

## Book Review

# An Anarchy of Families State and Family in the Philippines

*Edited by Alfred W. McCoy*

*(Madison: University of Wisconsin,  
Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1993, x, 541pp.)*

This collection of essays brings together some of the best Filipino and Western scholars, each of whom contributes an essay on a single family or a closely inter-connected set of families. The chosen families all have a lineage which extends through several generations of powerful players in the Philippine political system. Each family study also helps to illustrate the validity of the central thesis of the volume: that "[I]nstead of treating the Philippine past solely as the interaction of state, private institutions, and popular movements, historians might well analyze its political history through the paradigm of elite families." (p.1).

Another factor in the selection of families to be studied, and one which makes this volume such a valuable contribution, is that each author has spent years researching and often living in the provincial homeland of the family. The authors' in-depth, exceptionally detailed knowledge of their subjects gives each essay a richness, a sense of the texture of Philippine society and politics that has been seldom matched.

For scholars interested in the Philippines, the names of the authors will be almost as well known as the elite families they analyze. Chapter contributors begin with Brian Fegan who writes about the de Guzmans of San Miguel, Bulacan, the one example of a family which has not risen beyond the level of the municipality. Other contributors and their subjects include: John Sidel (Justiniano Montano of Cavite); Michael Cullinane (the Durano family of Cebu); G. Carter Bentley (Mohamad Ali Dimaporo of Lanao); Jeremy Beckett (the Muslim political families of Maguindanaon Cotabato); Resil B. Mojares (the Osmenas of Cebu City); Ruby R. Paredes (the Pardo de Taveras of Manila); and Alfred W. McCoy (the Lopez family of Iloilo, Negros Occidental, and Manila).

Above and beyond the contribution of each essay as superb biography; collectively, the volume challenges the reader to think about the family as a specific unit of analysis occupying a particular level within Philippine society. This approach brings with it certain strengths and weaknesses.

The strengths are immediately obvious: Alfred McCoy, in his introductory essay and in the concluding essay on the Lopez family makes a convincing argument that in the Philippine setting economic and political strategies are developed and operationalized within families. This finding is amply supported by the other contributors. To the extent that some analysts and some disciplines have tended to undervalue the role of the family this book is a necessary corrective. Likewise, the detailed knowledge of the contributors allows them to trace these families over the decades. This provides an understanding of the evolution of strategies and tactics as generations progress through the life cycle and new family leaders emerge and respond to changes in their family's socio-political and economic environments. The most powerful of families have held office for large parts of the last century and the most successful have continued to flourish through three colonial regimes and five republics.

Just as the focus on the family as a unit of analysis is helpful, so, too, is the focus on the level of analysis---the municipal and provincial level where families compete to capture local power bases and use these bases to marshal votes as bargaining chips with national level elites. The volume provides explicit, often colorful, and always entertaining depictions of the techniques used by these families as they rose to power and captured local power bases. We learn what strategies were successful in surviving crises and accumulating the resources necessary to compete at the national level. We also learn what mistakes might lead to a dissipation of local power and a collapse of the political fortunes of a family. All of this makes fascinating reading for a political scientist.

It does not detract from the value of this book and its approach to say that its focus on the family as a unit of analysis and on the municipal/provincial level of analysis also introduces certain weaknesses. In exploring these issues it may be valuable to begin with a point made by Resil Mojares. It is his position that a discussion of the Osmena case, because the Osmenas have been prominent for a century now, and because they do not conform to the stereotypical case of the warlord, "should shed an interesting light on such concepts of elite dominance as neo-patrimonialism, clientilism, machine politics, and corporatism." (p. 313). However, he cautions that there are pitfalls in the path to a successful case study; "one of which is the tendency to focus attention on rulers, leaders, and big men; another is a concern for models and typologies based on selected features and variables of a state or system." (p. 313). Victims of the first pitfall

tend to underprivilege those who are not participants in the power game; victims of the second slight "the scope and variability of social practice." (p. 313).

The authors in this volume have largely avoided the first pitfall. The empirical detail of the case studies guarantees that we get a sense of the relations which bind and the contradictions which separate the political families and the average voters in their respective districts.

The second pitfall was a bit more difficult to avoid. The analytical framework which organizes this book and several of the individual chapters posits an inverse relationship: the Philippine state is weak and when it has been at its weakest, the political families have been able to maximize their autonomy from the center and their control of their local power bases. Alfred McCoy states this position quite clearly, "[T]he strength of leading Filipino political families, as noted in the introduction to this volume, springs from the emergence of the Philippine Republic as a weak postcolonial state." (p. 434). The relation is not just inverse, however, it is also symbiotic. Again to quote Alfred McCoy,

[A] contradictory pairing of the state's broad economic powers with the executive's role as a political patron has made rent seeking an imperative for major Filipino families. Through their reliance on rents, these families can exploit the state's financial resources and regulatory powers to create optimum conditions for the growth of their corporations. . . . On the other side of this symbiosis, successive Philippine presidents have used their discretionary authority over the state resources to punish enemies and reward allies. (p. 517).

