

Vigilantes in the Philippines

From Fanatical Cults To Citizens' Organizations

Ronald J. May

Foreword by Belinda A. Aquino

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Foreword

One of the most alarming problems the Aquino administration had to face when it replaced the Marcos dictatorship following the 1986 “people power revolution” in the Philippines was the rapid growth of vigilante groups, especially in certain parts of the Visayas and Mindanao. While vigilantism is not a new phenomenon in Philippine society, the more recent wave of vigilante groups in the post-Marcos period was essentially directed against communists, in particular the New People’s Army (NPA). However, many of the victims of “vigilante justice” in recent years have been innocent civilians, poor farmers, human rights and church workers, lawyers, journalists, religious, and other individuals who have advocated such measures as land reform and the withdrawal of American bases from Philippine territory. Even more disturbing was the revelation of the fact-finding team headed by former U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark in May 1987 that certain foreign organizations like the Unification Church-

affiliated CAUSA (Confederation of the Associations for the Unification of the Societies of the Americas) and WACL (World Anti-Communist League) were actively engaged in encouraging, if not organizing, these right-wing groups. The team also found evidence of sophisticated counter-insurgency work being undertaken in Mindanao areas by elements of the Philippine military with U.S. technical assistance.

This latest title in the Philippine Studies Occasional Papers Series by Ronald J. May explores and analyzes the various factors that have contributed to the development of the vigilante phenomenon in Philippine society, particularly since the second half of the 1980s. Most of the vigilante groups studied by Professor May were on Mindanao, a region that has a long history of social tension and political instability, not to mention lawlessness involving various groups in certain areas. Other right-wing groups in the Visayas, especially in places like Negros, Cebu, and Leyte, are also analyzed by the author. The phenomenon is not as pervasive in Luzon.

This study is useful for a fuller understanding of a serious problem that has plagued the country, especially during the Marcos regime and Aquino administration. There are various dimensions to the vigilante phenomenon—social, political, cultural, and quasi-religious—that need to be appreciated and understood. This work is a major contribution to an area of Philippine political anthropology that has been the subject of research by scholars on the country's subcultures.

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Belinda A. Aquino, Editor
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Introduction

In April 1987 the pages of many of the world's newspapers carried a gruesome photograph of three young Filipinos, armed with bolos (traditional long-bladed weapons), holding up the severed head of an alleged communist guerrilla. The young men, who had hacked their victim to death and allegedly drank his blood to ward off his ghost, were identified as members of a notorious right-wing religious cult group, *Tadtad*, which has been operating in the Philippines' southern island of Mindanao. What made the photograph particularly noteworthy was not so much the violence it depicted — since violence has been endemic in the southern Philippines for some time — but the fact that *Tadtad* is one of a number of anti-communist "vigilante"

groups which received overt endorsement from the Philippine government of Corazon Aquino. Indeed, coincident with the slaying of the suspected communists, the president publicly endorsed the activities of one of the region's largest vigilante groups as a manifestation of "people power."

In recent years much has been written about vigilante groups in the Philippines and their role in the Aquino government's counter-insurgency program. Evidence has even been adduced to suggest that the spread of vigilantism has been encouraged by a strategy of low intensity conflict supported by American government and private interests (see, for example, Clark et al. 1987; Bello 1987; Delacruz et al. 1987). However, there has been little attempt either to link the rise of vigilantes to earlier popular movements, to examine their immediate social and political origins, or to explain the extent of support for such groups in the post-Marcos Philippines. Such questions are inherently difficult: groups like *Tadtad* tend to be, by their nature, inaccessible and often incoherent; what primary information is available, from the groups themselves or from their actual or prospective victims, can seldom be taken wholly at face value. And their activities, embracing the darker aspects of human behavior, are sometimes difficult to comprehend. Nonetheless, we know enough about

some of the so-called vigilante groups, and their antecedents, and about the way they have recently been manipulated, to make such questions worth pursuing.

This paper thus attempts to describe the apparent proliferation of vigilante groups in 1987-88, to critically examine recent policy initiatives by the Philippine government, and to place the rise of vigilantism in a broader historical context.

Part I

The Rise of Vigilantism

Several sources suggest that the proliferation of vigilante groups began in early 1987.¹ A Philippine Senate Committee on Justice and Human Rights *Report on Vigilante Groups* (1988), for example, begins with the comment: "Starting February 1987, there have been persistent reports on the proliferation of vigilante groups in many parts of the country An upsurge of these complaints was noted in October 1987." (Senate Committee, 1988:5) The sudden growth of vigilante groups has been related to the breakdown, early in 1987,

of negotiations aimed at a reconciliation between the Philippine government and the Communist New People's Army (NPA). A 1988 report of the New York-based Lawyers Committee for Human Rights (LCHR), for example, stated:

Although rooted in the Marcos era, vigilantism did not become a widespread phenomenon until recently, flourishing noticeably after the collapse of ceasefire negotiations in early 1987. By late 1987, over 200 vigilante forces were thought to be operating, and the numbers have continued to multiply (LCHR 1988:xi).

In fact, however, these observations have to be qualified on at least two accounts. First, the term "vigilante" has been used to cover quite a diverse range of groups, from what the LCHR (1988:xi) describes as "self-organized, unarmed and generally law-abiding groups that perform a neighborhood watch role," to fanatical anti-communist religious sects armed and supported by the military. A Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (PAHRA) *Update* (15 July 1987) for example, distinguishes between "right-wing vigilantes," "fanatical cults," and "armed bandits," though in practice the dividing line between these three categories is by no means clear.² Moreover, the PAHRA list does

not include a number of military or para-military units (particularly units of the former Civilian Home Defense Forces [CHDF], private armies of big politicians and landowners, and “lost commands”) which have been involved in vigilantism.

Secondly, many of the groups which have figured in the discussion of vigilantism since 1987 were in existence before — often well before the fall of Marcos.

It is no coincidence that the initial focus of vigilantism was on Mindanao. Mindanao has a “Wild West” tradition of lawlessness and violence (May, forthcoming). In the late 1960s, social tensions in Mindanao were manifested in accelerating conflicts between indigenous Muslim communities, immigrant settlers (mostly from the Visayas), emerging Christian landowner-politician interests, and indigenous tribal people. In such conflicts, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and Philippine Constabulary/Integrated National Police (PC/INP) units frequently sided with the Christian settlers and landowner-politicians.

Around 1970, in the region of Cotabato and northern Lanao, a group of Ilonggo settlers and tribal *Tiruray*, calling themselves *Ilaga* (“Rats”), fought with groups of Muslim “Blackshirts” and “Barracudas.” The *Ilaga*, it was reported, wore vests inscribed with Biblical

quotations, belts which carried bottles of oil and pages ripped from the New Testament, and amulets (*anting-anting*) which they believed rendered them invincible (*Far Eastern Economic Review [FEER]*, 22 May 1971). The Muslim-Christian conflict was in part over land and in part was fuelled by religious intolerance; but it also had political dimensions. In the 1971 elections the *Ilaga* and, it was alleged, local police and Philippine Constabulary (PC) units supported the gubernatorial campaign of an Ilonggo Christian PC commander, while the Blackshirts and Barracudas were linked respectively to prominent Muslim politician Udtog Matalam, the founder in 1968 of a Muslim Independence Movement (MIM) in Mindanao, and Ali Dimaporo, subsequently governor of Lanao del Sur and a Marcos crony. Noting the separatist demands of the MIM, a *Far Eastern Economic Review* report in 1971 commented: "This large 'blackshirt' army could be an even greater danger to the government than the Huks."³ (FEER 11 September 1971)

Subsequently, as the Muslim insurgency gained momentum, military authorities exploited Christian-Muslim antipathies in their campaign against the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). In 1973, a Local Self-Defense Force (LSDF) was formed in Mindanao. A contemporary account reported: "Thousands of

‘volunteers’ have been rearmed to form a second line of defense . . . [consisting] largely of Christian fanatics...who are trigger-happy and eager to avenge friends or relatives.” Noting that there were already reports of indiscriminate killing of Muslims and burning of mosques by the LSDF, and that the army found it difficult to control them, the report went on to suggest that there was a very real danger that the LSDF would escalate the conflict into a religious war (*FEER* 14 May 1973).

