

## **An initial response to Akbayan's defense of its coalition politics**

Akbayan's article in the Sunday's Philippine Daily Inquirer (July 20, 2014, p. A14) stresses the importance and need for coalition politics. Leaving aside the rather patronizing tone, the article is also revealing in what it doesn't say.

Akbayan is in a 'coalition government' with the ruling party, so this is clearly no ordinary coalition. This is a coalition with the ruling class in power and therefore has grave consequences for the progressive movement, the masa, and the entire nation.

## **The political character of the government**

The question was also posed right from the beginning: What is Akbayan coalescing around? What is the political platform of this so-called coalition government? If you are in a coalition government, you should be clear on what is the reform agenda of this government.

Many of us in the Left believe that this is a government still wedded to a neoliberal economic program. Many of us believe that the government represents the interests of the elite. Does Akbayan agree with this, or not?

Pointedly, how does Akbayan assess the political character of the government? The article

does not address this.

The article also defends Akbayan's decision to transform itself from a party of 'protest' to a party of 'governance'. Leaving aside the counter position of "protest" and 'governance', any political party worth its salt should aim to be in power – to be the government. The critical question is: Do you win government to work within and limit yourself to the existing system, or do you win government so that you can fundamentally transform the existing system?

Partido Lakas ng Masa (PLM) believes that we should win government to fundamentally change the system.

## **Governance and power**

We also understand that being in government ('governance') and being in power are different things. Power also resides outside government, such as corporate power and the economic and military power of imperialist nations, which use their might to intervene in governments in order to protect their vested interests.

The woeful inability of Akbayan to contest and hold back the neoliberal economic agenda of the current government is testimony to this. Akbayan might have some positions in government, but to imagine that this is the same as winning government or being in power is to fool oneself and your supporters. To defend its line by arguing that it's trying to influence the direction of government is farcical. The fact is that Akbayan is unable to influence the direction of government to the extent that it claims it can. Akbayan's record under the PNoy presidency demonstrates this. You merely end up becoming co-opted in the system.

If you are using your positions in government for your own political purposes, such as access to

resources to build your base, that's a different matter. But please don't claim that the aims are to influence and change government policy, and so on and so forth.

### **Some international examples**

And we too study international events and examples. We believe that in Bolivia and Venezuela today, we have socialist parties and forces who have actually won government and are using this power to implement anti-neoliberal policies and change the system. This also includes mass mobilizations on a massive scale and people's power participation in government. Here 'protest' and 'governance' are combined in a unified strategy and are not mutually exclusive.

In contrast, we also have the experience of the PT in Brazil and the ANC in South Africa, which are governments implementing pro-market neoliberal policies. These are traditionally considered to be progressive and Left parties which were able to win government.

### **The problem is the system**

Our differences with Akbayan are also linked to an assessment of the nature of the economic and political system. Akbayan believes, according to the article, that the system has 'limitations'. We, on the other hand, believe that the system itself is the fundamental problem. The system cannot be reformed. It needs to be replaced in order to implement meaningful and far-reaching changes.

These debates are as old as the hills -- as old as the debates from the time of Karl Marx and onwards. Whether the capitalist state can merely be reformed, or whether it must be replaced with a fundamentally different type of state which represents the interest of the masses, was the historical dividing line between what came to be known as the social democrats and the revolutionary socialist currents in the international workers movement. Akbayan's positions on this question have been ambiguous. The Inquirer article, however, further clarifies the PDSP-type social democratic leanings or character of Akbayan today.

As for electoral reform, we urge Akbayan to support and campaign for the anti-dynasty bills, the anti-DAP and anti-pork bills, the freedom of information bills, the genuine agrarian reform bills which are now key electoral reforms ignored by the president and the ruling party. Where does Akbayan stand on these key questions?

### **On the Disbursement Acceleration Program**

Akbayan has openly supported President Aquino's use of the DAP. The problem with DAP is that it is a scheme that reinforces political patronage, expands the "presidential pork" and tramples on the legislative's prerogative to apportion the national budget. While we campaign for people's right to participate in national budgeting and in law making, the DAP itself was a huge setback to the democratic principle, however limited, of the right of elected representatives' to determine and allocate public funds.

So it is unconscionable for Akbayan not only to refuse to demand accountability from the President, but to even taunt and ridicule all those who support calls for the President's impeachment.

### **On compromises**

There are compromises and compromises. There should be a framework to base these

compromises. Compromises that benefit and advance only the interest of a select few, such as Akbayan's people in Cabinet and in government, are by no means principled. One of the main and guiding principle in opening up compromises should be whether it advances the interests and the struggles of the masses in general. Otherwise one ends up compromised and becomes opportunistic.

We don't need lectures on compromises in coalition politics. Right now we need accountability from Akbayan on its role and activities in government, not just a superficial defense of its 'tactics'. There has been no such accountability from this government, let alone the Akbayan leaders who are now in Cabinet and in leading positions in government.

Akbayan also asks us to keep hoping. In whom? The President and Akbayan? For what? For a miracle that the government will fundamentally change its course and genuinely address the dire needs of the masses?

### **A pragmatic plea**

The article claims that this is not the politics of pragmatism but politics based on idealism. To ask us to continue to hope under these increasingly desperate socio-economic conditions, however, seems like a pragmatic plea to continue supporting Akbayan's coalition with this government.

The masses are losing hope and large numbers have already lost hope in this government. So is Akbayan trying to say that we should ask the masses not to lose hope in this government? We cannot do that when we believe the masses have the right to think that this government is a hopeless one. This line of asking them to keep up their hopes in this government, will end up derailing the mass struggle, with disastrous consequences for the masses.

In fact, our responsibility is not to ask them to hope for a miracle, but to develop a genuine alternative to this government of elite rule and neoliberal economics. This is the big challenge that the Left faces today.

**Partido Lakas ng Masa**

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