

An Insider's View on Military Intervention¹

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Editor's note: The author had been eight years in service in the Philippine Army (PA) when he joined the Magdalo, a reform organization in the military that broke away to stage the failed Oakwood mutiny on 27 July 2003. He wrote this discussion four years after Oakwood, while he was in detention and awaiting the sentence on the guilty plea he filed before the military tribunal. On 22 August 2007, he was dishonorably discharged from military service for violation of Articles of War 96.²

Intentions and obligations of soldiers

The officers and men of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) typically begin their career in the service as junior troops in the battlefield. Upon entry into the service, they carry with them the revolutionary fervor, the ideals, principles, and patriotism, as well as the desire for their service to contribute to the realization of noble aspirations for the country and its people. The tours of duty in the frontlines expose the soldiers firsthand to the ill effects of this nation's problems as seen in the lives of the ordinary people and in the experience of the common soldiers. Amid the people's unabated suffering and the irrational practices in the AFP that needlessly sacrifice worthy men in the frontlines, the soldiers' revolutionary fervor gains strength and the quest for a desirable change becomes imperative. However, soldiers must be prudent and cautious in channeling their energy and efforts as they take action to initiate genuine revolution. Whatever actions soldiers take, the consequences have the potential to be national in scope and would act like a magnet to political forces out to take advantage of the soldiers' noble intention.

Soldiers may have pure intentions, but on their own, they do not have the capability to see through the achievement of the desired end-state. It

would take tactical alliance with other sectors, a function that soldiers would be ill-advised to undertake as it overreaches the mandate of the military in a democratic country such as ours. Should this happen, the soldiers' desired end-state becomes pawn to unexpected consequences, to whims and maneuverings, and the soldiers' role is reduced to playing support to the emerging political blocs out to make a power grab.

Even if the movement were to succeed in overthrowing the powers that be, it would not be up to the soldiers to decide on the political leadership that would replace those who would have been deposed. Neither would it be appropriate for the soldiers to hold political power even if the intention were to use that power to ensure the political reforms necessary to better the lot of the people in the countryside. In a democracy, that is not the mandate of the military.

A history of military intervention

Since the 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution, military intervention has gained prominence in the Philippines as an instrument to effect a change in political leadership. In 1986, the tandem of AFP Vice Chief of Staff Fidel V. Ramos (FVR) and Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile was responsible for a *coup d'état* against the Marcos presidency. EDSA 1 installed Corazon C. Aquino as president. However, just months after she took over the reins of government, a restive military, impatient with the slow pace of reforms undertaken by the Aquino administration, sought to make its displeasure felt through a series of coup attempts, the bloodiest being the one that took place in December 1989.

In 1992, FVR became president. It was at this time that the nation was seemingly coup-free. Ramos was succeeded by Joseph Ejercito Estrada in 1998.

In 2001, Estrada was ousted from power through EDSA 2, an event that had the decisive factor in the form of military intervention consisting of the withdrawal of support by the AFP through its Chief of Staff himself, Angelo Reyes.

President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (GMA) was carried to power in the wake of Estrada's ouster. She had barely warmed her seat as president of the land when junior officers and their men undertook the Oakwood mutiny on 27 July 2003. This was an attempt to unseat the president in

order to set the track toward genuine reforms that would expedite the realization of the soldiers' desired end-state.

By the looks of it, military intervention has become a necessary ingredient in working to realize a revolution. In truth, what the successful ones accomplished had been merely to oust the sitting president. The fruits of a genuine revolution had not been attained by these exercises. However, for better or worse, the romantic notion that soldiers can organize for reform movements within the AFP had been set. The 1980s saw the formation of the Reform the Armed Forces,³ the Soldiers of the Filipino People (SFP), and the Young Officers Union (YOU). In more recent history, there are the Magdalo Group of the Oakwood mutiny, the Kawal, and the YOU – New Generation (YOUng).