However, this warning was not heeded by military authorities, who throughout the 1970s and early 1980s continued to employ paramilitary groups in counter-insurgency measures against the MNLF and subsequently the Communist New People’s Army (NPA). In 1975 Muslims in the town of Lamitan, Basilan, were said to be particularly fearful of a Christian vigilante group, *Mundo Escuro* (Black World), which was accused of kidnappings, killings, and mutilations of suspected MNLF supporters. Yet a regional military commander reportedly described *Mundo Escuro* as “a law-abiding group whose members often aid his troops in operations.” (*FEER* 9 May 1975)

In the provinces of Zamboanga del Norte and Misamis Oriental, in northeastern Mindanao, two other fanatical religious sects, Rock Christ and 4Ks, were also

co-opted by the AFP and PC in operations against the MNLF and NPA. Both seem to have originated among poor immigrant rural settlers from the Visayas in the 1970s. Like other fanatical religious sects, their activities included elaborate rituals, a belief in the power of *anting-anting*, and a propensity for bloodthirsty attacks on perceived enemies, who were often decapitated or otherwise mutilated. Rock Christ was affiliated with the charismatic Philippines Benevolent Missionary Association and allegedly supported by the AFP's 125th Airborne Company based in Pagadian City. Some of its members were recruited into the CHDF after 1976, and its founder, who was killed by NPA assassins in 1981, is said to have been a reservist colonel. After 1981, Rock Christ appeared to have broken up and its members to have joined either 4Ks or *Tadtad*. 4Ks was operating in Clarin, Misamis Oriental in the mid 1970s. Around 1984 it was reorganized as *Kapunungan sa mga Kabus Kontra sa Komunista* (Organization of the Poor Against Communism), with the backing of the military.⁴ In that year 4Ks members were accused of hacking to death suspected NPA cadres and using their blood in a sect ritual, but legal action against several accused collapsed when key witnesses were murdered. Further massacres of suspected NPA supporters were attributed to 4Ks in the mid-1980s and in retaliation in 1986 and 1987, NPA

sparrow units assassinated 4Ks' leader, Severino Bodiogan, and his son. In Davao del Norte, another group of religious fanatics, the Remnants of God, operated in a similar fashion, with AFP backing.

In Bukidnon, another region of heavy postwar immigration, fanatical "Rizalista" organizations appeared in the 1960s. Although in the 1970s they were initially involved primarily in action against loggers, immigrant settlers and big corporations — and even the PC — some "Rizalistas," notably the *Caballeros de Rizal Agricultural Endeavor*, which spread from Surigao del Norte to Bukidnon (where it became associated with the tribal *Higaonon Datus' Association*), were supported by the military as counter-insurgency forces (Cullen 1979; Edgerton 1983).

Another fanatical religious sect to emerge in Mindanao in the 1970s was *Sagrado Corazon Señor* (Sacred Heart of the Lord), better known as *Tadtad* (*tadtad* means to chop). A photograph in *Asiaweek* (14 June 1987) shows "the Master" of *Sagrado Corazon Señor*, Sagrado Catiil Sade Jr., at the sect's Holy Temple of Power in Initao, Misamis Oriental. It quotes Sade, who is described as "proclaiming himself to be Jesus Christ," as saying that the movement was established in the early years of martial law "to rout the forces of Satan by building an 'Army of Light.'" Sade is said to be a

retired military officer. The movement claims to have 4.5 million members in *Tadtad* groups throughout the country. While that is undoubtedly a vast exaggeration, it does appear to have thousands of followers in Mindanao, having grown rapidly in the early 1980s, especially in the province of Davao del Sur, and it has missions in Bohol, Leyte, Siquijor, Cebu, Samar, Novaliches, Pampanga, and Batanes. At the same time, *Tadtad* has been accused of putting extreme pressure on people to form vigilante groups, marking the houses of non-members and "frequently threatening to kill neighborhood leaders" if they fail to organize vigilante groups (LCHR 1988. Also see Morderno 1985; Fay 1987).

In a 1987 study of the *Tadtad*, Valencia and McAndrew describe the movement's rituals and beliefs:

Prospective members of the *Tadtad* are required to undergo a rite of initiation. Those seeking admission to the cult must kneel in prayer for several hours in preparation for the moment when their outstretched arms will be hacked by a *bolo*-wielding cult leader reciting Latin or Latin sounding prayers known as *oraciones*. If the initiates' faith is strong, their limbs, it is said, will not be severed....

Tadtad believers are divided into two groups: the missionaries and the combatants. The missionaries, composed mostly of women, are commissioned to promote faith among non-

believers and do this normally through the propagation of traditional healing. The combatants, by comparison, composed mostly of men, are armed with bolos and guns and commissioned to protect the cult and the country. The combatants, distinguished by red bands tied around their heads, arms, and legs, are often seen accompanying military man *[sic]* on patrols.

...the objectives of the *Sagrado Corazon Señor* are absolute devotion to God, self-preservation, and the defense of the country. For these reasons, the cult has vowed to fight those considered to be enemies of the state. These include communists as well as members of progressive organizations....

Members wear a pouch around their neck containing a small likeness of the Philippine flag and a white stone covered in a red cloth. Some members also wear a small bottle of oil around their waist. Such *anting* are said to make members invincible to bullets....For an *anting-anting* to be effective, one must forego pork, sex, and alcohol on certain days (Valencia and McAndrew, 1987:21-22).

Valencia and McAndrew (ibid.:24) report that in the five years to 1987, "the atrocities of the *Tadtad* have reached astonishing proportions. Hundreds of people have been killed (often chopped to pieces) and thousands forced to flee their homes under the terror of this cult." In Cagayan de Oro, a particularly vicious splinter group of *Tadtad*, The Bolo Battalion, was accused of a number of killings of suspected NPA in the mid-1980s. Yet

Tadtad has operated with the covert, and sometimes overt, support of military and civilian officials (see below), and its members were frequently integrated into the CHDF.

Another development in Mindanao in the 1970s was the emergence of "lost commands." The most notorious of these was the "Lost Command" of Colonel Carlos Lademora. Before resigning in 1979, following charges of civil rights abuses by his men, Lademora had been a provincial PC commander in Agusan del Sur in Eastern Mindanao. His "lost command" (known as "Charlie's Angels"), which is said to have included regular PC officers and men, as well as military deserters and criminals, embarked upon a bloodthirsty and often indiscriminate campaign against suspected MNLF and NPA supporters in the late 1970s and early 1980s, with at least tacit support from the military. It was also involved in a range of criminal activities, from strike-breaking and illegal gambling to landgrabbing and extortion.⁵

One colorful military figure, Colonel Alexander Noble (who later turned renegade and led an abortive Mindanao-based coup attempt in late 1989), also established his early reputation in Agusan del Sur in the late 1970s, when he organized and trained a group of Higaonon tribesmen as an auxiliary counter-insurgency

force against the NPA. This is one of several instances in which groups of tribal people were recruited as counter-insurgency forces against the MNLF and NPA. Other examples include the *Kontra Moro Brigade* among the *T'boli* of South Cotabato; the *Higaonon Datus' Association* in Bukidnon; the *Surit-Surit Battalion*, a group of *Mansaka* and *Ata* tribal people operating in Davao del Norte with homemade weapons; and the *Landasan* (Lord Divine Service) and *Mindahila Brigade* in North Cotabato. The semi-private presidential advisory body on national minorities, PANAMIN, played an active role in the 1970s and early 1980s recruiting and training tribal people in anti-communist vigilantism, in association with the CHDF. (See, for example, Cullen 1979; 1 CL Research Team 1979; Amnesty International 1982; Fay 1987; Tribal Forum February-March 1982.)

The NPA began to consolidate its position in Mindanao from around the mid-1970s, and by 1983 had established municipal and provincial councils (*Midweek* 10 June 1987, interview with "Victor Aguilar"). A particular stronghold was the southern city of Davao, about which an Australian journalist wrote in 1987:

Davao City concentrates every Philippines problem you can think of — a high birthrate, land shortage, absentee owners, prostitution and gambling rackets, corrupt police and military and, of course, the NPA whose avenging Marxist zeal

not infrequently cloaks a penchant for unabashed thuggery (Peter Hastings in *Sydney Morning Herald* 25 March 1987).

In the early 1980s there were frequent killings of police and civilians in Davao City, most of the former (and many of the latter) attributed to the NPA (see, for example, *Asiaweek* 12 April 1987). It was here that vigilantism, in the form of *Alsa Masa*, first attracted widespread public attention.

