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## Philippine Politics and Governance

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## Review Essay

### Philippine Politics and Governance

Noel M. Morada and Teresa S. Encarnacion Tadem. (eds.). *Philippine Politics and Governance: An Introduction*, 588 pages and Teresa S. Encarnacion Tadem and Noel M. Morada. (eds.). *Philippine Politics and Governance: Challenges to Democratization and Development*, 303 pages, both published in Quezon City, Philippines by the Department of Political Science, University of the Philippines, 2006.

These companion volumes arose from the need for a textbook on Philippine politics for political science students at the University of the Philippines (UP). But the efforts of the UP faculty (present and former) as well as of a few contributors outside the university are of general interest as well. These two books are the best reference currently available about politics in the Philippines. Well-researched and clearly written, they offer a “state of the art” analysis of the country’s politics and represent the most thorough overview since David Wurfel’s *Filipino Politics* published nearly two decades ago. Their thematic organization differs from the historical focus of Patricio Abinales and Donna Amoroso’s recent *State and Society in the Philippines*.

The introduction to volume one by Malaya C. Ronas considers two paradigms of economic development (authoritarian and democratic), but points out that despite largely following the latter route, the Philippine experience has been neither participative nor equitable. A “weak state” and elite-dominated democratization has slowed both economic progress and political participation. Unfortunately, this welcome comparative perspective is rarely taken up by the other authors, a point to which I will return.

Raymund Jose G. Quilop’s examination of nation-state formation in chapter one distinguishes between the “nation” and the state, showing the ideological character of their being lumped together as a common phenomenon and pointing to the difficulties involved in both nation and state building in the Philippines. He covers ground familiar to most scholars of Philippine politics, but offers it in the form of a usefully compact summary. He might have gone further, however, pointing out for example, that the Philippine “case” appears very contradictory as it experienced the first anti-

colonial, “nationalist” revolution in Asia yet it is often considered to have one of the weakest national identities.

Felipe B. Miranda’s chapter “public opinion and democratic governance” draws on his own innovative contribution in this area to show how social science surveys have flourished in the post-Marcos era. For me, the most interesting part of his discussion concerned the impact of opinion research on politicians and their policies. He points out that Gloria Macapagal Arroyo’s record lows in public opinion in 2005 were used by the opposition in order to legitimate their efforts to bring down her government. Here, it would have been useful to look at the Asian Barometer evidence from 2005 that Filipinos report the lowest confidence (38%) in democracy compared to six other Asian democracies. It also raises the question of the legitimacy of constitutional procedures when oppositionists use public opinion surveys to justify putschist tactics.

The next three chapters by Jorge V. Tigno provide a thorough historical overview of Philippines elections and party politics from the prewar era through the martial law period, with Renato S. Velasco’s chapter covering the post-martial law era. They deal with one of the most agonizing aspects of Filipino politics — the weakness of political parties. The regionalistic and personalistic nature of Philippine parties has persisted despite the anti-colonial nationalism of the American period, the “non-traditional” leaders of the post-war era (Ramon Magsaysay, Diosdado Macapagal, and Ferdinand Marcos), the “constitutional authoritarianism” of the martial years, or even the emergence of civil society to oppose the Marcos dictatorship. Without comparisons, the persistence of clientelism and parochialism in Philippine parties is difficult to explain. A look towards Indonesia, where despite widespread patronage parties are stronger because of their ethno-religious bases or — to consider another case — towards South Korea, where the rise of a large middle class seems to explain the relative strength of the party system would have been helpful in this context.

The executive/Philippine presidency is analyzed in three chapters by Ma. Lourdes G. Genato Rebullida. Her decision to concentrate on the historical context and personalities of Philippine presidents from Aguinaldo and Quezon to Marcos and Aquino is justified by the fact that the formal

institutional context of the executive has proved less important in the Philippines than the leadership abilities of particular presidents. Marcos used his executive power to overturn the democratic system entirely; Aquino used hers primarily to redemocratize the country's politics. But this useful summary of Philippine executives plays down one striking fact about Philippine presidents — their gender. Is it mere coincidence that two of the four post-Marcos presidents have been female, or is it perhaps related to the prevalence of “people power” uprisings that bring (supposedly less self interested, “non-traditional”) female leaders to the top?

