

*Book Review*

Patricio N. Abinales. *Images of State Power: Essays on Philippine Politics from the Margins*. Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1998. 191 pages.

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Most scholars of Philippine politics uncritically assume that events in Metropolitan Manila represent all there is to know about the country's political affairs. It is this perspective that Abinales addresses in *Images of State Power*. What Abinales tries to do is to present "Philippine politics from lenses other than that of Manila." (p. xiii) What he achieves in the end, however, goes beyond this modest intention.

*Images of State Power* is a collection of five essays covering different episodes of Philippine political history. While each essay stands on its own, they collectively illustrate the dynamic between region and center that constantly underlie Philippine politics throughout its historical development; a relationship where the "margins" in the title are shown to be more than just adjuncts of the Philippine political center in Manila. The historical chronology by which the essays are organized serve to emphasize the importance of this dynamic over time.

The first essay is the article on the Moro Province, circa 1904-1914. Abinales presents how the colonial state in Mindanao during this time developed differently from the rest of the Philippines. It was administered by a military authority given broad autonomous powers, and determined to shield its "uncivilized constituency" from the venal interests of the more

civilized and commercially sophisticated (read rapacious) Filipinos from the Christianized parts of the Philippines.

What was most surprising about this military administration in "Moroland" was Abinales' contention that it was legitimate in the eyes of its constituents as shown by the degree to which Muslim and other non-Christian leaders cooperated in the collection of taxes. This in spite of the grim pacification campaign the United States Army had conducted against the Muslim tribes in Mindanao, as well as the fact that the "U.S. army was not only ill-equipped to govern, it was also a hastily-organized force with very little time to be 'institutionalized.'" (p. xii) The vigorous attempts on the part of the military colonial administration in Mindanao to maintain its autonomy and thereby protect its charges from the civilian central government (particularly from the purely Filipino legislative chamber) contrasts two competing (until at least 1914) visages of the colonial state. These dynamics also illustrate the progenitor of the continuing tension between regional poles of power and the central government in Manila.

This dynamic was even more clearly shown in the second article which focuses on the rise to power of Alejandro "Landring" Almendras, Davao's most famous and most notorious political strongman in the post-war, pre-martial era. His story illustrates the importance of strongmen to the stability of local political relations and the consequent need for national and regional leaders to accommodate them. This process of accommodation defined the local/regional/national dynamic prior to the establishment of Martial Law in 1972 and underwent a fundamental change with the inception of increased political centralization under Marcos.

Abinales argues, however, that the process of political centralization was flawed from the start. In his third and fourth essays, he shows how the characterization of the Philippine State as a weak state made it difficult for Marcos to pursue this project. His third essay on the Philippine Military points to the important role that factionalization in the military – in no little way due to the politics of accommodation between the local and national levels of government – played in the eventual collapse of the Marcos regime. According to Abinales, it was the military which epitomized the authoritarian nature of the Marcos regime to the majority of Filipinos and who constituted the real sources of power during this period. (p. xi) Marcos, however, had to rely not only on the military to maintain his regime's hold on power, but also on local political strongmen. This worked well in cases where military officers in the field and local political leaders got along. In many cases, however, disputes between the military and local politicians were decided by the national government in favor of the latter thereby paving the way for demoralization within the ranks of the military (specially at the lower and middle ranks of the officer corps) and subsequent disillusionment with the Marcos regime. This eventually culminated in the failed coup attempt in 1986 which became the precursor to the People Power Revolt that swept Marcos from power.

In the fourth essay, Abinales takes us on a follow-on piece along this same argument. He uses the case of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its armed wing, the New People's Army (NPA), to emphasize the problems of sustaining the centralization project of the Marcos regime. The CPP-NPA succeeded in their armed opposition to the Marcos regime because they had adopted a decentralized strategy. The success of this policy turned the CPP and its umbrella organizations

into the principal opposition against Marcos. It also further complicated the negotiating process that Marcos had to engage in to maintain the balance between the military and local political figures, as well as within the military itself.

An important point raised by Abinales in this essay, however, involves the reasons behind the collapse of the CPP-NPA following the departure of Marcos. He criticized the analyses of this collapse that focused primarily on the internal dynamics of the party and instead argues that United Front Tactics coupled with the decentralization of operations opened up other important causes for the decline of the communist insurgency. The same decentralization strategy that had worked so well against the Marcos regime worked against the Party leaders when they decided to impose over their local units a uniform policy over important national issues in a pluralized political environment. The same centrifugal forces that had to be contained in local/regional/national relations within the Philippine State likewise affected the CPP-NPA. In Abinales own words, "[a]ccustomed to acting autonomously, regional might not agree, or worse, not comply with policy changes dictated from above." (p. 149) The consequence to the Left of the decision to boycott the snap elections of 1985 illustrates only too well the implications of this problem. In contrast to the decline in the fortunes of the CPP-NPA, traditional political figures who had opposed Marcos (the *caciques*) were restored to power. Philippine political dynamics returned to pre-Martial Law conditions.

The final essay looks into the role played by the Catholic Church in Mindanao in Philippine politics. Characterized as the most vibrant segment of the Catholic Church at the height of the Marcos era, Abinales noted how it had all but

disappeared at the time of the EDSA Revolt in 1986. The Mindanao-Sulu Pastoral Council (MSPC) had been the principal forum where ideas regarding the participation of the Church in social activism had been discussed. It became one of the initiators of the anti-Marcos movement in Mindanao. As its activities increased, the Church hierarchy in Mindanao noted the increasing polarization of national politics and felt apprehensive of the possibility of losing control over the religious and laity who were engaged in political activism. The Church leaders in Mindanao decided to dissociate themselves from the MSPC which then lost support within the Catholic network. The decision by the Mindanao Church to follow a conservative line eventually led to the strengthening of the Catholic Church nationwide. It, however, leaves unresolved questions on the role of the Church in social activism and popular empowerment.

The value of Abinales' work lies primarily in his attempt to move away from traditional political analysis that locate Philippine politics largely within political events that take place in Metropolitan Manila. While focusing largely on developments in Mindanao, he illustrates how local and regional political affairs interface with and influence political decisions at the national level. He situates his empirical findings (particularly those on the Philippines during the American colonial period) within well-structured analytical frameworks in each of his essays.

However, Abinales could have done better in explaining the interstices that link the disparate topics that the essays included in this compilation together. To merely say that this compilation constitutes his reflections on issues in Philippine politics as seen from outside of Manila could have been

elaborated further. Why these particular choice of essays? While inviting his readers to hopefully see things his way, it would have been helpful if he had explained in greater detail what exactly it is that he is inviting readers to share with him. ♣