

## Book Reviews

Dante C. Simbulan. 2005. *The Modern Principalia: The Historical Evolution of the Philippine Ruling Oligarchy*. Diliman, Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press. 350 pages.

The findings regarding the nature of the ruling class in Philippine society in Dante Simbulan's *The Modern Principalia* are as accurate today as they were during the period covered by the book. The focal point of the study were the years immediately after World War II from 1946 to 1963, though Simbulan presented an historical excursus of the rise of the elites in Philippine society from pre-Spanish time to the U.S. colonization of the Islands. The greater significance of the book to the reader is that the concentration of wealth in the forms of land and incomes in the hands of a few elite families during the period surveyed has worsened at present. While in 1955, those owning lands in the Philippines above 50 hectares was 41.5 percent of the population (p. 57), by 1991, when the last survey of Philippine land ownership was conducted by the National Statistics Office (NSO), this has decreased to 20.9 percent or by almost half. Further, in 1960, the richest families had 11.1 percent of total family income (p.77), and in 2006 this has increased to 35.9 percent of total family income (from FIES, 2006 NSO). Thus, as the French saying goes as things change, they ever remain the same, and we add, the same gets worse. Though more than 40 years have passed since the book was written, the plight of the Filipino masses has remained as miserable as ever. Because of the great disparity of incomes in the Philippines, almost 80 percent of its population is living below the poverty line. (IBON Phil., 2008)

Though Simbulan gives credence to Laswell's and Pareto's definitions of the elite as those who hold high positions in a given society, so that there may be elites of wealth (economic elite), power (political elite), prestige (social elite), etc., he quickly qualifies that this may be just a theoretical definition of the elite, a concept which is made independent from class. In real life, he contends, to be an elite is to possess wealth or economic power, since wealth can lead to more power in society (p.5). Thus, he recognizes that economic power merges with political power. Simbulan's concept of the elite is nearer to the Marxist C. Wright Mills, as presented in *Mill's Power Elites*, since it is based on empirical data of the control of wealth, including capital wealth, by a few presented extensively in the book. Simbulan further illustrates in tables and other discussions the interlocking of political with economic

dominations of Philippine society. He avers that the semi-feudal character of the Philippine economy with a backward agricultural sector has facilitated the kind of elite rule in our society (p.6 ).

Simbulan throughout the book interchanges the terms *elite*, *class*, *socioeconomic dominants*, and *oligarchy* to describe the modern *principalia*, but his perspective is closer to the class concept of Mill. Robert Michels' method of identifying the oligarchy as the few (as with Gaetano Mosca) who have a bent to rule a group or an organization (a political party to Michels), without analyzing the economic base of this few is so apart from the objective study of the economic structure of Philippine society and how it brought about the modern *principalia* in Simbulan's book. One may observe that Michels' and Mosca's approach is idealistic, while that of Simbulan concrete and scientific.

The characteristics of the Philippine *principalia* (the *principales indigenes* as they were called by the Spaniards) elucidated in chapters three to six of the book have remained intact up to the present. This *principalia* emerged from the economic class nurtured by the Spanish colonizers to serve the latter's interests and further endowed with political power by the Americans to cow the restive masses after the Filipino-American war. They were mostly composed of *mestizos*, native and Chinese, the former sired by Spanish fathers and the latter, offsprings of Chinese merchants who intermarried with native women members of the *principalia*. The Chinese metizos grew in economic status in Philippine society as they acquired haciendas, with crops meant for exports to Spain and later to other Western countries. The descendants of this *principalia* are still lording it over the socioeconomic arena with the likes of Aboitiz, Elizalde, Zobel Ayala, Madrigal, Tuason, Cojuanco, Lopez, Ledesma, Puyat, Arroyo, etc. This class interbreeds within itself, intermarrying within a limited circle of the so-called high society families (in Manila it is referred to as the Manila's 400). With this exclusiveness, the wealth of the *principalia* becomes more concentrated through time, as we have seen. This *principalia* has a highly Westernized outlook (Simbulan's), now Americanized as befitting their U.S. patrons, they send their children to the same exclusive schools (Ateneo, La Salle, Letran, Assumption, University of Asia and the Pacific) and have interlocking businesses in companies and banks. They have close connections with political leaders, since members of their clan may be holding public offices themselves or they have minions in government to protect their interests.