Chapters 11-13 provide a similar overview of the legislative branch of government. Chapter ten focuses on the bureaucracy, chapter 14 on the judiciary and chapter 15 on the military. The legislative chapters (all by Olivia C. Caoili) provide a detailed historical view of Philippine legislatures primarily from a socioeconomic perspective. I found the chapter on Philippine bureaucracy by Ma. Lourdes G. Genato Rebuillida and Cecilia Serrano weaker because it was more formalist and less sociological. Rather than focusing on what bureaucracies are supposed to do, at least from a Western perspective, it would have been interesting to explore the informal nature of the workings of Philippine bureaucracy and why it is so prone to corruption. A helpful historical discussion of bureaucracy does discuss these “deficiencies” but does not explore them systematically enough. Here, the comparative perspective offered by David Kang's comparison between the Philippines and South Korea might have proved useful. Maria Ela L. Atienza and Ferdinand C. Baylon's chapter on the judiciary shows how it has played an ambiguous role in the post-Marcos period. While the Supreme Court has been restored to its (pre-martial law) role as an anchor of democracy, lower courts have been plagued by issues of inefficiency, corruption, and access. Justice in the Philippines remains largely the domain of the wealthy. Carolina G. Hernandez has long been recognized as the leading authority on the role of the military in Philippine politics. I particularly liked the way she addressed the issue of the increasing politicization of the military in various parts of the chapter. She provides concrete suggestions on how this threat of military seizure of power — as well as its support for unconstitutional “succession” to the presidency in the “people power” movements — can be avoided in the future.

Volume one concludes with chapters on local governments and devolution (by Maria Ela L. Atienza), on autonomous regions in the Cordillera (by Athena Lydia Casambre) and in Muslim Mindanao (by Miriam Coronel Ferrer), and on foreign policy (by Malaya C. Ronas through the martial law era and by Natalia Maria Lourdes M. Morales and Noel M. Morada in the post-Marcos and post-9/11 periods). Decentralization and autonomy are two striking policy innovations since Marcos and are arguably among the greatest accomplishments of the era. Of course, decentralization has also had its drawbacks (particularly in a country noted for its local “bossism”), but its innovative aspects are also, rightly in my opinion, stressed by Atienza. A quick glance to southern Thailand suggests that the Philippines has come “a long way” in resolving the conflict with its Muslim minority in the South (though at the same time it has failed to establish an autonomous region in the Cordillera). Ferrer stresses how problems of patronage and the dominance of political clans plague regional autonomy in Mindano, but despite (or perhaps because of?) these limitations it seems to have contributed to the reduction of conflict in the region.

In the Philippines, relations with a former colonial power, the United States (U.S.), have long dominated its foreign policy. While Ronas and Morales point to a gradual evolution away from tight links with the U.S. in their largely historical chapters, Morada provides a very helpful summary of key recent issues after 9/11. U.S. military involvement in the fight against the Abu Sayyaf group in the name of combating international terrorism or the withdrawal of the Philippine humanitarian contingent from Iraq underline just how controversial this relationship with the foreign colonial power continues to be.

Volume two places a strong emphasis on social movements, social classes, gender, and cultural issues, thus balancing out the “state centered” character of the first volume. Unfortunately, the book begins with the same introduction used in volume one, even if the chapter summaries are very useful.

Teresa S. Encarnacion Tadem’s three chapters on Philippine social movements (before, during, and after martial law, the last co-authored with Jorge V. Tigno) provide a comprehensive historical overview of the Philippine

left. Using framework analysis, she looks at the millenarian movements of the Spanish period as well as the socialist communist movements that began during American colonialism and accelerated after independence — particularly after the declaration of martial law. With the peaceful overthrow of the Marcos regime by the “people power” movement, the communist armed-struggle paradigm lost its hegemonic status within the social movement sector. A “new politics” and new tactics (particular nonviolent ones pursued by NGOs) gradually replaced, though they did not wholly supplant, the old “class politics” of violent guerrilla struggle against the state. It would have been helpful if this highly informative discussion of the rise and fragmentation of the left were more closely related to the character of democratic development of the Philippines discussed in the introduction.

The next three chapters (about the Catholic church, Islamic nationalism, and indigenous peoples) analyze the roles of other key civil societal actors. Ma. Lourdes G. Genato Rebullida’s chapter on the majority religion in the Philippines focuses on the political role of the Catholic church in a democratic context. A helpful historical section points out that the Church maintained its central role in Filipino society despite nationalist antagonism to the Spanish Catholicism, and in particular to the Friars. It is then shown how Catholic church-linked actors (as well as those of other Christian denominations) have been involved in advocacy of democracy and development since then, particularly in alliance with other civil society groups against the Marcos dictatorship and afterwards. I found this overview somewhat uncritical at points, however. The church’s role in blocking population control measures and its often regressive stance on gender issues were two issues in particular that found no critical discussion, raising the question whether the Church has been a major obstacle in the country’s development.

