



People's Power After Marcos
Interview with Jose Maria Sison

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Introduction

The American press hailed it as a non-violent revolution. The change in power in the Philippines, they said, was a victory for American diplomacy and democracy. Pictures of millions of people surrounding the tanks and protecting the military flashed all over the world. In the aftermath of a completely fraudulent election, the Filipino people, using "people's power," combined with a rebellious military to oust one of the world's most entrenched dictators. On February 24, 1986, Ferdinand Marcos, his wife Imelda and several of their cronies left the Philippines aboard a U.S. helicopter bound for the U.S.

During their reign, Marcos and his wife had amassed enormous wealth at the expense of the Filipino people. It's estimated that their fortune is worth more than ten billion dollars. At the same time, Marcos left the country absolutely broke, with a national debt of over \$26 billion. He also left a legacy of militarization, corruption, poverty and repression.

In reality, the demise of Marcos could not and did not come after a mere four days. To say this denies the foundations built among the people through 20 years of organizing by the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), the New People's Army (NPA) and the many and diverse mass organizations. It ignores the years of violence perpetrated on the Filipino people and the suffering so many have had to endure.

Now, moving in an extremely complicated and fluid situation, it is the revolutionary people's movement that must still ensure that the fundamental aspirations of the Filipino workers and peasants are met. Land remains a vital issue. What will be the road to a genuine land distribution? Will the Philippines demand the removal of the U.S. bases? How should the left organize under the "new conditions" of the Aquino government? These are some of the questions *Breakthrough* asked Jose Maria Sison.

Sison is one of the most respected leaders in the Philippines. He is the founder of the Communist Party of the Philippines and the author of two basic books on the Philippine Revolution: *Philippine Society and Revolution* and *Specific Characteristics of People's War*. He is a teacher, a father and a renowned poet.

On November 10, 1977, Sison and his wife Juliet de lima Sison were arrested by the Marcos dictatorship. From that moment he was beaten and tortured. He was separated from his wife and was allowed no information as to her whereabouts. He was denied access to legal counsel until June of the following year. As a form of torture, Sison was manacled and shackled to his bed for months at a time. He was confined in solitary confinement in a windowless room and denied his glasses and reading material. Finally, after a long campaign, Sison and his wife were allowed visits, and were eventually imprisoned together from March of 1980 until 1982. The health conditions were so bad that Juliet suffered a miscarriage. Later she gave birth to a son in prison and, after much pressure was put on the authorities, was allowed a temporary release. Sison remained again in solitary confinement, until protests forced the prison to move him to a cell where he could have occasional cellmates.

Despite the harshness of his conditions, Jose Maria Sison remained a vital member of the political community. Together with the other political detainees, his resistance was an example of unrelenting opposition to the dictatorship. When the time came for Cory Aquino to honor her campaign promise of freedom for the political detainees, Sison remained in jail. The military and the U.S. did not want him released. He represented too much of a threat. Yet, after a week of negotiations, Sison—having spent more than nine years in detention—was freed.

As North Americans, it's important that we gain a deeper understanding of the conditions in the Philippines so that we can resist our government's imperialist plans. The U.S. has a long history in the Philippines. The 7,000 islands that make up the Philippine archipelago have been under U.S. control since 1898, when the U.S. took them from Spain as the result of the Spanish-American War. Although nominally granting "independence" in 1946, the U.S. has maintained a continuing military presence at Subic Naval Base and Clark Air Force Base. These bases, the largest in Asia, insure that the U.S. multinationals and other U.S. interests will be protected. The force of the U.S. military in the Philippines also serves as a reminder to the rest of Asia not to go against the interests of the United States.

The following interview was conducted in Manila in March 1986. We hope that it will contribute to building solidarity with the Philippine people and revolution.

Breakthrough: What do you think of the new Aquino government?

Jose Maria Sison: The Aquino government can be perceived in contrast with the fallen fascist dictatorship of Marcos. The liberal democratic tendency of this government is welcome. But, of course, if you take a still photo of this government, it has its pro-U.S. inclinations; and, of course, key positions in its cabinet are occupied by pro-U.S. and reactionary elements. But there are also quite a number of cabinet ministers who come from the middle class, and who take a liberal-democratic view of things.

