

The Philippine Statehood Movement : A Resurrected Illusion, 1970–1972

by

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The emergence of a movement in the Philippines in the early part of 1970 which sought the admission of the Islands into the United States as an independent state brings to mind the struggle that country has had since independence—and even today—achieving a national identity. It exposes the inadequacies of the Tydings-Mcduffie Law of the United States Congress which granted independence to the Islands. It also shows that this matter of autonomy has not been resolved for good. The relationship between the two countries has stifled the growth of the archipelago because it has always turned to the United States for counsel and aid in times of trouble without the determination and experience of having to resolve these problems itself. The passage of time has begun to take care of the deficiencies of this Act. In fact, martial law has for its goal economic solvency and political stability in an effort to bring about true independence.

A study of the political history of the Philippines must begin by accentuating the Filipino love of freedom. As Benito Soliven, Filipino legislator and scholar aptly put it :

If we look back over the entire history of our people..... we can see that the love of freedom has been a paramount virtue and a consuming passion in the Filipino heart. This is why for three hundred and fifty years we fought against Spain, and never for a moment relinquished our demand for it.¹⁾

Readers of Philippine history have encountered the controversy of Filipino independence versus annexation as a state of the United States under chapters or headings that read "The Philippine Question," "The Philippine Controversy," "The Philippine Independence Movement," "The Philippine Problem," to mention but a few which treat the general aspects of the question. This controversy erupted anew in the organization of the Philippine Statehood Movement. It seems to have been dealt a death blow by the martial law imposed by President Ferdinand Marcos. However, the fact that it gained such popularity underscores the ongoing feeling of Filipinos that the closer their country is tied to the United States, the better it will be for its prosperity. It is the purpose of this paper to find the reasons behind this movement, the controversy it generated in the

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1) Quoted in Gregorio F. Zaide, *Philippine Political and Cultural History*, 2 vols. (Manila : Philippine Education Company, 1957), Vol. I, p. 343.

Islands, the passive reaction of the United States towards the whole affair, and its continuing relevance to Philippine politics and Philippine-American relations.

World War II left Manila in almost complete ruins in much the same way that Warsaw was in Europe. Had it not been for the Japanese Occupation, the transition from Commonwealth to Republic would have been easier for the Philippines. However, the earlier promise of the United States to grant independence by 1946 did not take into consideration the suffering borne by the people for more than three consecutive years of war. The bankruptcy of the government was overlooked ; it was this bankruptcy which made reconstruction impossible.

The United States' generous aid of nearly two billion dollars to help uplift the economy of the Islands did not do any good at all due to the fact that its distribution lacked supervision. This money ended in the pockets of corrupt politicians who were deeply immersed in nepotism, favoritism, and bribe-taking. At one point some members of the Philippine House of Representatives disgraced their office by selling visas to the highest Chinese bidder.²⁾ Amidst all these ills, the young republic's hope for survival was dim.

The period between 1947-1972 was a test of Filipino ingenuity and enterprise to realize the democratic ideals inherited from the United States. In spite of the many problems that confronted the national leaders, from the bloody uprisings of the communists in 1949 to the crippling bipartisan politics throughout the ensuing years, the country remained relatively stable. But whatever progress was made in the economic sphere was quickly swallowed up by a fast-growing population. Domestic troubles became more complicated as the years went by when political consciousness, like wildfire, caught up with the people, especially the younger generation. In the midst of the changing scene, Marcos became the first Filipino president to be reelected—in 1969 in a landslide victory.

In July of 1972, the worst flood in Philippine history struck Luzon, pounded by heavy rains for more than a month, which literally wiped out all the progress made in the preceding years. This was a fearful omen of more social unrest in the provinces of the area, two of which Pampanga and Isabela were the citadel of the Communist movement.

Before the flood that left many homeless and needy, and before the imposition of martial law on September 21, 1972, the over-all impact of which seems to be favorably accepted by Filipinos both at home and abroad, some of the ills, that confronted the administration of President Marcos were the resurgence of a new breed of *Huks*, more subtle and ruthless than the group put down in 1949 ; the war between Moslems and Christians in the south, which brought ever-recurrent threats from Mindanao to secede from the rest of the country ; and the lack of effective legislation in the flow of firearms. There were also on the one hand, the maintenance of private armies by some politicians,

2) All press reports, both Philippine and foreign, were unanimous in their description of the sad plight of the Islands during these bleak years.

while on the other, the danger of a Communist take-over allegedly masterminded by the Chinese. Not only was the graft and corruption in high places rampant and out of control among many of the different sub-branches of governmental administration, but even worse, unchecked, fraudulent elections endangered the concept of "government of the people, by the people and for the people." There was a shortage of rice, the main staple of the people which, when sufficient, has quelled many complaints against the government. Inflation was running high, the prevalence of crime disturbed many citizens, and the concentration of land in the hands of the few was perpetuating the Spanish oligarchical system.

