

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

The Anti-Marcos Struggle, by Thompson

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Philippine Studies vol. 44, no. 4 (1996): 552–555

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Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

Book Reviews and Notes



The Anti-Marcos Struggle. By Mark R. Thompson. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995. xiii, 258 pages.

Rich and thick in detail drawn from the post-Marcos literature on the Philippines and from an impressive array of 150 informants, this book makes a major contribution to social science studies on authoritarianism and re-democratization in many countries today. It describes the efforts of the elite opposition and middle forces in Philippine society to put an end to Marcos' dictatorship in the February 1986 "People Power" upheaval, which happened on EDSA (Epifanio de los Santos Avenue), Metro Manila's major highway. The author's main thrust is to analyze why the four-day uprising by hundreds of thousands of Filipinos came about peacefully rather than through "violence and revolution," which was the case in many similar transitions or struggles of power in other countries. It also details the "democratic transition" in the Philippines after the fall of Marcos, focusing on the Aquino successor government.

The author uses a theoretical framework revolving around "sultanism," which he argues is a more appropriate characterization of Marcos' dictatorial rule than the "constitutional authoritarian" or "bureaucratic authoritarian" paradigms used earlier by other scholars. This "sultanism" concept, in turn, derives from Juan Linz's Weberian definition of the term as "personal rulership . . . with loyalty to the ruler based not on tradition, or on his embodying an ideology, or on a unique personal mission, or on charismatic qualities, but on a mixture of fear and rewards to his collaborators" (p. 4). In this formulation, the ruler exercises power without restraint, "unencumbered by rules or by any commitment to an ideology or value system." Examples of "sultanistic systems" in recent history include Batista's Cuba, Trujillo's Dominican Republic, the Shah's Iran, Somoza's Nicaragua, Duvalier's Haiti, Ceaucescu's Romania, and Seko's Zaire.

In all these regimes, the "sultanistic dictators" were unwilling to negotiate political transitions peacefully and thus, armed revolt appeared as the "only way to remove the standpat regime." The difference with the Marcos' regime was that he, already losing touch with reality and feeling intense pressure from the U.S. not to use force and violence, had no alternative but

to accept the American offer of an asylum if he wanted to get out of the impending confrontation alive. "People power" against Marcos came close, but never escalated, to an armed revolt.

The book's central character is obviously Marcos, who is described as a sort of "Filipino Caesar," whose "sultanistic rule" destroyed long-standing political traditions in the Philippines and blurred the distinction between state and society. The author could have made a more compelling argument for Marcos' "sultanistic" nature with a deeper assessment of Marcos' psyche, which was rooted in the violence and corruption of Ilocano warlord politics. Certainly he did not become a "sultan" overnight. His conviction at age 19 for the murder of his father's political opponent, Julio Nalundasan, showed his ability and, his willingness to use intimidation and violence early on. He internalized the "rules" of survival in the political jungle of the Ilocos. Years later, his top adviser in Malacañang, Rafael Salas, would say that Marcos brought to the presidency the ethic of Ilocano political violence. And because he needed the money and resources to maintain his Ilocos fiefdom, he vigorously engaged in the lucrative postwar blackmarket trade, tobacco ventures, land-grabbing schemes, and other dubious activities spawned by a now-changing politics which provided opportunities for corruption and greed. It was this consummate ability at "wheeling-and-dealing" which enabled him to remain Ilocos' "political kingpin" for a long time.

Then, he reinforced his political stock by clever manipulations, such as marrying into a prominent Visayan clan and turning his wife into his "secret weapon" in subsequent campaigns for the senate and presidency. He also manifested the kind of ruthlessness that was not, or rarely seen, in previous presidents of the country. The claim of Primitivo Mijares in his book, *The Conjugal Dictatorship of Ferdinand and Imelda*, that Marcos had something to do with the assassinations of some of his opponents or people who betrayed him is not without basis in fact. The ultimate political murder of Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino Jr. remains unsolved, but it would strain credulity to assume that Marcos did not have anything to do with it. Thus, Linz's "sultanism" may be too benign to describe or explain Marcos' violent political career.

Similarly, the author did not go deep enough into Corazon Aquino's character and background in his discussion of the "democratic transition." Essentially Aquino—while she had the popularity, courage, steadfastness, compassion and all these human qualities during that difficult transition period—did not have a political mind-set in terms of reform and justice for the many victims of the Marcos regime. She only had a "minimum program" of government.

She restored or re-created "democratic space," but this meant things like a Constitution, a Congress, elections and the usual forms of a not-so-meaningful democracy. A crucial question the author could have pursued is, how much did Cory Aquino realize that she had a sense of destiny? A "Cory Magic" phenomenon was palpable in the air. The context of the transition

was still suffused with the euphoria of "people power." If she had realized this, it would have been very clear that what the nation needed immediately was a vision for social justice and economic redistributive reform, not just the restoration of political forms.