We must make the government realize that the people's power, which made it possible to assume power, should be maintained, because the structures of fascist dictatorship still need to be eliminated completely. And this people's power needs to be raised to a new and higher level in order to confront and solve the fundamental problems involving questions of national security and the main substance of democracy. If people's power is not maintained, and does not reach a new and higher level, then this new government will become thoroughly frustrated and might become antagonistic to the people.

BT: When you say that people's power has to be maintained and raised to a higher level, what do you mean?



Sison: The people's power that put Mrs. Cory Aquino into power was sufficient insofar as it was able to topple the Marcos regime. But, we know very well that U.S. imperialism and domestic feudalism have been the root causes of fascist dictatorship. U.S. imperialism and feudalism are still there. So long as these basic problems of semi-colonial and semi-feudal Philippine society remain, the possibility of fascist dictatorship re-emerging is always there. Especially because the United States is always pressing on whichever government is in power to pursue a rabid anti-communist line and intensify the so-called campaign of counter-insurgency. So the pressures are there for the maintenance of repressive forces. And the military instrument used by Marcos to oppress the people has remained intact. And you know very well, when we speak of changing the character of the state, the reorganization of its main components, the military apparatus—changing the character of this military apparatus is necessary. The reorganization—this is a soft word, no? Smashing the military apparatus is supposed to be a necessity in a social revolutionary transformation. You see, the ruling classes and the state machinery have not really changed.

BT: *In regards to the U.S., what role do you think it played in the overthrow of Marcos?*

Sison: The U.S. asked Marcos not to attack Camp Crame.¹ So for a while a stalemate occurred with regard to Marcos not attacking Crame and Crame not attacking Malacañang.² Then Enrile/Ramos were able to win over the majority of AFP [Armed Forces of the Philippines] officers and men.

The next move of the U.S. was to convince Marcos to step down. The U.S. made threats like the cut-off of foreign loans, there was the threat to cut off bilateral assistance and there was the threat to reinvestigate and freeze the assets of Marcos in the U.S. That third threat was the most effective. I think the contribution of the U.S. was to save Marcos from being overtaken by the people in Malacañang.

Most decisive of the forces taking initiative in the four-day happening would be the people's power. Very decisive, more decisive than the military revolt, because that military revolt would have been wiped out any time between Saturday afternoon [February 22] and Monday morning [February 24]. Well, you might say that there was not much of

¹ Camp Crame is the army camp where Enrile and Ramos barricaded themselves after rejecting Marcos' authority following the elections.

² Malacañang—the Presidential Palace.

people's power yet, up to the early hours of February 23. But Marcos was underestimating the Enrile/Ramos group. Marcos must have thought that Enrile and Ramos were just ensconced in one building—the administration building. And Marcos must have known that they had only about 60 people—much less than 100. Enrile and Ramos had just enough men to make a bloody fight, and to make Marcos lose politically. But they would have been destroyed. But as soon as there were 40,000



Students and workers in Manila protest Marcos' fraudulent election victory.



A sugar cane cutter on Negros Island.

people, that must have been a stage when there was a combination of Marcos' underestimating Enrile and Ramos and fearing a political scandal if he had to make a bloody move.

BT: Do you think the U.S. underestimated the situation as well?

Sison: In a sense, the United States underestimated the situation up to [U.S. Special Envoy Phillip] Habib's mission. You see, the end of Habib's mission coincided with the February 22 happening. Habib's mission was to sell some kind of a coalition government with Marcos still as president, and possibly shortening the period of Marcos' stay in power as president. There may have been a coup d'état prepared in advance, but this was aborted. A coup d'état not necessarily occurring as soon as February 22. Possibly the coup d'état was in a wider time frame. But Marcos knew about this plan or got wind of this plan and tried to preempt it. This accelerated developments and, in the breach, people's power went in.

BT: Given the complexities of this current situation, how do you think the people can be organized to change things at this point?

Sison: There are legal organizations of three basic forces of the Philippine revolution—the working class, the peasantry, and the urban petit bourgeoisie. In the legal area of struggle, there is the trade union movement. And for the peasant, there are the peasant associations. With regard to the urban petit bourgeoisie, there are the three main organizations of students and youth, teachers, and professionals.

