

¶An American tells the Filipinos
what they feel.

DEMOCRACY AND INDEPENDENCE IN THE PHILIPPINES

THE fortunes of the Philippines are intricately linked, by our own actions, with the course we are proposing to follow in the world affairs.

It has been clear for some time that Filipinos are revising their accustomed stand on independence. The change in attitude has been brought about by the greater tension in the international situation and the clearer direction of American foreign policy. The proposals of the Joint Preparatory Committee on the Philippine Affairs, which have been submitted to the present session of Congress, would extend preferential trade with the United States to 1960, instead of bringing such trade to an abrupt end in 1946 as was originally provided in the Independence Act. These recommendations, if passed, would certainly brighten the economic outlook and at least give the Commonwealth a longer breathing spell in which to carry through measures of economic reconstruction. For this reason the proposals are receiving practically united support in the Philippines. But there is evident

a distinct feeling of disappointment, and even resentment in some quarters, that out of the discussions of the committee of experts no proposals were evolved regarding future political relationships between the two countries.

Manila wants to know what the United States is prepared to do before 1946 in the direction of committing itself to defense of the Philippines and taking adequate measures to that end.

Off the northern tip of their country the Filipinos confront Formosa; intervening between the Islands and Hawaii are the Japanese mandated possessions, the closest of which is but 400 miles from Davao. The latter, situated in the southern group of the Philippine Islands, is already the center of a virtual Japanese colony, a potential Sudeten area.

Under these circumstances, if Munich were to become a model for American foreign policy the Filipinos could plainly see themselves as another Czechoslovakia, with the United States playing a role similar to that of France and Britain. They had

assurances that this would not be the case in President Roosevelt's outspoken formulation of American policy and in the quickened anti-fascist temper of the American people.

Responsible Administration opinion holds as beyond a shadow of doubt that should it become clear that the United States will withdraw completely from the country, and formal independence, is obtained, this would be paramount under present conditions to Japanese sovereignty. This eventuality is viewed with extreme dread, for judging from the experiences in other countries, the Filipinos know that they would lose every shred of the autonomy they have so far been able to obtain under American rule, and that they would forfeit as well the considerable economic advantages they hold. The Filipino leaders desire, above all, to maintain the best possible relations with the United States and would zealously avoid any course which is likely to lead to misunderstanding.

This, however, should not be misinterpreted to mean that the responsible leaders in Manila would be willing to make any sacrifices in the rights of self-government or would agree to reduce their sphere of autonomy as a price for continued American collaboration.

The Filipinos do not object to "realistic reexamination"—this they have already undertaken on their own, without a hint from the High Commissioner—but they do find serious objection to his concrete recommendation that dominion status be worked out for the country. Such a suggestion, coming as it did from the official representative of the United States, could only impart the suspicion that the sovereign power may be attempting to impose its will upon the dependency. Above all, the Filipinos insist, this question has to be solved in the spirit of self-determination, with any proposals regarding political relationship with the United States emanating from and decided upon by the Filipino people. As matters now stand, the opinion is growing that it may be preferable to have a plebiscite on the independence question two or three years before 1946, to determine the will of the people. If the international situation has not been radically altered by the time of the plebiscite, it is recognized that some form of continued political relationship with the United States would be of mutual advantage to both countries. But if the situation improves to the degree that Japan no longer constitutes an actual danger to Philippine integrity, a complete

and absolute form of independence may be considered preferable. From all aspects, this seems a realistic and reasonable approach to the question.

The people distinguish clearly between formal independence and real freedom. The activities of such outspoken Japanophiles as Benigno Ramos serve to make this point clear. When Ramos, recently returned from four years of self-imposed exile in Tokyo, raises the slogan of "independence at all costs" and in the same breath advocates alliance with Japan as "the leader of the Oriental peoples," it does not take much political perspicacity to see to what pernicious influences the ideal of independence may be prostituted. The lessons of Austria and Czechoslovakia are not being lost: Ramos is often compared with Henlein, and the clamor raised from time to time by Tokyo with regard to "protection of the rights of Japanese nationals" in Davao is paralleled with Hitler's agitation on the Sudeten question.