The values and practices of the *principalia* class are not much different from the feudal lords of bygone days, cultivating patronage, maintaining private armies, like the mercenary armies of European vassals, and recruiting from within their own ranks to continue elite rule in the provinces and cities. Simbulan notes that the circulation of the elites is confined within very small circles of relatives and close friends. This has become more marked today since it was not a common practice during the time the book was written that wives themselves take over the public offices of their husbands as they do now. Think of the wife of Jejomar Binay of Makati becoming mayor after the latter reached the limit of his term and the wife of Metro Manila Development Authority Chairman Bayani Fernando who was previously the mayor of Marikina City now serving as mayor of Marikina after him. Thus, the decadence of elite rule is becoming more obvious in Philippine politics today.

The elites through political dynasties conduct the affairs of their little territories like petty warlords (*caciques*) but behave as bureaucrat capitalist with regard to the coffers of the government by cornering favorable contracts, franchises, and squandering pork barrels and other public funds to advance their economic and political goals. The semi-feudal and semi-colonial political economy of the Philippines has made this possible since the various anomalies committed by the *principalia*, mostly landlords and big businessmen (the *comprador bourgeoisie*) in public offices are often accomplished through partaking of loans and contracts from foreign capitalists. (This practice has been aggravated at present.)

However, Simbulan's analysis of the power of the elites could have been more thorough if he had delved into how foreign institutional creditors, like the IMF and World Bank, which were already very active in the Philippines during the period of his study, have dictated the economic policies of the government as well as how Filipino elites have profited from such policies. For after all, the dependence of the Philippine economy on foreign loans which to the modern *principalia* is highly lucrative for themselves, is a leading characteristic of its being semi-colonial.

When the book was first written, the Local Government Code (LGC) of 1991, granting autonomy to local governments, has not yet been passed and Simbulan evaluated the highly centralized structure of the Philippine

government at that time which to him facilitated hierarchical elite rule. It is to be noted, however, that the LGC has in fact worsened the rule of political dynasties in the provinces, since elite officials have monopolized the appointments to many public posts in their areas to favor their followers. And like the internecine quarrels of the warlords of old among themselves, the violence of rival elite factions in the provinces to grab political power has heightened with the central government acting as a helpless onlooker. The character of a feudal society, where territories controlled by individual vassals become like so many independent kingdoms, is thus seen in the semi-feudal Philippine countryside much more now, after the approval of the LGC, than during the immediate post-war period.

Simbulan bewails the fact that the non-elites, which constitute the majority in Philippine society, have no power or significant influence in Philippine society. When they become a threat to elite rule, like the Democratic Alliance during the 1946 election, they are at once suppressed. It can be said that this is still the stance of the modern *principalia* since the participation of party-list groups in Congress is considered as merely decorations to their rule and when these groups become a threat, they are easily coerced. Like the Supreme Court, as Simbulan observes, many so-called countervailing constitutional institutions are just democratic illusions since the U.S. which strengthened the rule of the *principalia* wished the latter to retain their stronghold on the Philippine populace (p. 298). Thus, the book makes the reader gradually comprehend that the true emancipation of the poor masses must come from a general overhauling of the semi-feudal and semi-colonial structure of Philippine society, which must also terminate the socio-economic dominance of the *principalia* and their foreign supporters.

The publication of this lucidly-written book has long been delayed due to the various vicissitudes of the author's life who was also a political prisoner during the Marcos regime. But its relevance is as strong as ever today, if not more so, and it is highly recommended for all students of Philippine society, particularly those who wish to understand why the Pilipino masses have remained poor. ❖

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**Raul E. Segovia. 2008. *Inside the Mass Movement: A Political Memoir*. Manila: Anvil. 320 pages.**

In this book, Raul Segovia writes a frank and concise narrative of his personal experiences and insights about the Philippine mass movement. This engagement spans decades of organizational, political and cultural work where he is not merely an observer but an active advocate, leader and participant. He knows this movement so intimately that he also considers it as his life's history for the past 50 years. But this does not diminish the book's critical lenses. Thus, true to form, the author locates the mass movement in the trajectory of the Filipino people's struggle for democracy, sovereignty and social justice.

