Headline: New direction for PH climate change policy

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Published Date: 12:07 AM December 27, 2014

Section: opinion

Word Count: 7557

Content:

How the Philippine government acts in the international climate change negotiations matters because if the world's governments fail to drastically reduce global greenhouse gas emissions and to establish arrangements by which those affected are provided adequate resources, then Filipinos will not just face more frequent and more vicious supertyphoons, most will also be left to fend for themselves and rely on charity to recover or survive.

At the latest UN climate change summit in Lima early this month, Philippine-government representatives appeared to have decided to undertake a major shift in the country's negotiating stance.

Previously one of the most outspoken members of the "Like Minded Developing Countries" (LMDC)—the bloc that has most strongly resisted the proposals of developed countries in the negotiations—the Philippines appears to have switched sides. It lined up, at a decisive moment during the talks, behind the United States, the European Union, and other developed countries in backing a draft "decision text" that the LMDC and other developing-country blocs vehemently opposed to the point of blocking consensus—precisely because, in the LMDC's view, it stood against many things that the Philippines had previously stood for.

Formed by an unlikely group that includes leftist Latin American countries like Bolivia and Cuba, emerging giants China and India, as well as oil producers like Saudi Arabia, the LMDC rejected the text largely because, while it seeks to oblige developing countries to pledge to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions, it does not oblige developed countries to pledge to provide finance, technology and other resources to enable developing countries to switch to low-carbon energy and adapt to and recover from the impacts of climate change.

Other countries outside the LMDC, such as the Least Developing Countries and the African Group, also blocked the text because it dropped their demand for poor countries to be compensated for the "loss and damage" they incur from climate change impacts.

Alongside the Philippines' decision to in effect purge its previous lead negotiator from its delegation, this move to abandon the LMDC and "vote" with America and the European Union signals a significant change in the government's negotiating position.

Long-time observers suggest that the shift resulted from US-EU pressure, which many consider routine in the negotiations, and which has been documented by WikiLeaks. But while external pressure—especially if understood in terms of "structural pressure"—may have been exerted, it could not have worked if there weren't like-minded actors in the Philippines who take the same position.

What likely happened was that external pressure made the conditions even more conducive for one side to prevail over another in an ongoing internal struggle: one between what we could call the "Third World nationalist" and the "liberal internationalist" factions among the Filipino intellectuals—officials, experts, diplomats, NGO workers, etc.—trying to shape Philippine foreign policy.

Such struggles are not new and are not confined to the Philippines. They date back to the 1950s or earlier, when the local ruling groups that emerged to take over newly independent states in the Third World debated over how to relate with the ruling groups of their former colonial masters—or over the terms of global intra-elite relations.

They essentially broke into two camps (though the actual divisions were more complex and messy).

On one side stood the liberal internationalists who, drawing mainly from “modernization” theories of development, held that local rulers could better improve their lot vis-à-vis other elites by competing on the terms of the existing capitalist order and state-system.

On the other side stood the Third World nationalists who, drawing from “structuralist” or “dependency” theories of development and absorbing “anti-imperialist” demands from below, believed that the existing order is stacked against the darker nations, so they sought a “New International Economic Order” so as to compete on more favorable terms with the former masters.

In the early 1970s, both sides extended their analyses to global environmental issues after developed-country governments, pushed by environmentalist movements in their countries, began putting these issues on the world stage.

Concerned about the attempt of developed-country governments and NGOs to blame them for the environmental crisis, many developing-country officials drew from Third World nationalism to blame Northern governments—their domination of the system, their production patterns, and their decadent lifestyles—for the problem. For them, the solution entails interstate redistribution of “atmospheric space,” as well as finance and technology transfers to the South, not as charity but as compensation or reparations.

Promoted largely by intellectuals from countries like China and India, as well as by a number of NGOs, this world view continues to inform the position of many developing-country intellectuals, and is most strongly pushed by the LMDC in the negotiations.

At the same time, other developing-country intellectuals drew from liberal ideas to blame “market failure” or vested interests (such as the fossil-fuel industry or oil-producing countries) for the problem, and proposed better global management, using carbon trading and other market mechanisms, alongside “safety nets” and “human rights” measures, to solve the problem.

Promoted by developed-country governments, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the World Bank, and NGOs like the World Resources Institute, this world view has also since been embraced by many developing-country intellectuals.

And today, proponents of this world view seem to have succeeded in wresting Philippine climate change policy from the Third World nationalists. How they did it requires further investigation, but it likely has to do not just with the intrinsic merits of their world views, but also with deeper, structural changes in the Philippine economy, notably the rise in the last four decades of a local capitalist class that is no longer interested in challenging the rules of global intra-elite relations. Indeed, the puzzle seems to be not why liberal internationalists have won, but why it took them this long.

Regardless of the reasons for their success, not just experts and activists but the broader public should be engaged in debating whether this shift serves the interests of all of us who stand in the path of ever stronger supertyphoons.

In evaluating our options, we must not lose sight of one thing. While there are great differences between the Third World nationalist and liberal internationalist factions, they also partake in a deeper consensus: Both ultimately believe that climate change can and should be addressed

without fundamentally modifying, if not supplanting, the existing global political and economic system.

But as many other intellectuals and social movements have warned as early as the 1960s, and as many worldwide are again beginning to conclude today, it may not be possible to undertake the massive changes required to drastically bring down emissions and to ensure that the most vulnerable are cared for without challenging capitalism itself.



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