Amidst the seeming ruin of Philippine hopes, one man appeared on the scene offering his "short-cut solution" to the present problems. Rufino D. Antonio, a former congressman and an architect by profession said he believed that the Philippines was on its way to becoming the fifty-first state of the United States by 1973. He was chairman of the board of trustees of the Philippine Statehood Movement and its major financier, to the coffers of which he had contributed "350,000 pesos out of his personal funds."³⁾

The movement was launched in a full-page advertisement in the *Manila Sunday Times* of September 19, 1971. In May of 1972, in a letter to the *Manila Times*, Antonio replied to the criticisms levelled against his movement, known also as Philippine Statehood, U. S. A., and its fast-growing membership :

I cannot see any treachery in the hearts and souls of six million members of the organization who are fed up with the present corrupt and abusive system and merely want to aspire for a better way of life.⁴⁾

On various occasions he made clear the military, economic, and political advantages that would befall the Islands upon the realization of such arrangement. On the military benefits, he had this to say :

..... in the fulfillment of America's commitment to stop communist expansion and aggression particularly in Asia America needs the Philippines. It is for this reason why America, after the Philippines becomes a member of the Union, will be building military, naval and air bases in all strategic places in the Philippines. Surely no communist country will ever tamper [with] the sovereignty of the Philippines unless that country is ready to face America in [a] nuclear world war because the Philippines is already a part of America.⁵⁾

As for the economic advantages, he was unambiguous :

..... after the Philippines becomes a member state of the Union, commercial and industrial companies from the mainland America will be building branches in the Philippines supplying the Asian markets to compete with Japan ... making the Philippines an economic giant in Asia and solving our permanent

3) Isagani Yambot, "Statehood Probe Opens," *Manila Times*, May 11, 1972, p. 1.

4) Rufino D. Antonio, "We, The People," (Letters to the Editor), *Manila Times*, May 11, 1972, p. 4.

5) R. Antonio, *Philippine Statehood, U. S. A.* (pamphlet), Makati, Rizal, P. I. : [1972?], p. 7.

and increasing unemployment problems.⁶⁾

The political expediency of his plan was clearly favorable to the Islands :

The American guidance, protection and supervision in the field of politics and good government will be a shortcut to eliminate corruption and abuse in Philippine government and society. We have had experience during the years of the Philippine Commission, the Jones Law and the Commonwealth when we enjoyed the life of peace, security and progress as against our present life of fear, misery, high prices and want.⁷⁾

Antonio intended to garner approximately eight million members by 1973 to enable a plebiscite to be held throughout the archipelago to decide whether or not it wanted to be a state of the United States. In the event that the Philippine Congress turned down the suggestion for a plebiscite, his staff planned to field an entire slate of candidates from president to local officials to enhance control of the government and its policies.⁸⁾

Asked whether the movement would be accepted by the United States, Antonio was unwavering in his affirmative answer. He was positive that it was only a question of time when the Philippines would become the American frontier in security, business, and commerce in the Pacific. The pouring in of American capital would enhance employment opportunities in the Islands and end Japan's economic dominance of Asia.

But Manuel N. Querol, a columnist for the *Manila Times* was not too enthusiastic about Antonio's optimism as was clear from his comments :

Assuming that the Philippines did get admitted as the 51st American state, what economic benefit would we get? The American capital would pour in. Americans would make the big money. Some Filipinos would be good enough to be junior or middle echelon executives but most Filipinos would be mere clerks.⁹⁾

Some were suspicious of the movement, accusing it of being a "propaganda movement of some sinister agency like the CIA or a gimmick to rally a massive political block for personal politics."¹⁰⁾ Antonio himself was not spared the accusation that he was using the press coverage "to give glamor and substance to what [was] obviously a pointless organization," and to cater to his hunger for public attention to "restore him to prominence and put him in contention for a seat in Congress in '73."¹¹⁾

When the American House speaker Carl Albert visited Manila, and was asked about the movement, he called it "a great idea." But a spokesman of the United States embassy, requested to comment on this, said : "The embassy is aware of Mr. Antonio's

6) R. Antonio, *Practical and Realistic Nationalism* (pamphlet), Makati, Rizal, P. I. : [1971?], p. 9.