This book explores why Philippine social movements—now ideologically in their plural form—have been organized, grown, risen and declined and like the proverbial Phoenix, have risen again. He investigates in the form of a personal political memoir the fortunes as well as misfortunes of the Philippine Left's mass movements. The dilemmas, contradictions and vulnerabilities of social movements are included. He analyzes everything from the movement's tactics, to its contradictions, dilemmas and internal dynamics—above ground (AG) and underground (UG).

This may be awkward to ask: How do successful political transitions affect the mobilization of popular forces? Do they necessarily weaken mass movements and make them vulnerable as more openings for democratic space are made available to people's empowerment, or do they make them more vigorous and strong to explore the new political arenas? Do mass movements fare better in a neoliberal political system compared to an authoritarian dictatorship?

In Nepal just a few years ago, it was unthinkable that the leader of the decades-long Maoist armed insurgency, Pushpa Kamal Dahal—with the nom de guerre Prachanda ("the fierce one")—would now be elected democratically as prime minister of this upland nation of 27 million people. Meanwhile, in Latin America, social movements in Venezuela, Brazil, Uruguay, Argentina, Chile, Bolivia, Nicaragua, and Ecuador have succeeded in

electing nine anti-free market leftists as presidents, the recent one being a former Catholic bishop, Fernando Lugo of Paraguay.

To what extent can Philippine social movements maximize constitutional provisions—hard-won space by popular struggles—which have institutionalized people’s participation in governance? Let me refer to pertinent provisions of the 1987 Constitution to wit:

1. “The State shall respect the role of independent people’s organizations to enable the people to pursue and protect, within the democratic framework, their legitimate and collective interests and aspirations through peaceful and lawful means. People’s organizations are *bona fide* associations of citizens with demonstrated capacity to promote the public interest and with identifiable leadership, membership and structure.” (Sec. 15, Art. XIII: Social Justice and Human Rights - The Role and Rights of People’s Organizations, 1987 Constitution)

2. “ The right of the people and their organizations to effective and reasonable participation at all levels of social, political and economic decision-making shall not be abridged. The State shall, by law, facilitate the establishment of adequate consultation mechanisms.” (Sec. 16, Art. XIII).

3. “ The State shall encourage non-governmental, community-based, or sectoral organizations that promote the welfare of the nation.” (State Policies, Art. II, 1987 Constitution).

Can social movements completely put their trust in written guarantees that are effectively shattered by disappearances and extra-judicial killings by state security forces? Segovia’s take in the book’s penultimate chapter is refreshing. He punctures ludicrous claims that Philippine social movements are declining, but presents them as dynamic and resilient. Even recent writings of intellectual counter-insurgents who have in the past repeatedly forecast the dissolution of the Philippine Left, cannot explain the rise, decline and rise again of the social movements in the Philippines. Having survived various OPLANs from the time of the Marcos dictatorship, vigilantes, DPAs and

Kahos, Bantay Laya I and II, and more than a thousand extra-judicial killings and *desapercidos* (involuntary disappearances), the Philippine social movement has not only survived, but has grown, reminding us of Nietzsche's words, "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

The U.S. empire and its subservient state in the Philippines which has failed to serve anything but elite and foreign interests has long subjected non-elite social movements to violent attacks, harassments and repression. Indeed, what is remarkable is how the mass movement has survived despite these ups and downs. Its counterparts in Southeast Asia and other parts of the world did not survive the ideological dilemmas of the end of the Cold War and the decline of socialist regimes. Not only has it grown, but the influence of Philippine social movements has become more mainstream.

