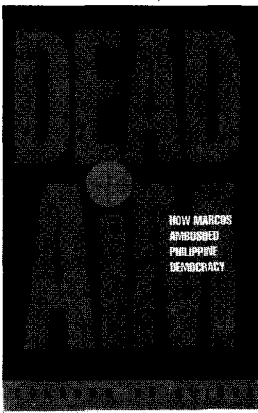


Review Essay

Democracy Waylaid

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Dead Aim: How Marcos Ambushed Philippine Democracy. BY CONRADO



DE QUIROS.
Pasig City:
Foundation for
Worldwide
People Power,
Inc., 1997. 457
pp. P495 (BK).
ISBN 971-
91670-2-5

CONRADO de
Quiros's

most recent book brought back vivid memories of martial law — a 'Marcos a.k.a. Hitler' poster in my bedroom, the paranoia of having your hair cut in the middle of the street, the cherished stay-in parties because of the midnight curfew, and an all-TV coverage of Marcos whenever there was a Malacañang activity. Being 12 years old in 1972, I literally grew up during the years of the Marcos dictatorship and the person that I am now was molded somehow by the brewing politicization that engulfed even the middle class.

MOTIVATIONS

Conrad de Quiros skillfully 'reconstructed' the various events leading to the proclamation of martial law. From the 1995 election fever and the uncertainties and rage of the first quarter storm to the fake ambush on Juan Ponce Enrile, de Quiros patiently pieced together the circumstances that were crucial in the emergence of the dictatorship. The book also depicted Marcos as a bright law student, as an astute politician, and finally as the scheming President. It described how Philippine democracy and its weaknesses were utilized by the shrewd Marcos to perpetuate himself in power. Marcos rationalized his acts by portraying himself as an indispensable messiah of Philippine society. Given the main objective of the book to narrate in detail the 'making of martial law' to those 'who have no recollection, or even knowledge of (this)... dark but critical conjuncture,' de Quiros was definitely successful.

The book ascribed the declaration of martial law to Marcos' obsession of staying in power indefinitely. Marcos

capitalized on the current political situation of the country (e.g. the communist threat, deteriorating peace and order, oligarchic control of the economy, moral decadence, etc.) and key external factors (e.g. the trend towards authoritarian regimes in the developing countries, his 'friendship' with Richard Nixon) to extend his term in office. While there were other options available (e.g. the lifting of term limits by the 1971 Constitutional Convention, Imelda running for President in 1973), he chose the option that was most feasible and which easily legitimized one-man rule. He wisely transformed the various threats to his presidency into golden opportunities for wresting full control of the nation.

The author recounted that martial law was premeditated. The idea started to evolve as early as January 1970 during the 'First Quarter Storm'. The pre-planning extensively manifested Marcos' meticulousness in handling important 'projects'. He had most of the angles covered — legal, military, US interests, business perception — before he launched his dictatorial regime. That martial law and his dictatorship lasted 14 long years is to be credited to Marcos' ingenuity and planning ability. He also successfully compartmentalized the entire grand design scheme that he alone knew, although Defense Secretary Jose Ponce Enrile and Armed Forces Chief of Staff Fabian Ver might have known some of its parts.

The book also delved into the mystery surrounding one of the main catalysts for the declaration of martial law

— the Plaza Miranda bombing. The case remains unsolved, however. The main culprits to this heinous crime are unidentified although de Quiros did probe into the possibility that it could have been the handiwork of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). The Cordero story, as given credence by other former CPP cadres, was treated to a lengthy discussion. But in the end, there were no additional evidence to pin down CPP chief Joma Sison and his group. In fact, the book also explored the possibility that loyalist Ilocano warlords may have planned it all. It would have been more interesting if there was a more definite conclusion on who actually masterminded the Plaza Miranda bombing.

PHILIPPINE-STYLE DEMOCRACY

Of great significance was the retrospective lens utilized by de Quiros — a lens that saw the past, present and future of Philippine-style democracy: its demise through martial law in the early 1970s, its resurrection through people power in the mid-1980s and its pathetic return to personality politics, elitism and bankruptcy in the 1990s. The interpretation of the events through this lens made it more in-depth and insightful. The book not only 'recreated' the incidents that led to martial rule but also described Philippine politics and processes in great detail. It can easily pass as an excellent reader on Philippine-style democracy.

Highlighted in the book were inherent flaws of the nation's political system. Political butterflies and turncoats

already existed during those times. Macapagal who was originally a Nacionalista got his presidential nomination as a Liberal. Marcos, on the other hand, shifted from Liberal to Nacionalista so as to challenge Macapagal in the elections. The red scare (from the Huks to the Maoists) has always been used by various regimes as a convenient scapegoat for political disturbances. Clinging to power has been a sickness afflicting many Philippine politicians. The recently concluded local and national elections saw politicians building family dynasties all over the country. Political parties are not institutions for democracy but mere instruments for achieving and even extending power. And in general, elections in this country cannot be held without its usual ingredients of money, entertainment, fraud and violence.