As it turned out, she did not even press for a vigorous prosecution of her husband's killers for fear of being labeled "vindictive." Instead, she chose to take the "moral high ground" and approached her daunting job more as a "healer" of the country's Marcos-inflicted wounds. She did not even want to head a political party on which the post-EDSA ruling coalition could anchor itself. She was not pursuing hardball politics. Just as Marcos brought an ethic of violence to the presidency, Aquino, according to her former Press Secretary Teodoro Benigno, brought "the capability and desire for reconciliation" to the position. Benigno speculates that Aquino's being "a middle child and a girl at the same time" may have conditioned her personality. She always spoke, according to Benigno, of being the "middle child," which always put her in a position to reconcile the contending halves above and below her among her siblings. She belonged to a closely-knit Chinese-Filipino family, "which kept pretty much to themselves." As a result, she did not know very many people and practically all the Cabinet leaders she appointed were associates of her husband Ninoy. Eventually, she began to feel that some people were "sneering at her intellectually." She grew with the job, but not fast enough. Her inadequacies began to show as problems and the need for compromises began to hound her fledgling presidency.

Another insight of a personal or cultural dimension was brought up by the late Filipino intellectual Gaston Ortigas to explain some of the confusion in the transition government. This was Aquino's discomfort with argumentation and debate and her preference for having people agreeing with each other. Thus, Ortigas concludes, some major policy issues were settled not by confrontation among different interests, but by individual lobby. He mentions a particular executive order that a formal committee was working on very hard, but every evening there was a "smaller informal group" that was changing it. Moreover, the whole idea of "Cory Magic" was overused by the public-relations units of her administration, and she would even own up to many problems that were not hers or her own doing, like the garbage on the streets of Manila! Thus, she became some sort of a one-person committee on many problems.

It is insights like these about the politics of culture and personality in the Philippines which could have enriched the author's analysis of the Marcos era and the "democratic transition." For some reason, Western analysts of the Third World gloss over salient cultural or personal factors in politics, probably because these often do not fit into the theoretical constructs or conceptual notions of politics they are using.

Another omission in the book is an adequate treatment of the role of the Philippine Left in the anti-Marcos struggle. Though the Left-wing alliances,

including the Communist Party of the Philippines, New People's Army, National Democratic Front, BAYAN and their followers, were either absent from or did not support the "EDSA revolution," they laid the groundwork for the eventual collapse of Marcos with their committed organizing on the countryside and vigorous undermining of the regime. These clandestine activities at the grassroots levels for nearly 20 years helped build the blocks for "people power" that would make EDSA possible in 1986. However, one big miscalculation of the communist Left was opting out when the supreme moment for Marcos' downfall became imminent. It would have been instructive for the author to have interviewed the Party leadership about missing the boat, and analyzed this debacle on their part.

Still another omission was the role of organized groups other than the Movement for Free Philippines (MFP) in the U.S. anti-Marcos struggle. While MFP was more visible because it had the big names like that of former Senator Raul Manglapus, several major groups also mobilized many of grassroots activities like organizing demonstrations in key cities, fund-raising to support the movement in the Philippines, lobbying the U.S. Congress to cut military aid and technical assistance to Marcos, publishing such newsletters as *Katipunan*, *Pahayag*, *FFP Bulletin*, and *Philippine Liberation Courier*, and duplicating as well as distributing underground literature smuggled by "couriers" from the Philippines. These groups were the *Katipunan ng Demokratikong Pilipino* (KDP or Union of Democratic Filipinos), Friends of the Filipino People, National Committee for the Restoration of Civil Liberties, International Association of Filipino Patriots, and various church and community groups. Without this assortment of groups and individuals, which had differing ideologies but recognized an overriding common goal in ousting Marcos, the anti-martial law movement in the U.S. would not have succeeded as much as it did, especially as the 1980s began.

Finally, though it is a minor point, there are various misspellings of Filipino names which could be corrected in later editions. *Angarra* should be *Angara*, *Ambrosia* Padilla should be *Ambrosio*, *Priscilla* Psinakis should be *Presy*, *Jane* Keithley should be *June*, *Tommy Monotoc* should be *Manotoc*, *Saturino* Domingo should be *Saturnino*, *Alexander Escalamado* should be *Alex* (which is short for Alejandro) *Esclamado*, and *Ramon Cruz, Jr.* should be *Roman*. Also, the late Senator Lorenzo M. Tañada was a Jr. and *Ramon Palaez* is probably *Pelaez*.

In spite of these shortcomings, however, the author has written a worthwhile addition to the current literature on Philippine politics and should be commended for the amount of research he undertook to give us a better understanding of a momentous event in Philippine contemporary history.

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