The author fills his book with much detail, names, dates and places. Segovia's desire to strip out the myths about an invincible movement is commendable. To challenge deeply held beliefs was brave enough, but to contradict movement propaganda is to be admired. To this he interprets, quite fairly, the genuine hopes and aspirations of social movement advocates. He gives crisp and engaging vignettes of his own experiences—both emotional and political—and this gives his story a fitting perspective. His shift to diary form in the discussion of the international relations of the mass movement, may be quite distracting, for he began with a narrative form, and should have continued using that narrative form using his diary as his primary reference.

On a cautionary note, the book's repeated shift from the UG (underground) to AG (aboveground) and UG again, may give away many of the still-active individuals and mass movements especially in these times of extrajudicial killings. Advocates and social movements in the Philippines are still engaged in a life-or-death struggle as they continue to face the challenge of an oligarchy and state that considers empowerment of the people a threat to national security and as acts related to terrorism. Defining the social movement from an insider's point of view can have some unintended consequences.

The last few chapters, however, look somewhat rushed, which is surprising because I know that Segovia has worked on this book for several years and

has had many years of reflection. Many chapters come to no definite conclusion on the events and data that they present, perhaps leaving it for the reader to decide. Perhaps another book from Segovia should be forthcoming.

But the book is written in an elegant and accessible style as Segovia gives a human face to the doubts, anxieties, conflicts, and dilemmas that has affected a social movement in the Philippine political landscape in five decades, involving millions of people. To the disenfranchised masses who comprise the majority of Filipinos, the movement may be the only hope for their social liberation. This book is essential to understanding the visible and invisible aspects of a movement that dares to continue to engage the neoliberal forces of globalization and their local lackeys. Despite the facts and interpretations that some other participants of the struggle may contest and even question, Segovia's book is a gem of reflection and soul-searching that we all need to be truly human in a dehumanizing world of markets, consumerism and neoconservative true believers.

In recent years, this is not really the first book to come out locally or abroad about Philippine mass movements, for there has been quite a lot lately from a variety of authors ranging from disenchanted activists who have made academic or journalistic careers out of being professional hitmen against the Philippine Left, or have become so-called experts on the Philippine Left. Fortunately, this book is neither of these, for it maintains its unshaken belief in the collective power of the people and their organized people's power. It could also be the most human of the recent works on the subject as it gives us a reflective perspective on the social movement's impact on the lives of those it has touched, most especially the author's. ♦

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**Tuazon, Bobby M. (ed.) 2007. *Dissecting Corruption: Philippine Perspectives*. Quezon City: CenPEG Books. 137 pages.**

Given the vast literature on corruption in the Philippines, *Dissecting Corruption* offers not only an updated but also an encompassing perspective on the phenomenon of corruption in the country. The various authors of the essays in the book analyze and address a number of themes and issues that can contribute to a common understanding and framework in looking at corruption and related issues of governance in the Philippines.

The book can be divided into seven sections with the first section serving as an introduction to the issue of corruption and other related phenomena in the Philippine context. In the first section, the first essay, "Corruption: Its Historical Roots and Development" by Satur Ocampo, traces the historical development of corruption in society to the "powers of an institutional authority" to manage social and economic relations. Corruption is then perpetuated by the goal of further enhancing both the economic and political power of those who practice it. Temario Rivera then presents a framework of analysis for studying corruption in "Political Corruption: An Analytical Framework". According to Rivera, the main problem of conflict of interests between private and public concerns is exacerbated by the electoral process because it produces a "network of political debts" which leads to the corruption of the individual in the interest of sustaining power for him/herself. In the third essay, "People's Governance to Fight and End Corruption", Antonio Tujan, emphasizes people's governance through genuine participatory democracy as a tool to struggle against bureaucrat capitalism and corruption. Rodolfo Desuasido, introduces the discourse on how cronyism, crony capitalism and bureaucrat capitalism can eventually lead to fascism which can develop in the "semi-colonial, semi-feudal" Philippines under the United States "sway of aggressive foreign policy." The last essay in the first section is the keynote address of the late Haydee Yorac for the 2005 National Study Conference on Corruption. The speech ultimately served as a preview of the succeeding section's topics regarding the universal problem of corruption, the abundance of Philippine laws against corruption, the problem of "talking" about corruption and not acting on it, the increasing sophistication of corruption from the lowest level to the highest position in the land exacerbated by the ineffectiveness of anti-corruption institutions, among others.

