

# Let the Stones Cry Out— A Prophetic Voice in the Philippines: An Interview with Rex Reyes Jr.



*Asian Christian Review has interviewed Rev. Fr. Rex Reyes Jr., the General Secretary of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines. He was also its Program Secretary of the Christian Unity and Ecumenical Relations from 2000 to 2007 until he was elected to the current post. Fr. Reyes, a priest of the Episcopal Church in the Philippines, is recognized both nationally and internationally as a prominent advocate for justice and peace in the country.*

**Asian Christian Review (ACR): You have been the General Secretary of the National Council of Churches in the Philippines (NCCP) since Nov. 2007. Could you tell us a little bit about what you do as the General Secretary?**

Reyes: The NCCP understands itself as a fellowship of churches, as a channel for united witness and as an institution whose history is recognized among the pillars of Philippine society. Given this self-understanding and the definition of ecumenism set forth by the World Council of Churches, the NCCP takes on the peoples' issues in addition to promoting Christian unity. The theological framework of the NCCP's self-understanding was refined and made more relevant during the Martial Law years.

The General Secretary speaks before a variety of audiences, in the Philippines and abroad and talks about the need for Christian unity as essential to Christian witness and prophetic service. He/she talks about the issues that need to be addressed both by individual Christians and responsible authorities in church and in government and how and why the necessity for churches to participate together. He/she tries to coordinate what the churches can do together.

As an institution, the NCCP has a wide range of programs which the General Secretary oversees collegially with three program secretaries and the finance officer: advocacy for just and lasting peace, ecology and human rights, relief and rehabilitation, indigenous peoples, children, youth and gender issues, chaplaincy in the Army and Police forces, partnerships with quasi-government agencies, non-government organizations and peoples' organizations, common advocacy with the Muslims and exchange programs among others. From time to time, we issue statements of social and church import.

**ACR: You are one of the most vocal critics of the current Philippine government under President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. As we understand, this is due mainly to the fact that a great number of activists, journalists, clergy, etc., who are critical of the government have been harassed, abducted, or killed presumably by the police or military since Arroyo's installation in 2001. The number of the murdered, according to a human rights organization, KARAPATAN, counts over 1,000 as of March 2009. Could you share with us your view of these extra-judicial killings and forced disappearances? And could you tell us how NCCP have been responding to the situation?**

Reyes: Whoever is in power in the Philippines and whenever human dignity is severely compromised by and for the interest of those in power, the NCCP will be a vocal critic. This is within the NCCP's vision for peace and justice, an enduring concern of the institution. The killings and other human rights violations are among the issues important to the NCCP. Long before the killings escalated, the NCCP called for the resignation of President Arroyo for her inappropriate involvement at the height of the electoral poll canvassing. We are also concerned about corruption, but the campaign to stop the killings was the NCCP's most important undertaking in recent years because lives and human rights were at stake. The Melo Commission Report, the report of Prof. Philip Alston, United Nations Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions as well as the findings of KARAPATAN, a staunch human rights advocate in the Philippines, all point to the military and the police for the cases of extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances. Save for a few soldiers and police, not one among the higher officers were made to account for these. One of the generals who gained the moniker "butcher" is now a member of the Philippine Congress representing a Party List.

For the NCCP one killing is one too many. It becomes a serious cause for alarm when the victims are activists and advocates of human rights and civil liberties. When the victims run to the church and the church people themselves also become the victims, we cannot be silent. Behind these killings is a state policy that unleashes the might of the military and police against those who maintain principled dissent. Under the guise of war against terrorism the state repression of perceived "leftists" has been given teeth by policies like the Human Security Act and Oplan Bantay-Laya or Operation Plan Freedom Watch. The killings have been well-planned, deliberate and victims are on the so-called Order of Battle of the military. Church institutions like the NCCP and denominational churches, along with church leaders are also on that list.

The response of the NCCP was to sound the call of alarm to ecumenical formations abroad. Organized pastoral delegations from churches and ecumenical bodies worldwide came to the Philippines and held dialogues with the victims, the churches and government agencies. They expressed their

concern and joined the call to stop the killings through letters to the President and government agencies. The NCCP prepared a report “Let the Stones Cry Out: An Ecumenical Report on Human Rights in the Philippines and A Call to Action”. We also organized a group called the Ecumenical Voice, and with the help of our partners and solidarity groups, brought the report to North America and the United Nations. The Ecumenical Voice testified before the US Senate Committee on Defense and through the World Council of Churches participated actively in the Universal Periodic Review of the United Nations Human Rights Council. The report was recently published in book form bearing the title “Let the Stones Cry Out”. It was well commended by the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the Philippines who wrote a foreword for the second printing. The book was also welcomed by the Chairperson of the Human Rights Commission of the Philippines.