You cannot build the organizations without a clear orientation. So when I speak of taking the anti-imperialist and anti-feudal line, I am speaking of the national democratic program, which means the program of completing the struggle for national liberation and democracy. Democracy entails not only formal bourgeois democratic rights and processes. National sovereignty of the people has to be asserted. And the peasants, who compose the majority of the people, must be emancipated from feudal exploitation.

Now, there are forces in the country working for national democracy which are not legal. There are the revolutionary organizations like the CPP [Communist Party of the Philippines], NPA [New People's Army] and NDF [National Democratic Front]. I think they have an important share in advancing our national freedom and democracy. Of course, I need not tell them to strengthen themselves. As a matter of course they would strengthen themselves. By strengthening themselves they push forward the national democratic revolution.

BT: What stage do you feel the Philippines is in right now?

Sison: It is now in the stage of the national democratic revolution. We are now in the process of completing the struggle for national liberation and democracy.

BT: What do you mean by national democratic demands? Are you referring to the issues of land reform, the U.S. bases and the dismantling of the military?

Sison: I'll take those things that you mentioned one by one. The U.S. military bases. They must be dismantled. Immediately, or as soon as possible. They violate Philippine sovereignty and territorial integrity. They are a shame we have had to bear for so long a time. And they jeopardize the survival of the Filipino people. If a new constitution is to come out, I believe that these military bases must be declared a violation of national sovereignty and territorial integrity. I think that when the first principle of sovereignty is asserted, that the following sentence should run in this manner: "No foreign military bases should be allowed," or "Foreign military bases are prohibited." These military bases can be removed and put to uses that are beneficial to the people. These bases can be converted into international sea and airports. The rest of the land can be put to agricultural use, or can be mined.

With regard to genuine land reform. Land must be distributed to the landless tillers. There is still plenty of land to distribute, or redistribute. Free or at a cost affordable to the tenants. There are logged-over areas. Areas already deforested. A certain portion of these deforested areas can be converted into agricultural land. But of course there has to be reforestation. Lands covered by pasture leas-



Ships of the U.S. Seventh Fleet at Subic Bay Naval Base.

es, but not used really for developing the cattle or dairy industry, should be distributed.

Then, of course, you know that land devoted to export crops, like sugar, coconut, bananas and so on, is over-expanded. And the world market for these export crops anyway is depressed. At this point we can see very clearly that there are more idle lands, so those excess portions of those plantations should be redistributed to the peasants and farmworkers.

Land distribution is the key to land reform. But, you see, if you just distribute land, it's a step backward, if there is no cooperatization. Cooperatization must be carried out in stages in order to achieve economies of scale. *But the most important thing is that political emancipation goes along with the economic liberation of the peasants.*

With regard to the dismantling of the state, of course, in a social revolution, the armed forces of the Philippines have to be dismantled. But if the government should take the anti-imperialist and anti-feudal line, then there may be no sudden smashing or dismantling of the armed forces of the Philippines by revolutionary forces. Of course, the complete dismantling of the main component of the state does not occur without revolutionary upheaval. There is a time for trying to reorient and reorganize the armed forces of the Philippines. And the revolutionaries, I am sure, will insist that they will go on developing the people's army.

BT: So what function do you feel the Aquino government can play in that process in this period?

Sison: The Aquino government has the choice of being revolutionary or being reactionary. Al-



Friends of democracy? Armed Forces Chief of Staff Fidel Ramos (left) and Minister of Defense Juan Ponce Enrile (right) flank Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos.

