



CORDILLERA PEOPLES ALLIANCE

For the Defense of the Ancestral Domain and for Self Determination

July 6, 2011

STATEMENT OF THE CORDILLERA PEOPLES ALLIANCE (CPA) ON THE THIRD ATTEMPT AT REGIONAL AUTONOMY

A third attempt for an Autonomy Act on Regional Autonomy for the Cordillera is again being pushed by some politicians and other adherents. The National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA–Cordillera) and the Regional Development Council (RDC) had earlier initiated research and information campaigns, and a draft of the proposed law crafted by the Third Autonomy Act Drafting Committee (TAADC) chaired by Mayor Mauricio Domogan of Baguio City is now the subject of consultations with Local Government Units and the public. After two popularly rejected Organic Acts for the Cordillera in the past (RA 6766 in 1990 and RA 8438 in 1997), as well as the publicized failure of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), how does the Cordillera Peoples Alliance (CPA) view this third attempt for Regional Autonomy in the Cordillera?

There is no popular clamor for Regional Autonomy in the Cordillera at this time, except by the proponents of this third attempt. It is enough that the different provinces have been brought together in the Cordillera Administrative Region.

In the past, the urgent demand for Cordillera regionalization was advocated by the militant mass movement through sustained popular campaigns such as the *Regionalization and Beyond (to Regional Autonomy)* campaign from 1984 to 1986. The regionalization of the Cordillera provinces was a popular demand that had the active participation and support of a broad section of Cordillera society. Proponents of the third autonomy act warn that the Cordillera region would be dismembered with parts reverting to regions I and II if their proposed third Autonomy Act is not passed. Such threatening scenario is nothing but blackmail and is irresponsible.

While Regional Autonomy is our perspective and our aspiration, we have come to realize that it is a futile objective at this time. As with our past campaigns to reject the two earlier Organic Acts that sought to establish Regional Autonomy in the Cordillera, we reiterate that *Genuine* Regional Autonomy is not possible at this time. This is because essential changes in Cordillera and Philippine society are not yet in place that would guarantee the operation of a Genuine Regional Autonomy that would serve the specific interests of Cordillera peoples, as distinct indigenous peoples and as Filipinos, and also the other residents in the region.

The present pyramid structure of Philippine society is characterized by a ruling class – elite based politics and system that is corrupt, with feudal and decadent bourgeois values, and questionable patriotism because of subservience to foreign interests. There must be system change so that Genuine Regional Autonomy can be realized as our assertion of the right to self determination, which is the right to freely determine our political status, and to freely pursue our economic, social and cultural development.

The militant national democratic movement sets such a high standard for Regional Autonomy as a form of Self-Determination, that it now qualifies its program as Genuine Regional Autonomy (GRA). This is to differentiate our aspiration from mere bureaucratic decentralization and devolution of powers which is the regional autonomy perspective pursued by politicians and other adherents within the significantly unchanged political system.

There are then two perspectives in the pursuit of Cordillera Regional Autonomy. The perspective of the Cordillera Peoples Alliance is based on indigenous peoples' rights and human rights, on the inalienable right to self determination of indigenous peoples, and on regional autonomy as the appropriate application of the right to self determination. This would also define the relationship of the autonomous region with the national government, as well as that of

the Cordillera people in particular with the wider Filipino people of which they are also part of. This would require a genuinely democratic local and national context for its substantial operation. It combines the process and program for the fulfillment of our strategic aspiration of genuine regional autonomy with programs and campaigns that deal with the urgent problems and issues that we presently face.

Regional Autonomy is empty and bogus if it does not address the current problems which are the manifestations of national oppression that violate the right to self determination. For the militant mass movement, Genuine Regional Autonomy is both a long term goal (i.e. autonomy act, structure, and positions) alongside simultaneous action on current peoples issues, while continuously building unity and practice on the substance and features of self determination at local levels or on specific concerns. These are the building blocks for grassroots people's empowerment which should be the foundation for Genuine Regional Autonomy in the future.

The other perspective characterized by the initiative of politicians and bureaucrats gives general recognition to the history and specific identity of Cordillera indigenous peoples, but is essentially lacking in substantive rights and principles. It is largely of structures, positions, and budgetary allocations. It is decentralization of functions and devolution of powers much of which already obtain in the regionalized Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR) or even in the other regions created by the Local Government Code. This regional autonomy perspective is also political expediency because it is associated with the ambitions of politicians and bureaucrats for a niche in Cordillera regional politics.