With the help of partners abroad, we have put in place the Ecumenical Movement for Peace and Development. It is a modest attempt to provide for the immediate needs of the children of victims, like school needs. It also takes part in the documentation of continuing cases particularly the militarization of communities that are targets of so-called development projects like mining. It hopes to gain the capacity and resources to deal with the trauma of these relatives.

The NCCP, along with allied organizations continues to call the people to vigilance and awareness of their basic human rights.

**ACR: Although the number of extra-judicial killings and disappearances decreased in the past two years (which could be due to US Congress hearings on the issue and UN Special Rapporteur’s report both in 2007), Arroyo’s government so far managed to resist the pressure to really put an end to these killings and abductions. Do you see any hope of change in the near future, for example, of having new pressure coming from Obama administration, or EU Parliament (which recently voted a resolution on the issue), or the newly established UN Human Rights Council?**

Reyes: The number decreased, not only because of the reasons you mentioned but also because of the local outcry and the international outrage expressed and conveyed to the Philippine government. The first half of this year showed a resurgence in extrajudicial killings. According to KARAPATAN, a person was killed each week since January. The alarm must still be sounded. I hope President Obama will have the political will to stand by his inaugural address where he said corrupt states which also oppress their people are on the wrong side of history. We have seen many cases where the UN is ignored but it does provide a venue where grievances against repressive states are heard and aired before the international community.

Recently, the government announced that it is taking on one of the

recommendations of Prof. Alston by dismantling the Inter-Agency Legal Action Group or IALAG. Formed in January 2006 through Executive Order 493 the IALAG was mandated “to provide effective and efficient handling and coordination of the investigative and prosecutorial aspects of the fight against threats to national security” and “ address specific offenses that constitute threats to national security including but not limited to cases of rebellion, sedition and related offenses.” Human Rights groups have cited IALAG as the basis for fabricating charges against activists. On one hand, the dismantling of the agency is a victory for human rights advocates. It also shows the effectiveness of the UNHRC in some way. On the other hand, the activists who have been arrested due to fabricated or politically motivated cases are still in jail. Those who have trumped up cases who are still free are still in hiding because the military and police are out to get them. A case in point is Pastor Edwin Egar of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines. He could go as far as attending the funeral service for his mother. He could not stay longer for the burial. He had to leave immediately as military intelligent assets were spotted all over the place. It was good he left early for just as soon as he did an air force battalion descended on his town.

Much will depend on the vigilance of the people in this country and the solidarity groups outside the Philippines in maintaining consistency in lobbying work and in telling the truth of state repression in this country. There is not much hope when we consider the long historical US interest in the Philippines and the subservience of the Philippine government to such hegemony. But, there is hope when we see a growing number of people asserting their rights. A lot of work has to be done in educating and arousing the people, those in the pews included, into common action.

**ACR: What are other aspects of the present government you are critical about?**

Reyes: She failed to deliver on her promises when she was installed President following the ouster of President Estrada in 2001 through EDSA Dos (People Power 2). Now, she'd rather forget EDSA Dos. During the presidential elections in 2004 she admitted having talked to Commissioner Garcillano over the phone. This is what is now known as the “Hello Garci Scandal”. That election will go down in history as wrought with massive fraud and cheating. The impeachment case filed against her was thrown out by her allies in Congress. Today, her presidency is dogged by questions of illegitimacy. She rewarded generals loyal to her with key positions in government. She maintains patronage politics, generous with her supporters. Corruption and bribes involving her family are a public knowledge. So far she is well-entrenched with loyal supporters. Today, she wants to amend the Constitution so she can remain in power. Political survival and the removal of nationalist provisions to protect Philippine interests

are strong grounds for her to amend the constitution. While we believe that there are indeed much needed amendments in the Constitution, the motives for amending the Constitution at this time are suspect.