though, at the moment, it is characterized more by its existence and operation within the parameters of U.S. world domination and reactionary class interests of the country. The term revolution has been used in a number of ways by many people in reference to this government. There is no social revolution in the sense of radical transformation of society. Philippine society remains semi-colonial and semi-feudal. What has happened is merely the departure from fascist dictatorship toward liberal democracy. But we know that this society continues to be very sick and it is dying. It is afflicted with fatal diseases, like increasing oppression, the tendency to increase oppression and exploitation by U.S. imperialism and domestic feudalism. You see, the U.S. is now extracting not just superprofits—an increasing amount of superprofits from direct investments—but this country has been put into the debt trap and it is sinking into greater indebtedness from year to year. Just to be able to service, to pay interest on the old debts, this country has to borrow. And with regard to domestic feudalism, there has been

the rapid spread and intensification of the armed peasant rebellion. And what is funny is that U.S.-oriented technocrats keep on saying that the salvation of this country is the further development of the plantation economy in this country. But that is exactly what will make the armed struggle spread and intensify faster. If you have more modern plantations, the peasantry will become more dispossessed. And so this is how the armed peasant revolution will intensify. The conditions will grow, the conditions for the armed peasant rebellion.

The Aquino government is the result of a combination of military revolt and people's uprising. People's uprising, or people's power, seems to have been the principal aspect in the making of the Aquino government vis à vis the fallen Marcos autocracy. But there is also something underlying this. The military revolt could be seen as a semi-coup. But so far it has not become a full coup d'état, because the Enrile/Ramos group is still bowing to civilian supremacy and to Mrs. Aquino as President and Commander-in-Chief.

BT: Could the Marcos forces make a comeback?

Sison: There is the comeback potential of the Marcos forces. And these forces are much stronger than those in power now were when they were in the opposition. The Marcos forces have billions of assets in the country and abroad. They have personnel who are armed. They are to be found inside and outside the Armed Forces of the Philippines. I understand by one reckoning that about 25% of the armed forces can be said to be anti-Marcos now. Seventy-five percent can be said to be only outwardly following the 25%.

Then, there is also the danger of militarism arising from the armed forces. They might become ambitious. The Enrile/Ramos combine might be tempted to get power for themselves. Or just any group, possibly a group of colonels might become ambitious.

Now, the Aquino government, its present civilian officials, might also be tempted to do what Marcos did. If you fail to solve the problems, the basic problems of the country, you might be tempted to press the rabid anti-communist line and use the armed forces in intensified military campaigns of suppression against the people and then adopt fascist laws and fascist methods. So there could be a reversal of the process of democratization along the bourgeois democratic way. There are conditions which make these three possibilities serious threats. The United States keeps on pushing the Philippines authorities to pursue an anti-communist line and an intensified campaign of military suppression against the revolutionaries.

BT: *In that sense, how do you assess the Reformed Armed Forces Movement (RAM)?³*

Sison: RAM is more concerned with professionalism, restoration of the merit system, having no more favoritism, nepotism and regionalism. It's not yet developed as a national democratic force, but at this moment I think the officers and men of the AFP are more receptive to new ideas, including revolutionary ideas. There could be elements, you see, in the Catholic Church, its priests and nuns have deep philosophical, theological foundations. Many progressives have developed within the Catholic Church. Maybe within the armed forces, if only some work could be devoted, some personnel could be devoted to developing a progressive force. In due time that progressive force will grow.