Alsa Masa (Masses Arise or People's Uprising) appears to have been formed in the Davao suburb of Agdao in early 1984 by a barangay captain, Wilfredo "Baby" Aquino, said to be a staunch Marcos loyalist and anti-communist. Agdao is a low-income settlement, populated largely by immigrants from the Visayas (many of whom, Hastings suggests, were petty criminals fleeing justice), and by 1984 had, like much of the Davao area, come strongly under the influence of the NPA, earning the popular appellation "Nicaragdao." Ostensibly, *Alsa Masa* was formed among a group of non-communists to resist the financial and other impositions of the NPA. However, as one report says, "Aquino's *Alsa Masa* became notorious for its own lawless activities, including liquidations of suspected rebels." (LCHR 1988:24) And in late 1985, following the murder of "Baby" Aquino, reportedly by NPA assassins, it was unofficially

disbanded, though it seems to have survived as a small street gang. During 1985, however, the NPA in southern Mindanao was heavily infiltrated by "deep penetration agents" (DPAs) of the military, and in an outburst of paranoia, the local organization instigated a series of purges and apparently indiscriminate killings of suspected DPAs. As a result of this, the NPA in Davao alienated much of its popular support and when in April 1986 a group of ex-NPA members, led by Rolando "Boy" Ponsa Cagay, revived *Alsa Masa* as an anti-communist group (Cagay claims to have had a close friend killed by the NPA on suspicion of being a DPA), they attracted support from both the urban poor and the middle class in Davao. A resident of Agdao was quoted as saying in 1987: "'We are tired of the communists' taxation and killings. They have no respect for God.'" (*Post-Courier* 29 May 1987)

Initially the revival of *Alsa Masa* was opposed by the then local PC commander, Lt. Col. Jesus Magno. However, in July 1986, Magno was replaced by a hardline anti-communist, Lt. Col. Franco Calida, who actively encouraged the growth of the vigilante group. By March 1987, *Alsa Masa* was said to have 9,628 members in Davao City, including 3,000 former NPA members (*Manila Bulletin* 12 March 1987; in January 1988 Calida claimed a million supporters). These members patrolled the city, operated checkpoints on roads in and out of the

city, collected intelligence for the PC and reported on any strangers, and exercised the right of citizen arrest. Initially Calida denied that *Alsa Masa* members were armed (though observers refuted this), but in testimony before the Senate Committee on Justice and Human Rights, he admitted that *Alsa Masa* had been organized "in coordination with our military and police detachments," (Senate Committee 1988:8-9) and that *Alsa Masa* members had been inducted into the CHDF and issued with arms. The (US) Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights (LCHR) described *Alsa Masa* as "more closely supervised" and "substantially less abusive" than other vigilante groups, while at the same time acknowledging that its early activities "included harshly coercive practices and several instances of extrajudicial execution." (LCHR 1988:25) Local sources, however, report widespread harassment of non-supporters (including cause-oriented groups, labor organizers, church workers, and, during the 1987 elections, supporters of the left-wing *Partido ng Bayan* [PnB]); "taxes" ("democratic extortion") on individuals and businesses to support the organization; enforced membership, with ID cards costing 35 pesos; and illegal "arrests." A *New York Times* report (4 April 1987) quotes Calida as saying: "In the fight between democracy and communism, there is no way to be neutral. Anybody who would not like to

join *Alsa Masa* is a Communist." By the end of 1987 *Alsa Masa's* activities had resulted in large scale evacuation from some barangays.

The revival of *Alsa Masa* in 1986 was supported by a number of prominent local citizens, including flamboyant local radio announcer Jun Porras Pala, who became known as "the Voice of *Alsa Masa*."⁶ Pala, a confessed admirer of the tactics of Hitler and Goebbels, frequently pictured in his sandbagged studio with his .38 pistol and hand grenade (see, for example, *Asiaweek* 12 April 1987), became a source of vitriolic attacks on human rights activists, religious groups and cause-oriented organizations. In June 1987, however, Pala split with Calida and formed his own Contra Force. Subsequently he seems to have shifted somewhat to the left (see below).

By mid-1987 *Alsa Masa* was credited with reversing the growth of NPA support in Davao (though others claim that the NPA had largely withdrawn from Davao by 1986). Calida himself is credited with the revealing comment: "There are almost no Communists left in Davao City today, just the priests and the nuns, and we'll go after them next." (*Midweek* 3 June 1987)

Alsa Masa has been described as "the most popular and considered forerunner of the different vigilante groups." (De Guzman, in testimony before Senate

Committee 1988:8) As such, it appears to have attracted the membership of a number of other groups on Mindanao, including *Tadtad*, and to have lent its name to vigilante groups elsewhere in the country “which have little in common with the Davao group other than the name they borrowed.” (LCHR 1988:25) Despite well documented accusations of human rights abuses by *Alsa Masa* members, in 1987 senior members of the Aquino government praised the movement for its counter-insurgency efforts and held it up as an example to others (see below).

Another group which was accorded official endorsement was NAKASAKA (*Nagkahiusang Katawhang alang sa Kalinaw*, People United for Peace). NAKASAKA was established in Davao del Sur in 1987 by the then Officer-in-Charge (OIC) Governor Douglas Cagas (a former human rights lawyer) and Col. Jesus Magno, then regional military commander, as, it was claimed, an unarmed, non-violent “quasi-police group” to counter NPA abuses of the civilian population (Clark et al. 1987:18). It appears to have been intended that NAKASAKA would bring together under government control several existing vigilante groups, and indeed *Alsa Masa* and *Tadtad* members were incorporated, though Cagas subsequently denied association with *Tadtad*. According to Region 11 anti-insurgency plans

(quoted in *Financial Post* 2 November 1987), its function was to assist in “the attraction, surrender, or defeat of rebels by people power.” To achieve this, NAKASAKA, was to organize barangay residents, conducting nightly patrols (*ronda*) and checking the movement of people so as to be able to alert the military when suspected NPA were sighted. “Prayer sessions, rosaries, Bible reading and invocations” were to be conducted at every guard shift “for enlightenment and spiritual strength of the NAKASAKA members.” Membership was nominally voluntary, though Cagas was quoted as saying that all citizens were expected to join and that those declining membership “will be asked to defend their decision.” (Clark *et al.* 1987) Members were to receive regular military training and instruction aimed “to develop values such as love of God, nationalism, respect for elders and women, human rights, and others.” NPA surrenderees were to be subjected to a “rehabilitation process” (*gambalay*) involving social reorientation skills training and “spiritual formation.” The provincial government, national line agencies, and private sector and religious groups were to participate in this program, and resettlement plots and soft loans for “livelihood projects” were to be provided from a Local Government Development Fund. NAKASAKA’s activities were to be supervised by local police or military units and

monitored by the Provincial Coordinating Council and Department of Local Government.

During 1987 NAKASAKA was frequently hailed as a model for civilian involvement in counter-insurgency, even by President Aquino, and it was said to have strong support from local businesses. Nevertheless NAKASAKA members often carried guns or bolos, there were frequent reports of harassment of citizens who preferred not to join the movement, and NAKASAKA members were accused of "extrajudicial executions" and other human rights abuses (for example, see Clark *et al.* 1987).

Perhaps encouraged by the official endorsement of vigilante groups, other groups which had been involved in operations against Communist and Muslim insurgents during the Marcos administration became more visible, more active, and were frequently overtly encouraged by some military and civilian authorities. And new groups emerged.

One such group was *Kuratong Baleleng*. (*Kuratong* is a bamboo percussion instrument traditionally used to summon villagers together or warn them of danger; *Baleleng* is a folkloric figure.) *Kuratong Baleleng* had its origins in Ozamis City, Misamis Oriental, where it emerged under the leadership of Octavio "Ongcoy" Parohinog. A former CHDF commander, Parohinog has been described as a "notorious criminal,"

associated with petty crime in Ozamis City and having links to a national criminal syndicate (see, for example, *Manila Chronicle* 23 June 1987; LCHR 1988). *Kuratong Baleleng* is said to have been formed as a counter-insurgency force in May 1987 following the assassination by the NPA of a prominent Marcos-loyalist community leader and former Presidential Security Command member, who was related to Parohinog. By August 1987, the movement claimed 66 members and was said to have received weapons from the Southern Command military headquarters in Zamboanga City; its counter-insurgency activities had spread to the adjoining provinces of Misamis Occidental, Zamboanga del Sur, and Zamboanga del Norte. *Kuratong Baleleng* conducted house-to-house searches for NPA supporters and organized public oath-taking by alleged NPA surrenderees; it was accused of carrying out executions and of being responsible for disappearances, and is said to have had an “official” death list of human rights activists, church workers and government officials. However, according to reports, “the group’s rebirth as a counter-insurgency force has not blunted its criminal activities. Instead the status it acquired with military authorities has seemingly emboldened its members to plunder local residents with a sense of impunity.” (LCHR 1988:110) *Kuratong Baleleng* is alleged to have been

involved in extortion — imposing “taxes” on local businesses and demanding money and rice from local villagers — and to have operated as a private army of certain political patrons; in 1988 it was employed as a strike-breaking force by a logging company in Misalip, Zamboanga del Sur. In late 1987, *Kuratong Baleleng* attracted national attention when, following statements by Mindanao politician and Local Government Secretary Aquilino Pimentel, AFP chief General Ramos promised an investigation into its activities; but no action appears to have been taken.

