



# CORDILLERA PEOPLES ALLIANCE

*For the Defense of the Ancestral Domain and for Self Determination*

## ON DEFINING REGIONAL AUTONOMY FOR THE CORDILLERA

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### SUMMARY

Initial ideas on identity as Igorots, were expressed by pre-martial law Igorot student leaders of the Centralized BIBAK Association. Also, ideas on devolving or decentralizing government's administrative task on this mountain region were expressed by Igorot politicians earlier, such as at the Batasang Pambansa in 1978. (*Atty. Sergio Kawi, Developing a Vision for an Autonomous Cordillera Region*)<sup>i</sup>. Meanwhile, historical understanding of the Cordillera that fertilized progressive Cordillera politics, were the writings of Scotty(W.H. Scott) on Cordillera history and culture and challenge for Igorot youth to be involved. (*William Henry Scott. The Discovery of the Igorots*)<sup>ii</sup>. These inspired Igorot youth to be proud of their Igorot identity, and be part of the national movement for social change and nation building.

But the comprehensive understanding and articulation of Cordillera history, as a people and as a region, indigenous peoples rights and the right to self determination with option for regional autonomy; was by the national democratic movement. The distinct character of Igorots or Cordillera peoples with their specific problem of national oppression, ancestral land rights and indigenous socio political systems; and aspiration for people's welfare and a bright future, is richly dealt with by the movement for national democracy. (*CPA Pantatavalan: National Oppression and Genuine Regional Autonomy in the Cordillera*)<sup>iii</sup>.

National democratic politics expose the pyramid structure of Philippine society that is basically undemocratic, with an elite few ruling class who control the economy and politics, and the exploited and oppressed majority that include indigenous peoples like those in the Cordillera. The status quo is a corrupt bureaucrat capitalist system with backward feudal and decadent bourgeois values, that is servile to foreign economic interests and political influence. The struggle for national democracy unites and mobilizes all exploited and oppressed peoples for social change; to have a Philippine society that is truly sovereign, democratic, and with progressive culture and values. (*Jose Ma. Sison: Philippine Society and Revolution*)<sup>iv</sup>. Only with such essential change will the democratic rights and welfare of Cordillera peoples be truly upheld and addressed, including the aspiration for Regional Autonomy.

The principle of self determination, articulated by Lenin and others, is the political basis for the aspiration on Regional Autonomy. Peoples as nations or as minorities within a nation have the right to self determination (*Vladimir Lenin: The Rights of Nations to Self Determination*)<sup>v</sup>. Cordillera peoples as distinct indigenous peoples or as minorities within the Philippine nation-state have the right to self determination – to decide on their political, economic, social status and well being.

The Cordillera People's Democratic Front of the CPP-NPA-NDFP, has also forwarded its program that supports ancestral land rights, indigenous socio political systems, self determination as national minorities, and equality with the rest of the Filipino people .(*CPDF Eight Point Program*)<sup>vi</sup>.

Regional Autonomy for the Cordillera therefore evolved from such understanding of the distinct history and identity of the Cordillera (Scott), within our national democratic struggle and aspirations (Sison) , and based on the principle of self determination and rights of peoples (Lenin). These are further grounded on rich local history and the mass movement experience (Chico, Cellophil, open pit mining in Itogon, Taloy assertion of land rights, San Roque dam, and other local struggles) that have contributed to our present knowledge and lessons.

Systematic and comprehensive work by the national democratic movement, defined the substance and features of self determination in the Cordillera. The history and objective situation of Cordillera peoples is a particularity within the general history and situation of the Philippine nation state. The practice of countries that sincerely dealt with the self determination and democratic rights of their national minorities/minority nationalities or indigenous peoples were also studied (USSR, China, Vietnam, Nicaragua). Thus applied to our history and situation, Regional Autonomy is the appropriate application of the principle of self determination for Cordillera national minorities or indigenous peoples, rather than mere Cultural Autonomy; or Secession/independence which is the highest political form of self determination. This political understanding of the Cordillera was formally launched at the founding of the Cordillera Peoples Alliance (CPA) in June 1984(*Cordillera Peoples Alliance. Papers and Documents from the First Cordillera People's Congress*)<sup>vii</sup> . Henceforth, the aspiration for Regional Autonomy has been embraced by a broad cross section of Cordillera peoples: youth activists, organized basic sectors and communities of peasants-urban poor-workers, professionals, and political leaders.

