

Book Review

Impossible is Not so Easy: A Life in Politics, by Joel Rocamora. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2020. Pp. 294. ISBN 9789715509442.

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The book starts with an apologetic tone. In the introduction, the author, Joel Rocamora, explains his hesitation over putting together a collection of his political essays. Rocamora claims that even his “mentor and friend,” Benedict Anderson viewed such an intellectual product as a “non-book.” The general reader, however, discovers very early on that the said format has its strengths and weaknesses.

Because it is a collection of essays, Rocamora is able to cover a wide spectrum of interesting topics: the current (Rodrigo Duterte) and the past (Benigno Aquino III, Joseph Estrada, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo); the national (political parties) and the local (federalism); the political (charter change) and the economic (economic provisions of the constitution); government reform efforts (National Anti-Poverty Commission or NAPC, Bottom-up Budgeting or BUB) and civil society initiatives (Institute of Popular Democracy or IPD), and their crossovers; and the different shades of the Left (National Democrats, Popular Democrats, Akbayan).

The diversity of topics covered is reflective of Rocamora’s varied political engagements over several decades: the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and the National Democratic Front (NDF) during the years of the Marcos dictatorship (1970s and early 1980s), the Popular Democratic Movement immediately post-Marcos (late 1980s and early 1990s), the political party Akbayan (mid-1990s),

and the National Anti-Poverty Commission (NAPC) of the PNoy Aquino administration (2010–2016), where Rocamora served as Lead Convenor and Secretary.

The obvious downside of the essay collection format is the fragmentation of ideas and narratives. The examination of populism, for example, is presented through think pieces about President Duterte at the start of the book and about President Estrada towards the end of the book. The author tries to compensate for this fragmentation by way of categorizing the essays into four parts that are presented as self-contained divisions: Duterte, Federalism, Explanations, and Contributions. Readers can delve deeper into a category or topic that they are deeply interested in, skip topics, or go back and forth across the varying essays. This kind of non-linear format brings with it a distinct kind of reading pleasure. Moreover, readers are able to overlook the fragmentation flaw because the essays are written in excellent, inviting prose.

Another apparent downside is the book's presentation of some (controversial) claims that are not backed sufficiently by evidence. In one essay, for example, Rocamora claims that “more has been done for the poor under the Aquino administration than at any time under any one regime” and that “Mar Roxas is the best President we never had” (p. 7), but he does not elaborate why or how.

The reader is aptly forewarned in the author's introductory piece that the collection was put together “for practical, sentimental and only lastly, intellectual reasons” (p.x). The book's secondary title, “A Life in Politics,” also staves off any expectation regarding the primacy of academic content or timbre, and the reader can, in fact, easily deduce that the book is a sort of autobiography, not a purely academic treatise.

As an autobiography, there is no escaping the political choices and opinions—the voice—of the author. The said voice can actually be viewed as a strength of the book, because written ideas borne out of actual experiences, not just texts, are always worth perusing. The author is both an academic and a political actor and that, in itself, lends credence to the book.¹

Notwithstanding its seeming gaps, the book can be commended for surfacing at least three themes that merit further political discourse: (1) a critique of Duterte, (2) a critique of the Philippine Left, and (3) mass-based parliamentary politics as political project.

Critique of Duterte

Rocamora's characterization of President Duterte as a populist leader is accurate.

Rocamora is correct in claiming that Duterte is the “perfect populist” with his “oversized personality and self-absorption” and that “all he has to do is (re)present in his words and actions the people's fears, anger and hope” (p.7). Rocamora is also correct in pointing out that Duterte's anti-elite and anti-establishment rhetoric is the main reason why he won in the 2016 elections and why he continues to be popular. After four years in office, there is enough evidence to back Rocamora's claims about the populist nature of Duterte's rise to power and his maintenance of that power. Perhaps the best evidence of Duterte's populism is his anti-drug war: despite the illegitimacy and unconstitutionality of his ways (such as the *tokhang* campaign and the unexplained deaths of drug users and pushers), Duterte was able to convince “the people” that this war was necessary.