Recent political developments are inadequate to explain the emergence of these reform movements in the AFP. This revolutionary fervor has its roots in the heroism of Andres Bonifacio and the KKK,⁴ and is embedded deep in the soul of every Filipino. It finds expression given the call of the times. As society evolves, it brings about new forms of oppression to the common people. However it is achieved, seeing the abject condition of the people awakens the soldier's revolutionary fervor and fans the flame for the quest for genuine reform. The formation of reform groups are just symptomatic of the revolutionary fervor that lies in the heart of every Filipino soldier.

However, change should not be sought for the mere purpose of change. The bitter lessons learned from the history of military interventions in this country should be heeded. While there indeed is just cause to seek a specific set of conditions that have to be in place for a revolution to spell a success, it is paramount that any act toward this end should first be well-considered and only taken when it is sure to culminate in the attainment of no less than the objective. Simply said, responsible revolutionaries should abstain from initiating military intervention when the attainment of the desired end-state is clearly out of sight and the costs and negative trade-offs required in mounting it are dangerously imminent. That will be doing more harm than good.

Lessons learned from military intervention

As a caveat, what follows in this section is not intended to prescribe to the reader a certain form of action. Rather, this is to provide an inside view on the intricacies of staging an exercise at military intervention. Inasmuch as it has been the experience of the writer, the Oakwood mutiny is referred to as an example where necessary.

Intentions. A rightist movement or military intervention stems from numerous intentions—patriotic, noble, and genuinely borne from the heart of a revolutionist. Reform is the primary battlecry of every soldier, and rightfully this is reasonable as the country and its people are indeed mired in undesirable social and economic conditions. It is recognized that ultimately the political system requires reform for this country to take its rightful place among other nations.

From the selfless point of view of a revolutionist, to fight for the common Filipino is an expression of service. But perhaps just as compelling are the specific intentions with which revolutionists interpret and justify their actions as a fight for the common Filipino. These include the need to realize a reformed AFP, reform the government, institute systemic and structural reforms, cleanse the bureaucracy (executive, legislative, and judicial), arrest poverty, eliminate graft and corruption, bring prosperity to the countryside, resolve insurgency and secessionist problems, and contribute militarily in the revolution. The desired end-state, to the view of the revolutionist, must achieve all the foregoing conditions. Anything less would fall short of the mark.

What about ideology? Ideology is basically the doctrine, deep belief, or strong opinion espoused by a group of people which prescribes a definite course of action to achieve genuine revolution. The Magdalo does not have this.

The Magdalo was a composite of units and individuals that joined together in just a short span of time. Each of them held a different opinion and belief on how to go about realizing the reform agenda. With no single track to follow, as in the ideology prescribed by hardline communists, the members became highly vulnerable to the influences engulfing them. This was clearly evident when a faction of the Magdalo Group signed a manifesto signifying intent to go back to the AFP, for the reason that the Magdalo was not anymore true to the intentions with

which it started out. By no means were their signatures on the manifesto a rubber stamp on the existing corruption and wrongdoings in the AFP organization.

Rather, those who signed this manifesto recognized that the post-Oakwood developments pushed the Magdalo to where it had no intention of going—the domain of politics. For some, however, finding the movement in this unexpected and unwanted situation was taken as an opportunity for them to engage the politicians, this time with the intention to align against the current administration.⁵

But at the end of the day, the Magdalo are soldiers, not politicians. Soldiers should remain soldiers, and the Magdalo soldiers who signed the manifesto to adhere to the AFP did so as an act of closure to their involvement in a futile exercise that had been put to issue by unscrupulous politicians in order to further drag down the Filipino nation.

Coalition of forces. Considering that the Filipino society is so complex, the military faction alone will not be able to effect substantive change. There are many sectors representing various interests that have to be considered, as they would become crucial to the attainment of the goal. Any movement for reform has to factor in alliance with the sectors that can provide the necessary resources for the planned mobilization. However, linking with these sectors necessitates that the revolutionists give in to trade-offs, allowing the interests of these groups to dilute the pure and noble intentions of the movement. Also, access to resources has a way of dividing the revolutionaries on the matter of decision-making. Military intervention has an *ad hoc* structure, and this allows for the possibility that whoever controls the movement's access to resources controls the group's direction. It is also not totally impossible that control extends to grafting the resources.