In this symbiotic pairing, the rent-seeking families are actors and subjects of history, they are brought to life and enthused with values, tribulations and successes. In short they are privileged. The state, on the other hand, is slighted, it is weak, and reduced to the barest Weberian minimum, usually nothing more than a bureaucracy and a president. To return to the language of Resil Mojares, it is model which is based on "selected features and variables" and it is not problematized.

This failure to problematize the state begs two questions: what would a strong state look like in the Philippines and what segments of society are represented by the current "weak" state? Temario Rivera is quoted favorably for having made the point that "[T]he state, as it evolved out of the colonial context, remains a weak apparatus for economic development." (p. 11). This is the only point at which a purpose for the state is asserted; it is a weak apparatus for economic development. If we follow that clue, then a strong state would

presumably work to accomplish a number of tasks. These would, perhaps, include: the extraction of a higher level of taxation and the use of these revenues for social welfare spending, education, and health care; the opening of the economy to international investment and trade; the enforcement of a universal standard of justice for rich and poor alike; and the elimination of corruption and other forms of patrimonialism from the government. In short, I can only surmise, a strong state would be modeled after the Weberian ideal-typical, rational, bureaucratic state; the result of which would be a model of development very western in its orientation.

Yet this would be inimical to the interests of the elite political families that are the subjects of this volume. If a state avoids doing the things which are inimical to the elite, is it necessarily weak? Conversely, it does not require a crude, instrumentalist notion of the state to presume that the elite political families benefit nicely from the Philippine state as it is now constituted and as it has been constituted for most of the last century.

To carry the analysis one step further: would it not be possible to argue that the state in the Philippines has been weak if the goal is bureaucratic rationality and economic development, but that if the goal is the defense of elite privilege, if the goal is to protect the interests of the top ten percent or top one percent of Philippine families, then the state has, in fact, been quite strong?

The case studies in this volume are replete with examples of how the state has been manipulated by the elite to protect and advance their interests at the expense of the lower and middle classes which constitute the majority. The power of the state has been used to divide the lower classes, the power of the state has been used to propagate an ideology that elections pitting one faction of the elite against another are the essence of democracy, the power of the state has been used to crush lower class armed movements in the 1950s and the 1980s.

But these kinds of questions and qualifications are difficult to entertain when the state is labelled as weak without examining what it can and cannot accomplish; and it is difficult to determine the full range of social reality if the capitalism in the Philippines is reified and pigeon-holed by appending an adjective and calling it "booty capitalism." (footnote 8, p. 432). The evidence is clear that rent-seeking is rampant and that the state is seldom able to resist the demands of the elite families. But the unit of analysis should probably be not just the individual families, but also the families as class. As Ruby Paredes notes

[S]ince the rise of the export economy more than 150 years ago, there has always been a Filipino upper class whose position

is based on combined economic and political power. But the composition of this class, the actual families that comprise it, is constantly changing. (p. 417).

Expanding the scope of study to compare the experience of this Filipino upper class with the experience of the aristocratic or oligarchic ruling classes of the other countries of East and Southeast Asia may be instructive. The upper classes have been muscled aside by revolutions in countries such as China and Vietnam. The military has replaced earlier elite-dominated social orders in Korea and Taiwan. And middle class governments have largely replaced the old aristocracy of Malaysia and Indonesia. Only in Brunei and, perhaps, in Thailand has there been a continuity in the nature of the upper class for a period similar to the 150 year record in the Philippines. In short, the Philippine upper class must have had more on their side than just the skills of individual families. I suspect that the families have held on to their social status, ideological hegemony, wealth, and political power because they were aided by a state that was strong in the ways which most suited the purposes of the elite.

But this long digression is only to point out that the use of the family as a unit of analysis may not be the best way to get at the nature of the state in the Philippines. The central focus of the authors was to explicate the role of political families and to redress the weaknesses of analytical frameworks which underestimate the role of the family as a unit of analysis. To belabor the point about the nature of the Philippine state would achieve something I do not intend; I do not wish to detract from the real importance of this collection and the impressive scholarship that went into each of the chapters. The volume deserves a wide readership and will, without doubt, make a lasting contribution to the study of Philippine politics and history.

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