Since then, regional autonomy (RA) has been a defined political aspiration in the Cordillera, pursued mainly from two perspectives. The national democratic movement led by CPA pursues RA comprehensively, as a strategic goal that is achieved only if essential national democratic changes are in place – an equal genuinely democratic and not a pyramid structure of Philippine society, where national leadership and politics is not dependent on pervasive foreign economic and political influence, and with corresponding progressive and patriotic values. It combines the strategic aspiration of RA with current peoples struggles and campaigns , like against destructive mining and dams, human rights, ancestral land rights , deceptive laws and programs that undermine indigenous peoples rights and the peoples self determination. It asserts that RA without such basic changes in Cordillera and Philippine society, is bogus as it does not genuinely serve the interest and self determination of Cordillera peoples. It will only perpetuate the present undemocratic system, exploitation and plunder of Cordillera resources resulting in irreversible environmental destruction, and operation of laws and programs inimical to Cordillera peoples. With this perspective, the militant Cordillera peoples movement rejected the past two Organic Acts; and likely, as well, the third attempt being pushed at present.

The other perspective on Regional Autonomy is by government – politicians and bureaucrats, which is Regional Autonomy in terms of administrative regionalization and decentralization of functions, budgetary allocations, and positioning in regional structures . Their campaign for a third Autonomy Act warns that the present regionalized status or Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR) is at risk, if the Regional Autonomy structure through an Autonomy Act is not put in place now. This is blackmail to force acceptance of their proposed Autonomy Act. Of course, the regionalized status of the Cordillera that has been achieved, is a positive gain on self determination. It must be affirmed and nourished, while we work towards building the requisites for RA .

Interaction and advance of both perspectives therefore characterize the dynamics for Regional Autonomy in the Cordillera. One seeks comprehensive, therefore long term goals, and high standards on compliance with the substance and features of self determination for Cordillera peoples. Along the

way, specific objectives are achieved. Regionalization of the Cordillera was the first campaign of the militant mass movement preceding Regional Autonomy, that resulted in popular clamor and the eventual formation of the Cordillera Administrative Region. Among gains on peoples issues and campaigns; the Chico dams and the CRC were stopped, the Taloy Folk recovered their ancestral lands, open pit mining in Itogon and the nearby San Roque dam were determinedly opposed, deceptive FPIC is persistently exposed, and entry of destructive projects like mining and dams are opposed. In this way, organized politically conscious sectors and communities exercise self determination at local levels. These are the building blocks for genuine Regional Autonomy in the Cordillera. It takes time but our cause is genuine democracy and this is painstakingly built from the grass roots.

On the other hand, the government perspective aims to establish a Regional Autonomous government here and now, to comply with a Constitutional provision. It is structural for governance and bureaucracy, budgetary for allocations, and whets the appetite of politicians and bureaucrats for positioning. It is politically expedient and rides on the popular recognition of indigenous peoples identity and rights, captured in the aspiration for regional autonomy. It is mainly on form – setting up regional structures, positioning in such structures, budget and allocations, regional governance and administration. It is lacking in principle and substance, and on the comprehensive unification of Cordillera peoples and the Filipino people on self determination and regional autonomy; before such operative structures, administrative mechanisms and budget are put in place.

Thus far, the attempts at formal establishment of a regional autonomous government in the Cordillera have failed. (*Athena Lydia Casambre, Ph.D "The Failure of Autonomy for the Cordillera Region, Northern Luzon, Philippines"*)<sup>viii</sup>. But one of these days, the necessary votes maybe generated and a Regional Autonomous structure established even within the present government perspective. In such instance, you can rely on the militant mass movement to still seek substance and genuine democratic rights, and to pursue the struggle for genuine regional autonomy.