7) R. Antonio, *Manifesto* (pamphlet), Makati, Rizal, P. I. : [1971?], p. 1.

8) R. Antonio, "Memo to All Officers and Members," *Documents of Philippine Statehood* (pamphlet), Makati, Rizal, P. I. : February 12, 1972.

9) "On Probing Statehood," *Manila Times*, May 10, 1972, p. 4.

10) "Statehood as Escape," *Manila Times*, May 6, 1972, p. 4

11) *Manila Times*, May 10, 1972, p. 4.

effort, but we have not expressed ourselves on the question in any way.”¹²⁾

Various individuals and groups attacked the position of the Philippines Statehood Movement. President Marcos called it “a ridiculous proposal,”¹³⁾ while members of the House demanded an immediate investigation of the movement to uncover the identity of any foreign power which might be its financial support. Former House Speaker Jose B. Laurel assailed the movement at a meeting of the *Samahang Balagtas* and conceded that the economic and social climate of the country had driven many people to seek membership in the organization. He welcomed the opportunity to look at the real national picture and called on the leaders “to exert efforts to improve the economy of the nation and the lot of the common people.”¹⁴⁾

Former Assistant Majority Floor Leader Joaquin R. Roces, in a privileged speech, urged an investigation of the movement to see :

1. If its activities border on subversion, even treason ;
2. If it is a racket ;
3. If it is financed by foreign entities ;
4. If it is gaining many adherents because of the disenchantment of the people with self-government, in which case ‘it is the leadership of the country which should be investigated.’¹⁵⁾

Teodoro Valencia, a political analyst of national renown, credited the movement with the possibility that it might arouse the nationalistic spirit because Filipinos were likely to react negatively to an idea that did not take into consideration more than four hundred years of heroic struggle to be free.¹⁶⁾

Teodoro Locsin, Jr., a journalist for the *Philippine Free Press*, was vitriolic in his criticism of the organization. He deplored the distorted value system of its founder, asserting that “if the Filipino people were incapable of independence, American statehood would not be the answer” either. He warned against the deplorable consequences of such a plan which would be tantamount to submission to “foreign domination.” He also called the people’s attention to live up to their dignity as free men, for “those who would be human [had] no choice but to stand for independence.”¹⁷⁾

The Philippine Civil Liberties Union accused American business of being behind the movement since the businessmen wanted “parity” privileges with Filipinos after their expiration in 1974, thereby using this organization as a front for their self-interest. It admitted the disenchantment of many towards the national leaders but asserted that

12) “Philippine Statehood Pushed,” *Long Island Press*, October 6, 1971, p. 11.

13) “FM Calls Statehood Ridiculous,” *Manila Times*, May 8, 1972, p. 1.

14) Isagani Yambot, “Statehood,” *Manila Times*, May 6, 1972, p. 1. Congressmen Jose de Venecia of Pangasinan and Lamberto Macias of Negros Oriental concurred with Laurel.

15) “Statehood Hearing,” *Manila Times*, May 10, 1972, p. 24.

16) “Statehood and Patriots,” *Manila Times*, May 14, 1972, p. 4.

17) Teodoro Locsin, Jr., “Tango-Philippine Style : Tanga Na Gago Pa!,” *Philippine Free Press*, May 20, 1972, p. 2.

“the failures, the mistakes, the horrors, and venalities committed on and by our people [could] never serve as justifications for turning our backs on freedom and self-respect.”¹⁸⁾

Granting the hypothesis that the United States was willing to grant the Filipinos American citizenship and all the rights that went with it, another political analyst, Alfredo R. Roces, asked whether it would serve the best interest of the Islands. He asserted that such an idea would endanger the national interest, because the concept of nations would be erased. He added that the issue also involved many factors—economic, political, psychological, and cultural. After analyzing the problem of the growing membership in the movement, he came up with two major conclusions: “the poor management and the distorted view of the United States among many Filipinos.” Thereupon, he called on the people “to recognize our weakness and improve them (sic), rather than seek to be little Americans.”¹⁹⁾

Roces also argued that the present society certainly needed a dedicated and exemplary leadership. But he questioned whether American statehood provided the answer, and whether under American leadership and within American society these problems and troubles would be eliminated. He pointed to the lack of factual assessment of the United States which has had enough troubles of its own, and whose leadership was questioned by many of its own citizens.²⁰⁾

Others attacked the Philippine Statehood position as treason. Congressman Angel D. Concepcion of Nueva Ecija condemned it as trampling on Philippine independence and giving it to the United States. He accused the movement as foreign-inspired with the aim to divide the nation. He added that it has caused considerable damage the Philippine prestige abroad and would take the Foreign Office years to erase the embarrassment that resulted from it.²¹⁾

There were also influential people who formed the bulk of those in favor of the movement. Congressman Pablo Masarte of Bohol found the invitation to join the organization a very tempting proposition “to become its presidential candidate in 1973,”²²⁾ in the event Congress turned down its request for a plebiscite. His silence on the matter was construed as consent.