Julkipli M. Wadi’s chapter on Islamic nationalism focuses on the question of various Muslim identities in the Philippines as well as the way Muslim (Moro) nationalism casts doubts on traditional assumptions of Christian-dominated Philippine national identity. It is a helpful addition to Quilop’s chapter in volume one, though more concrete references to current conflicts among competing Muslim groups would have strengthened it. Indigenous peoples and the “new social movements” organized to represent them are Athena Lydia Casambre’s theme in chapter six. Despite some gains by this

marginalized sector, it remains confronted by a state bureaucracy (in particular the National Commission for Indigenous Peoples) that has a poor record of policy implementation. Its bureaucratic procedures often clash with customary law while policies have had unintended negative consequences. The Philippine peace process is Miriam Coronel Ferrer's subject in the next chapter. The varied (and often impressive) peace efforts the government and civil society have undertaken in recent times in the Philippines are reviewed in this informative chapter.

Perlita M. Frago takes a critical look at the role of media in Philippine politics (chapter 8). Arguing that the media is a powerful tool of corporate and state interests, she shows how it has nonetheless helped strengthen civil society. More than most chapters in the volume, this chapter deals with the paradox raised in the introduction — the limitations of democratic development. Despite being among the freest in Asia, the Philippine press has not been independent enough from vested interests that have often stood in the way of a coherent developmental strategy.

Temario C. Rivera's fine chapter guides us through the tricky waters of identifying a "middle class" generally and in the Philippines in particular, using both gradational and relational frameworks of class. Class development is put in historical perspective and brought up to date through the Estrada period. Rivera argues that although the political attitude of the middle classes is ambivalent and its behavior unpredictable due to its contradictory position in the country's class structure, a distinctive middle class form of politics can nonetheless be identified. Given their special technocratic skills, self-conscious sense as bearers of "modernity," and distinctive political opportunities, they were able to play a key role in two recent national popular uprisings in the Philippines that overthrew the Marcos regime and the Estrada government. My question in this regard is whether the role of the "bourgeoisie" has been underestimated by Rivera. In both "people powers", it is striking that Philippine presidents had lost the support of much of the country's big business community. Following Frago's suggestion in the discussion of corporate control of the media, one could point to the role of big business in mobilizing "in the name of civil society" (to use Lotta Hedman's felicitous phrase). Unlike in Indonesia where few corporate leaders dared to oppose Suharto, in the Philippines they supported



“middle class” protests in the name of “good governance” against presidents accused of corruption. This suggests that the distinctiveness of Philippine insurrectionary politics is less the mobilizability of the middle class than its close alliance with big business.

“Women and Politics” is the focus of the next chapter by Maria Ela L. Atienza and Ruth Lusterio Rico. The chapter begins by providing a useful overview about women’s status in the Philippines (put in its comparative statistical context with a number of tables) in which the country ends up in the middle of selected Asian countries on the UN’s “Gender-related Development Index” (though ahead of most on the “Gender-Empowerment Measure”). Women’s participation in politics is also analyzed statistically (congressional seats, cabinet representation, and the bureaucracy). Although increasing, it still remains relatively low. Here the role of two female presidents (Aquino and Arroyo) could have been given more attention. It would have been also interesting to learn more about how the voting behavior of women differs from men in the Philippines. Still, this chapter provides one of the best summaries of the role of women in politics in the Philippines currently available.

Ruth Lusterio Rico’s contribution to this volume focuses on the current environmental crisis in the Philippines, recent environmental policies, and social movements that aim to improve environmental protection. The next chapter, by Teresa S. Encarnacion Tadem, takes up the matter of cooperatives in the Philippines. She advocates cooperatives as a way out of rural poverty through the empowerment of impoverished farmers. But patronage politics poses a formidable obstacle to the promising, though thus far limited development of such cooperatives. It is well known that overseas workers have become a crucial part of Philippine economic development. Jorge V. Tigno’s chapter deals well with this crucial area.

My major criticism of these two volumes is less “endogenous” than it is “exogenous.” Although the introduction and a few of the chapters make reference to theories and country cases beyond the Philippines, a comparative perspective is generally lacking. The Philippines belongs to a small category of long surviving democracies in poor countries (martial law was less than a decade and a half — among developing countries perhaps only Colombia,



Costa Rica, and India can be said to have more significant democratic traditions). The emergence of a strong mestizo-dominated elite and its early anti-colonial revolution as well as its colonial and postwar democracy put the Philippines on a very different trajectory than its Southeast Asian neighbors. The impact of the country's "weak state" is also striking. This criticism notwithstanding, students of Philippine politics — in and far beyond UP — will find these volumes essential starting points for understanding key current issues. ❖

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