Another group of vigilantes which achieved notoriety, both on Mindanao and in the Visayas, in 1987-88 was a collection of fanatical sects, variously titled (according to the color of their headbands) *Pulahan* (“the Red Ones”), *Greenan* (“the Green Ones”), *Ituman* (“the Black Ones”), *Putian* (“The White Ones”) and *Pula-Puti* (“Red-White”). Like *Tadtad*, these groups performed religious rituals, believed in the power of *anting-anting*, and were involved in a number of brutal killings which, in one case (in Negros), involved the public display of the severed head of a woman NPA suspect and in another, the cutting out of a man’s liver. They were also accused of extortion. Most of the groups drew their membership from among poor peasants in fairly remote areas (though a photograph in *Asiaweek* 14 June 1987

shows a group of *Pulahanes*, with their distinctive red headbands, wearing *anting-anting* and carrying bolos, in Diangga, Davao City, "where they work on a banana plantation"). Some appear to have been recruited exclusively from among tribal minorities. The majority were reported to have received training and weapons from the AFP and PC; some were inducted into the CHDF.

In June 1989, the *Ituman* came into public prominence following an incident in Sitio Rano, Digos, Davao del Sur. In what became known as "the Digos massacre," a NPA unit which engaged members of the *Ituman* in the foothills of Mount Apo proceeded to kill 37 villagers, mostly women and children, and decapitate the *Ituman* leader and his brother, a United Church of Christ of the Philippines (UCCP) pastor.⁷ Subsequent investigations by the government, civil rights groups and by the Left's National Democratic Front (NDF) cast a spotlight on the Digos *Ituman*, a group of Manobo and Upo tribal people brought together by Ruben Ayap in 1987, and adherents to the Lord Divine Service. The *Ituman*, apparently reluctantly, had become caught up in the long-running war between the NPA and the AFP/PC. (See *Manila Chronicle* 30 June, 9,16, 19 July 1989; *Pilipinas* [NDF] September 1989.) The immediate aftermath of the Digos massacre was a spate of

assassinations of suspected NPA in the Davao area, and an announcement that 200 *Ituman* would be recruited into Civilian Armed Forces Geographical Units (CAFGU). (See below.)

Other anti-communist vigilante groups identified in Mindanao in 1987-88 included *Masa Laban sa Komunista* (People's Fight against Communism, MALKOM) in General Santos City, South Cotabato; MMASADA (*Mata Masa sa Dakbayan*, "Eyes of the City's Masses" or "Civic Watch") in Iligan City; KOMUT (the Koronadal Movement for Unity and Tranquillity) in South Cotabato; *Sikad* (*Serbisyo sa Katiling alang sa Demokrasya*, Association for Serving Democracy) in Davao Oriental; *Kilusang Laban sa Komunista* (Movement Against Communism, KLK); *Alsa Moro*, a Maguindanao-based group comprising mostly MNLF surrenderees; the Christian Mindanao Liberation Organization-Mindanao Liberation Army (CMLO-MLA), a group founded by Pedro Rivera Montojo in Misamis Oriental, which demanded "full autonomy" for Mindanao, but appears to have been largely motivated by fears of Christian subjugation in the autonomous Muslim Mindanao provided for in the 1987 constitution; and a regional umbrella group, the Mindanao Anti-Communist Crusade.

Vigilantism, however, has not been confined to

Mindanao: of the 127 right-wing vigilantes identified in the *PAHRA Update* of August 1987, 53 were in Mindanao, 41 in the Visayas, and 33 in Luzon, including six in Metro Manila.

Among a number of fanatical religious sects in the Visayas which were used by the military before 1986 were the Knights of Rizal and various other *Rizalista* groups, Philippine Divine Missionaries for Christ, Rock Christ, White Rock, Power of the Spirit, Alpha Omega, *Walay Sapatos* (No Shoes), *Tres Cantos* (Three Corners), Salvatore, *Dalan sa Langit* (Way to Heaven), Missionaries for Social Transcendental Inc. (MSTI), the Philippine Benevolent Missionaries Association, *Pulahan*, and *Tadtad*.

In Cebu, a US-Philippine Fact-Finding Mission (Clark *et al.* 1987:20) in May 1987 reported "anti-communist hysteria" and "vigilante violence" (LCHR 1988:20). The following year a Lawyers Committee for Human Rights report stated: "The vigilante movement in Cebu is highly sophisticated, and the province has become a nerve center for the national movement" (LCHR 1988:70).

A leading figure in the vigilante movement in Cebu is Pastor "Jun" Alcover, a former NPA member who left the NPA in the late 1970s (some say he surrendered to the government after a factional fight in

and BASKOM (*Bagong Alyansa Sapak sa Komunista*, New Alliance Against Communists), led by a reputed former NPA commander, Carlito Sanday. In the latter

which a close friend was executed, others that he was expelled for "sexual and financial opportunism."). Alcover appears to have been the founder of SUKOL (*Sundalo Batok sa Komunismo ug Alang sa Linupigan*, Soldiers Against Communism and for the Oppressed [*sukol* means fight]), a group which in 1987 claimed responsibility for a grenade attack on a prominent local civil rights lawyer, and a leading member of CACA (Citizens Against Communism Army), and of KADRE (*Kalihukan sa Demokratikong Reporma*, Movement for Democratic Reform), an anti-communist group claiming 2,000 members and reportedly armed and supervised by the military, backed by local mine owners, and involved in strike-breaking and marijuana growing. Alcover was also instrumental in the formation of the National Coalition Against Communism (NCAC), an umbrella organization formed in 1987 and by September of that year claiming 30 member organizations representing 1.7 million members. In the 1987 congressional election campaign (during which eight PnB activists were killed in Cebu), Alcover supported the candidacy of the conservative former Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile. There was also in Cebu a Philippine Alliance Against Communism (PAAC; *paac* means *bite* in Cebuano), founded by Cerge Remonde, which was a coalition of multi-sectoral organizations patterned on the Left's NDF,

with the heads of two NPA suspects. In late 1987, the situation in Leyte attracted public attention after metropolitan police in Manila under Western Police

armies, an unsourced report listed 40 vigilante groups in November 1987 and commented,

Most of the private armies/vigilantes [in Negros Oriental] are members of religious fanatics or bandit groups. They are armed with assorted weapons supplied by the military or by themselves.... Most have gruesome records of salvagings, rapes, arson, landgrabbing, terrorism and harassments.

Among those listed were a local *Alsa Masa* organization; several religious cult groups including KKK (*Kristiana Kontra Komunismo*, Christians Against Communism⁸); groups allegedly involved in criminal activities, such as *Disoamahan and Tulisan nga Grupo*, and a number of PC Forward Command organizations, several of which were associated with the renegade military elements in 1987-1990. There was also on Negros an organization, *El Tigre*, which consisted of a network of armed groups, mostly organized by sugar cane growers and other landlords, predominantly Marcos loyalists, frequently with close military attachments, who were involved in opposition to land reform and to trade unions, and in some instances supported the right-wing Movement for Independent Negros (MIN). An umbrella Negros Citizens' Alliance Against Communism and a Negros Concerned Citizens Group (with links to *El*

Tigre) also came into existence in 1987.

Samar, also an area of strong NPA activity in the 1980s, similarly produced a spate of vigilante groups, including *Magkaisa* (Unite) in Western Samar, and NORSACAL (North Samar Anti-Communist Alliance).

