

## Book Review

*The Drama of Dictatorship: Martial Law and the Communist Parties of the Philippines* by Joseph Scalice. New York: Cornell University Press, 2023. 384 pages. ISBN: 9781501770470

The 2022 elections in the Philippines witnessed the stunning return of the Marcos family to the apex of power, with a scion of the family emerging victorious. What used to be subdued, decades-long, smoldering “wars” over the history and memory of the Marcos era exploded in remarkable displays of acrimony on both sides of the political divide, tearing apart friendships, romantic and family relations, and professional ties. The clashing narratives of the Golden versus Dark Ages, which supposedly characterize the Marcos period, reflect the unprecedented polarization of the Filipino nation along simultaneous political and historical fault lines.

The book *Drama of Dictatorship: Martial Law and the Communist Parties of the Philippines* is a decisive and timely intervention in the still-ongoing, fiery debates. In my view, it is an exemplar of a nuanced and meticulous approach to the history of the Marcos era, which is a rarity in the scholarship on this period. Rather than the one-dimensional, black-or-white teleology of good and evil that is common in the Marcos era historiography, each chapter pulsates with the complexity and dynamism of a compelling historical account. This does not mean that the book will have the final word, as several of its claims and conclusions are likely to be debated for years to come. Nonetheless, this book forces proponents of both the Golden and the Dark Age narratives to reconsider their beliefs. They will find it challenging to uphold the simplistic, highly selective, and moralistic character of such narratives.

The book clearly shows the power of a rigorous, path-breaking scholarship in the face of massive political and moral pressures from both the pro- and anti-Marcos camps, all vying to control historical narratives. It forcefully asserts adjudicatory authority of historical

scholarship on this subject. While likely to be dismissed by both pro- and anti-Marcos die-hard supporters as flawed, it will be appreciated by those who have grown tired of the highly partisan character of scholarship and media coverage about the Marcos era.

The book comprises five main chapters that narrate and analyze, in very fine detail, the events leading to the declaration of martial law in September 1972, up to its peak in 1975-1976. The well-written introduction outlines the book's startling arguments: (1) it posits that it was not only Marcos, but also other Filipino leaders across ideological divides, who desired dictatorship; (2) suggests that they all, under the guise of fighting for the common people's welfare, threw them under the bus of political expediency and hypocrisy; and (3) argues that the communist parties, despite claiming to fight for the interests of the working classes, betrayed them due to their adherence to Stalinism. While most Filipinos know that elite politics can be extremely dirty, the book's revelations about how much filthier it actually was might still astonish them. The guilty parties were not just the traditional elites, whose exploitation of the common people was ostensibly in their DNA, but also the liberals and leftists who easily claimed moral authority to castigate them.

Packaged as a drama, the book prepares the audience with an overview in Chapter 1, setting the stage for the post-war political landscape. It introduces key players and their "understudies". The story of the 'gathering storm' in the mid-late 1960s starts to unfold in this chapter with eloquent and engaging prose. The first act of the drama concludes with Marcos's decisive victory in the 1969 elections and the ballistic responses of his enemies. The use of drama as metaphor to describe the build-up to dictatorship seems astute. On one hand, drama connotes intense emotion characterized by conflict, tensions, and unexpected turns which the book successfully captures. On the other hand, the dramatic framework used to weave the narratives impart the sense of being staged or conspiratorial, downplaying the open-ended nature of the unfolding historical process. While one may decry the diminishing of the open-endedness of history, perhaps it is the point: in a country like the Philippines, power relations are so skewed in favor of the few that history and politics can hardly be open-ended. Much of what transpired was staged and carried out through the theatrical machinations by elites vying for directorial supremacy. Personally, I

like the metaphor for its honesty about the representational character and narrative roots of historical reconstruction. As the author, Scalice is the scriptwriter and director of this drama. He has the power to stage it in ways he deems right and defensible; he is also accountable for whatever consequences it may bring.

Chapter 2 focuses on the First Quarter Storm from January to March 1970, a period marked by a series of violent confrontations between mostly student activists and the state operatives. A key point noted here, which the book shows to be a crucial feature of the CPP's strategy, is the deliberate provocation to elicit state violence to radicalize and brutalize the youth. It was reportedly intended to hasten the revolutionary process. Another key point raised in this chapter is the Stalinist injunction to cooperate with any groups including the "class enemies" such as oligarchs and capitalists. This cooperation aimed at advancing the cause of the national democratic revolution, often at the expense of the interests of the working class.

