

# STUDENT ACTIVISM FROM THE CAMPUS VIEW

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**HEAVILY ARMED** government troopers in full battle regalia pursuing students as they scampered for safety; a taxicab bursting into flames in the middle of the street; heaps of rocks, wood, dirt and desks blocking traffic flow; scores of students walking out of their classrooms and invading exclusive girls' schools; mini-skirted college students stopping motorists for sympathy money; huge red and black flags and streamers fluttering in the heat of the sun as student marchers snaked through the streets—these were some of the dizzying phenomena during the past weeks that left everyone asking, "What is happening?"

Those of us who have spent many a good part of our lives in teaching the youth have probably asked, at least in the back of our minds, "Where did we go wrong?" Some of us have even gone as far as condemning the youth for having muddled up the situation. It would be good to look back and see how student activism metamorphosed in the last few years.

## Awareness of Rights

It all started when students, aroused into an awareness of their rights and power, began to talk school administrators into giving them more say in school affairs, such as better school facilities, curriculum formation, and faculty se-

lection. They wanted to have more freedom in the publication of their school paper, and study the things that interested them. In time increase in tuition fees became the target of their protest.

Many pointed out, however, that student interests were merely confined to their local needs and did not reach out to the country at large. Upon the proddings of their teachers, there began a series of "teach-ins." Then what began as a fist-sized snowball swelled into an avalanche. Protest marches. Pickets. Rallies before Congress, Malacañang, factories, government offices.

All these were relatively peaceful. In fact, they were uneventful. And the students felt that nothing concrete was happening. It seemed to them that all their protestations had fallen on deaf ears. Then the historic January 25 came. What had started as a plea for non-partisan constitutional convention resulted in violence and death. Things were never the same after that. For students now began to talk in terms of revolution. As students organized themselves, numerous names emerged: KM, SKIT, SDK, MDP, MAKI-BAKA, NUSP, etc. As students vied for prominence, classifications were labeled at them as radicals and moderates, as lefts and rights. Meanwhile brute force was the answer of the government, but every spilt blood encouraged more protest marches and boycotts. Every burst of gun fire was echoed by a pill box explosion.

## Sympathetic Understanding

As a teacher committed to educate, to bring out the best of the

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youth's faculties and capabilities, I write down my sentiments here regarding student activism. My contact and exposure to student ideas have made me come to this conclusion. What is needed very badly today is a sympathetic understanding for the students. Due to the tremendous advance of science and technology, particularly mass communication, students are more knowledgeable today. They are aware of the many undesirable elements of the Filipino society. The call for the Filipinization of education, of the economy, of trade and commerce, of political life, of practically everything under Philippine sun, is a clear indication of this. In fact, many of them have already cast doubts as to the efficacy of democracy and have made vehement avowals for the embrace of communism to the shock of their elders.

We who are part of the school have encountered dilemmas. The Ateneo University, for instance, has come out, through Fr. Francisco Araneta, with the statement that the university, as its name signifies, would be remiss in its duty if it did not make its educational efforts relevant to the needs of the times. And to translate its desires into action it has opened its Padre Faura gates to striking jeepney drivers and demonstrating students alike. But the school has to go on performing its task: to teach. Could it allow its studentry to walk out of class and join protest marches? What would the parents say if they found out that their children were out in the streets instead of within the confines of the school?

#### Students' Rationale

In the high school department of the Ateneo, for instance, students are allowed to join demonstrations provided they had previous parental written permission. But since no parent would consent to his son's risking life and limb, and to go without such written permission would mean truancy and punishment, it would seem that this is tantamount to repression of student activism on the part of the school. But if the parents themselves were unwilling to allow the school the use of their right and duty to educate their children, there would be nothing that the school could do. Convincing their parents about the importance of joining such demonstrations would then rest on the shoulders of the students. On the other hand, if students walked out



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of their classes, one is not warranted to condemn them outright. For consider their rationale: our country is in a sorry mess and it is not getting any better. Study efforts will come to naught unless drastic changes are effected now. In school they are taught about such things as principles and virtues and the need for hard work; but such things are meaningless in the world they will live in. They know that the students in Indonesia had to stop a whole year of schooling just to save their country from communism. And they cannot do less.

Again it would not be wise to dismiss the students as communists, or communist-inspired, or Maoists, or rabble rousers. It would not be wise to display frightening arsenals and armies; nor to stage counter-demonstrations and marches of allegiances. What is sorely needed is understanding.

#### Common Good

In short, we have to lend a listening ear. We have only to point out that all of us have one and the same goal: the common good. Radicals want food and justice for the downtrodden. Maoists want discipli-

ne for the recalcitrants and opportunists. The government agencies have to protect property and keep order. Parents have the duty to rear and educate their children. In other words, everyone is possessed of the same good intentions. There is no solution, therefore, except to have an open mind, to have a deeper understanding of the students' aspirations.

For if people today discern some semblance, though feeble, of government reforms, if bills of national interest get passed by a well-attended congress, if a few grafters, tax-evaders and oligarchs get the axe of the law, if efforts are exerted for clean elections, we have only the students to thank. On the other hand, if, as many people would want to happen, the voices of the youth were silenced and stifled, one can only wonder what would become of our country. Had student dissent and enthusiasm been looked upon with understanding by our elders, one wonders whether the names Sta. Brigida, Catabay, Roldan, Alcantara and Sontillano would have as much ring as Recto, Vinzon, Laurel, Soliven and Marcos in the few years to come. ●