Vigilantism seems to have come more slowly to Luzon, but proliferated there in the latter part of 1987. Among a number of groups listed in *Business Day* (25 March 1987) were: the Counter-Insurgency Command (CIC), led by Enrile ally Alberto Maguidad, and a Special Anti-Terrorist Group (SATG) of Enrile loyalists, both in Cagayan; *Kilusan Laban sa Komunismo* (Movement Against Communism), a group of military renegades in Isabela led by Lt. Col. Reynaldo Cabauatan; and New Filipino Crusaders, an intelligence-gathering group with CHDF links. Also operating in northern Luzon was a group, *Alsa Bayan* (a local version of *Alsa Masa*) associated with former PC commander and subsequent Cagayan governor, Col. Rodolfo Aguinaldo. Aguinaldo, with his personal army of tribal Agtas, the "Cagayan 100," had openly supported the August 1987 coup attempt against Aquino, as part of an anti-communist crusade, and was again involved in the aborted coup of December 1989; he was also said to be involved in logging and gambling rackets (*Manila Chronicle* 5 March 1990). Other groups included a Central Luzon branch of

KADRE; *Guerilyang Tagapagtanggol ng Masa* (Guerrillas Protecting the Masses), *Kilusan ng Pilipinong Magsasaka* (Filipino Farmers Movement) and People's Militia Force (PMF) also in Central Luzon; Guardian Angels, *Bagong Alyansang Makabansa* (Patriotic New Alliance, BANSAs) and *Alyansa ng Magsasaka Laban sa Komunismo* (Alliance of Farmers Against Communism, ALMAKA) in Nueva Ecija; the Peace and Order Brigade in Pampanga; KILCOM (Movement Against Communism) and Movement Against Violence in Bicol; Yellow Union, an Aquino-loyalist group in Masbate; and KATAD (*Kapatiran ng mga Mindoreño Tungo sa Adhikaing Demokratiko*, Brotherhood of Mindoreños Advocating Democratic Principles), and ANAKPAWIS on Mindoro. Several of these were initiated by provincial officials; most had links with the AFP or PC/INP. (INP stands for Integrated National Police.)

In Metro Manila itself, there were several vigilante groups evident by early 1987, including Magic Eye, organized by Manila Mayor Gemiliano Lopez (masked members of Magic Eye were used to pick out suspected NPA supporters from line-ups of *barangay* residents—a technique which had been used earlier against the Huks); Citizens for Peace and Order, an organization of former military personnel, organized by retired Major

General Benjamin Vallejo; the Youth Intelligence Group, organized by the Quezon City OIC Mayor to assist the police and military; the Association of Democratic Vigilantes and Concerned Entrepreneurs (ADVANCE), backed by several business groups; and the United Vigilantes Association, which seems to have been an umbrella group. Following an escalation of NPA activity in Manila during 1987, General Lim announced that he would use vigilantes against NPA guerrillas and called for volunteers.⁹ Within a week it was reported that over 5,000 people, some with their own firearms, had queued up outside police stations seeking to enlist. One aspect of this mobilization was the formation in Tondo — one of Manila's poorest areas — of the Manila Crusaders for Peace and Democracy (MCPD). The MCPD, initiated by local police commander, Major Romeo Maganto, were described as an unarmed force to be used as information gatherers — though weekly training was said to include self-defense, combat shooting, and intelligence operations (*Manila Chronicle* 11, 12 November 1987; *Age* (Melbourne) 13 November 1987). In July 1989, Maganto was suspended and his MCPD disbanded. However, six months later he was appointed as Metro Manila Field Force commander and a new Metro Manila CPD was created.

Among several organizations claiming to represent

vigilante groups nationally, Alcover's National Coalition Against Communism, and an apparently Manila-based National Movement for Freedom and Democracy were the most prominent.

In an article published in September 1988, frequent commentator on Southeast Asian affairs, Justus van der Kroef, suggested that the number of vigilante groups had peaked in early 1988 and since declined (van der Kroef 1988b). The evidence for such a conclusion is thin. Although the term "vigilante" has been generally rejected in official circles,¹⁰ and although vigilante-type groups have received less publicity since 1987, human rights groups such as Task Force Detainees of the Philippines, the Ecumenical Movement for Justice and Peace, and the National Movement to Disband Vigilantes continue to report widespread abuses by vigilante groups, and local sources of information suggest they are still active in many parts of the country. A report of the government's National Peace and Order Council in late 1989 identified 152 active "armed groups or private armies" (*Manila Chronicle* 7 November 1989), and a rally of vigilante groups in Davao in July 1989, held to mark the third anniversary of *Alsa Masa*, was reported to have attracted between 10,000 and 50,000 marchers (*Manila Chronicle* 17 July 1989). Nevertheless, there do appear to have been changes in the nature and perhaps the scale of

vigilantism.

For one thing, some of the more prominent early groups have split or have come into conflict with one another. Thus, for example, Davao's Jun Pala, having split from *Alsa Masa* in 1987, was in 1988 reported to be moving towards "independent social democracy," questioning the virtues of vigilantism ("Anti-communism is not enough . . . the Government must solve the root cause of Communism . . . poverty and injustice"), and even opposing the presence of US bases in the Philippines (*Manila Chronicle* 9 May, 9 August 1988). There have been several other reported splits in *Alsa Masa* (for example, see *Manila Chronicle* 10 April 1989) and in Cebu reports of fighting between local *Tadtad* groups and KADRE over control of marijuana distribution. Secondly, as vigilante groups began using their position to settle personal and communal disputes and became increasingly involved in the sorts of activities attributed to the NPA and "criminal elements," which they had ostensibly set out to eliminate — notably "revolutionary taxes" and "criminal extortion," enforced recruitment, and general harassment of the population — they alienated growing numbers of the population. Among tribal people in remote areas, in particular, there were frequent complaints during 1989 about the activities of vigilante groups and CAFGUs (see below), whose members were often

recruited from among vigilantes (see, for example, *Manila Chronicle* 2, 11, 30 June 1989; 9 July 1989; 25 August 1989; 5 November 1989). There have even been reports (see, for example, *Manila Chronicle* 8 May 1989) of members of vigilante organizations drifting back to the NPA. Thirdly, the formalization of the government's multi-tiered counter-insurgency program since 1988 (see below) has perhaps brought some of the more extreme groups under a greater degree of control, especially after right-wing and Marcos-loyalist civilian groups and some CHDF/CAFGUs apparently supported renegade military factions in several abortive coup attempts against the Aquino government in 1987-90. Notable in this respect was General Ramos's order in early 1990 to disband a number of CAFGUs, notably those associated with oppositionist sugar planters in Negros and with military officers sympathetic to renegade AFP factions (see *Manila Chronicle* 7, 26 March 1990).

In this respect, van der Kroef is correct in suggesting that, as the climate for the growth of vigilantism has become somewhat less favorable, many of those who emerged as vigilantes in 1987 have turned (or returned) to the more traditional pursuits of banditry, hired guns or employment in the private armies of businessmen and politicians.¹¹

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Vigilante Groups and the Government

Although the proliferation of vigilante groups and their involvement in the Philippine government's counter-insurgency program have frequently been pinpointed to 1987, following the breakdown of the government-NPA peace talks in January, the co-opting of popular movements, private armies and so-called fanatical cults was already a well-established strategy of counter-

insurgency under President Marcos, and even much earlier.

During the Spanish colonial period, the recruitment of local groups as paramilitary forces was an essential strategy in maintaining the tenuous grip of the small European population, and converted *indio* troops were used in the protracted wars against the *Moros*. Subsequently, attempts were made to enlist Filipino civilian forces in the process of American "pacification." Hurley records, for example, that in operations against "bandits" in Cebu in 1903, the colonial Philippine Constabulary (anticipating the tactic of "hamletting") gathered the people of one district into several small towns surrounded by high stockades; "Each small group was then organized with a volunteer force of forty to fifty men, armed with spears and bolos, to assist the Constabulary as lookouts, auxiliaries, and *cargadores* (baggage carriers), against the bandits." (1938:156)

During the 1920s and 1930s, it became increasingly common for wealthy landowners and politicians to maintain their own private armies, or to hire "goons," and to use them to intimidate tenants, break strikes, and deliver the vote. Sturtevant (1976) refers to several such groups, including *Batung Maputi* (White Stone) in Pampanga in the 1920s, the National Volunteers (which Sturtevant specifically refers to as a "vigilante group"),

established by the governor of Cavite in the late 1903s, and *Cawal ng Capayapaan* (Soldiers of Peace), formed by the governor of Pampanga in the late 1930s and employed as strikebreakers.

