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# What's SDK Got To Do With It?

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**THE WORLD OF MY SDK SEEMS LIKE A DREAM TO ME** now. It's a dream that keeps coming back, like a *deja vu*. Some images are vivid still, others already too distant and faded.

I see Tonyhil, Sid and myself, clad a la Che, hiking from Diliman to Malolos in midsummer. I remember our threesome doing this a few times for good reasons, romantic or otherwise. We were preparing our legs, and our hearts too, for what we were told was the coming high-level struggle.

Why Malolos? We did bivouac to other places. But Malolos was specially dear to heart: it was the base, or one of the strongest bases of the old communist movement. It was, and probably remains, the heartland of the Lava family. Or more properly, the Lava brothers, the much demonized "Lavaites" who we were educated to hate and avoid like a plague. Sid had the connections, through some relatives. Tonyhil and I were itching for some explorations. I don't

know about Tonyhil and Sid, but I was plain curious. What sort of “devils” are the Lavas anyway? What have they done beyond what I read and was told about them to deserve their billing in the hall of infamy? I guess I was just interested to know more about them as persons, especially because they were no ordinary people assigned a big responsibility for a fraction of our history.

We never got far enough. The best value out of that effort was a realization about the way the old movement organized people, at least in that part of Central Luzon. Whole families were enlisted: father was in the peasant association, mother was in the women’s group, sons and daughters were in the youth or some other type of organization. I thought that was fascinating.

**T**he KM split in 1967. I was then a neophyte KM. And so were Tonyhil and Sid, and Popoy V., Tony Tagamolila, Max P. and the only woman in our DG (discussion group), Cecil G. We were all newcomers on membership probation for six months, according to KM rules. We all graduated to full membership just before the split during the second congress. Most of the group went the other direction, at least I’m sure about Tonyhil, Sid, Popoy and myself, and mainly because our political officers (POs), like Jun Tera, Max Lim and the others, belonged to the splinter group. That’s how we became SDK. Our group, together with others, was hastily formed into an SDK chapter in UP Diliman in 1968, with Sixto Carlos as chair. Meanwhile I kept my links to my earlier associations, the Student Christian Movement and the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, the latter also under similar fractional pressures.

I found out that the splits had global connections. The line was being drawn between China and the Soviet Union. This was the era of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, the GPCR as we fondly called it. I too was mesmerized by the messages and images flying around. I remember begging Tonyhil to get me a Mao pin at least, better if it goes with a Mao jacket and a PLA cap with a red star on it. The little red book I could get easily because it was a familiar fixture at the Popular and Solidaridad bookstores, favorite hang-outs of progressives and radicals. The others were rarities and Tonyhil’s girlfriend then, later wife, Annie had just been to China and brought home the precious items.

Then the only bad spot on the GPCR for me was the Peking Review. I never liked its style. But I learned to tolerate that and to pay attention to the ideological and political line instead. I had to suppress my liking for Hemingway and Camus. Anyhow, these writers belonged to a



decadent era I was being educated to forget. But there's one thing about Peking Review I could not get out of my mind: erasing from a group photo a fallen party leader who had been accused of turning revisionist. That's tampering with a historical record, plain and clear! I could not live with that but later I convinced myself that maybe that was nothing compared to the higher values the GPCR stood for. Curiously enough, and from a hindsight, there had been a number of things I thought were wrong but later I convinced myself to believe otherwise. Maybe this is what faith conversion has been doing to many of us.

**N**othing beats the 60's. It was my defining decade. Of course others are just as stubborn about their own defining moment. In the 60's I saw a rapid transformation in my interests, from stream of consciousness, situational morality, Freud, agnosticism and atheism, absurdity and decadence, existentialism, pacifism, anarchism to revolution. It was a fascinating journey I could give up a fortune to travel again.

Like many others, I too went gaga over the Beatles. But the poet in me was more excited by the likes of Jim Morrison of the Doors. Despite his America-centric bias expressed in lines like *"the west is the best"* which incidentally I also believed at the time, as many of the things that shaped my consciousness came from there, I could easily get high with his Dickinsonian lines like *"This is the end, beautiful friend, the end"*, obviously with tangential reference to the US military adventure into Vietnam. Or take his classic, *"There are things known and unknown, and in between, the doors"*. Yet another grabber for me were lines from Simon and Garfunkel,

"I don't know a soul who's not been bothered  
don't know a friend who feels at ease,  
don't know a dream that's not been shattered  
or driven to its knees."

These, for me, sharply captured and portrayed the spirit of the 60's, and the 70's too.