The book's arguments are well established in the first two chapters. The subsequent chapters provide more details and cases to reinforce the points. The lengthy Chapters 3 and 4, entitled "Barricades" and "The Writ Suspended" respectively, cover the eventful year of 1971. They narrate and analyze, in characteristically detailed fashion, key events such as the attempted coup in January, the establishment of the Diliman Commune in February, the CPP's attempt to control the labor unions, the rivalry between the CPP and PKP, the massacre in May, the Plaza Miranda Bombing and suspension of the writ of habeas corpus in August, as well as the elections in November. Together, Chapters 3 and 4 demonstrate the manipulative actions of the elites and the communists, revealing their betrayal of the working classes, as well as the collusion among groups that were supposedly ideologically incompatible. The author can hardly conceal his disgust over the opportunism of the key actors in this drama, particularly those from the two communist parties.

Chapter 5 focuses on the events leading to the declaration of the Martial Law in September 1972, as well as its aftermath up to 1975-1976. Just like the other chapters, several claims here can be endlessly debated, but the evidentiary justifications the book offers may not be easily dismissed. For those who genuinely

believed in the integrity of Ninoy Aquino and Joma Sison, reading through this chapter will be excruciating. Ninoy, the poster boy of the liberals, is portrayed here as Marcos's alter ego—manipulative, prone to violence, and authoritarian just like his nemesis. Joma, representative of leftist politics, is depicted as the betrayer of the working classes, someone who satisfies the interests of the capitalists concomitantly feeding the working classes to the machines of state repression that brutalize and awaken their revolutionary spirit. The implication is dire: ordinary people cannot trust political leaders regardless of ideological orientation. Amidst the rising tides of populism in various parts of the world, including the Philippines in the past two or more decades, a book like this offers more than a glimpse at possible reasons.

The book closes with an epilogue that, in my view, is less than satisfactory. I am unsure as whether it was hastily written when mental fatigue had set in, or if it was carefully thought through but the author was simply blindsided by his own predispositions. I feel the conclusion missed the opportunity to pin down and articulate far-reaching implications of the findings. The supposed re-staging of the drama of dictatorship in contemporary Philippines with Duterte and another Marcos at the helm, and the reference to the rather tired liberal tirade against populism, invoke the well-rehearsed trope of history being replicated and continued. It painfully missed the huge changes of situations on the ground. For instance, the overwhelming support of Filipinos for Duterte's authoritarianism until the end of his regime is mirrored by the spectacular return to power of a Marcos.

The book's epilogue clings to the liberal fantasy that Filipino voters who elected Duterte and Marcos were "unthinking". It suggests that voters were merely manipulated by Marcos' fake news and propaganda. However, the book's epilogue ignores a crucial implication that needs to be confronted head-on. What was the pattern of behaviors among the elite liberal, conservative, and leftist political actors in the Marcos era? How did these patterns continue in the post-Marcos decades? Did these patterns contribute to the growing distrust and weariness of traditional representative politics? Could this be a major factor that led many to throw their support behind figures like Duterte and Marcos Jr.?

The book is rich in details which could have cast a spotlight on the logic of progressive politics that, for decades, tied liberals and leftist groups at the hip. That is, rather than being responsive to people's needs, it was anchored mainly on the hatred of Marcos and authoritarianism. Resurrecting the old and trite bogeyman of the return of dictatorship, the author seemed tone-deaf. He sorely missed the big elephant in the room: unlike liberal-leftist intellectuals, most Filipinos do not care as much about the issues of human rights abuse, authoritarianism, and anti-Marcosism. By attributing the "noxious political atmosphere that hangs over the Philippines today" (263) solely to the CPP, the book suggests an inadvertent exoneration of liberal intellectuals and traditional elites. This gives the CPP too much credit for the sad state of contemporary Philippine politics. Personally, I find it sad that the 260 pages of pure grit, beautifully written prose, and vigorously argued historical analysis, ends with such a whimper.

The book is breathtakingly brave or reckless, depending on one's viewpoint. Seemingly unmindful of the nerves it will touch or the potential dangers it could pose, the book names people involved in episodes that, from the viewpoint of certain groups including their families, may be better buried in the past. It raises confronting questions about who has the right to one's stories and memories, and what or who gives scholars the moral license to dig up and appropriate them in the name of scholarly pursuits. At the height of the controversies surrounding red-tagging, these questions occupy center stage. This book forces us to revisit the old debates on the role of scholars as public intellectuals, particularly the boundaries of responsible and engaged scholarship.

The book is definitely a must-read for anyone interested in Philippine politics, in general, and the history of the Marcos era, in particular. Once a study or any knowledge claim, for that matter, circulates, it assumes a life of its own independent of the intent and interpretations of its authors. How it will be assessed and appropriated depends on various factors, including the proclivities of the readers and the configuration of power relations in society. This is particularly true for a book like this, which shakes to the core the self-image of the powerful and influential groups in society, as well as the many people who follow their lead. How various groups react to this book may serve

as a barometer of the level of maturity the Filipino nation has attained, both as a body politic and as a moral community.

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