The 160,000-strong AFP is only a small part of the Philippine society. The AFP on its own, much less so just a small fraction of it, could not effect substantial change and reform without involving the broad spectrum of society. Coalition is a necessity. As a result, the objectives and aspirations of the group will have to be realigned with the interest of the other forces, especially the political forces that have much to gain in the success of the exercise.

Three things could happen with these alliances: 1. The military faction could preserve its interest by handling the other forces in a way

as to exact from these the required resources, and drop them when the objective has been secured; 2. The other forces could handle the military faction in a way that the latter secure their objective, upon which time they drop the soldiers; and 3. A compromise to reconcile interests and share the spoils of victory—if and when achieved—is hammered out.

Let us examine briefly the lessons to be learned from the experience of the RAM in undertaking the 1986 military intervention exercise, perceived by many to have been a success because it had culminated in the ouster of Marcos. But a closer look would show that the turn of events thwarted the achievement of the RAM's initial goal and deflected the RAM from the execution of its plan. In order to achieve its objective, the RAM found that it had to make and accept compromises with an overwhelming number of societal forces: The Church, civil society, the Cory supporters, the militant elements, and the Filipino masses that flooded EDSA on 22-25 February 1986.

While the People Power Revolution was initiated by the military faction of Ramos and Enrile, with Gregorio Honasan as the combat commander, the revolutionists found themselves marginalized when the smoke cleared. Worse, Aquino's agenda for dividing the spoils of the victory prioritized benefits for the Philippine Left, the military's sworn enemy. Ironically, in committing the sacrifice to rectify injustice and serve the people, the efforts of RAM ultimately earned for the soldiers a distinct lack of appreciation from those who benefited the most. Worse, it made possible the realignment of Leftist elements into positions where they could inflict major damage to the AFP.

The RAM leadership realized that the gains from the People Power Revolution were a far cry from what they initially set out to do. This was one of the compelling reasons why coup attempts were made during the Aquino presidency.

What exactly did the 1986 military intervention achieve, if anything? It changed the leadership, but it did little to change the living conditions of the vast majority of the Filipino people. In this sense, there was no genuine revolution.

In comparison, the 2003 military intervention by the Magdalo Group was intended to correct conditions of systemic graft and corruption and address the issue of AFP reform to improve the living condition of battlefield soldiers, among other imperative issues for the GMA's government to address. However, in mounting the Oakwood exercise, it

was the bitter experience of the Magdalo to have been taken advantage of by political and other interest groups. Then, too, with the Magdalo soldiers in detention after Oakwood, their fate was not anymore within their control and opportunists wasted no time to use the movement for their own purposes.

The RAM and the Magdalo experiences have shaken out of the woodwork all those forces that would be among the most interested in the event of a military intervention. These parties will have to be taken into consideration by future military interventionists as these forces will definitely try to influence events to serve their own distinct interests.

There is the Philippine Left that will support any campaign for military intervention as it would be beneficial to its broader, ideology-based struggle. An alliance with the military, or even with just a fraction of the AFP, would already be a tactical victory that the Left could exploit for its formidable propaganda potential. Any form of political destabilization erodes the strength of the state machinery, a condition that benefits the Left, as it moves the nation closer to conditions ripe for General Offensive and General Uprising.

There are the politicians, especially those that are shut out from the corridors of power, who would welcome military intervention inasmuch as it has come to mean the alternative route to power. The political scene in the Philippines is fragmented, as shown for example by the 2004 Presidential elections that had the different factions of Fernando Poe, Jr. (FPJ), GMA, Panfilo Lacson, Raul Roco, and Eddie Villanueva battling it out. In the sidelines are the networks that could be called into play by FVR, Edgardo Angara, Eduardo Cojuangco, and other emerging political stalwarts.

One feature in common among these political factions, be it in the Opposition or in the Administration, is that they all have influential crooks, corruptors, and bad elements within their ranks. Their presence underlines the need for the military to be insulated from politics. However, this becomes impossible during a military intervention. It is more realistic to assume that coalition and alliances would be made. The danger here, as was said before, is that the genuine and noble intentions of the soldiers would be compromised by their alignment with unscrupulous political animals. And when the smoke clears even in victory, the military interventionists would likely find themselves among those shut out from the corridors of power.