Following the Japanese occupation of the Philippines in 1941, the Philippine Constabulary cooperated with the Japanese high command but groups of Filipinos joined the resistance, and some as members of the Hukbalahap (*Hukbo ng Bayan Laban sa Hapon*, People's Anti-Japanese Army), and some as guerrillas with the US Armed Forces in the Far East (USAFFE). On Leyte, Baclagon (1952:271) records:

The early groups first called themselves "vigilante groups" because they had pledged themselves not only to fight the Japanese but also to eliminate the bandit groups which instituted a reign of terror in Leyte by engaging in brigandage, murder, and rape.

On the other hand, on Samar the Japanese revived the *Pulahan* movement and used it to suppress resistance (Arens 1959).

After the war, "peace officers" — later "civilian guards" — were appointed to assist in the restoration of peace and order. Among these were former USAFFE guerrillas, prewar members of private armies of

landowners, and landless unemployed who took whatever jobs were available. But members of the progressive Hukbalahap were largely overlooked in the reestablishment of government. Kerkvliet (1979: 124-125) comments:

Landlords were the ones who wanted these peace officers or civilian guards to restore peace and order after liberation. But they had in mind more than cracking down on thieves and highway bandits. They were especially anxious about the growing peasant movement. Civilian guards, therefore, became basically armed groups that landlords used and that the local government and Military Police sanctioned.

Disillusioned by lack of recognition and by the absence of change in postwar social conditions, some Huks, many of them members of prewar peasant organizations, turned to insurgency through the *Hukbong Mapagpalaya ng Bayan* (HMB, People's Liberation Army). (See Fegan, forthcoming.)

Civilian guards were subsequently used by the Philippine Constabulary (PC, as the Military Police was renamed in 1948) as their "eyes and ears" in countering the Huk insurgency. But frequent abuses of the civilian population by the PC and civilian guards quickly earned them a bad reputation; one of Kerkvliet's informants

recalled of a particularly infamous PC unit, which wore a skull and crossbones insignia, "The Nenita unit broke bones, killed, and cut off people's heads." (Kerkvliet 1979: 160) In response to growing popular resentment, which had the effect of accelerating a drift of the population to the Huks, the civilian guards were disbanded in the early 1950s, though some members of the civilian guards remained on the payroll of big landowners and politicians.

In the early years of the Marcos regime the continued threat of left-wing insurgency led to the revival of what were then called Barrio Self-Defense Units (BSDU) and, in 1976, to the creation by presidential decree of the Integrated Civilian Home Defense Force (later, dropping the "Integrated," CHDF), a civilian auxiliary force under the command of the PC. CHDF volunteers were given weapons, uniforms, and rations, but they were not part of the regular military and "not subject to normal military discipline." (Selochan 1990:148-49) By the end of the Marcos administration the CHDF numbered some 76,000 personnel.

Also, as described above, from around the early 1970s, the AFP and PC were providing assistance to extremist organizations which they could use in counter-insurgency operations, or as sources of information about suspected NPA and MNLF supporters. This was

particularly the case in places like Mindanao, where the NPA and MNLF had local advantages but where the government could exploit longstanding social tensions. Frequently local military commands appear to have given covert support to extremist religious sects or private armies, or to have in effect turned a blind eye to the activities of "lost commands" or bandit groups which served their purpose. Key members of extremist groups and private armies were often integrated into the CHDF, where they received weapons, training, and official status. NPA and, especially MNLF surrenderees, were also integrated into the CHDF; in the early 1980s a "People's Liberation Organization" (PLO), consisting of MNLF surrenderees, was being supported by the military in operations against the NPA.

As early as 1970 it was suggested that the arming of civilian BSDUs was intensifying violence in Luzon (*FEER* 20 August 1970). An Amnesty International report of 1982, referring to the ICHDF, says:

In some areas recruits are reported to include criminals and the personal bodyguards of locally powerful figures. Another source of recruitment is reported to be members of irregular quasi-military political, religious or criminal groups. (*Amnesty International* 1982:27)

By 1986 the CHDF had acquired such a bad reputation for human rights violations and general abuse

of its authority that one of the first decisions of the Aquino government was to accede to demands for its dissolution. Such a commitment, in fact, was written into the 1987 Constitution (art. XVIII [24]). During 1986-87 some of the more unsavory elements of the CHDF were dismissed (many subsequently joined vigilante groups) and CHDF numbers were reduced. In July 1987, it was announced that the CHDF would be replaced by CAFGUs under direct AFP control, but it was another 12 months before steps were taken to establish CAFGUs, and it is not obvious that the change made much difference at the local level. (See *Manila Chronicle* 25 October 1988) In early 1989, there were proposals to deputize CAFGUs to supervise barangay elections, but these were rejected by the chairperson of the Commission on Elections (*Manila Chronicle* 4 February 1989). Subsequently, there have been demands for the disbanding of CAFGUs and their replacement by a system of armed forces reservists.

Meanwhile, faced with a rapid expansion of armed vigilante groups, the Aquino government reacted ambivalently. In mid-March 1987, in directing Defense Secretary Rafael Ileto and Local Government Secretary Jaime Ferrer to disband the CHDF and private armed groups, the president was reported as specifically including anti-communist vigilante groups such as *Alsa*

Masa and NAKASAKA in Davao. The same month, however, Ferrer endorsed the activities of NAKASAKA and undertook to seek government funding for similar groups elsewhere, and AFP Chief-of-Staff, General Ramos, and retired General Jose Magno, went further, saying that *Alsa Masa* deserved "full support and encouragement in dismantling communism" in Davao and throughout the country. (*Philippine Daily Inquirer* 12 March 1987; *Asiaweek* 12 April 1987) By the end of March, peace negotiations having broken down and with Aquino herself under increasing pressure from the AFP, the president, on a visit to Davao, spoke of NAKASAKA (which she referred to as an unarmed citizen's group) as a welcome manifestation of "people power." (*Asian Wall Street Journal* 30 March 1987) A shift of policy appeared to be confirmed by the president in a speech to the Philippines Military Academy at the end of March and on 1 April 1987 the cabinet endorsed "voluntary and spontaneous [groups] of citizens for self-defense in areas where there was an insurgency." (*Business Day* 2 April 1987)

The president had in mind, however, certain conditions on the operation of what General Ramos preferred to call "civilian volunteer self-defense organizations" (CVSDO), or citizens' volunteer organizations (CVO), namely that they be unarmed,

popularly supported (there had been widespread accusations of vigilante groups using coercion to recruit members), and effective against insurgents. Guidelines governing CVSDO were drafted in May 1987 but not formally adopted until October (by which time Ramos had, in April, introduced AFP guidelines, which largely anticipated those approved in October). *Inter alia*, the Guidelines provided that

Normally the volunteer organizations shall be under local civil government supervision and their activities must be sanctioned by the barangay and municipal authorities, and coordinated with the local military and policy authorities;

However, the “armed component” of CVOs “shall be under the supervision of the military and police.” (*Guidelines on Civilian Volunteer Self-Defense Organizations*, 30 October 1987 art. iv [c]) The Guidelines also made provision for a national overseeing Inter-Agency Subcommittee on Citizens’ Volunteer Groups (with representatives from the AFP, Departments of Defense and of Local Government, and the Commission on Human Rights) and corresponding regional bodies.

By October 1987, President Aquino’s position had shifted to the point where, in a speech in Davao,

referring to *Alsa Masa*, she said:

We look up to you as an example.... While other regions are experiencing problems in fighting the insurgency, you here ... have set the example (*Manila Chronicle* 24 October 1987; *FEER* 5 November 1987).

The same month the chairman of a regional development task force, presidential consultant Jesus Ayala, also advocated the use of vigilantes in the government's counter-insurgency program, endorsing *Alsa Masa*, NAKASAKA and other groups (*Financial Post* 2 November 1987). Anti-communist CVOs were also endorsed by church leader Jaime Cardinal Sin.

This position was not shared by a Philippine Senate Committee on Justice and Human Rights inquiry into vigilante groups, chaired by Senator Wigberto Tañada. After receiving testimony from a variety of sources, the committee reported amongst its findings: that the record of complaints against vigilante groups (some of whose leaders and members "are police characters with criminal records") pointed to "a trend of escalating human rights violations against innocent civilians"; that the organized "proliferation" of vigilante groups violated the new Constitution; that certain military officers allowed members of vigilante groups to carry

high-powered firearms in violation of existing law; and that peace and order councils [see below] “may be wittingly or unwittingly used to legitimize armed vigilantes and other paramilitary groups.” (Senate Committee 1988:14-21) The committee’s report recommended that vigilante groups be disbanded and that the CVSDO guidelines (whose legality the committee challenged) be recalled.

