

Experiencing Transitional Democracy: The Role of the Anti-Marcos Opposition Groups

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Thompson, Mark R. *The Anti-Marcos Struggle: Personalistic Rule and Democratic Transition in the Philippines* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995).

Democratic transition has been experienced by many societies especially during the last two decades of the twentieth century. This period has been referred to as the "third wave" of democratization¹. While democratic transitions in other countries have largely been brought about by negotiated agreements initiated by authoritarian rulers, the Philippines' transition to democracy has been caused by the breakdown of authoritarianism due to "people power." It has also been observed that the Philippine experience towards democratization has neither been "smooth nor unidirectional."² It is perhaps for these reasons that rigorous studies and critical assessments have been undertaken by scholars and observers of Philippine politics on this subject.

Mark R. Thompson's *The Anti-Marcos Struggle: Personalistic Rule and Democratic Transition in the Philippines* analyzes the Philippine experience on democratization by focusing on the nature of the opposition which toppled down the dictatorship and which eventually led to the country's transition to democracy. In this book, Thompson contributes not only to the growing literature on contemporary Philippine politics but also to the comparative study of democratization.

Much of the data used in this study were based on interviews conducted by the author from 1984 to 1992. His informants consisted of members of various anti-Marcos groups and analysts of Philippine politics. Unpublished materials during the era of the Marcos dictatorship were also utilized for this study. The extensive research, which spans almost a decade, is quite commendable. The author's pioneering effort to analyze the character of the opposition and the dynamics among the different groups (traditional opposition, the military, leftist and civil society groups) is definitely one of its major strengths. For these reasons, this book would surely be welcomed by both students and scholars of Philippine politics.

Thompson argued that the nature and character of the opposition was shaped by the type of politics perpetuated during that time. His characterization of Marcos' rule as "sultanistic" takes off from Juan J. Linz's definition of sultanism as:

[P]ersonal rulership...with loyalty to the ruler based not on tradition, or on his embodying an ideology, or on a unique personal mission, or on charismatic qualities, but on a mixture of fears and rewards to his collaborators. The ruler exercises his power without restraint at his own discretion and above all unencumbered by rules or by any commitment to an ideology or value system. (p.4)

Such type of rule has never been a characteristic feature of Philippine politics until Marcos' declaration of martial law in 1972.

The Philippines' transformation from clientelistic democracy to sultanistic rule was discussed quite extensively in chapters 1 and 2. During the pre-Martial Law period, Philippine politics was dominated by two political parties (Nacionalista and Liberal) "which alternated in office with almost mechanical regularity." The two parties were elite-dominated and competed in free elections. The "quest for state patronage" characterized Philippine politics during this time.

In chapters 3 and 4, Thompson discussed how Marcos perpetuated his sultanistic rule by exercising power for the benefit of his family and his cronies. The author also showed how Marcos exhibited the two factors which were observed to be unique to sultanism: (1) the systematic manner in which the state is plundered; and (2) the ruler's centrally-controlled rent-seeking behavior.

Following his central thesis that the character of the opposition is shaped largely by the type of politics perpetuated by the ruler, Thompson proceeded to discuss the struggle of the anti-Marcos groups against the dictatorship. Although the various groups succeeded in ousting Marcos, their struggle consisted "not of cooperation...to arrange an authoritarian withdrawal from power but of competition between moderate and radical oppositionists to overthrow an unyielding regime."

The author's analysis of Marcos' personalistic rule and the character of the anti-Marcos struggle explain why a peaceful or negotiated

transition had little relevance in the Philippine case. Marcos' sultanistic rule was very much vulnerable to a violent overthrow. It was during the Martial Law regime that the communist movement grew to become a major revolutionary threat. It was also during this period when a faction of middle-level military officers formed the Reform the Armed Forces Movement (RAM) which launched the coup attempt that sparked the "people power" revolt in February 1986. Even the traditional opposition tried to instigate an insurrection against the regime by launching an arson and bombing campaign.

However, the victory of the anti-Marcos groups was achieved not through these violent means but through the traditional way, i.e., the ballot. The opposition, led by Corazon Aquino, waged a moral campaign against Marcos. With the support of the Church, the business elite, the members of the U.S. Congress and the foreign press, it was able to achieve moral victory against the dictatorship. When Marcos did not allow Aquino to win the elections, the opposition mobilized its broad mass base to topple down the regime.

Thompson also made observations on the factors which shaped the character of Philippine democratic transition. First, he noted that the Philippine transition was an "unusual overthrow because electoral and revolutionary legitimacy went hand-in-hand." Second, it appeared that the only thing that brought the various opposition groups together was their desire to get rid of Marcos. As a result, a power struggle among the various groups which brought down the dictatorship ensued. The most prominent struggle was between the military and civilian authorities. This eventually caused many problems in achieving democratic transition and consolidation under the leadership of Corazon Aquino. Finally, the Aquino administration's inheritance of a highly politicized and factionalized armed forces proved to be its biggest problem. The dissident military challenged the government's stability by launching seven major coup attempts between July 1986 and December 1989. This has eventually prevented the government from focusing its efforts on addressing the issues concerning the restoration and consolidation of democracy. Instead, Mrs. Aquino focused on winning the support of the military, which she had antagonized at the beginning of her presidency. She yielded to the military's demand to increase its budget and by accepting a previously rejected counterinsurgency plan.

The author's discussion of the problems and issues of democratic transition and consolidation focused on the first years of the Aquino administration. Hence, attempts towards democratic consolidation during the administration of Mrs. Aquino and her successor, Fidel Ramos, were not discussed. Although this may be beyond the scope of the study, it is perhaps significant to identify the factors which have contributed towards democratic consolidation, or those which can be considered obstacles in its attainment. A more in-depth discussion on the prospects of democratization in the Philippines may have likewise been included. Nevertheless, the author was able to show why elite restoration occurred more swiftly than democratic consolidation and social reforms.

Although a number of scholarly works on the politics during the Martial Law era and its aftermath have already been produced, none of these have really focused on studying the character of the opposition and the nature of the struggle against the dictatorship. This definitely makes Thompson's contribution significant to the growing literature on democratization. The author's efforts likewise open a lot of areas that could be explored to further understand the Philippine experience on democratic transition and consolidation.

Future projects can perhaps focus on identifying the factors which contributed significantly to the occurrence and timing of Philippine democratic transition as well as the political, economic and cultural obstacles to democratic consolidation. As Thompson's study of the Philippine experience on democratic transition focused on the role of opposition groups, it is also interesting to find out the role played by "external forces."³ Was democratic transition in the Philippines influenced by transitions in other countries? What factors are common among societies that have experienced transition during the so-called "third wave"? Answers to these would definitely contribute significantly to the comparative study of democratization. ●

Notes

- 1 Samuel Huntington, "Democracy's Third Wave," in *Journal of Democracy*, July 1991, pp. 12-34.
- 2 Felipe B. Miranda (ed.), *Democratization: Philippine Perspective*, Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1997, p. ix.
- 3 Huntington, p. 14.