There, too, is the formidable force of the Church. In the Philippines, the adherence to the principle of separation of the Church and the State is purely superficial.⁶ However, the religious sector is acknowledged to be the decisive factor in bringing the multitude out on the streets for a convincing display of people power. The Church has the resource to gather the civilian component and provide the moral guidance in the execution of the revolutionary action. This kind of clout could not be lightly dismissed by anyone planning to stage a successful operation.

In addition, there are the civil society groups, the business sector, the elite, the student sector, the academe and the intelligentsia, among others. Each among these groups could generate strength to influence events as they unfold and derail the revolutionist movement from its intended path.

Indeed, there are so many factors and considerations that may not immediately be factored in by a group of soldiers that moves to undertake military intervention.

Plan and execution. Blunders, irregularities, and commitment violation are a fact of military intervention. These result in the break in cordial relationships between otherwise reasonable and good people. The tactical blunders jeopardize the mission and remove any chance to attain the desired end-state. As objectives have to be won through firefight and skirmishes, violence and bloodshed become imminent when soldiers embark on their execution of a plan that requires the seizure of Malacañang and key installations, to include Camp Aguinaldo, Camp Crame, and Villamor Airbase, seaports, business centers, airports, power and communication facilities, as well as media outfits.

The 1986 People Power Revolution prescribed the model that subsequent attempts at military intervention sought to follow. In order to oust a sitting president, two basic elements should be present: 1. The military element; and 2. The civilian element where the political component will emanate. The model for People Power Revolution has been doctrinized in such a way that tactics and strategy evolved as a formula for toppling down a president—a formula that everyone seems to want to try and achieve for his or her self-interested ends.

Planning and executing this model is difficult because of the *ad hoc* structure of reformist membership. Up to the moment of execution, the military planner cannot ascertain what units to utilize for what task. AFP

units are constantly rotating, a fact that makes difficult the development of cohesiveness and interoperability required for the execution of such a delicate mission. And even before the problem of task organization becomes a matter for consideration, there has already been the difficulty posed in constituting the membership of the group, as there is the high probability of the recruitment being monitored.

On D-Day then, the military intervention group is likely to move with a meager and non-cohesive organization whose chance for success greatly depends on the sympathy and turnaround of other military units and the civilian sectors. With so much that is not within the soldiers' control, so many things are bound to go wrong, and the desired end-state will drift well out of sight.

Planning a military intervention is not limited to the military aspect only. The political and higher level aspect need to be planned as well, and this necessitates liaising with civilian elements. In the experience of the Magdalo, some of the members toyed with the idea that the group could make use of the resources of the civilian political component because they thought that when success would have been achieved, the Magdalo would still have control over how things would proceed. Of course, this never happened. The civilians who provided the resources for the Magdalo to mount the Oakwood exercise used their investment to derive returns in the political arena, and this they did without feeling the need to seek the permission of the Magdalo.

The usual paradigm of a military intervention has the ingredients of the 1. Situation; 2. Mission; 3. Execution; 4. Service support; and 5. Command and Signal. In the case of Oakwood, there was a clear situation that deserved correction. Similarly, the Magdalo Group was ready for the mission to secure the military objectives. However, at the point of execution, it had been the painful experience of the Magdalo that those who committed to the mission did not show up, leaving the soldiers to face all the negative consequences. In addition, the *ad hoc* organization of the Magdalo made command and signal blurred and confusing.

But perhaps the most bitter lesson learned from Oakwood has to do with the utilization of service support. In the AFP, there is a valid gripe with how the top level is not able to bring the resources to the field and the line units that need it. In the Magdalo experience, the very same gripe it fought against featured in its operations. Those at the higher level of the movement got more of the resources and the comforts that

went with these. The civilians and military elements that composed the decision-makers conducted their meetings in high class hotels. Those in the field and line units had to be content with *caldero* and sardines as provisions for the execution phase. How can that be revolutionary? That was hypocrisy!