BT: *How do you think the left can best respond to the current situation?*

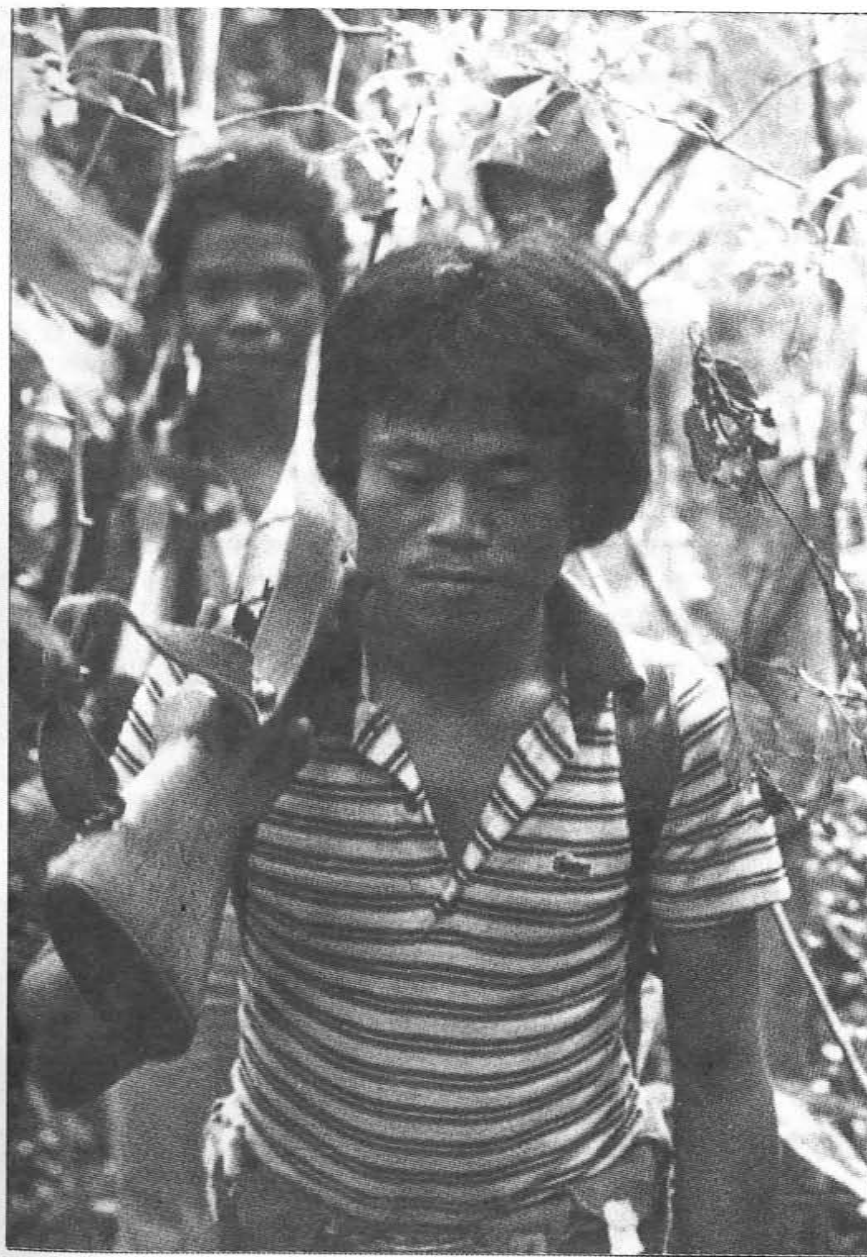
Sison: It is clear to me that the progressive legal forces must make use of the democratic space and must make higher demands along anti-imperialist, anti-feudal lines. A point may come that the Aquino government clearly cannot adopt, or cannot give in to those demands—and even opposes them. But there is also the possibility that it can somehow, to some extent, respond to those demands. The principal current would be that the Aquino government as it is now composed cannot respond satisfactorily to the demands of the people, especially the toiling masses of workers and peasants.

The Aquino government is in a moving picture, with the forces of the workers and peasants trying to get into the picture. We'll see if the Aquino government can put out the new democratic constitution, if it can reconstitute the cabinet after some time, if it can reorient and reorganize the armed forces, reduce the military forces and expenditures in order to make better use of the resources. There are so many requirements.

BT: *What do you think the prospects are for a ceasefire between the Aquino government and the NPA?*

Sison: With regard to the question of a ceasefire, there are two stages to pass through. The first stage would be the improvement of conditions to foster the spirit of and atmosphere for national reconciliation. This would involve unilateral acts of good will by the Aquino government for its own good. For example, I've cited reorientation, reorganization and

³ RAM—a group of middle level officers who seek to "professionalize" the Armed Forces of the Philippines (allegedly CIA-funded).



NPA guerrillas

reduction of the military forces. A new democratic constitution. Completion of the process of releasing all political prisoners. There are so many possible actions.

Now, when it comes to the dialogue of the negotiations proper toward the ceasefire, there would have to be an exchange of maximum demands by the government and the Communist Party. But all the way, ceasefire would be something possible only if there is an agreement to achieve common goals and to fight a common enemy. So, sometimes, in a lighthearted way, I would say in a forum, "Certainly, if the military now would like to cooperate with the New People's Army in going after Marcos loyalist forces and other forces and political warlords, it is possible, no?" Because, you know, a ceasefire with the arms of the revolutionaries not being used would lead to the weapons getting rusty, including the people holding those weapons.