The report drew criticism from General Ramos (Ramos replaced Ileto as Defense Secretary in January 1988), who expressed the view that the abolition of CVOs “would jeopardize the country’s defense system” (*Manila Chronicle* 24 April 1988), and from the new Local Government Secretary, former Davao Congressman Luis Santos, who said that vigilantes were a “very potent weapon in the fight against communism and subversion.” (*Manila Chronicle* 27 April 1988)

In fact, by 1988 vigilantes — as CVOs or *Bantay Bayan* (“People’s Watch”) — had become a generally accepted part of the Aquino government’s “total war” against insurgency. Military tactician (and former NPA strategist) Victor Corpus, for example, outlined a “three-tiered” counter-insurgency defense system which comprised “military mobilized forces” (the AFP, especially through “special operations teams” or SOTs), “territorial forces” (PC/INP and CAFGU) and “the

mobilization of the populace" through CVOs or *Bantay Bayan*. The latter he described as "an organization patterned after the CPP/NPA's barrio revolutionary committees," whose chief tasks were intelligence gathering and maintaining security in the barrios (Corpus 1988:174-76; 89-91. Also see *FEER* 4 August 1988; *Manila Chronicle* 15 April 1989; *Kitanglad* 1988).

In theory, CVOs were to be thoroughly screened by peace and order committees (POCs) set up under the Department of Local Government,¹² but in fact such screens often seem to have used a very large gauge, and in some cases, CVOs have come under direct military control (see, for example, the complaints of Mayor Agatep, reported in *Manila Chronicle* 30 July 1989).

Vigilante groups of different hues thus continue to operate around the countryside, frequently in collaboration with AFP or CAFGU units, and not infrequently in the interests of local politicians, landlords, and criminal elements.

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Vigilantism in Historical Perspective

Most commentators on recent vigilantism in the Philippines, while decrying its often savage and arbitrary nature, seem to have been content to describe the phenomenon as a regime-supported — if not regime-initiated, and in some accounts US-sponsored — response to left-wing insurgency.¹³ Certainly, it has been, in part, just that. But the proliferation of vigilante groups in

1987-88, the apparent extensive popular support for them, and the involvement of a large number of so-called "fanatical cults," all raise questions which call for more fundamental explanation. Why, for example, did vigilantism spread as it did in 1987, in the wake of the people power revolution, not only in rural areas and provincial towns but in Metro Manila, where even among the urban poor of Tondo prospective recruits volunteered in such numbers that they had to be turned away? Who in fact were these vigilantes? And why were so many "fanatical cults" — movements rooted in a "little tradition" of popular protest, the *tao* (ordinary people) seeking *kalayaan* (liberty) — fanatically anti-left?

Any attempt at explanation must begin by recognizing that there have been several strands to vigilantism.

Perhaps easiest to explain are those groups — like *El Tigre*, ADVANCE, and *Kuratong Baleleng* — directly tied to landowner, business or politician interests, or to organized crime. In such cases anti-communist vigilantism provided a convenient front for the self-interests of those who supported organized groups as a means of containing recalcitrant workers, tenants, civil rights activists and political opponents, or were involved in criminal activities; they also provided a source of employment or other benefits for poor, landless and

unemployed rural and urban dwellers, some of whom used the opportunity to settle old scores, or to indulge a proclivity for violent behavior. There is a direct continuity here not only with the private armies and goons of landowner-businessmen-politicians, which have long been a feature of the Philippines political landscape, but also with earlier vigilante groups such as the National Volunteers and *Cawal ng Capayapaan* in Cavite and Pampanga, and with the former CHDF and earlier BSDUs and civilian guards. With respect to the last of these, Kerkvliet (1979:125) recalls:

The unfortunate part, residents of Talavera quickly pointed out, was that men who were civilian guards frequently had no quarrel with the peasants they abused ... most civilian guards were unemployed or landless "little people" who needed work and took whatever employment they could find. "They were used by hacenderos," said Hilario Felipe, "against other little people — us — who were really like them."¹⁴

That such groups proliferated in the aftermath of the 1986 people power revolution perhaps reflects the degree of breakdown of central state control and the provincialization of Philippines politics, which took place after the overthrow of Ferdinand Marcos (see, for example, May 1987). In this situation, local politicians and warlords, and some regional military commanders,

took the opportunity to assert their relative autonomy, and the failure of the Aquino government to resolve the communist insurgency provided them with a rationale for unilateral action. In many instances, most notably in Negros, landowner-businessmen-politicians acted in concert with local military elements, some of whom subsequently supported right-wing challenges to President Aquino.

Also comparatively easy to explain are vigilante groups which developed as a genuine reaction to the excesses of particular NPA commands — who, like vigilante groups, imposed “taxes,” energetically sought recruits, and punished informers¹⁵ — or to the activities of local criminals. Disenchantment with the NPA (whether or not attributable to the work of DPAs) was undoubtedly a factor in the initial attraction of groups like *Alsa Masa* and NAKASAKA in Davao and the MCPD in Metro Manila. And there is little doubt that the circumstances which culminated in the “Digos Massacre” in 1989 were replicated to a greater or lesser degree elsewhere, among remote communities caught in the middle of the war between the NPA and military. There is nothing particularly new in this situation; writing about the colonial PC’s campaigns against local insurgent movements earlier in the century, Vic Hurley observed:

The peaceable farmer was in an unenviable position. As a nonmember of the secret groups, he was subject to constant raid and extortion; as a member, he was harried by army and Constabulary (1938:120).

As in the past, some probably joined vigilante groups because, as the post-1986 euphoria dissipated, they believed that vigilantes represented the winning side.

More difficult to explain is the part played in recent vigilantism by what have been loosely referred to as "fanatical cults." It is these groups which have attracted most attention to the vigilante phenomenon, as much, perhaps, for their magico-religious orientation and violent behavior as for the scale of their operations.

Such groups have a long history. Hurley's account of uprisings on Samar at the turn of the century (1938:131-132), for example, recalls names and describes rituals which would be familiar to those reading accounts of vigilantism in 1987-88:16

As the *pulajan* [*pulahan*] movement grew in strength it became impregnated with a tone of religious ritual and frenzy.... Their weapon was a heavy crescent-shaped bolo.... Their battle preparations consisted of bottles of holy oil, prayer books, consecrated *anting-antings*, and other religious paraphernalia. The mode of attack was a

massed bolo rush. Their battle cry was that dreadful
“*Tad-Tad*” which means “Chop to pieces.”

David Sturtevant, in his pioneering study of popular uprisings in the Philippines,¹⁷ initially identified as the central theme of his study “the transition from mysticism to relative sophistication” (1976:18), and hailed the 1930s *Sakdal Party* of Benigno Ramos as marking “the shift from blind responses against real or imagined sources of frustration toward national movements dedicated to purposeful change” and, with the Socialist Party of the Philippines, breaking “the traditional supernaturalistic mold of rural rebellions.” (*Ibid.*:255)¹⁸ But in an epilogue written after the *Lapiang Malaya* uprising in Manila in 1967 (see Sturtevant 1969), he refers to the “predictable revival of millennialism” and concludes:

By 1970 the peasantry’s turbulent heritage appeared to have moved full circle: from supernaturalism to secularism to supernaturalism again (1976:260, 263).

Recent Philippine scholarship (following a European tendency established by such people as Linton, Cohn, Wallace, Redfield, Hobsbawm, Wertheim, and Lanternari)¹⁹ has paid particular attention to what have

variously been described as religio-political, mystical, millennial, messianic, nativistic, and charismatic popular uprisings from the *Cofradía de San Jose* of Apolinario de la Cruz in the 1840s, through the *Babaylanes*, *Dios-Dios*, *Guardia de Honor*, *Pulahan*, *Santa Iglesia*, *Colorum* and *Katipunan* movements of the late nineteen and early twentieth centuries, to the more recent *Sakdal* and *Lapiang Malaya* uprisings.²⁰ Such studies have tended to emphasize the nationalistic (“patriotic” as well as anti-colonial) and class (anti-*hacendero*, anti-*ilustrado*) attributes of such movements, acknowledging Robert Redfield’s distinction between the “Great” and “Little” Traditions.

