

Another ‘Travesty’ as Congress Votes to Extend Life of Failed CARP

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The landlord-dominated Congress, led by the relatives of President Arroyo, voted Wednesday night to add five more years to the implementation of a 20-year-old agrarian-reform program that has failed to uplift the lives of peasants and farmers in the Philippines. And critics say the new proposed law is even worse than the original.

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MANILA – A day after members of the House of Representatives approved a resolution that would pave the way for the possible extension of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo’s rule, they passed on third and final reading a controversial bill extending the implementation of the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program – a bill that progressive partylist legislators had rejected for being anti-farmer, pro-landlord and worse than the original.

Led by the four relatives of President Arroyo (her two sons, her brother-in-law and sister-in-law), 211 legislators voted “yes” to House Resolution 4077, or the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program Extension with Reforms (CARPER), 13 voted “no,” and only two abstained.

The bill intends to extend by five years the original Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP). However, critics say CARPER is worse than CARP because it only reinforces the pro-landlord orientation of the original law.



Peasants, farmers and activists protesting in Congress Wednesday night. (Photo by Janess Ann J. Ellao/ bulatlat.com)

Among those who defended the bill and voted for its passage were principal authors Rep. Edcel Lagman of Albay and Rep. Risa Hontiveros-Baraquel of the party-list group Akbayan. Rep. Jun Alcover of the partylist and anti-communist group ANAD praised the CARPER bill, calling its passage a “victory for farmers and democracy.”

The CARPER’s approval is sure to stoke the anti-Arroyo fire created by the approval Tuesday night of the resolution that would convene

Congress into a constituent assembly so it can amend the Constitution.

Already, farmers’ groups have lined up protest actions against CARPER, with one protest march scheduled today, Thursday, from the Department of Agrarian Reform office in Quezon City to Mendiola, where farmers calling for a genuine agrarian-reform program had been shot and killed.

Arroyo Lands

“If CARP is extended, would it distribute the lands of the Arroyos to farmers?” Anakpawis Rep. Rafael Mariano asked his colleagues shortly before the bill was approved through nominal voting

before midnight Wednesday. Some members of the Arroyo clan had been resisting the implementation of CARP for years, as do many of the country's landowners.

CARP, Mariano added, "was used only to reconcentrate the land of a few landed families," referring to loopholes in the original law that allow landowners to circumvent the program, for instance by turning their farmlands into non-agricultural property.

Kabataan Rep. Raymond Palatino said CARP "failed our farmers." He said — by way of explaining his "no" vote — that he could find no "just and righteous reason to extend a bogus land program."

Bayan Muna Teddy Casiño called CARP "heartless and soul-less." He pointed out that even Lagman, the principal author of CARPER, had admitted that the proposed new law "will not correct the congenital defects" of CARP. "By extending the life of a zombie agrarian-reform program, we are repeating the sin of the 8th congress," Casiño said.

Failed Program

CARP, passed in 1988 as part of President Corazon Aquino's so-called social-justice program, has largely been a failure. The extensions it has been given, including the one under CARPER, only underscores this.

According to a study by the economic think-tank Ibon Foundation, full land ownership in the Philippines has actually been declining since 1972, when the dictator Ferdinand Marcos passed Presidential Decree No. 27 that created the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR). Fully owned farms during that period accounted for 63 percent of total farm area, but this decreased to around 50 percent in 2002.

"Although there was a decrease in the share of completely tenanted and leased lands, this did not translate into full ownership but only part ownership," Ibon Foundation's research head, Sonny Africa, wrote in 2006. This implies, he said, "a continuation of tenancy and lease arrangements."

In fact, Africa pointed out, the Annual Poverty Indicators Survey (APIS) of 2002 reported that "only 11 percent of all families owning land other than their residence had obtained land through CARP."