However, Rocamora has two other assertions about Duterte which are debatable and should be subjected to further discussion. One is his claim that Duterte is a demobilizing rather than a mobilizing populist. The other is his list of factors that could bring down Duterte's popularity.

Rocamora claims that Duterte, like former President Estrada, “may bring the popular *medyo bastos* into political discourse, but he does not bring citizens into formal processes of political participation” (p.12). The latter assertion is debatable. One can argue that there is citizen participation under Duterte and that, in fact, the citizens participating now are those that were never able to participate politically or institutionally in previous regimes. Examples include particular businesspeople especially those outside of “Imperial Manila,” social influencers hitherto not visible in mainstream media, and the unorganized section of the Overseas Filipino Workers. Very

early into the Duterte regime, the Maoists (CPP-NDF-affiliated) were also very visible politically. These Maoists had never supported any President post-Marcos—except President Duterte. It is thus not accurate to say that Duterte is a demobilizing populist. What can be questioned is the quality and direction of popular mobilization under Duterte. There is evidence, for example, that Duterte is mobilizing people only around his preferred advocacies, like the campaign against drugs, and not around a coherent set of policies or an ideological platform.

Rocamora also claims that the following factors could bring Duterte's popularity down: economic slowdown, a Trump defeat in the November 2020 elections, controversial relations with China and the US, and an electable successor. While these can indeed determine people's continuation or withdrawal of support from Duterte, two more factors have to be considered: the configuration of contenders in the 2022 presidential elections and the COVID-19 pandemic (although it must be noted that the book was published before the pandemic). In 2016, this configuration—the fragmentation of the administration camp—was key to Duterte's victory. The separate campaigns of erstwhile administration allies Mar Roxas, Jejomar Binay, and Grace Poe split up the votes and created space for Duterte to win the election. In 2022, if the Duterte camp becomes factionalized and the opposition is unified, the former could lose its majority-vote base to the latter. Moreover, COVID-19 is a game-changer. Duterte's dismal and visibly ineffective responses to the pandemic are likely to shape voter behavior in 2022.

Notwithstanding the abovementioned debatable claims, the author as political actor shines through in Rocamora's essays on Duterte. Writing about Duterte is in itself a political act given the context of Duterte's repression of critical political views. In this regard, the book is a very bold political endeavor.

Critique of the Philippine Left

The author has been bold not only in his critique of the incumbent administration but also in questioning the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), which he was formerly affiliated with. In his 2004 essay, "The Enemy Within: Murder and Revolutionary Violence," the

author lambasts the “RAs” for killing former NPA Commander “Rolly” Kintanar, and “RJ comrades in Central Luzon, Mindanao and Negros and Akbayan leaders” (p. 137). According to Rocamora’s estimates, the CPP had killed at least a thousand in its anti-infiltration campaigns.

Perhaps the boldest proposition of the author is his claim that “the CPP of the RAs is not anymore a progressive force, is not part of our broad progressive community” (p. 140). For Rocamora, while there continues to be differences between non-RA groups, said groups continue to “talk” to each other. Rocamora’s bottom line thus is not the absence of ideological differences among Left groups but the resolution of these differences through non-violent means.

The issue of “murderous sectarianism” (Rocamora’s term, p. 139) is indeed valid because even non-state actors have to be held accountable for acts of murder. The commission of murder by the Left—by virtue of their being Left—does not justify murder.

Ironically, Rocamora paints a different picture when narrating the role of the Left under the Duterte regime. He suggests, for example, that the easing out of the Leftist (Jun Evasco) faction was detrimental to the Duterte regime and signalled the latter’s movement to the Right. In the author’s words, “The Left has been decimated; all the Maoists and other Leftists, those associated with Jun Evasco are out. They have been replaced by retired generals, pushing the cabinet decidedly to the Right” (p. 3). These words seem to contradict the author’s earlier statement (in his 2004 piece) that the Maoists should no longer be viewed as part of the progressive movement. These words, after all, have the effect of validating the progressive-ness, if not the Left-ness, of the Maoists.

