

"I AM wanted in my country," admits CHARLES AVILA, who spent 15 years actively organising peasant movements and cooperatives in the Philippines. He was president of the Democratic Socialist Party before martial law was introduced by Ferdinand Marcos.

He also served as vice-president of the Federation of Free Farmers. "I was avid in proposing a Henry George solution. We were proposing a land tax." The Federation, which was eventually suppressed by Marcos, received research assistance from the Boston-based Lincoln Institute.

Avila escaped into exile, and now spends most of his time in North America, where he writes for Philippine News, a San Francisco-based weekly newspaper, and the London-based South, a Third World orientated magazine. He makes occasional clandestine journeys back to his country. "I sometimes fear for my life," he says. "There is a lot of evidence of persecution. But what can we do, it's part of the job."

He admits that he has helped to organise Filipino solidarity groups, "and doing errands for opposition political parties."



● Charles Avila

● The struggle for political power in the Philippines reached its turning point on February 7, when Ferdinand Marcos staged a coup by tricks election which he claimed to win, but which left a lot of questions unanswered.

● Guerrilla warfare has disrupted the economy, and opposition parties have raised questions about the future of the two American bases there. The assassination of Benigno Aquino as he stepped onto the tarmac

at Manila airport focused the deep-seated anger of millions of peasants who, through landlessness, were forced to migrate to the cities.

● Aquino's widow, Corazon, decided to challenge Marcos for the presidency. As soon as she formally announced her intention, she received a court order that threatened to seize the family's plantation on the grounds that the estate had "failed to submit to land reforms."

● Mrs. Aquino claims that, because

sugar is grown exempt from laws which require redistribution she claims a part of a plot of the millions of for her. Iron served to his important is population: land.

# Marcos: the way to clean up 20 years of despotic blundering

By FRED HARRISON

OFFICIALLY, there are 12,500 guerrillas fighting in the Philippines. But according to David Durenberger, chairman of the U.S. Senate's Intelligence Committee, there are more than 30,000 armed fighters who want to overthrow Marcos from his palace in Manila.

These men are labelled as communists, and their ideological slogans certainly seem to classify them on the extreme left of the political spectrum. In fact, however - as is the case throughout the Third World where hungry, property-less people are transformed into outcasts by society - they are merely demanding a fair share of the wealth of their community. Marxist concepts have become the simplest instruments for publicising their grievances and mobilising people and munitions behind their cause.

Guerrilla movements are violent expressions of the failure of society to incorporate all of its citizens into a system that allows for the peaceful resolution of primary needs - the need of every man to feed his family and provide a decent home and education for his children. At heart, the peasants who resort to warfare to recapture the right to work without fear of repression are deeply conservative in their attitudes. Provide them with enough land on which to work, and they become right-wing in their ideological preferences!

Ferdinand Marcos recognised this fact, and - in fairness to him - he attempted to do something about the maldistribution of land when he came

to power two decades ago. His solution was bound to fail, however. For his land reform took the form of redistributing land from some of the big estates, to those who wished to till the soil. There are two classic disadvantages with this approach.

First, the enforced dismantling of working estates leads to a reduction in productivity. This does not happen in cases where the estates are composed of vast tracts of vacant land, of course, as with the *latifundia* of South America. Second, no matter how hard the authorities work to redistribute land, there is never enough to go round: the population usually grows at a faster rate than the supply of new land. The perfect example of this is Mexico, where the revolutionary government is dedicated to allocating virgin and under-used land to the tenant tillers: even so, poverty and rural discontent are widespread, because there is just not enough land for everyone who needs it.

The solution to this problem is the combination of ancient Christian beliefs with classical economic theory, according to one Filipino rebel, Charles Avila. Avila, a lay Catholic priest, is difficult to trace - because he is on the Manila government's hit list of troublemakers. So I had to follow a trail of telephone numbers that began in San Francisco, through Canada, to New York, where I was

eventually able to interview him.

Avila's book on property rights (*Ownership: Early Christian Teaching*, published by Orbis Books in 1983) effectively reveals that the priests who provided the philosophical foundations of the Christian church were powerful opponents of private property rights in land - rights which were used to exclude people from the means to make a decent living for themselves and their families.

Twenty years ago, as he worked to improve the rights of tenant farmers in the Philippines, Avila came across the modern solution to the problem that originated in classical civilisation. He describes his findings in these terms:

"The injustice of individual ownership of land seems to have been recognised quite instinctively by the earliest human beings, both at the food-gathering stage, and when they first graduated to the production of their means of subsistence. The appropriation by some individuals of the land on which and from which all must live was seen as a condemnation of the producers of wealth to deprivation, while non-producing owners would be pampered in luxury at their expense.

"The producers would be denied the right to either a part or the whole of their own produce. Some persons would be able to appropriate the produce of other persons' labor as the price of permission to work the land - which no one had made but was simply 'there', a free gift of nature. In the end, it was feared, ownership of the land would give the landlords ownership of the labor power on the land. And of course, ownership of that on which and from which all people must live would be little different from owning the people themselves."

Having analysed the source of inequality in society, Avila needed a solution that fitted the needs of the 20th century. This, he stumbled across in the writings of a 19th century American social reformer and economist, Henry George, who had drawn the conclusion that private property in land led directly to the enslavement of people - enslavement, that is, through the appropriation of all the income that was surplus to the basic need to physically reproduce the population. "Patristic thought," wrote Avila, "the thought of the fathers of the Church, the early Christian philosophers, concurs."

I ASKED Avila if he really thought that the patristic strictures against ancient injustices - based on the unequal distribution of land - were still relevant today. He replied:

"The basic criticism of the early Christian philosophers of society in the late Roman Empire would be substantially true today, because in many Third World countries you will find literally the same conditions prevailing, with superficial differences like the advance in technology. But the ownership arrangements that prevailed then, still prevail now; more significantly, the justification for society as it was then is still prevalent now. So the criticism should be equally relevant.

"The very concept of ownership of property was understood in an absolutist and exclusivist sense, and not in the context of being a means to the ends of society, of community and self-reliance. It was practically an end in itself, and with some modifications that substantial concept exists today in law and fact."

Henry George's solution was a fiscal one. People should be free to

own as much land as they provided they paid the rental value of the community. The result would be estates which were run efficiently - a redistribution of hoarders who, in land merely to speculate. How relevant to modern conditions

"More relevant Avila, "because the land ownership has past 100 years in land as a free gift use... not to trade commodity."

Avila believes critique has some to make to contemporary reform. "Too many the statist solution communitarian solution

Catholic priest Latin America, had advocating land reform. The Pope, however, opposition to theology". The Vatican be traced back to according to Avila

"In how many church a big land many," says Avila

Does this affect attitudes? "It does is that where your your heart is also