Uncontrollable battlefield. Once actions for military intervention are initiated, the tide carries the revolutionaries to uncharted waters of political maneuverings for which they are ill-prepared to control. The trade-offs erode the purity of noble intentions. And the soldiers, despite the full intention to be patriotic, ironically find themselves committed to actions that endanger the nation and its people.

To the soldier, the objective of the military intervention, while national in scope, is at first glance simple enough to realize. It is after all just another kind of battle. Soldiers begin toying with the idea of a military intervention bearing in mind the kind of battlefield for which the military has trained for. But in the soldiers' paradigm of battle, the enemy is identified and the path toward the desired end-state is perfectly clear. During the engagement of opposing forces, doctrines of war through tactics and strategy are applicable. And when the smoke clears, the result could be ascertained with the decisive route of the enemy.

However, for military interventionists, it is not as easy as it looks. The action will bring the soldier to an uncontrollable battlefield where his paradigm of battle would be rendered inadequate to allow him to comprehend, much less take control. For one, the players are not limited to two opposing forces. Rather, there will be a multitude of players, each fighting to secure what is to his interest. The entry of these identified and unidentified players makes the arena more complicated and infinitely more difficult to understand. This was the situation that the Magdalo Group found itself in almost immediately after it made its move and even during the detention of its members.

There was the media battlefield where the Magdalo had to fight it out to win the battle of public impression. There was the legal battlefield where the odds of winning are heavily in favor of those who can exploit the technicalities, something that the soldier has not been trained to do. There was the political battlefield where the soldier had to defend the platform on which his claim for posterity was premised. There was the moral battlefield in the ultimate struggle for the moral high ground in order to win the hearts and minds of the populace.

All these battlefronts had to be fought simultaneously and the players that assembled for the skirmishes were just mind-boggling in number. These included the forces of the Philippine Left, the political opposition, administration, civil society, business community, media networks, religious groups, the Social Democrats, parliamentary strugglers, the Muslim community, the secessionists, and the terrorists, to name a few. Then there was the reaction from the international community, especially the United States that is ever so wary to protect its investments in the country.

Any move for military intervention puts the soldiers in a situation where they are at the mercy of the events as they unfold. The revolutionists open themselves up to be taken advantage of by opportunists. An example in the experience of the Magdalo Group was the directive of Ka Roger Rosal of the CPP/NPA/NDF⁸ which gave instructions to the line units to encourage defection by ground army units to the New People's Army (NPA). His directive attached the letter signed by the six core leaders of the Magdalo. While this Magdalo letter was authentic, it was a letter for the dependents intended to be read out during mass. It was a sad development that the communists managed to covertly infiltrate the ranks of the junior officers. Ka Roger's use of the letter for his purpose created the impression that the Magdalo had aligned itself with the CPP/NPA/NDF.

The bigger picture. The economy takes a battering. Statistics show that military interventions plunge the country into a worse condition, the very opposite of what it seeks to bring about, and it does so immediately. While the Oakwood exercise was still playing out, for example, the Swiss and French Ambassadors described it as an incident "that had further eroded the already tainted the image of the country in the international business community."

The comment was not off mark. Consider that in 2003, the gross domestic product (GDP) grew at a measly 4.2 percent, instead of the projected 5.2 percent. Gross national product (GNP) grew at 5.4 percent, instead of the targeted 5.7 percent. The dollar exchange rate, while already exhibiting a downtrend at mid-year, further deteriorated to its lowest levels in the aftermath of Oakwood. From an average of PhP51.60 to the USD1 in 2002, the peso dramatically devalued to an average of PhP54.20 in 2003. In the international scene, exports

dropped after the incident and the Philippines fell from eighteen to twenty-two out of thirty Asian countries surveyed by the International Management Development (IMD) that year on competitiveness to attract foreign investment.

Indeed, the Oakwood incident was not the only reason for the reversal of fortune suffered by the Philippines in 2003. There was the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) scare in Asia and the Iraq war that took their toll on the Philippine economy. Still, it would be prudent to say that Oakwood did not help stabilize the conditions in the Philippines under which the vast majority of people were suffering.