A footnote on the struggle for regional autonomy was the mercenary and politically bankrupt Cordillera Peoples Liberation Army (CPLA), that espoused the notion of a "Cordillera nation"; and "bodong" as government for Cordillera indigenous peoples. Without sound grounding on self determination and democratic principles, the CPLA carried narrow and reactionary indigenist thinking that pitted Cordillera peoples with other Filipinos. This CPLA politics was roundly rejected. What remains of CPLA now, are as mercenaries or groups that government and individual CPLA leaders activate every now and then for self serving interests.

The present move for a 3<sup>rd</sup> organic act is seen within the reality that RA as an aspiration is a political issue in the public domain. The militant mass movement must again reiterate its position and views on the continuing struggle for self determination and regional autonomy. The gain from the dynamic interaction of both perspectives, and other views, should be continuous raising of standards; and over all political maturity on self determination and regional autonomy.

### **THE BASIC POSITION OF THE MILITANT MASS MOVEMENT ON GENUINE REGIONAL AUTONOMY**

(*CPA: A Primer on Regional Autonomy in the Cordillera; and "Genuine Regional autonomy: An Updated CPA Position"*)<sup>ix</sup>

1. Regional Autonomy as application of the principle of self determination shall guide all political relations in the Cordillera. The practice of self determination shall provide for the institution of a political system which can truly represent the interests of Cordillera indigenous peoples, in recognition of their political integrity and in due respect for their particular socio-political institutions.

Regional autonomy shall mean the recognition of the Cordillera peoples distinct identity as diverse but one people. Their common geography, history, traditions, and current situation dictates that they be treated as one political body and as one region; and that this be the framework for responding to their needs, problems, and demands.

Regional autonomy shall mean self government for the Cordillera people, that they be their own masters in all decisions of importance and in all matters that concern them. They shall have the right to manage their internal affairs according to the wishes of the majority, without interference or external pressures. They shall be guaranteed democratic participation in determining policies which affect their lives and future. They shall be ensured of comprehensive development, with their full participation and at a pace they can assimilate and understand. Their ancestral lands and resources shall be safeguarded for their benefit, and to be shared with other Filipinos through genuine national development.

Regional autonomy shall mean equality of the Cordillera people with other Filipino people. They shall enjoy without discrimination the same rights and duties as other citizens of the Philippine state. They shall participate on equal footing as the rest of the Filipino people in all aspects of public life.

Regional autonomy means unity with the rest of the Filipino people, in recognition that this can only be realized within the framework of a truly democratic and sovereign Philippine republic. The Cordillera people shall work with other oppressed sectors of Philippine society towards establishing a government in which all democratic sectors, including indigenous peoples, are given adequate and genuine representation. Regional autonomy, therefore, is not independence or secession. It is political integrity, self government, and equality practiced within the bounds of the unified leadership by a coalition government of the Philippine state. The particularity and self determination through Regional autonomy of indigenous peoples shall be exercised with due respect to the legitimate interests of the Filipino people as a whole; and should not impair, but rather contribute to the territorial integrity and political unity of the entire Filipino nation-state.

## 2. Genuine Regional Autonomy

Because government and *trapos* (traditional politicians) coopted the idea of Regional Autonomy popularized by the militant mass movement; the Cordillera mass movement later qualified its continuing campaign as Genuine Regional Autonomy; with the "genuine" qualifier to ensure that it addresses the issue of national oppression and aspiration for self determination. This also clarifies the progressive movement's regional autonomy campaign that ensures substance and democratic process; from the version of government that is merely structural administrative regionalization and decentralization of functions, positioning in elective - appointive positions and access to finance.

GRA and RA are the same in substance. To further sharpen the difference of GRA from the government/trapo version of RA, it is clarified that GRA is within the following framework:

**Principle.** The right to self determination of indigenous peoples and regional autonomy as the political realization of such right for Cordillera peoples.

**Substance.** Comprehensive indigenous peoples rights constitute the components of Genuine Regional autonomy.

**Process.** Peoples participation and empowerment with stress at grassroots level, which certainly takes time. But as regional autonomy is the practice of self determination, there is no substitute for such a process.

**Form.** A democratic structure that truly represents all the self-determining peoples of the Cordillera and that defines a workable relationship with the national government by regional autonomy as the political form of self-determination.