Now, on the present third attempt for an Autonomy Act, an outright critique is that it would allow the dismemberment of the Cordillera Region; with the provision of "Article I, Sec 2. (a) The area of the Cordillera Autonomous Region shall consist of the cities and provinces that shall vote favorably in the plebiscite called for the ratification of this Organic Act...." This provision destroys the premise of the Cordillera as ancestral territory of indigenous peoples that they have occupied, defended, and nourished since time immemorial. To allow the possible dismemberment of the Cordillera region undermines the integrity and unity of Cordillera indigenous peoples. The Cordillera region and its people are indivisible. We achieve Regional Autonomy as one, or not at all at this time. If it requires a longer time to build higher unity towards achieving regional autonomy, then so be it. But we will arrive there as one united Cordillera people and one region. In the absence of the necessary requirements for genuine regional autonomy, we will not be railroaded by politicians' ambitions and expediency for regional autonomy at this time.

Another specific critique is on Article II, Sec 2.(b), that defines a relationship of *subsidiarity* between the national and regional governments; where "the national government shall *veer away* from activities best handled by the autonomous government." (*italics provided*). This is not a relationship of an autonomous region with the national government founded on the recognition of the right to self determination. The national government should not just merely *veer away*; but should *categorically* not counter or undermine the self determined will and actions of the Cordillera autonomous region. Furthermore, *subsidiarity* relations already obtain in the present regionalized status. In short, except for providing structures, positions and added allocations, this third attempt does not address the genuine substance of regional autonomy as an application of self-determination. Its provisions are just improvements on the present Cordillera Administration Region.

To gauge the public pulse on Regional Autonomy, we can say that the discourse of these two perspectives -- one for comprehensive substance although to be achieved in the long term, and another for form and political expediency to be achieved immediately -- have impinged on the popular rejection of the past two Organic Acts and the anemic response to the present third attempt. There is great public hunger for information and analysis -- on the concept and practice of regional autonomy as application of the principle and right to self determination, on the particular problem of indigenous peoples which is national oppression, and the general problems of Philippine society of which Cordillera people are also part of, on indigenous peoples rights and ancestral land rights, on the discrimination of indigenous peoples and on reverse

discrimination. There is much available literature from decades of CPA work that can be accessed and made available to the public.

On the other hand, a major factor in the rejection of the past two organic acts, as well as the lacklustre response to the present third attempt, is the identity and suspected political ambitions of the proponents. In the earlier attempts, the association of the organic act with the Cordillera Peoples Liberation Army (CPLA) and its bankrupt divisive politics among Cordillera peoples and between indigenous peoples and non-indigenous peoples, as well as its mercenary character and criminal acts was translated into popular rejection of the Organic Act identified with it. Public suspicion of political motives for pushing Regional Autonomy now, without doubt also affects the credibility of this third attempt.

A positive sign of our growing political education is in being critical and not readily accepting politicians' prescriptions, i.e. regional autonomy, if this is not sufficiently understood. Unless internalized well and seen to contribute to the over all unity and wellbeing of the Cordillera people, as well as being in tandem with the wider struggles of the whole Filipino people, such politically expedient efforts as regional autonomy in the here and now will only be self serving and divisive, and will likely be rejected.

Instead of regional autonomy now when the people are not yet ready, we can live with the present status as a Cordillera administrative region (CAR). We propose, however, that EO 220 which created CAR should now be scrapped and another executive order be issued by the president to allow the continuance of the Cordillera administrative region as a regular region, but without the unnecessary and controversial structures and privileged status for a few.

This would rightly be so as it is pertinent for President Benigno Aquino to rectify a grave injustice committed by his mother, President Cory Aquino in 1987, against the militant mass movement in the Cordillera and the struggle for self determination and regional autonomy.

For a flashback on history, Cory Aquino and the CPA were would-be allies in the anti-Marcos dictatorship struggle, up to the campaign for Cory as President in 1986, and up to the early months of her presidency. Attesting to this alliance is a faded black and white photo of Cory meeting with CPA leaders in Malacanang, where the CPA recommended the cancellation of the Chico dams and the CRC logging/paper mill, the return of the Ibaloi lands in Taloy Sur, Tuba where the Marcos park and bust were erected, and the agenda for ancestral land rights and regional autonomy for the Cordillera, among others. While some of our demands were granted, such as the return of the landgrabbed lands of the Taloy folk, and the cancellation of the Chico dam project, the big issues of ancestral land rights and regional autonomy had to be addressed by a new law.