But perhaps more alarming among the consequences of the Magdalo intervention was the way it had set the precedent to license the seeming rebellion of junior officers against the AFP leadership. And while the aim of the Magdalo was to reform the AFP and not to destroy it, the horizontal divide it caused in the ranks could only be beneficial to the enemy. With a broken AFP, the Left would have a field day pushing its agenda.

Hypothetical assumption of an end-state. The path has been laid out for the officers and men of the AFP to follow. There is no alternative path that would allow them to be more productive and efficient in the service of the people. A desired end-state is an ideal. As a tool to achieve it, military intervention is inappropriate. Understanding the odds, the probabilities, and the futilities of employing it would be fruitful learning.

Where will the end of the road be for the military interventionist? History shows that there are three end-state scenarios: 1. Defeat makes detention a likely proposition. Those who would defy this would find themselves taking on fugitive status. Worse, they may turn rebels; 2. Protracted struggle may ensue from a stalemate. Confrontation will escalate and there will be a polarization of forces leading up to the likelihood of a civil war. Destruction of lives and property, economic breakdown, and political uncertainty will be in the cards; and 3. The optimistic assumption is that the intervention will result in success.

Assuming that the battlefield was controlled and all the forces agree to somehow unite to bring about change, is there a chance for the military idealist to realize his initial well-defined objectives for the AFP, the country, and the Filipino people? History shows that it is not to be. In the aftermath of EDSA 1 and EDSA 2, the AFP remained rife with corruption and the vast majority of the Filipino people continued to suffer.

The natural complexity of society. Ideology, politics, and aspects of national situation are dynamic and evolving. They cannot be designed or pre-projected. Proper calibration of actions must be undertaken in order not to do more harm than good. To assume that revolutionists could direct the course of ideology, politics, and aspects of the national situation is to arrogantly and erroneously overreach the soldiers' training, understanding, and capability. These are things beyond the soldiers' power to control. To be responsibly productive, soldiers need not initiate radical societal phenomena, but should limit themselves to options within their mandate and their capability.

Conclusion

This paper was conceptualized from the perspective of a former military interventionist who, despite whatever legal and professional consequences his actions would merit, has held on to the ideals of patriotism and service to the people in his recognition of a desired end-state for the good of the AFP and the nation. It is his experience and observation that sometimes, in the soldiers' quest to find personal relevance to their service to the country, they try to accomplish great things without realizing that the greatest tasks to be done are in fact the little ones. In the course of a soldier's service to the country, he may at one time find himself at a crossroad where he has to consider what action to take.

Consider the path analogy: There is a yellow path and a red path. Everyone seems to think that when you are taking the yellow path, you are by deduction and false conclusion in the red path. They fail to see that there is a white path where the people walk with courage, integrity, and loyalty; a path where one need not lie, cheat, steal, nor tolerate those who do. This path is very hard to discern because the white path sometimes crosses the yellow and the red. But it is there for men with the right heart and mind whose intents are aligned with God.

Patriotism, idealism, and principles make soldiers desire to take huge leaps, but true responsibility requires that the little tasks be also seen to. There, too, is a kind of greatness in seeing to it that the soldier takes his responsibilities seriously.

Notes

¹ Condensed by Gail Ilagan from the discussion points written by Milo Maestrecampo. The original version was intended to accompany a Power Point presentation. The publication of this article has the author's permission.

² Conduct unbecoming of an officer and a gentleman.

³ The RAM has since been renamed the Rebolusyonaryong Alyansang Makabayan (RAM).

⁴ Kataastaasan, Kagalanggalang na Katipunan nang manga Anak ng Bayan, a revolutionary movement that sought liberation from Spanish colonial rule in the late 1800s.

⁵ Former Magdalo spokesperson Antonio Trillanes IV, for example, refused to plead guilty to the crime of rebellion and even ran for senator in the 2007 national elections under the banner of the United Opposition. He won.

⁶ Editor's note: Taking its mandate from the compendium of Catholic Social Doctrine, the Catholic Church in the Philippines exercises strong commitment in teaching the faith as constitutive to the teaching of social justice. It, therefore, considers participation and engagement in the sociopolitical arena as a manifestation of its prophetic function.

⁷ Cooking pot.

⁸ Communist Party of the Philippines/New People's Army/National Democratic Front.