**Goal.** A diverse but united Cordillera peoples with active self-determining units fully exercising indigenous peoples' rights from the village to higher levels; and a region-wide autonomous system that ties up and ensures regional autonomous governance within a Filipino nation; that genuinely upholds ancestral land rights and other indigenous peoples' rights, and where government sincerely works for national prosperity and unity.

**GENUINE REGIONAL AUTONOMY would end National Oppression, and give reality to our struggle for self-determination which means the following:**

- Recognition of the Cordillera Peoples' Ancestral Land Rights and the Cordillera Ancestral Domain.
- Recognition of the Cordillera people's ancestral proprietary rights to the disposition, utilization, management and development of the land and resources.
- Recognition of the right to economic prosperity and genuine social development.
- Respect for the indigenous culture and the right to pursue cultural development.
- Recognition of indigenous socio-political systems and political integrity as a people.
- Protection of civil liberties and human rights, against militarization and state repression.
- Institutional rectification of national oppression through legislation and policies, curriculum on indigenous peoples' education, and values formation on equality and non-discrimination.

### **3. CONSTRAINTS on Genuine Regional Autonomy**

CPA perceives the following constraints within the present system in the attainment of GRA :

- Regalian Doctrine and all oppressive land laws.
- Government regard of the Cordillera only as a resource base to be exploited -without much regard for the rights and welfare of the people.
- Traditional elite, patronage politics of the prevailing pyramid structure of society with feudal and bourgeois values
- Militarization and Ethnocide; harassment of activists, people's organizations and NGOs.

### **CONCLUSION AND CHALLENGE**

The Cordillera Peoples Alliance pursues Genuine Regional Autonomy by asserting Cordillera indigenous peoples' collective rights to self-determination; and cumulatively build levels of self-determination through grass roots capacity building. This is done simultaneously with addressing the burning issues of destructive projects like mines and dams, as well as militarization and human rights violations. It is a combination of building long-term capacity for self-determination and regional autonomy while also dealing with immediate concerns. On the other hand, there is the push for immediate formal structures and systems for a regional autonomous government. There is presently a third attempt where two failed in the past. A plebiscite will likely ask us again, to affirm or reject this third attempt to formally establish an autonomous cordillera region.

With this scenario, it is a challenge to check our understanding on the substance and process of self-determination. Regional Autonomy is not merely structures, positions, and funds. It is uniting instead of being divisive – as indigenous peoples or national minorities of the Cordillera, and as being equal to and one with other Filipinos. It is necessary to have a comprehensive knowledge of our history. And it is a challenge to have a clear, firm grasp of our present, and future social-political-economic well-being. It is also a challenge to now raise the standard of politics and rise above mere structures, positions, and allocations. Let there be sufficient stress on principles and process, as well as the substance of our distinct

history and identity as indigenous peoples; for which we have the right to self determination in the form of regional autonomy.

Our timely forum this afternoon, highlights the important role of the academic community in providing space for principled discourse on self determination and Regional Autonomy in the Cordillera. May such activities be sustained, as we all work towards genuine regional autonomy . The exercise and quality of self determination is what we make of it.

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<sup>i</sup> *Atty. Sergio Kawi, "Developing a Vision for an Autonomous Region". Cordillera Regional Assembly*

<sup>ii</sup> *William Henry Scott. Discovery of the Igorots. 1974*

<sup>iii</sup> *Cordillera Peoples Alliance. Pantatavalan: "National Oppression and Genuine Regional Autonomy in the Cordillera", 1998*

<sup>iv</sup> *Jose Ma. Sison. Philippine Society and Revolution . 1970*

<sup>v</sup> *Vladimir Lenin. "The Rights of Nations to Self Determination", 1914*

<sup>vi</sup> *CPDF - "Eight Point Program 1987", Revised 1989.*

<sup>vii</sup> *Cordillera Peoples Alliance. Papers and Documents from the First Cordillera People's Congress (June 1-4, 1984; Bontoc, Mountain Province)*

<sup>viii</sup> *Athena Lydia Casambre, Ph.D "The Failure of Autonomy for the Cordillera Region, Northern Luzon, Philippines", November 11, 2000*

<sup>ix</sup> *CPA- " A Primer on Regional Autonomy in the Cordillera", October, 1988; "Genuine Regional autonomy: An Updated CPA Position", June, 1994.*