**S**DK didn't change all that. Indeed it was itself just another moment in time building on the past. But it was a different moment. Its timing was swell: GPCR, Paris student uprising, grieving over Che's death in Bolivia, Vietcong Tet offensive, Marcos digging in and gearing for the long haul. SDK was a serious preparation for a wholly different encounter with the future. It's like leaving behind one's schoolboy days.



In his article SDK Revisited, Sol Santos quoted from Marcos September 21, 1972 Proclamation 1081, the official declaration of Martial law in the Philippines, which described SDK as a cadre organization composed of “highly indoctrinated, intensely committed and almost fanatically devoted individuals”. Sol finds this description an unintended praise, and he maybe right. I should add Marcos could never find a better caricature.

The SDK activist is a cadre compleat: deeply ideological, agitator, communicator, popular educator, organizer, mass mobilizer, derring-do. Daring was somewhat in question, especially if this meant meeting police truncheous and guns with stones and pillboxes, because not too many SDK activists could match their KM counterparts in this area. SDK put the highest premium on education, in cadre formation. What it lacked in numbers it strived to offset with quality cadre. It did try to engage KM in the battle for numbers, but KM was just miles away. Somehow SDK found a convenient excuse in the off-quoted alibi “fewer but better”.

**W**henever this SDK’s outstanding feature comes up, I’m always reminded of Jun Tera and Tonyhil. To me, they were both a cut above the rest, even by SDK’s norm. Jun was a “spiritual” leader of sorts. Though younger than Joma Sison, he was among the members of the KM founding national council. He was the chief mentor of the study group where Tonyhil and I belonged and he saw through our formation. I found Jun very unassuming but intense. I liked him because he was somewhat like Uncle Ho Chi Minh incarnate, looks and all.

Our hideaway in Taytay, somewhat like a small rainforest patch a few kilometers from Manila, was what “tara” was to Maureen O’ Hara of *Gone With the Wind* fame. It was Jun Tera’s pet project. There he built his prototype of a future revolutionary base. Now and then a select group of us, his “pupils”, would come to visit and “live” the future. We planted cassava, slept in the nipa hut Jun built himself. With gusto, Jun would show us the diversity of his cassava menu. We had cassava for rice, viand, soup or dessert, from breakfast to lunch and supper, including meriendas in between. He told us that cassava sustained the Vietcong guerillas and that we would be better off living the life of our models even that early.

It’s from Jun that I learned the *Internationale*, its origin in France, its tune and lyrics, both in English and Pilipino, some such things that in those days were shared only among smaller circles. One had to be “in” to know them. I like to remember Jun as a fusion of the Parisian radical,



the anti-Vietnam War peacenik and Mao's young cultural revolutionist during the GPCR. And most of all, because he lived what he taught us.

Tonyhil, Sid and I conspired to build our own "base" in Quezon province. Sid's family had large estates there, including an island named after his father, along the Pacific coast. Century-old mangroves had been cleared to make way for Sid family's huge fishponds. I wonder if Sid felt sorry about that since he's a natural environmentalist concerned with the reproduction of marine life. Of course, green was not yet in our psyche (I had in mind another meaning of green). We enjoyed shooting wild ducks and roasting them for dinner. It's shooting birds with one bullet, literally: we enjoyed the game and learned to shoot like upstart guerilleros, with Che always in our mind. We tried out the same experiment in my hometown in Samal, Bataan. We would join in hunting, have a feast and hold political discussions into the night.

As always, fate has a funny way of treating people. We called its ways the necessary twists and turns in the struggle for emancipation. Jun fell out, or perhaps just lingered on by the waysides. Sadly, it had to be my closest friend and comrade Tonyhil, together with Sixto, who had to play the hatchet role.

It all began in 1969, or perhaps the roots traced farther back. Reconciliation between KM and SDK was up in the air, occasioned by the rebuilding of the new revolutionary party seeking to unite all radical and progressive groups under its leadership. SDK was naturally on the spot. But it seemed Jun Tera had other things in mind which didn't sit at all with the views of the new leadership. He had to go or had to be pushed out. His leaving was quite reminiscent of the fate of those who had been crushed in so-called struggles between two lines, a tradition that has been haunting revolutions to this day.

The power of education to raise consciousness and commitment never ceases to fascinate me. It was a right choice for SDK to put a high value to it. But what about this education? How does it account for what happened to Jun Tera who was our teacher and to Tonyhil who was once his pupil? How is it to explain the phenomenon of "demonization" that has dogged marxist revolutions from Lenin's time to the present? What did we teach ourselves and others that led to actions whose results were hard to live down? Were we interested more in received truths and answers than questions?

