

The Ghosts of *Aktibistas* Past: A New Generation of Filipino Women's Rights Activists Faces a Daunting Legacy of Inspiration, Expectations, Stigmas & Divisions

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ABSTRACT

For young Filipinos activists like Judy, a leftist working for women's rights, the Filipino activist tradition is a complicated inspiration and a mixed legacy. In the 1980s, now-revered aktibistas successfully overthrew Ferdinand Marcos' dictatorship. Today, those working towards social change are frequently and negatively compared to the anti-Marcos activists, who had the benefit of a single, easily defined enemy. Young activists have also inherited a division within the left, born after the collapse of the Marcos coalition that stigmatizes all activism as "communist" while creating tensions between individual organizations. Judy's story shows the impact of these expectations, stigmas and divisions.

In an upscale pastry shop in one of Manila's many shopping malls, Judy, a 23-year-old women's rights activist, leans across the table and says that she does not offer clients hope. As a full-time counselor and paralegal assisting victims of rape and assault, what she offers is a choice.

"I just tell them that the justice system here sucks and we all know it. Now, what do you want to do? You want to continue fighting for your rights, no matter what the ending? At least you can tell people that you fought for your rights. Or just go back out and continue with your life." She pauses.

"The longest-running case I ever encountered went for twelve years. Incest. It got dismissed." Bitterness haunts her voice. "That's reality... The progress we make on

women's rights is like a centimeter a year, just a centimeter."

Her words seem pessimistic, but Judy's passion for her work drives her to speak for hours. All I have to do is listen. I've been doing a lot of listening; I am in the Philippines conducting interviews with young women's rights activists and asking them about what brought them to activism. I've recorded story after story, and I'm meeting Judy to discover hers.

As a young white woman without the ability to speak a word of Tagalog, I feel conspicuously out of place everywhere I go, but Judy doesn't bat an eyelash when I reach out to shake her hand. I mention my Filipino grandfather, my feminist mother, my research interests, but she doesn't seem

to need my justifications. I want to hear about why she's an activist. That's all she needs to know.

Judy gestures to our pastries and informs me that their price could pay a family of four for a day, an example of the economic inequality crippling her nation. Picking at her roll, she castigates colonialism, corruption, inadequate laws, sexist social structures, and complacency. She's full of facts and figures, well-briefed by her organization, GABRIELA – the General Assembly Binding Women for Reform, Integrity, Equality, Leadership and Action, an leftist umbrella organization with operations are almost as expansive as its name.

Judy blends her training, knowledge and experience to explain the forces she is fighting. Her voice is steady, frustrated. She has turned down promising job offers in order to fight for women's rights, for social and political equality, for the justice she cannot promise the women who come to her. But she is tired.

In my time in the Philippines, I learned that young women's rights activists across this archipelago feel similarly mixed emotions towards the social justice movement driving their lives. Many of those conflicted feelings are tied to a complex relationship with the Filipino activist tradition. I interviewed 53 self-identified women's rights activists or advocates under the age of 30, with a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, educational experience, and family histories, from five different islands and eleven cities. Their organizations ranged politically from communist to moderate, and covered women's issues from angles including women in politics, working women, reproductive right, religious issues, women's health, indigenous women's rights, and anti-prostitution work.

In one-on-one and group interviews, I asked these diverse activists and advocates to tell me about their history with activism and what drew them to women's rights

in particular. At first, my goal was to collectively describe what had inspired these young people to pursue women's rights activism. But as I conducted my interviews, I realized that interviewing the youngest generation of Filipino women's rights activists had given me a fascinating cross-section of stories about an ongoing activist legacy. Judy's story was one response to a generation-wide, highly contradictory inheritance.

In the 1980s, after decades of resistance, Filipino activists overthrew the Marcos dictatorship. While today's young activists cannot remember this seminal event, it profoundly influences their activist work. The impressive achievements of earlier activists both inspire Filipino youth and give them an impossible standard to live up to, now that the struggle against a single, specific opponent has been replaced by attempts to change more subtle societal structures. Meanwhile, the shifting post-Marcos political landscape has linked the word "activist" with Maoist communist doctrine and sharply divided organizations with different political philosophies; both the stigma of activism and the split within it continue to haunt young activists.

The complex inheritance is implicit even in the language of Filipino activism: *aktibista* and *tibak*, the two Tagalog words for "activist," directly invoke the popular social movements of the 60s, 70s, and 80s. Once valued, today the words have negative connotations. The mingled associations of *aktibista* and *tibak*, like Judy's blend of passion and cynicism, reflect the paradox lived by young Filipino activists: their work, following a revered tradition, is often denigrated in the modern world.