Former Congressman Bartolome Cabangbang was more open in his support of the movement. This was shown in his request addressed to the Philippine Department of Justice, asking for an opinion on whether the organization was “subversive or treasonous.”²³⁾

18) “CLU Hits Statehood Movement,” *Manila Times*, May 14, 1972, p. 1.

19) “Why This ‘Statehood,’” *Manila Times*, December 7, 1971, p. 4.

20) *Ibid.*, p. 21.

21) “Solon Attacks Drive for Union with U. S.,” *Manila Times*, May 30, 1972, p. 1.

22) Isagani Yambot, “Statehood Probe Opens,” *Manila Times*, May 11, 1972, p. 1.

23) “Statehood Opinion Bid Turned Down,” *Manila Times*, May 30, 1972, p. 1.

Benjamin Ayson, a prominent Filipino-American community leader in Honolulu favored the idea of statehood on his visit to the Philippines. He deplored the unequal distribution of wealth among the people, with the gap alarmingly widening all the time. He looked upon the movement as a noble endeavor to alleviate the misery of the masses and put an end to the ruthless exploitation of local politicians.²⁴⁾

Amidst all this controversy, Antonio remained unshaken by the criticisms of his movement. He staunchly fought back against his critics, raising questions as to their "self-proclaimed nationalism and patriotism." He accused them for "holding on to the status quo in guise of love of freedom and country," thereby betraying "their real motives by refusing to share their wealth with the great mass of the suffering people."²⁵⁾

Thus was reborn the bitter debate which first erupted at the turn of the century when the Federal Party (Federalistas) in the Islands advocated the annexation of the Philippines to the United States as a state of the Union. However, it never could secure any commitment one way or another from President William McKinley, even with Civil Governor William H. Taft in Manila begging both the President and Secretary of War Elihu Root to send word of encouragement to the Federalistas. During this recent movement for Philippine statehood, American attention was also turned away. Rather it concentrated on both domestic and foreign problems, such as the speedy and honorable settlement of the Vietnam War, the termination of the cold war confrontation with the two Communist giants, the possible expansion of trade with the Soviet Union, the inflationary effects towards the domestic economy of continued American involvement in Indo-China, convention preparations for the election of 1972, and many others.

The fact that the Philippine Statehood Movement received exposure only in newspapers with not a word from foreign political analysts or academicians points out that most felt it was a fly-by-night movement with no lasting effect on Philippine political affairs. However, the experience of this author when he visited the Islands in 1970 leads him to conclude that the sentiments expressed in this movement were typical of Philippine middle and upper classes. One can only ask whether or not these pro-American tendencies as well as the threat of Maoist ideas led to the declaration of martial law in 1972.

Since martial law promoted a fierce Philippine nationalism, it buried into privacy any contradictory views. However, Philippine-American visitors to the Islands during *Balibayan* (Homecoming), initiated three years ago, continue to find sympathetic feelings for the United States as prevalent as ever, though muted. As martial law becomes less and less effective, the nationalism that accompanied it seems to be abating. Indeed, even President Marcos' lavish welcome of President Gerald Ford in December of 1975 is a

24) Dan Carmichael, "RP Leaders in Hawaii Cool to Statehood Idea," *Manila Times*, May 12, 1972, p. 13.

25) "Statehood Critics Rapped," *Manila Times*, May 15, 1972, p. 1.

reversal of his previous chauvinistic cry that the Americans and all their bases must go.

This about-face of the Philippine president reflects the dilemma of his country. A young nation is much like a young person striving to reach adulthood. He is subject to unexplainable moods. Deeply certain of what he does not want, he is ambiguous concerning what he does want. He arrogantly refuses any form of help or counsel, yet clings insecurely to the strong pillars of his childhood. As the social, political, and economic problems of the Philippines continue despite the initial impetus of martial law, one wonders how long will it be before the ghost of the hastily buried movement rises to offer once more a "guaranteed" solution to the nation's troubles—annexation with the United States.