-bent on fulfilling the government's previous commitments to 'free trade' and the framework of the WTO and globalization.

The rice import liberalization program of the GMA regime, in as much as it attempts to fast track the liberalization of the rice industry, is actually a measure similar to the "early voluntary sectoral liberalization".

There are also current moves in and out of Congress, with the support of President GMA, for changing the Philippine constitution in order to eliminate its “nationalist provisions” and to allow the 100% foreign ownership of land. These maneuvers follow the thrust of the WTO to facilitate the total surrender of the national patrimonies of the Third World countries to monopoly capitalist domination and exploitation.

GMA’s adherence to the WB’s “market assisted land reform” and the International Monetary Fund (IMF)/Asian Development Bank (ADB) – funded Agricultural and Fisheries Modernization Act (AFMA) is another way that the elite few and TNCs maintain and expand their land monopolies. In other words, AFMA only intensifies the export-oriented, import-dependent character of Philippine agriculture, and thus further displaces and destroys the livelihood of the peasantry.

### **Hope Lies in the Peasantry’s Militant Struggle**

In short, CARP, a program that had already an inherent anti-peasant bias from its very start, was conveniently used by the ruling classes to concentrate land into their own hands and to prevent the farmers from realizing their hope of owning the land they till.

After more than 17 years of CARP we can easily conclude that for the peasantry this program has been useless. Landlessness is still widespread, feudal and semi-feudal exploitation is still the norm and the landlord class continues to wield economic and political power in the countryside. The peasantry has understood that genuine land reform cannot be achieved within the framework of CARP.

Therefore, hope lies in the militant peasant struggle for land. Our experience shows that the farmers’ assertion of their rights has been much more successful than the few and token gains of CARP.

Since its founding in July 1985, the Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas (KMP – Peasant Movement of the Philippines) has grown from 15 regional chapters and 64 provincial chapters nationwide with more than 1 million members. Its continued expansion and strength is the result of militantly advocating and struggling for genuine agrarian reform and leading in mass peasant campaigns and struggle that have achieved concrete gains.

Through their united and militant campaigns, the peasants in so many places were able to improve their living conditions. They have forced the exploiting classes to reduce land rent, to curb interest rates on farm capital and to increase the wages of farm workers. They were also able to exact better prices for their products and develop appropriate forms of cooperation among the farmers.

In Bicol, the farmers were able to reverse the share tenancy, favoring the peasants. Instead of 70% to the landlord, it became 70% to the peasants.

Cases where farmers were able to increase the prices of their farm produce include the farmers in the Ilocos who were able to increase the price of their tobacco. In Tuguegarao,

the farmers were able to raise the price of their palay (unhusked rice) and in most places in Southern Tagalog, the farmers were able to remove the rescada in copra.

There were also successful campaigns to raise the wages of farm workers. In Bukidnon, Northern Mindanao, the sugar workers had their wages raised from P80 to P120.

Other examples of peasants' successful initiatives, local campaigns and struggles include: campaigns against privatization and conversion of fishing grounds; campaigns against destructive dams, megadikes and mining; land rehabilitation; conservation, dissemination and improvement of traditional varieties of rice and other genetic resources; campaigns against genetically engineered seeds; and the development of various forms of agricultural cooperation.

Hacienda Looc is one of the examples of heroic resistance to landgrabbing. The farmers organized themselves in 1996 and decided to carry on tilling the land that is rightfully theirs. Although Fil-Estate, a mighty real estate company, and local politicians are applying every possible tactic to drive the farmers away, they are still there. They were able to resist because of their firm unity and the support from others, even from other countries.

Hacienda Looc has become a symbol of peasant struggle and resistance. There are many more places in the Philippines where farmers have successfully resisted landlords and big business. Hacienda Luisita is another one.

The 800 farmers who faced eviction from the lands of the Central Mindanao University (CMU) in Musuan, Bukidnon, can also serve as an example. They were threatened and harassed by the CMU's management and their armed goons. Yet instead of relying solely on CARP or other deceptive programs of the government, they organized themselves and stood their ground. Their militancy bore fruit last February 2001 when they were able to exact a favorable lease contract with CMU that saves them from harassment and eviction for at least another five years.

The local struggles are complemented with nationally coordinated campaigns, like the yearly anniversary of CARP on June 10, which is usually marked by massive peasant protest. In October each year, KMP is spearheading the campaign to commemorate peasant month in time for the PD 27 anniversary, culminating in nationwide rallies to express the peasants' outrage about the continuing absence of rural justice.

Even in the midst of these campaigns, the comrades who are suffering or have given their lives for the struggle of the basic masses are not forgotten. The 13 martyrs of the Mendiola massacre who fell under the bullets of the US-Aquino regime in 1987 while holding a peaceful demonstration are commemorated yearly. Political prisoners, most of whom are peasants, can count on unwavering support. In 2002, Ka Miling Cañete, a peasant leader from San Jose del Monte, Bulacan, was set free after a campaign of KMP and its local chapters. Unfortunately, the 7 Mamburao farmers, including a former KMP

National Council member, who are falsely accused of a killing a despotic landlord, are still languishing in jail.

In these just and democratic struggles, the peasantry is supported by other sectors, especially the workers with which it has forged a firm alliance because of their common class interest. The peasants also enjoy the ever-growing support of church people, lawyers, scientists, academes, journalists, government employees and workers, and other members of the middle sectors who have chosen to side with the basic masses like they did during the people's protests against Estrada.

KMP also engages in dialogues and interactions with legislators and policy-makers, and various government agencies. Attendance to the congressional hearings on specific farmers' issues is quite a remarkable achievement. We make it a point to submit our position paper in every hearing attended. The victory of Anakpawis Party List to the 2004 national election brought its KMP Chair Rafael Mariano to the 13th Congress, contributed a lot in its congressional lobby work. KMP also worked with 5 anti-GMOs/IRRI legislators from 4 different congressional districts and 11 anti-WTO legislators from 16 different congressional districts and 3 party lists.

Advocacy work with the local government units (LGUs) brought positive results. For example in ARCA, Pangantucan, Bukidnon, we were able to install the farmers in 40 hectares of agricultural lands from the total 100 hectares of land. Demolition attempts against farmers and indigenous peoples' were also stopped in Quezon, to name a few successful farmer struggles. However, the militant mass campaigns and struggles continue to be the primary form of action.

Above all, KMP draws strength from the determination of millions of poor farmers in the Philippines who courageously carry through the heroic struggle for land. More than any legislation from the reactionary government, it is the peasantry's strong unity and firm resolve that will bring about genuine rural justice through the redistribution of land according to the principle of "land to the tiller."

At the international level, KMP links up the struggle of the Philippine peasantry and like-minded movements. KMP is a founding member and secretariat of the Asian Peasant Coalition (APC). It is an active member of La Via Campesina and the international anti-imperialist alliance, the International League of People's Struggle (ILPS). KMP is also a member of the Peoples' Food Sovereignty Network (PFSN) coordinated by the Pesticide Action Network Asia Pacific (PANAP).

It is imperative that Asian peasant movements and organizations unite and continue to help strengthen international solidarity and the anti-imperialist struggle and movement. Let us continue to expose and resist imperialist plunder and war.

## ENDNOTES

1 In her speech on the occasion of CARP's launching, President Aquino herself acknowledged that CARP was far from a redistributive land reform program saying, "Let us see the program not as taking of property from some and giving it to others."

2 Republic Act 6657, Section 3: "Agrarian reform means the redistribution of lands and all other arrangements alternative to the physical redistribution of lands such as production or profit sharing labor administration and the distribution of shares of stock."