Like these earlier “popular movements,” the so-called “fanatical cults” which appear to have enjoyed a recrudescence in the 1970s and were an important element of vigilantism in the late 1980s, consisted predominantly of poor peasants, particularly rural immigrant settlers and tribal minorities in remote areas.²¹ But if such groups are the heirs to the nationalistic and class traditions of popular protest, one must ask, why in the 1970s under Marcos, and even more so after 1986, did they align themselves not with the revolutionary left but with the conservative and repressive forces of the military and right-wing politicians? It is not a sufficient answer (though it is true) that people were coerced into joining

vigilante groups; there is too much evidence of spontaneous popular support. A partial explanation may lie in the essentially religious nature of most of the groups, who might thus see "godless" Communists as a greater threat than the military. It has also been suggested that since the NPA, too, has found popular movements among remote immigrant and tribal communities a fertile ground for recruitment, it is often simply a question of "who gets to them first." (Rex Aguado, in *Manila Chronicle* 30 July 1989)

But the rush of people, especially young men, to join *Alsa Masa* in Davao in 1987 and the MCPD in Manila in 1989 suggests that these explanations are not sufficient. The conclusion seems inescapable that after 1986 a good number of "little people," heirs to the tradition of popular protest, believed that left-wing insurgency posed a threat to the gains of the people power revolution which outweighed any promises of a better society. That they were encouraged and manipulated by Marcos loyalists and other reactionary right-wing elements, including some regional military commanders and civilian and church officials, and exploited by a motley array of opportunistic and criminal elements who stood to gain from a weak central state, is both obvious and unsurprising. But this does not alter the fact that, just as in the past some poor peasants sided with

government against uprisings, from the *Cofradía de San Jose* to the Huks, so in the 1970s and the 1980s some poor rural and urban dwellers took sides against the left.

If there is a general conclusion to be drawn from this, it is perhaps that “the masses,” the “little people,” the *tao*, “the peasants” are less homogeneous aggregates than many nationalist historians tend to suggest. Thus, for example, Iletto, writing about the *Cofradía*, records (1979:78) that when in 1841 Spanish authorities attacked the Commune at Aritao, troops from Manila were assisted by “peasant volunteers from the surrounding provinces,” And Sturtevant, despite his claim (1976:116) that “Few bandits, after all, victimized the poor,” notes that as the *Guardia de Honor* attracted a wider range of followers, including bandits (*tulisanes*) and fugitives from the law, “small farmers...turned against the movement when it unleashed its fury on the poor,” (*ibid.*:112) and says of the *Babaylan* and *Pulahan* movements: “Sectarian sadism gradually turned hamlet dwellers against both.... Visayan peasants accepted the colonial government because it represented a lesser evil,” (*ibid.*:131)

In fact, in periods of agitation for change, along with the *tao* seeking *kalayaan*, the Robin-Hood-style social bandits and the visionaries (Sturtevant [*ibid.*:121] refers to “religious Robin Hoods”), there have always been the opportunists, the bullies, the individuals and

groups with scores to settle, and those who simply see change as threatening. In the aftermath of the people power revolution of 1986, paradoxically, such tendencies appear to have been, at least temporarily, on the ascendancy.

Endnotes

¹The following account draws on a number of sources, including reports in several Philippine and foreign newspapers, *Far Eastern Economic Review* (FEER) and *Asiaweek*; publications of the Task Force Detainees of the Philippines (TFDP), Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (PAHRA), Ecumenical Movement for Justice and Peace (EMJP), and Episcopal Commission on Tribal Filipinos (ECTF); reports of Amnesty International and of US-Philippine and Australian fact-finding missions; and interviews, conducted mostly in Mindanao, over a number of years. Perhaps the best general surveys of vigilante groups in 1987-88 are Clark *et al.* (1987), Delacruz *et al.* (1987),

LCHR (1988) and Senate Committee (1988), though van der Kroef's analysis (1988a,b) is also useful.

² For what it is worth, a *PAHRA Update* in August 1987 gave the following breakdown: right-wing vigilantes 127; fanatic cults 63; armed bandits 15. Cf. van der Kroef's (1988b: 642) distinction between "those inspired by reputedly spontaneous 'people power' that . . . seek a broad base from which to ferret out NPA infiltrators," "religious charismatic or cultlike armed organizations," and "the armed retainers of politicians-businessmen, landowners, or sugar barons committed not only to struggle against local NPA insurgents, but also against the implementation of government policies believed to be harmful to their interests.

³ The Huk insurgency will be discussed later in this study.

⁴ There is some confusion about this group. A 1982 Amnesty International report refers to the early 4Ks group as *Kasalanan, Kaluwasan, Kinabuhi, Kabus* (Sin, Salvation, Life, Poverty). Others refer to KKK (*Kusog sa Katauhan Alang sa Kalinaw*), as People's Power for Peace operating in Davao. A July 1987 *PAHRA Update* refers to 4Ks, *Katilingban Kalihukan Kontra Komunismo* (Coalition of Associations Against Communism) as a South Cotabato group.

⁵For a more detailed account of the colorful career of Colonel Lademora, see Ocampo in *FEER* 19 March 1982; *Amnesty International* (1982); and reports in *Bulletin Today* 24 and 29 September 1981.

⁶Pala was employed by radio station DXOW, which was owned by Marcos crony Eduardo Cojuangco. DXOW was closed by the government in December 1989.

⁷The killing of the UCCP pastor was ironic, since the UCCP had been an outspoken opponent of vigilantism, and its members had suffered harassment from the military and vigilantes as a result of this opposition. (See, for example, *Manila Chronicle* 3 April, 15 May 1989).

⁸Notwithstanding its “Christian” label, the KKK in 1987 claimed responsibility for bombing the residence of progressive local bishop Antonio Fortich.

⁹According to a *Manila Chronicle* report (13 December 1987), between January and early November 1987, 88 people, mostly police and military personnel, were killed by NPA assassins in Manila. NPA “sparrow” units were also specifically targeting the organizers of vigilante groups. The event which triggered

Lim's decision was the killing of a highly-decorated, and apparently popular, police captain and an "anti-communist community leader" in November 1987. See *Asiaweek* 20 November 1987.

¹⁰In early 1989, however, the newly appointed chairman of the House Committee on Human Rights said: "I defend the *Alsa Masa* (United) concept in Mindanao." (*Manila Chronicle* 5 February 1990)

¹¹On the subject of emerging vigilante-politician links, specifically, see *Manila Chronicle* 17 November 1989.

¹²POCs, comprising local civil and military officials, clergy, and civic leaders, were created in 1988 to coordinate government programs aimed at insurgency and criminality. According to a *Manila Chronicle* (30 July 1989) report, some 1665 POCs were set up across the nation in July 1989 but were "completely immobilized" by lack of funds.

¹³The major exception is van der Kroef (1988a, b).

¹⁴Compare this to the somewhat cynical comments of Filipino political scientist Remigio Agpalo (1965:13): "The *tao*, thinking of his survival and his family first, cares not for high-

sounding policies, or ideologies, or principle of good government and administration. He is more interested in which party or group will give him a job."

¹⁵ See Cullen (1984); Fr. Cullen, SJ, a prominent church activist in the prelature of Malaybalay, Bukidnon, who was detained in 1972 for alleged involvement with the underground left, is critical of the NPA which he accuses of "applying pressure" to barrio people, especially Catholic chapel leaders.

¹⁶ For a later account of the *Pulahan*, see Arens (1959).

¹⁷ Sturtevant's PhD dissertation was submitted in 1958 and published in a revised form in 1976, though some of the material was published in Sturtevant (1969) and elsewhere.

¹⁸ Similarly, Constantino (1975) suggests a movement from mystical, millennial movements to secular and class-conscious ones; even Iletto, whose *Pasyon and Revolution* seeks "to bring to life the masses' own categories of meaning" (1979:10-11) refers (*ibid.*:3) to the "backward" ways of thinking (reflected in the *Lapiang Malaya*)."

¹⁹But, interestingly, ignoring a Melanesianist tradition, represented, for example, in the writings of Worsley, Lawrence, Burridge, May and Gesch.

²⁰See, for example, Sturtevant (1969, 1977), Foronda (1961), Hart (1967), Cullamar (1986), Constantino (1975), Shoesmith (1978), Iletto (1979), Flores-Tolentino (1982), and Mallari (1983).

²¹In an article in *Manila Chronicle* 30 July 1989 ("War comes to the tribals"), Rex Aguado attempts to argue, citing a Mindanao State University professor, that some of the more violent aspects of vigilante group behavior, such as the beheading, mutilation, and cannibalism of victims, can be traced to "the ancient tribal practice of headhunting" and traditional tribal beliefs that a warrior could gain strength (*Kusog*) through eating the heart or brains or drinking the blood of a slain enemy.

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