We are also dismayed over bureaucratic corruption in high places while the people are mired in poverty and want. She is perceived to be the most corrupt president in the history of this republic. The Philippines was ranked as the “corrupt” among 13 countries and territories across Asia and the 141<sup>st</sup> out of 180 countries and territories worldwide.

She boasts of sound economic fundamentals that have kept the Philippine economy afloat. Filipino resilience is true and notable. But something is fundamentally and grossly wrong if the survival of the economy rests on the remittances of overseas Filipino workers and more loans.

We decry repression and militarization. The former is her tool to get back at her critics and detractors as well as those who espouse principled dissent. Militarization is the means by which she does it. Bureaucracy is full of former military and police officials, intelligence agents are crawling in cities while soldiers hold their sway in distant rural areas and in the ancestral homes of indigenous peoples where resistance to development aggression is strong. If there is an active recruiter for the New People’s Army or armed movements, she and her policies, is a most effective agent for swelling the ranks of the latter.

**ACR: Arroyo’s term will end in 2010. Do you expect a major breakthrough in the matter of extra-judicial killings and/or other issues?**

Reyes: As long as the government continues to hold on to its militaristic solution to the long historical causes of unrest this will go on. This is the reason why the NCCP consistently calls for the principled peace negotiations. It is not the solution but it does constitute a major breakthrough in addressing the issues that give rise to social unrest, political dissent and the armed struggle being waged by the New Peoples’ Army.

**ACR: What is the prospect of peace and reconciliation in Mindanao? Are you hopeful about peace initiatives underway such as Konsult Mindanaw? What needs to be done in your opinion?**

Reyes: The Mindanao issue is complex, made more complex by the mineral resources in the area coveted by multinationals and Mindanao’s role in Asian geopolitics. With a deep-seated resentment towards the national government in Manila, peace in Mindanao will be a long uphill struggle. We can only hope that the various non-government and peoples’ organizations will remain steadfast in the campaign to promote co-existence among the Christians, Muslims and the Lumads in Mindanao. It is also important to continue prodding the national government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front to

go to the negotiating table to stop the war that has been going on intermittently for several years now. Filipinos elsewhere in the country have been affected by the “demonization of the Muslims” and need to appreciate the relationship of the situation in Mindanao to the national policies determined in Manila. Building communities of peace in Mindanao is a necessary project.

**ACR: You are the first indigenous person to head NCCP. Does it tell anything about the place of the indigenous in the current Philippine society/church, or you are rather an exception? And how does your ethnic identity affect your ministry?**

Reyes: Might I say, my being a staff of the NCCP since 2000 and my being an ordained person figured more prominently than my being an indigenous person during the last General Convention of the NCCP. While many indigenous people, especially among the Igorots in the Cordilleras have distinguished themselves in various fields both nationally and internationally, indigenous peoples are by and large still very much marginalized. Laws have not been in their favor and the threat of dislocation due to development aggression is real. Indigenous peoples live on those areas with mining potentials.

My theological training and understanding confirm my being an indigenous person. Many Christian values are as much as indigenous peoples’ values – community, sharing, stewardship of the earth, respect for human dignity, aspiration for freedom, concern and accountability to the future, reverence for land and life, - all of these and more. Translated into practice, they are concrete responses to a world gone mad by consumerism, the unbridled exploitation of the earth’s resources, greed for capital and profit and selfish individualism.

**ACR: How do you respond if somebody criticizes you for “politicizing” faith?**

Reyes: How does one manifest faith in a God who cares and wills abundant life for all people? Like Archbishop Tutu I cannot see how one can isolate faith and politics. What and where is the dividing line? What is a “politicized faith”? Political involvement is one aspect of living out one’s faith. I do not wish to confuse faith with piety.

**ACR: What are the most rewarding and what are the most challenging aspects of your work as a church official and/or priest?**

Reyes: When I see young people responding to the call and taking active role in the search for a just and lasting peace by crossing denominational lines and challenging unjust structures there is a feeling of accomplishment. It is rewarding to see younger pastors and priests cooperating and working together in the communities where they are deployed. It is a challenge to be faithful and encourage others to be faithful in the renewal of the church i.e. the need to

constantly understand the mission landscape and discern new Biblical truths and theological reflections that are relevant to the demands of the times.

**ACR: What do you hope for/from the churches in the Philippines?**

Reyes: I hope for churches that are movements rather than monuments, churches for people and with people – people here referring to the greater majority of the citizens of this country.