

Book Review

Philippine Politics and the Marcos Technocrats: The Emergence and Evolution of a Power Elite, by Teresa S. Encarnacion Tadem. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2019. Pp. 244. ISBN 9789715509138.

Joel Rocamora

Teresa Tadem had a difficult political (as opposed to intellectual) problem in writing this book. When you identify your subject as “Marcos technocrats,” you already put them at a serious “sympathy” disadvantage. Anyone tagged with a “Marcos” modifier automatically takes on “dictatorial” and “corrupt” attached to them. However, Tadem succeeds in explaining the role of technocrats in the Ferdinand Marcos pre-martial law period without explicit political judgment.

With a lot of personal details, and because they mainly served other people’s interests, the chosen “technocrats” do not come off too badly. Apart from their public record, I knew several of Tadem’s subjects personally. I can safely say that none of them come off as corrupt or more self-serving than others in similar positions. It was their location in circles of power under Marcos and their role as “bearers of relations of ideological domination” that Tadem makes them accountable for.

To start with, Tadem makes it clear that whether as individuals or as a group, these technocrats had no independent sources of power. As Caroline Hau (2017, 37) points out in another study, “The fact that Filipino technocrats and top officials were recruited largely from the private sector, and were dependent on politicians for their

appointment, meant that the bureaucracy did not have sufficient autonomy to formulate macroeconomic, trade, and other policies that could be isolated from the sectarian interests of the political and economic elites.”

This group of technocrats were justifiably called “Marcos technocrats” because their role derived most importantly from Marcos’s ambitions for the kind of regime he wanted to craft. Their role changed markedly in the latter part of the Marcos martial law regime when Marcos’s health deteriorated. At that point, “technocrats” recruited by First Lady Imelda Marcos took on competing roles. Marcos’s role becomes even more pronounced when you contrast it with Rodrigo Duterte’s “technocrats.” Duterte has shown little interest in economic policy, and Finance Secretary Carlos Dominguez has a power base in the Mindanao business elite.

Marcos, unlike Duterte, could claim intellectual capacity as a lawyer and a politician. Both took liberties with the law and took authoritarian shortcuts. While Duterte allowed his assistants, Vitaliano Aguirre and Jose Calida, most glaringly, to mutilate the legal system, Marcos struggled to provide legal justification for his actions. While Duterte’s cabinet, with a few exceptions, is made up of intellectual lightweights dredged from Davao City and the San Beda College of Law, Marcos surrounded himself with technocrats with graduate school pedigrees.

Tadem’s analysis takes off from Paul Hutchcroft on how American colonial policy led to a weak bureaucracy and strong oligarchy:

It is in this kind of condition where elite theories ultimately fail to thoroughly examine the role of technocracy. Although they are considered the elites who bear a new occupation (managers, administrators of the state sector, upper level professionals), ‘they are not an independent group but are rather part of the higher bourgeois order or, to the degree that they find themselves in a contradictory situation, ultimately too close to the bourgeois to break with it’ (Oppenheimer 1985, 131) (p. 95).

Tadem’s analysis is decidedly progressive, advancing the work of Temario Rivera, Walden Bello, and Antoinette Raquiza among others.

Secondly, Tadem links the technocrats' role unequivocally with American dominance, in particular with US modernization theory:

In the developing regions such as in Southeast Asia, as well as in Latin America, the emergence of technocracy was given impetus by the political economy of US geostrategic concerns of the 1950s and the 1960s. This was preoccupied with the containment of communism as manifested by revolutionary forces at the onset of the Cold War. (p. 9)

Many of the ideas propagated by the Marcos technocrats derived from “modernization theory” which was popular at that time:

This was propagated foremost by the American economist Walt W. Whitman Rostow's five stages of economic growth (Latham 2000, 59). Rostow provided the modernization theory as being more than just an academic model. It proposed to understand better the process of global change and to identify ways by which the United States “could accelerate, channel and direct it” (Latham 2000, 2). (p. 11)

The period under study saw the transition from “import substitution” policies to “export oriented” policies, a process that began under the Diosdado Macapagal administration:

Under the Macapagal administration, there was thus the consolidation of two opposing factions of technocracy. On the one hand, the NEC [National Economic Council] was headed by Hilarion Henares who was an advocate of nationalist economic policy, which called for protectionism as well as an import-industrialization strategy... Such a position was opposed by the technocrats whom Macapagal recruited into the PIA [Program Implementation Agency] (e.g., Mapa and Fabella). (pp. 94-95)

...under the 1965 Marcos administration, Macapagal's technocrats who were advocates of import-substitution industrialization (ISI) were eased out. Foremost of this was NEC chair Hilarion Henares. Henares was supported by nationalist economists such as Alejandro Lichauco, who obtained a doctorate in economics from Harvard University. Lichauco

was the Deputy of Emmanuel Q. Yap who founded and headed the Congressional Economic and Planning Office (CEPO), the forerunner of the Congressional Policy and Budget Research Department of the House of Representatives. (pp. 124–25)

Tadem understandably focuses on the policies espoused by the technocrats she studies. To highlight the significance of these policies, it would have been useful to give more space to the policies espoused by the “import substitution” technocrats. She identifies them as “a faction of technocracy that was identified with key members of the country’s landed elites” (pp. 87–88) but does not elaborate further. The literature points to these landed elites’ successful transition from land ownership to light manufacturing and service industries. How this was achieved, what divisions existed among these elites, and what economic policies they fought over are important issues.

Another set of issues that I wish Tadem had given more attention are those around the East Asian developmental states. I would have thought that Marcos’s ambitions would have been supported by the discourse around the successful industrialization of South Korea and Taiwan under authoritarian regimes. This was particularly interesting because for a short time in the period under study even the World Bank looked with favor on these policies.

I look forward to this book’s sequel dealing with the martial law period. I am particularly interested in the impact of the regime’s continuing search for intellectuals to buttress the regime in the University of the Philippines (UP), partly because I personally experienced its consequences. Manda Elizalde, before he concocted the Tasaday hoax, succeeded in recruiting young UP Ph.D.s to assist the martial law regime. How this affected the social science departments and most importantly the history department of the UP would make for a fascinating, if perhaps painful story. The UP School of Economics is itself another study.

I was part of the story of the Institute of Asian Studies, which was transformed into the rather pretentiously named Philippine Center for Advanced Studies. This process derived directly from efforts of key personalities from Malacañang itself. The regime’s needs were best illustrated by a study we were asked to review on the opening of

diplomatic relations with China which was based almost completely on Newsweek articles. Having just come out of imprisonment, I was, to say the least, in a rather difficult position. After I was threatened with a return to prison if I did not behave, I was forced to move to the political science department.

Tadem's analysis is important not just as history. Many of the ideas the technocrats espoused continue to underlie government economic policies to this day. She has made an important contribution to what, in many ways, is the beginning of the answer to this history. I hope she goes ahead and continues to write its sequel.

Joel Rocamora, Ph.D. is president and executive director of the Institute for Popular Democracy.

Reference

Hau, Caroline. 2017. *Elites and Ilustrados in Philippine Culture*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press.