Activism as Inspiration, Activist as Insult

Judy's generation of Filipinos was raised in a world transformed by activism. Dictator Ferdinand Marcos, president

of the country since 1965, had declared martial law in 1972 and maintained an authoritarian and corrupt government for twenty years. During that time, covert opposition groups included armed resistance as well as moderate, non-violent organizations. In 1983, senator and opposition leader Benigno Aquino was assassinated and Marcos accused of masterminding his death. Aquino's martyrdom fueled a widespread uprising, bringing decades of civil resistance and armed struggle to an astonishing finale. In the People Power Revolution of 1986 massive nonviolent demonstrations on the main highway of Manila resulted in Marcos fleeing the country. Democracy replaced autocratic martial law, Aquino's widow, Corazon Aquino, became the new president, and the activists who led the revolution were national heroes. This peaceful revolution set a high standard for future activists to meet – in the Filipino memory, successful activism brings democracy back to a long-suffering nation.¹

Today, the public still venerates these martial law activists. Aquino's face graces reverential t-shirts, and the names of both Benigno and Corazon Aquino are invoked in political conversation on a daily basis. Their son, Noynoy Aquino, won the 2010 presidential elections based primarily on his patriotic pedigree. The most moderate, respectable middle-class Filipinos will wax rhapsodic about the joy they felt marching during the People Power Revolution. But the same people who adore the old *aktibistas* look with suspicion upon the activists of today.

1 For more information on the People Power Revolution from an activist's perspective, see Mendoza, Amado, "People Power" in the Philippines, 1983-86; in Adam Roberts and Timothy Garton Ash (eds.). *Civil Resistance and Power Politics: The Experience of Non-violent Action from Gandhi to the Present*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. For a political history of Marcos' rule during the martial law era, see Celozo, Albert F. *Ferdinand Marcos and the Philippines: the political economy of authoritarianism*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing, 1997.

"If you were an activist in the 1970s and 1980s when there was martial law, you were viewed as being a patriot because your intention was very clean: to uplift the country, to free it," explains John, 22, an interior design student not associated with any activist organizations. "But now..."

He hesitates. "People doubt your intentions. Nowadays it's not so patriotic to be an activist."

"There is a connotation that you smell," says Maria, a 24-year-old researcher who studies gender issues. "That you are always on the streets. That you are very hard-core." She glances around her quiet office at a collegiate Women and Gender Institute, filled with pamphlets and project reports, and smiles ironically. "I think I don't fit well in that stereotype. But I see myself as an activist."

The legacy of the martial law heroes both inspires and burdens the new activist generation. Young protestors have a level of respect for the Marcos-era revolutionaries that borders on the worshipful. But the pressure of constant comparisons with the original protestors – and the unquestioned validity of their cause – haunts contemporary activism.

From Overthrowing a Dictator to Changing a Society

Today, many Filipinos think that activism became obsolete after Marcos fell. En route to interviews, taxi drivers inform me that the activists I'm visiting are holding the Philippines back. In the pastry shop, Judy lays out their logic: "During the martial law era, there were a lot of abuses, very blatant human rights violations, and after martial law there was a lot of hope that things would change. I would say people are no longer in favor of activism because they would say Marcos was evil. And now he is gone. It's okay!"

Anti-Marcos activists fought a dictator with the promise that if they threw him

out of power, the country would change forever. Today's Filipino activists can make no such claims. They fight against colonial influences, political and economic inequality, environmental destruction, corruption, poverty, poor health, sexism, and a host of other issues; women's rights activists, many of whom embrace intersectionality, often protest all at once. But they cannot point to a single issue or individual as the root of the nation's evils.

The efficacy of a common enemy in building a coalition or movement has been well-established since Émile Durkheim first started theorizing about social integration, and continues to be acknowledged contemporary social movement theory.² As James M. Jasper writes in *The Art of Moral Protest*, "it seems easier to forge consensus around an analysis of what is wrong with current policies than around directions for the future."³ For Filipino activists, this generalization seems to hold true; activists enjoyed stronger coalitions and a broader base of support when they fought against Marcos than when they fought for any cause.

