

POLITICS AND POLARIZATION THE TIANANMEN CRISIS AND THE R.P. CHINESE COMMUNITY

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THE BELIEF that the local Chinese community is a cohesive, homogenous group is nothing more than a myth. There is no better proof of this than the reactions of the community to the Tiananmen Square events.

The pro-democracy student movement in Beijing hogged the headlines of Philippine dailies from April to June last year. Today, while news about China is relegated to the inside pages, discussions and debates on the issue go on heatedly in the local Chinese community.

The varied reactions to the Beijing crisis can roughly be classified first, on the basis of the age or generation of those who expressed them; second, according to the conflicting attitudes towards China — whether pro-Taiwan, pro-China or neutral; and third, according to their sentiments towards the crisis: whether pro-students or pro-Chinese government. No other event in recent memory has served to polarize the entire local Chinese community more than the Beijing crisis last June.

Take for instance the family of the owner of a big department store chain. The wife lamented about what happened to the students. She said that no matter what one's ideology or political inclination is, the fact that a peaceful student movement was quashed so brutally cannot be justified in any way.

But the husband quipped: "The students deserved their fate. They had been repeatedly warned. Why didn't they heed their elders and go back to their classrooms? They were wasting their time and money demonstrating in the streets instead of studying their lessons."

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And the younger daughter, when asked what her feelings were, answered: "I don't understand why they are making so much fuss about China. Beijing is so far away; what happens there does not affect us anymore. If it were the Filipino student movement during the Marcos days, then I might be personally affected since some of them may be my classmates."

These reactions show first of all the generational differences. The old generation who came from and have had first-hand experiences of China naturally have strong emotional reactions to what is happening there. They identify with China and they are pained by the turmoil in their homeland. There are also younger ones who share the same feelings — mostly those who were born in China and had their Chinese education either in China or in Hong Kong. Among the most vehement protests against the Chinese government that appeared in the local Chinese dailies were those expressed by middle-aged alumni of schools in China or Hong Kong.

The young generation of locally born Chinese, while being concerned about the issues, no longer have the deep emotional response that their elders have. They identify with and think of the Philippines as their home. A young Chinese, when asked how he would feel if Deng Xiaoping were to die now, asked: "Who's he?" He can not even name any of China's current leaders.

The older generation lament over this attitude and accuse the younger ones of forgetting their roots; failing to understand that the roots they have established are in fact here in the Philippines, not in China.

The second difference in reactions is based on political leanings — the pro-China, pro-Taiwan, and the centrists or neutral group. Among these three groups, the pro-China group would have the most varied reactions.

Those who sided with the students are mostly more intellectually inclined and have attained higher levels of education. They feel the need for reforms in China and understand that historically, it was often the students and the intellectuals who spearheaded these reforms in China.

Those who supported the government's stand are again further divided into three groups. One group would be the relatively less-educated elderly Chinese who have blind devotion to China or who cling

tenaciously to the traditional Chinese values (foremost of which is respect for the absolute authority of the leaders), and who readily blame the Americans for China's woes. They are not politically mature and do not understand the students' clamor for reform. The only thing they see is that China has indeed made great strides in the past several decades.

The other group would be the pragmatic businessmen who have business ties with China. Some of them take the view that the government is justified in using force because it is a situation of "either you win or I win", and there was no way that the Chinese government could have allowed the students to win.

Others were supportive of the students at first or were at least non-committal; but now that the official line of the Chinese government has come out, they have changed their tunes or simply kept quiet for fear that their business interests may be adversely affected.

Still others will be those with the "ostrich syndrome". They bury their heads under the sand and believe what the government says because reality is unacceptable. Denial is another traditional Chinese way of making reality acceptable.

The pro-Taiwan group, on the other hand, sided with the students mainly. While some of them are genuinely concerned and sympathetic to the students' cause, others are simply capitalizing on the issue to take up the Kuomintang's anti-communist cudgels. A rally held at the Quirino grandstand supposedly to express sympathy for the students who died in the Tiananmen massacre turned out to be an anti-communist bash.

The Federation of Filipino-Chinese Chambers of Commerce which had erstwhile claimed to be apolitical and to be concerned only with business matters, this time came out with a full-page advertisement in both Chinese and English language dailies — blatantly calling for the termination of diplomatic contacts with the People's Republic of China.

These differences gave rise to situations where husband and wife, members of the community, friends and classmates become polarized — highlighting the pluralistic make-up of the Chinese community.

Time passes. Life goes on. Now that a semblance of sanity has seemingly come back to Chinese soil, it would be better if the local

Chinese were to stop arguing over China politics and come back to local Philippine realities.

Some Chinese who still harbor strong pro-China sentiments have realized even more that the Philippines is the only home that they have and there is no more going back, particularly now that political unrest once again besets their former motherland.

This is an unexpected consequence of China's present crisis which should lead to positive results in the Philippines, aside from the much bruited about, anticipated re-channelling of Taiwanese investments from China to the Philippines. When all sectors in the Chinese community accept the reality that this is the only home that they have, then we can expect that one day, they would all come to identify Philippine interests as their paramount concern.