The so-called Popular Front, a coalition of minority parties which in the past took its stand in opposition to anything the Administration might propose, has finally reformulated its position on independence. Formerly, when it was dominated by General Emilio Aguinaldo and his group of unreconstruct-

ed veterans of the revolution, the Popular Front took an uncompromising stand for immediate, complete and absolute independence.

However, in its program for the 1938 elections to the National Assembly, the Popular Front dropped completely the demand for immediate independence and, instead, declared the necessity of abiding by the terms of the existing Independence Act.

Furthermore, the Popular Front proposes that certain Islands or areas be ceded to the United States after 1946 for the maintenance of naval and air bases. This also makes it clear that the Filipinos wish to assure joint action with the United States for purposes of mutual defense.

Another important sign of the changing sentiment, is the position of the Filipino Communists. A Communist statement of policy, issued last fall, called attention to the worldwide struggle between fascism and democracy, pointed to the danger of aggression against the Philippines, and declared that the immediate severance of all ties with the United States would throw the country upon the mercy of Japan. They advocated national unity, on the basis of democracy, as the means of preserving and safeguarding the autonomy and the rights

which the Filipinos had already attained.

The Socialists, the only other important minority group, have recently merged into the Communist Party. With the exception of that section of the Sakdalista (now renamed Ganap) under the influence of Benigno Ramos, all organized political opinion tends toward essential unity on the independence question.

It is, perforce, inevitable that hand in hand with the political reorientation on the independence question there should be taking place in the Philippines something in the nature of a resurgent democratic movement. In fact, it is this internal development which is making possible a democratic solution of the problems of nationalism.

President Quezon inaugurated a new era for the Philippines when he pardoned political and labor prisoners who had been jailed and exiled in pre-Commonwealth days. In his Christmas (1938) amnesty practically all remaining political prisoners were freed and conditions removed from those previously pardoned. The last official remnants of a suppressive policy were discarded with the President's proclamation of last October 12, which was occasioned by the refusal of Mayor Posadas of Manila to extend permits for public meetings to the

Communists. The President declared: "Whatever may have been the reasons the government has had heretofore in adopting a restrictive policy in the matter of granting permission for public demonstrations or meetings, I feel that there is no longer any valid reason for continuing such a policy." All public officials were instructed to "be very liberal in granting permits" and "not assume that they (the meetings) will be necessarily illegal or subversive." The proclamation was greeted as a new people's Magna Charta.

The establishment of the Labor Relations Board has on the whole encouraged collective bargaining and led to better enforcement of the existing labor and farm-tenancy laws. The minimum wage and the eight-hour day for government employees are now established and measures are being sponsored to extend these laws to private industry as well. Various forms of cooperative farming, government credit cooperative marketing are being proposed in connection with extensive colonization plans in Mindanao, the center of Japanese penetration. Steps are being taken by the administration to lease large haciendas owned by the friar corporations and to turn these into model cooperative farms. In connection with the national economic recon-

struction of the country, the National Economic Council is proposing government ownership of the public utilities and the development of a government power industry. In this recent message to the National Assembly, the President urged the revision of the immigration laws to remove existing unequal restrictions against the Chinese, and the Commonwealth has offered asylum to 10,000 Jewish emigres from Germany. These measures constitute an auspi-

icious beginning in the process of democratic transformation, and the new temper of the people guarantees its continuance.

A new country is in the making in the Western Pacific and we can take some pride in the part we are playing. Its destiny, however, is inseparable from the destiny of world democracy. Whether it will succeed depends most directly upon the responsibility our country is willing to assume in defense of democracy at home and abroad —*James S. Allen, condensed from Amerasia.*