For women's rights activists, their sense of decreasing popular support post-Marcos is almost completely disconnected from the actual effectiveness of activists. In many ways, after Marcos' fall the women's rights movement leaped forward more dramatically than ever; new organizations arose, and women gained new power within an activist community that had previously emphasized the "national good" over women's

interests.⁴ But this "rebirth" of the women's rights movement occurred at a time when, according to the activists I interviewed, larger culture viewed activism in general as no longer necessary.

Elisa, a 30-year-old activist and advocate, remembers the aftermath of the fall of Marcos and has seen the role of activism evolve since then. She sighs when she talks about the growing mistrust of activists and their intentions. "The problem is that the issues now are not as manifest as they used to be," she says. "Young people might think that there's nothing wrong, but that's precisely it. When young people stop questioning and stop wondering why certain things are, that's a huge problem."

Even when people are aware of the Philippines' many modern struggles, they may still choose to dismiss modern activists on the basis of the martial-law history. Continued social and political problems lead some citizens to conclude that activism, even activism as successful as the People Power Revolution, simply does not work. After protests overthrew Marcos and later president Joseph Estrada, corruption remained. Poverty remained. Abuses of power, violent conflict, and failures of the justice system remained.

"When you hope so badly for change and you don't get it," Judy tells me, "you learn that if you want to get justice, you have to be rich. You see that there's no alternative to the society that you're living in. You know that, 'oh, well, this is life.' People are apathetic, but to be honest, the primary need of the Filipinos is to survive." She shrugs. "It's understandable."

The perceived complacency of the general public, the same people who were on the streets during the People Power Revolution, continually frustrates

2 For instance: "It is only when independent groups have been forced, particularly in order to defend themselves against a common enemy, to draw closer together and keep the peace with one another, that a group was able to repress an assault by one of its members upon another group..." Durkheim, Émile. "Political Obligation, Moral Duty and Punishment." Durkheim on politics and the state. Ed. Anthony Giddens. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1986. 167.

3 Jasper, James M. *The Art of Moral Protest: Culture, Biography and Creativity in Social Movements*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997. 362-363

4 For an extensive description of this process, see Kwiatkowski, Lynn. "Feminist struggles for feminist nationalism in the Philippines." *Feminist Nationalism*. New York: Routledge, 1997. 147-168

present-day Filipino activists. They want to transform their country from the inside out, moving beyond a model in which international NGOs and aid agencies reach out to the Global South. Without the muscle and bank accounts of foreigners, though, they need a broad base of local support. Every day they fight to overcome what they identify as their twin ailments in the public's eye: general apathy and activism's bad reputation.

Activism and the Left

Adding to the stigma of activism, popular opinion indelibly links contemporary activism, including women's rights activism, with leftism. The anti-Marcos movement was not exclusively leftist: it included a somewhat fractious coalition of the Catholic Church, the military, moderate political organizations, and the intellectual elite, as well as armed communist groups. After Aquino became president, most groups chose to cooperate with the new government; a communist faction, however, was excluded from the new government and continued armed resistance to authority even after the fall of Marcos.

Today, many Filipinos closely associate the word "activism" with the New People's Army, or NPA – communist guerillas, hiding in the mountains, opposing democratically elected presidents. When I mentioned to one cab driver that I was visiting an activist, he said with concern, "Why would you want to talk to them? Isn't that dangerous?"

Any type of social justice work can open activists, advocates and non-profit employees up to accusations of communist leanings. Elisa, 30, has faced this stereotype for so long that she responds with amusement. "After college," she says, "I wanted to get into human rights work. My mother said, 'Why, do you want to be mistaken for a leftist?' " Elisa shrugs. "That stigma is very limiting to a lot of people. I just tried to change it."

Many activists and organizations work to improve the lives of the nation's poor and marginalized while denouncing both the politics and the methods of the far left. To complicate matters, however, other activists believe that communist organizing, following Maoist philosophy and upholding the primacy of armed revolution, is the only valid type of activism. These leftist activists embrace the derogatory connotations of *aktibista* and promote the blanket stereotype that more moderate activists try to resist.

The divide within the activist community goes far deeper than this disagreement over the validity of stereotypes. After the Marcos regime fell, the community of Filipino leftists split between those who reaffirmed the armed struggle and those who chose to work with the new government. "National Democratic" organizations carry the standard for the 'reaffirmists' and stick to Maoist communist principles, and an array of more moderately socialist groups stand with the 'rejectionists'. In the world of women's rights activism, GABRIELA – Judy's organization – represents the most powerful NatDem women's rights group. These inherited, post-Marcos tensions still hamper attempts at cooperation between GABRIELA members and rejectionists, even those who once worked side by side. Activists from both sides of the split told me, plaintively, that the conflict impedes the development of effective coalitions that fight for women's interests. Others saw the split as simply dividing right from wrong.