De Quiros aptly depicted how Philippine politics revolved around personalities. He elaborated on the character and behavior of three key personages during those times (e.g. Marcos' stark and dark ambitions, Ninoy Aquino's 'blabbermouth' self-confidence, and Joma Sison's audacity and stubbornness). Interesting personality sketches of Juan Ponce Enrile, Rocky Ileto, Manuel Yan, Imelda Marcos, Kit Tatad, Fabian Ver, Ronnie Zamora, Victor Corpuz and other key political players during those times added much color to the book. Whether in a democracy or dictatorship, whether in the left or right, personalities still dominate the political scene in the Philippines.

REVELATIONS

The book reveals that the planners of martial rule, including Marcos were pleasantly surprised at the general public's acquiescence to the loss of their democratic rights during the early years of the regime. The people's initial reaction disproved what Ninoy Aquino and other members of the opposition had been saying: that the Filipinos would not allow martial law to be proclaimed and that there would be fighting in the streets. Yet de Quiros did not give us much insight on why this was so.

Leon Ma Guerrero, writing in 1975, had rationalized martial law from a historical perspective and said that the Filipinos saw in the regime the possibility of real change. Marcos called it the 'revolution from the center, a revolution led by the government' towards the creation of a 'new society'. He vowed to limit the powerful influence of the oligarchy in Philippine politics. Fed up by the status quo, the middle and upper classes easily yielded to his calls for a renewed society characterized by discipline, peace and order and future prosperity. They believed Marcos when he said that martial law was temporary. But in just a couple of years, many of them had already realized their mistake.

The book reveals an important chapter in Philippine history that helps one to contextualize the string of events leading to the EDSA revolution. The main lesson is that we Filipinos are indeed a patient people but our love for freedom and democracy are deeply rooted. Marcos should have seen the

warning signs during the eve of the 1978 Interim Batasang Pambansa (IBP) elections when the opposition in Metro Manila successfully launched the first noise barrage. He should have seen the writing on the wall when millions attended the funeral procession of Ninoy Aquino in 1983. Having been suppressed for far too long, the yearning for freedom and democracy eventually exploded into the people power revolt at EDSA.

What does the book impart to its target readers? Philippine-style democracy during those times was weak and anyone who had the mind and ambition of Marcos could have successfully ambushed it. A democracy that served only the Philippine elite, one that was not broad enough and formalized only by elections remained vulnerable to ambushes. The message of the book is relevant to contemporary times because Philippine democracy remains practically the same.

In its report on the May 1998 elections, *The Economist* commented that Filipinos should 'lament that their (People Power) revolution, launched with such courage and hope, should so soon have degenerated into political farce.' However, there is one saving grace. The spirit of people power remains manifested in the dynamism of Philippine civil society. This provides a ray of hope in preventing future raids on our 'renewed' democracy.

DEMOCRATIC SPIRIT

During the dark years of martial rule, the flames of the Filipino democratic spirit kept on burning. These were found

among individuals and groups which clandestinely organized themselves at first to share information, to spread the 'resistance' and later to mobilize people towards the downfall of the regime. Aside from the underground communist movement — which had a windfall of recruits from student activists in the early years of the dictatorship — various civil society organizations gradually expanded in spite of the repressive regime. Church-based social action centers became the refuge of socially and politically oriented Filipinos who had the courage to secretly work for change. Basic Christian Communities (BCCs) sprouted in various places in the country.

Such groups contextualized the political and economic situation and exposed the evil of the regime. Many non-government organizations (NGOs) got involved in development work where their 'conscientization' activities, (i.e. making the people aware of the regime's excesses) were integrated into their regular programs (e.g. livelihood and social services). There were other NGOs and civil society organizations that were apolitical at first but became politically involved especially after the assassination of Ninoy Aquino in 1983.

As the martial law years unfolded, the infrastructure for the people power revolt at EDSA was slowly being built. The foundations were laid during the noise barrage in 1978 and the mass mobilizations of 1983. The final structure was completed in 1986 when millions of people, organized and unorganized, provided the impetus which ousted Marcos from his seat of power. In

recent times, such civil society activism successfully crushed the PIRMA (People's Initiative for Reforms, Modernization and Action) and CHACHA (Charter Change) initiative. Even the clear mandate given by the masses to Joseph Ejercito Estrada manifests the people's clamor for change from 'traditional and erudite politicians' to someone with whom they are able to identify. This same people power will also be the force that can make our democracy real and effective in the near future.

De Quiros' book successfully brought us back to the events leading to martial law. However, the succeeding martial law years from 1972 to 1986 are an equally important stage in Philippine

history. (In 1981, martial law was supposedly lifted but the authoritarian powers of Marcos remained in place.) The 'remake' of these remaining years will provide 'martial law babies' more insights and lessons on how the Filipino democratic spirit survived and eventually flourished. While these years saw the brutal repression of the people it also showed the emergence of a dynamic civil society which has become a positive 'by-product' of the Marcos regime. It should be fitting then that a sequel to *Dead Aim* be written. Perhaps Conrad de Quiros may once again guide us in this important journey through the years of struggle against the dictatorship.