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An Interview With Benigno Ramos: Translated from the Japanese

GRANT K. GOODMAN

Over four decades after his death, Benigno Ramos is still an enigmatic figure in Philippine history. The shock of the American colonial authorities on the occasion of the Sakdalista uprising on 2 and 3 May 1935 was perhaps exceeded only by the fear and revulsion of the indigenous Filipino oligarchy. Subsequently, the name of Ramos became anathema to both Filipino politicians of the "mainstream" and to the United States government, even though Ramos himself was outside the country at the time of the Sakdalista affair and was only indirectly involved in it. However, his leadership of the Sakdals was undisputed, and his self-exile in Japan from December 1934 only exacerbated his seeming malevolence.

As has been described in detail elsewhere,¹ Ramos was welcomed in Japan by politically peripheral radical Pan-Asianists who appeared to give him both the attention and the support which he had never received in his own country. In turn, Ramos, like his quixotic Filipino revolutionary predecessors, Mariano Ponce and Artemio Ricarte, spoke with great warmth about the role of Japan in Asia and urged the Japanese people to give their backing to popular anticolonial movements like his own. While, in fact, the Japanese government scrupulously avoided any direct contact whatsoever with Ramos and indeed spied on his every act and association in Japan, nevertheless his presence in the island empire proved extremely disturbing to both the Philippine Commonwealth and to its American mentors.

Ramos himself took full advantage of his stay in Japan, utilizing every opportunity to vent his spleen against the institutions which he believed to have been responsible for the grinding poverty of the

1. E.g. G.K. Goodman, "Japan and Philippine Radicalism: The Case of Benigno Ramos" in *Four Aspects of Philippine-Japanese Relations, 1930-1940* (New Haven, 1967).

Filipino peasant. Moreover, he found among those Japanese who rallied to his support what he believed to be a sympathetic understanding of his view of the economy and politics of the Philippines. Many of those who listened most attentively to his opinions were young men fired with idealistic enthusiasm for Japan's assuming the role of "liberator" of Asia from Western colonial domination, men who believed that this was Japan's destiny and that the leaders of Japan's government were too cowardly to place Japan in the forefront of such activities.

Among those committed youths was Ashizu Uzuhiko (1909-), a nationalistic critic and gadfly, who spent a great deal of time with Ramos and sought to make Ramos's ideas and ideals known in Japan. Under the pen-name Nansen Hokuba, Ashizu had begun in 1935 to publish a series of short writings under the collective title *Pacific Pamphlets*. It is Number 3 in that series, entitled *The Ideal Spirit of the Japanese People*, in which Ashizu printed an interview with Ramos under the title "To Introduce the Sakdalistas."

It is that interview which I wish to present here in translation for the first time. In any evaluation of the role of Ramos in modern Philippine history, it is obviously of great significance to have assembled all of the available evidence of his own thinking. In that regard his views as recorded by Ashizu within some three months after the May 1935 outbreaks are surely pertinent. Moreover, in better understanding prewar Japanese Pan-Asianism the kinds of concerns on which Ashizu himself reflects in this piece are equally relevant.

THE BACKGROUND OF THE INTERVIEW

The total number of participants in the Sakdal uprising (or perhaps more accurately riots) of 2 and 3 May did not exceed 3,500 and was confined to two towns in Laguna Province, one in Bulacan, and one in Cavite. At least 58 people died, 67 were wounded, and 213 were arrested. The official Filipino political position was that the Sakdal revolt was an "outbreak" of economic dissatisfaction by a segment of the population against day to day depression. Acting Governor General Joseph Hayden, however, radioed Washington: "The riot this time is completely political in nature, not the result of economic dissatisfaction." In fact, of course, both explanations were partially correct, since the Sakdal movement encompassed multiple stimuli.