Irene, 22, a student activist with GABRIELA, bluntly frames her opinion of the division between moderate activists and the far left: "There are many people who claim to be activists, but they are not National Democratic activists and they can't define themselves as activists... to be a real activist, I mean the ones who can really stand for the interests of Filipinas, you have to be Nat Dem." The split between the left and the far left, which had

combined forces during the days of martial law activism, defines the very meaning of *aktibista* for many of today's young activists.

The Path to Activism – And The Price

Like Irene, Judy considers all non-Nat-Dem groups “an enemy” to her cause; she, too, does not believe that members of non-communist groups deserve the title of “activist.” But she is more diplomatic than Irene, saying, “We all have different perspectives based on our experiences in life.” Judy herself was born into an upper-middle-class family and supported by her father’s work overseas, a common path to Filipino prosperity. She was as surprised as her family by her journey from a comfortable childhood into the world of activism and its complex divisions and challenges.

Educated at one of the Philippines’ top private colleges, Judy first encountered Marxism in a sociology class. As she learned more about leftist political ideology, and as her psychology practicum led her to work with GABRIELA, she soon turned away from her original goal of being a doctor and became interested in activist causes.

Meeting victims of rape and incest led her to women’s issues in particular. “I realized Sex and the City didn’t do much when it came to women’s liberation,” she says wryly, as the pastry shop starts to close. She describes how devastating poverty, an unresponsive police force, and the lack of reproductive health care services exacerbate many problems facing Filipinas, particularly problems of assault and abuse. Sexist cultural and social institutions also abound. The waitresses in our pastry shop – there are no waiters – wear a uniform featuring short skirts and tall socks. Judy looks pointedly at their clothes and asks, “Do you think they have a choice whether to wear that?” She sighs. “I just want to live in a society where people are not raped and won’t experience sexual harassment.”

When she was 18 years old, Judy became

an activist, saying to herself: “I want to do something that’s worthy, that’s important in my life. I want to do something so even if I died right now I would say - I do this thing.” She lied to her parents and told them she had to keep working with GABRIELA to get her degree. Long after she’d finished her practicum, she kept volunteering. In women’s rights advocacy she did rewarding work, used her psychology degree, and found a community that supported her as a woman, as a lesbian, and as an activist.

Her non-activist parents were not pleased. “If your father worked his ass off to give [you] a great education... get you to study in a very expensive school, let you choose whatever courses you want, and then suddenly you work in a nongovernment organization with no pay, no salary, you go to the streets to protest and rally...” Judy says, “Nobody wants that.”

Life as an activist comes with risks as well as financial costs. Filipino activism has always been dangerous.⁵ While many organizers hope for a safer environment under President Aquino, the son of two activists, such improvement is hardly guaranteed. Journalists who uncover injustices routinely disappear, and activists fighting those injustices are equally vulnerable; a U.N. investigation cited a Karapatan report claiming that 885 left-leaning activists and political leaders were killed over six years, including human rights defenders and unionists.⁶

5 “Arbitrary, unlawful, and extrajudicial killings by elements of the security services and political killings, including killings of journalists, by a variety of state and nonstate actors continued to be serious problems. Concerns about impunity persisted... Leftist and human rights activists reported harassment by local security forces” U.S. State Department. “Philippines.” Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2010. The Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. <<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/eap/154399.htm>>. Accessed September 14, 2011.

6 UN Human Rights Council. Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions, Philip Alston: Addendum: Mission to Philippines. 16 April 2008. A/HRC/8/3/Add.2, <<http://www.unhcr.org/>

While I was in the Philippines a prominent party-list leader was assassinated in broad daylight, and many of the activists I spoke to expressed anxiety over his killing.⁷

Kim, who once served as a spokeswoman for GABRIELA and now holds a more moderate rejectionist stance, describes the daily fears of activists: "Especially under the previous administration--Gloria Arroyo's--it was very, very tense time for activists. I was coming home, always looking over the shoulder to see if someone was following me. Every week could be three to five people dead," she says. "There's a lot of worrying, should I continue or should I just let things mellow for a while? I want to preserve myself..."

"A lot of activists actually went to hiding for a while," she says, "but I couldn't go into hiding at the time. I was the only public figure of GABRIELA in my area. Plus, why would I hide? I'm not doing anything wrong!"