Africa explained that CARP's failure is rooted in its pro-landlord orientation. "CARP is not about free land distribution to the tiller, which is the core of a genuine land reform program. Instead, CARP seeks to provide landlord compensation and require peasant beneficiaries to pay for land that they have been tilling for generations. Land reform under CARP is essentially a land transaction between landlords and peasants with the government acting as the middleman."



Peasants, farmers and activists protesting in Congress Wednesday night. (Photo by Janess Ann J. Ellao / bulatlat.com).

CARP, Africa said, “cannot address peasant poverty and landlessness because it was never meant to.”

In a statement released today, Ibon said CARPER “strengthens the pro-landlord provisions of the failed CARP.” For one, it said, the bill “promotes the creation of more agrarian-reform communities (ARCs), further increasing the insecurity of land tenure in the countryside. The House version, in fact, seems to target the fine-tuning of the bankrupt ARC program to continue restructuring local agriculture in order to suit the needs of big land owners and agro-corporations.”



Far from developing farming communities, as the name implies, ARCs have actually been used by landowners and big business to circumvent CARP. Among the ventures these communities go into are contract-growing schemes that favor companies and essentially turn the peasants into farm workers, not farm owners.

CARPER, as well as the agrarian-reform extension bill in the Senate, “reinforces the pro-landlord orientation of the original CARP, which was why it failed to make a dent in peasant landlessness in the first place,” Ibon Foundation said.

Additional Loopholes

Outside Congress hours before the voting, peasants and farmers have congregated to protest the impending passage of CARPER.

“CARPER creates additional loopholes to the already punctured CARP,” said Imelda Lacandazo, spokesperson of Kasama-TK, a peasant group from Southern Tagalog. “Twenty years of CARP is enough to conclude that it has and will never benefit our poor farmers.” CARPER is even worse than CARP, she said, especially after amendments were introduced that would further “reconcentrate lands in the hands of big landlords and big business.”

The progressive bloc in Congress led by partylist legislators from Bayan Muna, Anakpawis, Gabriela and Kabataan tried to introduce amendments to CARPER but were prevented every step of the way.

Among the rejected amendments was the one scrapping the stock-distribution option in the original law, which has been blamed partly for CARP’s failure. This option allows landowners to give shares of stocks of a farm venture to farmers, instead of actually subdividing and distributing the land, which should be the intent of a genuine agrarian reform program.

Despite the rain on Wednesday, hundreds of farmers and activists lit their torches at the south gate of the Congress, with some banging on the doors of the gate. A firetruck was brought by House security to be used in case a dispersal was needed.

“We are not here to create trouble,” said Danilo Ramos, secretary-general of the Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas (KMP, or Peasant Movement of the Philippines). “We are here to express our sentiments about this law.” Ramos and his groups tried to enter the gallery to watch the plenary session but were prevented by House security, which even barred employees from entering the hall at some point during the day.

Lacandazo of Kasama-TK decried the prioritization of CARPER over the Genuine Agrarian Reform Bill (GARB). Authored by the late Anakpawis Rep. Crispin Beltran, GARB or House Bill 3059 seeks to distribute land to landless farmers for free. Filed in November 2007, GARB is still pending with the House committee on agrarian reform.

“A genuine land reform law is impossible to attain in a Congress dominated by landlords, greedy politicians and their cohorts,” Lacandazo said. “The true interest of the House leadership is clear – it is to perpetuate the Arroyo ruling clique in power, and not to serve the poor farmers, which make up the majority of this country.”

Rep. Dato Arroyo from Camarines Sur, the president’s son, defended his “yes” vote by saying that “what we need is an extension of CARP that may be seen faulty or flawed by many of our colleagues, but that extension is better than having nothing at all.”



Photo by Janess Ann J. Ellao / bulatlat.com)

The House leadership conducted the nominal voting in an unusual way – it called on each legislator using the reverse alphabet, seemingly so that the Arroyos in Congress, all four of them, would not be among the first to vote “yes” one after the other.

And for some reason, many of those who voted for CARPER could not say their votes out loud and were using signs to communicate their “yes” votes. (Bulatlat.com)