The long-lasting traumatic effects of the Sakdal rebellion, however, were far greater for the dominant governing Filipino elite than for the Americans. Clearly the uprising reflected the profound socioeconomic

deprivation among a significant group in Philippine society. Moreover, the shock of the violence which the Sakdalistas directed at established authority literally terrified the Filipino oligarchs practically on the eve of the inauguration of the Commonwealth. These men especially feared the potential vicissitudes of an uncertain future with the support of the American military no longer available.

Perhaps most fearful of all was the seemingly charismatic Benigno Ramos and his potential for mischief in Japan. It is, of course, difficult to know with certainty, but at least part of the rationale behind Manuel L. Quezon's two trips to Japan in 1937 and 1938 was to dissuade the Japanese from any possible official involvement with Ramos and the Sakdalistas and simultaneously to reassure the Japanese government of the eager willingness of the Commonwealth elite to cooperate with it in developing much closer Philippine-Japanese ties in the future. Very significantly, of course, by means of a combination of verbal flattery and financial inducements, Ramos was persuaded by Quezon to return from Japan to the Philippines in August of 1938. After his return, Ramos announced his support for Quezon and by October, 1938 gave an anti-Japanese speech in which he claimed that Japan planned to conquer the Philippines in the future!

It seems in retrospect, therefore, that Japan was as incidental to Ramos as Ramos was to the Japanese. His responses in his interview with Ashizu Uzuhiro seem to have been designed at that time to attract support in Japan, especially from among the very Pan-Asianist fringe which Ashizu represented. However, it also appears that, despite the invocation of supposed anticipated Japanese assistance during the Sakdal disturbances, Ramos was a practical Filipino political realist as witness his capitulation to Quezon, after appropriate presidential blandishments, and his seeming abandonment of populist reliance on Japanese help.

The text of Hokuba's interview follows.

To Introduce the Sakdalista by Nansen Hokuba

"Sakdalista" means insurgents. This is the name of the Philippine independence party. In Japan, though we have common knowledge of such groups as the Nazis in Germany, the Fascists in Italy and the Ku Klux Klan in the United States, we do not know very much about the Sakdalistas in the Philippines. This is an example, of what has

been criticized for several years, of the evil of following the trends of thought in Europe and in America. Rather than political activities in Western Europe, the Japanese must know about Oriental, especially Far Eastern, independence agitation.

The Sakdalistas are the radical independence party in the Philippines. In May of this year, demanding independence, they carried out an armed uprising. Therefore, emissaries of that party who had been sent to Japan by their party have been unable to return to the Philippines. The Sakdalistas have been hunted down as rebels in the Philippines, and it is clear that if they go home now they will inevitably be subjected to capital punishment. The names of the three Sakdalistas who are now in Japan are the party president Ramos, "Kappa" and Crespo.² In the Japanese press it has been reported that the Philippine independence law, the Tydings-McDuffie Act, has been passed and that the Philippines will soon be free. Despite this why did the Sakdalistas have to demand independence even to the point of rebellion? In response to this question Mr. Ramos answered as follows:

We do not believe the Tydings-McDuffie Act. The Japanese will probably think my response odd. However, we cannot possibly believe in [the Tydings-McDuffie Act]. Since 1898 the United States has again and again repeated the statement: 'We will recognize the independence of the Philippines' and has designed legislation to permit independence. But they never carried it out. By saying that they will recognize independence in ten years, the Americans are doing nothing more than suppressing independence agitation for ten years. The Americans, who have over and over promised to recognize our independence and have always broken their promise, have now enunciated a new promise called the Tydings-McDuffie Act. So, why should they be believed this time? We have affirmed that at whatever cost we must secure independence by our own strength.

I questioned Ramos further:

I cannot guarantee, of course, that this time the Americans will carry out their promise without fail. But they probably will. If they carry through, will you gentlemen be satisfied with the new independence law? Among political parties in the Philippines, the Nacionalista Party and the Democrata Party have evidenced their agreement with the new independence law. What is the difference between you people and them?