Rocamora’s contradictory presentations of the CPP’s progressive nature can perhaps be explained by the fact that no matter how one dismisses the CPP, it continues to be a visible social force that engages government, citizens, and other social forces. Furthermore, Left-ness and progressive-ness could be a matter of self-definition and self-assertion. As long as the CPP maintains and demonstrates that it is (the radical) Left, its Leftness will continue to be part of public discourse—even among those who criticize the CPP.

The debate about “who is more Left,” however, has no real relevance if confined to mere abstractions. What could be more useful are debates that exact accountability from the Left: Why kill comrades? Why join Duterte’s government despite the drug war-related extrajudicial killings and Duterte’s obvious sexism and misogyny? Why collaborate with Duterte despite his visible support for the Marcoses? (Unfortunately, Rocamora does not categorically raise these questions in the book—except those relating to the CPP’s anti-infiltration drive.)

The lack of accountability of the Left is underpinned by a tradition of ideological righteousness and attachment to ideological dogma. Rocamora himself has written extensively about this in his book, *Breaking Through: The Struggle within the Communist Party of the Philippines*, which came out in 1994. As long as this tradition is continually cultivated, whether by the CPP, the RJs, or Akbayan, the “progressive movement” that Rocamora speaks of will always be in danger of being undermined by those who don’t even care about ideologies (e.g., Duterte).

Moreover, the Leftists in the Philippines have yet to learn that the support they hope to gather from the masses have to be repeatedly earned. The masses are likely to support the Left not because they claim to be Left but because they are able to establish positive impact on the masses’ everyday lives.

Mass-based parliamentary politics as political project

At the beginning of his book, Rocamora challenges the reader to figure out his “political project.” As a reader who has joined Rocamora in a number of political engagements, it is clear that this project has to do with mass-based politics—in *the parliamentary arena*. The emphasis on the parliamentary arena must be noted because all Leftists and progressives claim to challenge “elite-based politics” and vow to pursue “mass-based politics.” Not all Leftists and progressives, however, focus their energies on the parliamentary struggle.

Rocamora’s preference for mass-based parliamentary politics is evident in many of his essays—from his critique of Duterte’s politics (i.e., that it is influenced more by military generals than by citizens)

to his critique of the CPP (i.e., that Leftists should not be preoccupied with asking whether a “revolutionary situation” that justifies armed struggle exists), to his propositions about what the progressive movement’s priorities should be (i.e., federalism, local governance, party building).

The preference for struggle in the parliamentary terrain is highly debatable among the Left. It is a debate, however, that needs to be revisited, not only because of its ideological moorings (reform or revolution?) but because the Left, in fact, has already been deeply engaged in parliamentary politics—from the Social Democrats who became part of Cory Aquino’s government, to the Popular Democrats who were part of Estrada’s government, to Akbayan leaders who gained prominence during PNoy’s administration, to the National Democratic Front (NDF)-recommendées who were initially appointed by Duterte to his Cabinet as part of the peace talks. Each episode of participation of the Left in parliamentary politics has been controversial, perhaps due in part to the absence of political discourse on why the Philippine Left continues to be in the periphery of power rather than in the center—despite its alliances and its efforts at movement-building.

If Rocamora’s book sparks these debates about progressives especially *among* progressives, then the book would have served a worthy purpose. Getting the Left to reckon with its own flaws is part of the “impossible is not so easy” that Rocamora speaks of. Perhaps Rocamora’s book is already part of this much-needed reckoning.

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Note

1. Full disclosure: this reviewer knows the author personally and was at some point a member of two organizations mentioned in the book—IPD and Akbayan