"But I was crossing my fingers every time I left to go home."

Bringing Filipino Activism Into the Future

Today's young Filipino activists, carrying both the burden and the banner of their martial-law forebears, face big questions. Will the rejectionist/reaffirmist split be bridged by cooperation? Should activists continue street organizing and rallies, or turn to online organizing and social media? Can these two organizing approaches be integrated, or does the Internet only create "armchair activists" who will not appear at

rallies? More fundamentally, how can dozens of separate political causes be pulled together into a sustained movement?

And, given the high expectations, harsh stigma, lack of mainstream support, conflicts between activist groups, and physical risks, is life as an activist still worth it?

I interviewed over 50 young women's rights activists, and almost all answered that question, explicitly or implicitly, with yes. They didn't deny the challenges they faced, and some had lowered their own personal expectations of success, but all were unambiguously committed to their fight. Except one- Judy.

By the end of our interview, Judy and I sit outside the mall, after the pastry shop waitresses locked the doors and the mall policemen pushed us out. The sun has long since gone down, but Judy isn't done talking. She jokes lightheartedly that as the youngest woman at her office, the other activists treat her like she's crazy. "But I have a right to get crazy," she says, less jokingly, "I get an average of ten calls a day from women talking about their abuses. Who wouldn't get crazy?"

Entirely serious now, she stutters to a stop. After three hours of talking ceaselessly about why she works with women, day in and day out, listening to their pain and giving them emotional support and legal advice, she now has to pause to choose her words.

"What if I tell you that I want to stop?"

I wait. The Manila heat is finally dissipating into the night air, and a cooler breeze hits our faces.

"Sometimes you want to explore other things," she says as if apologizing. "Of course I'd still be a woman's rights advocate. Just maybe not an activist."

Judy told me that any time spent promoting women's lives, health and safety doesn't count as activism unless it is within the framework of a NatDem organization. She is convinced that only a NatDem strategy

refworld/docid/484d2b2f2.html>. Accessed September 14, 2011.

7 See Kowk, Abigail and Nestor P. Burgos, Jr. "First killing of activist under Aquino condemned." *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. July 5, 2010. <<http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/breakingnews/nation/view/20100705-279295/First-killing-of-activist-under-Aquino-condemned>>. Accessed September 14, 2011.

has any hope of creating substantive, positive changes for her country, so any other type of activism – or labor – is futile. If she leaves GABRIELA, by her definition she will no longer be an activist.

As we sit on the steps, I feel the urge to comfort Judy, who looks bereft at the thought of losing that aspect of her identity. I tell her about another woman I recently interviewed, Michelle, a researcher and activist who works with high school girls to promote self-esteem and gender consciousness. Michelle had told me, “Activism is a lifestyle. It’s not just something you do. If you’re an activist, if you are a feminist, then you are an activist for the rest of your life.”

Judy’s face is somewhat doubtful. When she talks about stopping, about moving from the world of activism to the world of paid labor, her voice wavers with the fear of something ending forever. Michelle’s eyes shone when she talked about the frustrating challenges she faces. Judy just looks pensive. But after a long moment, she smiles again.

No activist I spoke to could stand as a representative of “the young Filipino women’s rights activist experience,” and certainly not Judy, the only activist who told me of plans to leave the field. Where she is frustrated by what she sees as an apathetic post-Marcos public, some activists

were inspired; where she embraces the post-Marcos link between communism and activism, many others try to erase that association. But every activist I spoke to was, in some way, navigating this relationship with the glorified activist history. In that sense, Judy’s struggle is entirely representative: even the most committed and passionate activists struggle with the standards imposed by the past, and the divisions that have arisen within old alliances.

For Judy, that struggle may end in a change of lifestyle, but as her stubborn glance makes clear, that doesn’t make her any less of an activist now. She won’t be leaving GABRIELA today, or this week. She won’t make this decision overnight.

Tomorrow she’ll go back into work, greeting her patients and clients. She’ll answer calls from new victims, hoping she will not hear more terrible stories than she can bear. Unable to offer those victims a promise of justice, she’ll tell them about their choices. It will be a long day’s work, and to carry her through it, Judy holds on to a humble hope, smaller and yet somehow more profound than the old vision of a toppling dictatorship. Knowing all the limitations on her achievements, on her mission, and on her nation, tomorrow she’ll keep seeking a centimeter’s worth of progress.

Names have been changed to pseudonyms.

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All other quotes and data are from personal interviews conducted in the Philippines in June and July of 2010.