In the second section of the book, three essays delve on the issue of corruption in the military. The first piece written by Dan Vizmanos traces how the perfidious examples set by the commander-in-chief, the President of the Philippines, rationalize and justify the corruption of the military hierarchy dominated by graduates from the Philippine Military Academy. The second essay by the late Rene Jarque advocates a "pro-active, resolute, sustained, sensible and top management supported" reform of the AFP to combat corruption within the Philippines' military hierarchy. Benito Lim, in response to Jarque speculates on the possibility of reform within the AFP because of the military's fear of change. Lim, however, emphasizes the need for an "intelligent military leadership committed to protect our people and our national interests, not collaborators who seek to profit from their positions" given their legitimate mandate for the use of violence.

The third section of the book focuses on globalization and corruption including the issues of privatization and foreign investments. Santiago Dasmariñas, Jr. conveys how corruption occurred in the privatization of state assets i.e., water privatization (MWSS) and power privatization (NAPOCOR). On the other hand, Moises S. Tolentino, Jr. exposes how "institutional" corruption doomed the Ninoy Aquino International Airport 3 Project and how globalization has exacerbated the phenomenon of graft and extortion in the Philippines.

Globalization can also be related to the theme of the succeeding section — the fiscal crisis and corruption. Teodoro Casiño points to: (1) a "flawed" economic strategy that resulted in an "unsustainable and maldeveloped economy" and (2) "bureaucratic capitalism" as a systemic corruption affecting the entire political system as the roots of the country's fiscal crisis. Edberto Malvar Villegas examines the fiscal crisis and the economic crisis in the context of the dynamics between the neo-colonial Philippine state (or rather the neo-liberal state), the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization.

The media and corruption is highlighted in the fifth section of the book. Inday Espina-Varona focuses on media corruption, its causes, and a number of recommendations. On the other hand, Josefina Santos examines the

problem of corruption and cronyism in television regulation in the Philippines. Luis Teodoro, Danilo Arao and Evelyn Katigbak, emphasize with a thorough scholarly analysis, how the media reports corruption.

The sixth section of the book offers a number of critiques of the government's anti-corruption program. Romulo Pagulayan describes the government's lifestyle check programs as selective and ineffective. He encourages militant, progressive and nationalist unionism in the public sector to effectively fight corruption. Joe Dizon describes the government's anti-corruption drive as a political survival mechanism rather than a sincere attempt to reform and eradicate corruption. Dizon argues for a democratic mass movement to dig out the roots of bureaucratic corruption and abuse of authority. Julie Po completes the critique with a description of the development of a culture of corruption in the bureaucracy and the inevitable corruption of culture in the Philippines.

The last section of the book features the observations of Renato Reyes. In this essay, Reyes affirms the dynamics between cronyism and corruption and highlights how the effects of cronyism essentially worsen the economic and political crisis in the country.

The issue of corruption has been one of the most crucial issues in the study of Philippine government and politics. Given the existing literature on corruption, this collection of perspectives on corruption provides the reader a look into corruption from inside-out. Aside from the fact that the collection was the output of the 2005 National Study Conference on Corruption which was convened by the Center for People Empowerment in Governance (CenPEG), IBON Foundation and BAYAN, the book serves its purpose — an eye-opener that is inclusive of other actors fighting corruption. With its interesting presentation albeit in a condensed form, it can contribute to greater public awareness on corruption and to the adoption of corruption as an issue for actors in government, the academe and civil society. In addition, the various policy recommendations and action points from the contributors can be part of the solution to the endemic crisis of corruption in the entire Philippine political system. The book, however, lacks a concluding article that synthesizes the recommendations offered by the contributors. A

synthesis can contribute more to the aims of the book in enlightening readers on the issue of corruption and eventually make the readers do something about it. ❖

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