BT: *Do you think the CPP should fight for legalization?*

Sison: The CPP wants to legalize itself by winning power. Legalization might come, however, in formation with ceasefire, but ceasefire is not here.

BT: *Will the CPP participate in the coming elections in November? And run their own platform? Do you think they should take advantage of the electoral opening?*

Sison: The CPP? Now, that is a big question. I don't think the Communist Party will readily surface. I was speaking of the conditions, the stages, rather, before there can be a ceasefire. And even if there would be a ceasefire, the CPP might take precautions. Or the ceasefire might enable the CPP to come out. But I cannot really tell you if the ceasefire will occur and the CPP will surface. Now, it is possible, however, for legal, democratic organizations to participate. BAYAN⁴ can certainly participate. Or there can be a new democratic party. It can grow out of all the forces and elements of the national democratic movement. And that's something new. But I'm not saying just today there can be a new democratic party.

BT: *What do you think of the newspaper stories that there are NPA units that want to surrender?*

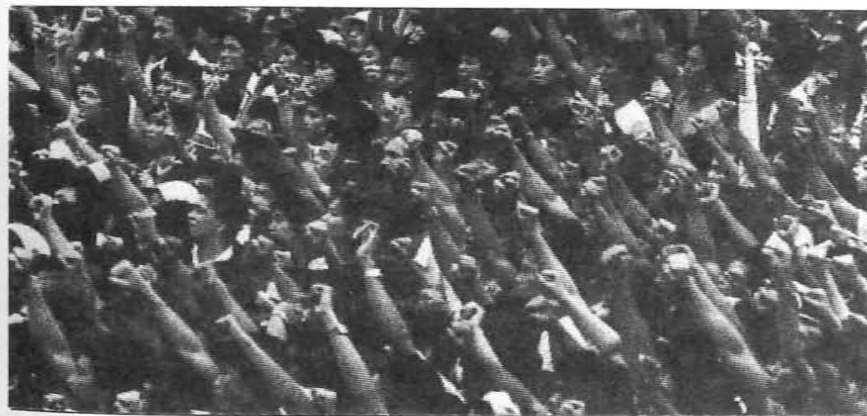
Sison: Oh, that's psywar from the military. Psychological warfare. There are localized ceasefires—truces. No, I think the subject of truce is

⁴ BAYAN - the largest alliance of cause-oriented organizations and individuals.

something that, if it will occur, will be something decided upon by, say, the Communist Party. Or, even, you know, going through any stage of development toward ceasefire is something that is decided—let me say, it involves political leadership. And I do not think the Communist Party will allow centrifugal forces to break up the entire revolutionary movement. I think at least the Communist Party, the revolutionary movement, no matter what one may say about it, it's still far better than the level of revolutionary movement in the 1950s. You see, when certain leaders of the revolutionary movement then took the initiative of negotiating with the government representatives, elements and units at lower levels also took the initiative to deal with supposed negotiators from the government side. There was a tendency then for the organization to disintegrate.

BT: *I just have one final question. Do you have any thoughts about how we can support the Philippine revolution in the U.S.?*

Sison: With regard to the U.S., first I must express a very important point. If the American people will frustrate U.S. official actions—actions not only by the U.S. government, but also by its multinational firms—to continue to oppress and exploit the people, the Philippine revolution, the national democratic movement, will advance towards victory earlier than if these U.S. forces are able to intervene in Philippine affairs. The American people can do what they were able to do with regard to the American war of aggression in Vietnam. So, I think you have the experience in the anti-war movement with pertinence to the Vietnam War to be able to help us effectively. Build the organizations for that purpose. Conduct all forms of education to propagate, to give support to the revolutionary cause of the Filipino people.



IN THE DARK DEPTHS

The enemy wants to bury us
In the dark depths of prison
But shining gold is mined
From the dark depths of the earth
And the radiant pearl is dived
From the dark depths of the sea.
We suffer but we endure
And draw up gold and pearl
From depths of character
Formed so long in struggle

Jose Maria Sison
10 April 1978

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