2. Kappa is either a nickname or a mistake. In fact, the third member of the group was Ricardo Enrile, not Ramon Crespo.

After strongly denying that the new independence law would probably ever be carried out, Ramos continued his discussion:

If the Japanese people do not neglect keeping a close eye on the USA, it is not impossible that the new law will be put into effect. But this new independence law provides nothing more than a facade for the independence of the Philippines. Even after independence the USA is said to have reserved the right of the Far Eastern fleet to protect important bases in the naval stations of the Philippines. Moreover, the primary authority in the internal economy of the Philippines is in the hands of white men. The Philippines cannot escape from the clutches of the Americans and other white men. Thus, I think that at any cost we must secure independence with the strength of our own people.

Almost all the forests and the land of the Philippines have been confiscated by white men. There is no land for Filipinos to cultivate. Even when they do try to farm, they must buy confiscated land back from white men at exorbitant prices. The Filipinos are unemployed and poverty stricken, and they need land to cultivate. The Sakdalistas declare that the Filipino people must try to take back by force that which was taken from them by force. It is their aim to confiscate land from the white men and to apportion it among their Filipino brethren. This is the principal reason for fervent support of the Sakdalistas among the broad masses of the Filipinos.

Formerly the Nacionalistas and the Democratas worked for independence. However, they have been gradually bought off by the Americans, and they have lost sight of their original purpose and have turned into a pro-American group. Even Aguinaldo, who led the fight for independence against the Americans in 1898, has joined the Democrita Party and is receiving ₱7,000 per year from the American government for 'entertainment expenses.' We are overcoming such difficulties, temptations and obstacles and are struggling everywhere against the United States. We must liberate the Filipinos from slavery.

In Ramos's opinion there is no room for compromise between the Sakdalistas and the American government. The Sakdalistas represent the mass of landless unemployed farmers whose land has been stolen from them. These people could never accept any compromise with the United States. Changing the subject, I asked a different question.

I understand that there is no single uniform language in the Philippines. Is this not a great calamity for the Filipinos? Whether encouraging independence activism or even after the achievement of independence, I would think that a single national language was essential in order to integrate the thinking of the citizenry or to understand their collective intentions. What is the view of the Sakdalistas on this matter?

This, too, is one of the main concerns of the Sakdalistas in demanding independence. We were formerly united by means of a language called Tagalog. After the coming of the Spaniards, this was disrupted. When the

Philippines moved away from Spain and became an American colony, the Americans imitated the policy of the Spaniards toward a national language.

The Americans tried to eradicate our national language. This was like trying to destroy our national soul. In transmitting the unique character, the traditions and the culture [of a society] a national language is a necessity. However, in the Philippines, from the outset the educational system was organized around the use of English. Thus, although the Filipinos bear the burden of their own educational expenses, they are in the position of not being able to hand on their own culture to their descendants.

Nevertheless, without attaining political independence, we can not hope for a national language. When we gain our independence, we will revive our Asian Tagalog language and its culture. The name Philippines and my name Ramos are from the Spanish language. After independence we must change both the name of the country and the names of individuals.

When I finished my questions, Ramos himself raised some questions:

My followers rose up for the sake of the people and fought the Americans. We certainly lacked weapons. We could only fight with staves and bolo knives. The Americans had rifles and used machine guns, and they battled us with planes and by telephone and radio. My followers never feared death and fought heroically. For ten days, fighting against overwhelming odds, we sought to demonstrate the essential fighting spirit of the Filipino people.

In the end, there was no way we could win. My followers fled into the jungles and mountains of the east coast pursued by the armed police of the enemy. Only the Sakdalistas, unlike the Nacionalistas or the Democratas, are conscious of their Asianness and seek to align themselves on the battle front with the Japanese people and hope for a reawakening of Asia under the leadership of the Japanese. Will the Japanese people, especially young people like yourself who have such sincerity of spirit, come to our rescue?

I ask Ramos's question of all of you Japanese young people. I wait for all sincere youths to give a positive response.