No doubt SDK produced many thinking activists. It helped in a big way to train a generation of young people who trooped to the frontlines. It had ample share of names in the roster of martyrs. Yet despite all



these, perhaps SDK was also party to fostering the illusion that we have all answers to all the questions that bother humankind.

What I found most attractive among the marxist propositions was “merciless critique of everything existing”. Sparing no one, including your own, was what it meant to me, to many of us. This proposition was the foundation of criticism and self-criticism, a time-honored practice that has carried the movement forward. But why did comrades gang up on my idol Rosa Luxemburg when she asserted that democracy means freedom to think differently? Why were so many comrades hounded for thinking differently? It seems as though our truths cannot be subject to self-criticism.

Tonyhil was a great guy who valued critical thinking so much like it was second nature to him. With him, it was always endless debating, especially on questions where revolutionary theory had only vague answers. Outside of our study group, we would always be locked in one-on-one discourses that went into wee hours of the morning. They were like daily bread in our austere everyday lives. But I did not join him in “hounding” Jun Tera and company, at least not as actively as he would have wanted it, again because my usual uncertainties got the better of me.

It is difficult to figure how Tonyhil will respond to the problems of today’s revolution. My guess is, he will be in the thick of the raging debate, relentlessly asking the hard questions till he finds the best solutions. For sure he will bring to bear the strength of his character forged during his SDK years, a strength he already possessed even before entering SDK.

**W**hat makes SDK different? A theme that always comes up in SDK reunions, this is still in search of a more coherent answer. Always there are as many suggestions as there are members of this tiny society, a society that’s turning out to be a gathering of friends of Tonyhil. Sol Santos identified a few common features that set SDK apart, such as initiative, the high value it gave to education and cadre formation, it’s advocacy for pluralism and alliances, the stress on democracy, all these on top of former President Marcos’ own way of differentiating SDK from KM. These were valid and important points of distinction but by no means unique to SDK. And when it comes to the fundamentals of party line, it mattered little whether one was KM or SDK.

In the end, it may come down to image. Intentionally or otherwise, SDK had an image. Call it “less radical than KM” or by some other



names, still some image just got formed and stuck and mainly because of the kind of men and women who joined and shaped the organization. "Samahang Double-Knit" suggested a lot about what these men and women tended to think, wear and enjoy in life. They had their characters and habits formed long before there was any SDK. SDK suited their biases and their collective bias helped shaped the SDK image.

I was 19 when I joined the KM and 20 when we organized the SDK. There's very little SDK could do to change what I was, it could only provide the space to nurture the best or trigger the worst in me. I was never sorry, but in fact, very proud to be associated with SDK. Somehow SDK may have been instrumental in promoting a "totalizing" view of reality but whether a member turned "totalitarian" or not cannot be wholly attributed to SDK. No matter its failings, I think SDK stood for the defense of democracy and our common humanity which was what attracted me to join it in the first place.

**W**here are the men and women of SDK now? Here, there and everywhere, it seems. After a brief stint at Sorbonne, Jun Tera has found his way into the green movement, a thinker-writer, as expected. Tonyhil and Lory Barros are resting in peace in the company of other martyrs of the revolution. Many have scaled new heights: in the academe, like Rey Veal; in government, like William Padolina, Bebet and Chuck Gozun, and Jeepy Perez; in banking, like Jun Miranda and Gary Olivar; in the media, like Noel Cabrera and Chito Sta. Romana; in the women's movement, like Judy Taguiwalo and Bebop Sajor; in the revolutionary underground and in the most difficult of circumstances, like the indefatigable couple Benny and Wilma. And the list goes on. Wherever they may be, in government, business or civil society, living more or less dangerous lives, known or less known, the men and women whose lives were touched by SDK would not fail to remember.

With or without SDK, we all probably will be the same kind of persons we grew up to be. As for me, SDK was one of the doors to knowing some of humanity's very strange ways.





## About the author

Isagani R. Serrano is Senior Vice President and Board Member of the Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement (PRRM). He's written for CIVICUS the following: *Civil Society in the Asia-Pacific*, 1994; *Humanity In Trouble But Hopeful* in CITIZENS, 1995; *Profile: Philippines* for CIVIC INDEX, 1997; *Coming Apart, Coming Together* in Civil Society at the Turn of the Millennium, 1999; *A Global Citizens' Commitment*, 1999. A community organizer, educator, writer, guitarist, 'farmer', and political prisoner for seven years during martial law in the Philippines. Trained in education and literature, community organization and development management. Holds a Master of Science in Environment & Development Education (MSc in EE/DE) from the South Bank University-London.