Cory Aquino promised the CPA that she would appoint a CPA representative to the Constitutional Commission in order that we would be able to help craft the new law. She however reneged on this promise. Unfazed, the CPA was able to mobilize region-wide and lobby the Constitutional Commission to have the provisions on ancestral land and regional autonomy passed.

It is ironic that while the CPA was at the forefront of the anti-dictatorship struggle, and also the regionalization and regional autonomy campaign since its organization in 1984, Cory chose to turn her back on the CPA, and instead embraced the Cordillera People's Liberation Army (CPLA) which had emerged from a split with the New Peoples Army (NPA) in the Cordillera shortly after EDSA I. They had the so-called Mount Data *sipat* after which Executive Order 220 was issued.

EO 220 caused the formation of the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR), created the Cordillera Regional Assembly (CRA), Cordillera Executive Board (CEB), Cordillera Bodong Administration (CBAd), and gave privileged status to the Cordillera People's Liberation Army who then became the kingpins in the region. History itself has judged the irrelevance of said superfluous bureaucracy as it withered away after Congress refused to provide the funds to maintain it, without having accomplished anything of worth.

When the Cory government forged its partnership with the CPLA, these were difficult times for the CPA. We became the target for virulent red-baiting and attack by the CPLA under the regime of the so-called icon of democracy. The Cory regime colluded with the CPLA and traditional politicians to try and derail the mass movement and reap the results from our earlier campaigns and lobby. Worse, she allowed the CPLA license to rule roughshod in the Cordillera. They were allowed to harass CPA organizations, destroy socio-economic projects of CPA communities, and even to murder CPA leaders with impunity.

While the CPLA had publicly acknowledged that they were responsible for the killings of then CPA vice-chairperson and Tanglag pangat Ama Daniel Ngayaan and CPA organizer Romy Gardo from Tubo, Abra, the Cory regime did not lift a finger to hold them accountable. Such was the disgraceful honeymoon and criminal embrace of the CPLA and the Cory Aquino government that they have blood on their hands. Because the tainted partnership was the immediate context of the issuance of EO 220, this should now be scrapped and replaced with another executive order, for the continuance of the Cordillera Administrative Region as a regular region, but without the folly associated with EO 220.

The Cordillera struggle for indigenous people’s rights and aspiration for genuine regional autonomy is a continuing movement among the grassroots and the middle forces, of which the militant national democratic mass movement is a significant part. Attaining GRA may be slow as we wish to build it from the grassroots, with corresponding changes also at the national level. But as the dynamics of local and national politics still have to unfold, there may come a time when an Autonomy law may indeed be passed and subsequent Autonomy structures established, even without the prerequisites being met. As this would not yet be GRA that we envision, trust that the militant mass movement will pursue its comprehensive and substantive program and campaigns for self determination in the Cordillera together with advancing the politics of national democracy, as these are the continuing preparations for, and until Genuine Regional Autonomy will finally be attained.

In summary, given our local and national situation, it is not yet the right time to establish the Cordillera Autonomous Region, regardless that there is a Constitutional provision for such, which was the result of the militant mass movement’s lobby in the past. The integrity of the Cordillera as territory of indigenous peoples and as a region for administration and a level of development has already somewhat been achieved with the regionalization of the Cordillera provinces. Let us be satisfied with this for now, as we nurture and develop our region for our people’s welfare, demand sufficient allocations, and always assert our indigenous peoples rights and our right to self determination, while continuing to collectively empower ourselves for genuine regional autonomy in the future.

The CPA is issuing this statement as the government celebrates its Cordillera month this July, and its Cordillera Day on July 15, which is the anniversary of the signing of EO 220. Alternatively, since 1985, the CPA has commemorated Cordillera Day on April 24, the anniversary of the martyrdom of Cordillera hero Macliing Dulag, who gave up his life in defense of ancestral land and indigenous peoples rights, including other martyrs and heroes. We hope that the difference is clear, as are the differing perspectives and approaches to regional autonomy. #

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