

# Change versus Continuity in the Philippines. Insurgency, “Counter-Terrorism” and the Mamapasano Incident

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*After more than 30 years I recently spent a week in the Philippines, giving a few arranged talks at universities, meeting with NGOs, and old friends who shared their understanding of this fascinating fast growing country of approximately 105 million people living on an archipelago that consists of more than 7,107 islands.*

*Additionally, of course, Manila is a mega-city that exhibits traffic at its worst, colorful jeepneys by the hundreds that are a distinctive national mode of urban transportation, a kind of customized bus service in smaller vehicles colorfully adorned, and now almost as many malls as churches epitomizing the economic and social intrusion of neoliberalism in the guise of globalization. Probably because of the large number of affluent expats living in the Makati neighborhood of Manila, the malls in the vicinity of my hotel offered visitors a wide range of world cuisines in numerous restaurants, cafes, bistros, and of course, a large Starbucks, staying open and crowded late into the night. As well, there were housed in these malls the same upper end array of global stores (e.g. Gucci, Coach, Cartier, Burberry, Zara, and so on)*

My visit coincided with two preoccupations in the country: the celebration of the 29<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the overthrow of the Marcos dictatorship by the People Power Revolution in 1986 and the current obsessive national debate about how to understand and react to the bungled counterterrorist operation in the Mindanao community of Mamapasano located in Manguindanao province that took place in late January of this year. Each of these occurrences offered a politically attuned visitor a finely honed optic by which to grasp the central tensions currently gripping the country.

There is little doubt that the people power movement of the mid-1980s remains a source of national pride for many Filipinos, although its overall results are not nearly as emancipatory as were the original hopes and aspirations. Procedural democracy seems to have become firmly established, and the fact that the president of the country is the son of Benigno and Corey Aquino. Benigno Aquino who had been assassinated as he stepped on the tarmac in 1983 is an important symbolic expression of a reformed political order. Marcos denied the crime, and there have been two inconclusive trials of military officers alleged to be responsible for planning and carrying out the assassination, but the event has not been authoritatively explained to date. Yet despite the momentous changes brought about by this populist rising, the political economy of the country remains as enmeshed as earlier in a web of entanglements with predatory globalization, making income and wealth disparities ever larger while massive degrading poverty persists. The oligarchic structures of land

tenure have been tweaked by mild reformism without being loosening their chokehold on the nation's vital arteries.

The Philippines have long been beset by insurgent challenges, which also seem likely to continue indefinitely. After decades of struggle the New Peoples Army founded in 1969 and operating on Maoist principles of 'peoples war' remains in control of a large number of remote communities in several of the important islands, clashes with government forces are reported in the media from time to time, and negotiations with the government with the goal of ending the conflict have been undertaken from time to time. This persevering movement appears to remain under the ideological leadership of Jose Maria Sison, who has been living as an exile in Utrecht for decades.

Given far more recent attention for both internal and international reasons are the several violent movements seeking autonomy and other goals in the largely Muslim island of Mindanao. There had been lengthy negotiations with the Moro Liberation Movement that agreed finally on a resolution of this conflict through the autonomy arrangement embedded in the Bangsamoro Basic Law that seemed on the verge of enactment until the Mamapasano incident of January 25<sup>th</sup> put off adoption at least until June, and possibly forever. Opponents are now raising Islamophobic fears that Mindanao would become a platform for political extremism if the agreement reached with such difficulty goes into effect.

What for me was particularly strange was this deeply ingrained national experience of successfully challenging intolerable aspects of the established order without being able to follow through in some way that achieves the goals being sought. In one way it is a rather impressive sign of reconciliation to realize that the son of Ferdinand Marcos, Bong-Bong, is an influential senator, and is even contemplating a run for the presidency in 2016 despite never repudiating the policies and practices of his father, which are movingly on display in a small museum dedicated to the crimes committed by the Marcos regime during the period of martial law (1972-1981). Additionally, Emee, the oldest Marcos daughter is the governor of the Ilocos Norte province, their home province, and even Imelda Marcos has been forgiven her excesses, shoes and otherwise, and serves as a popular member of the House of Representatives since being elected in 2010 by a plurality of over 80%. This is a remarkable type of rehabilitation of a family dictatorship believed responsible for siphoning off public monies in the billions and suppressing its opponents by reliance on torture, brutality, and assassination. The Marcos clan has never recanted or expressed remorse, but explains that whatever wrongs occurred during that time as either 'mistakes' of subordinates or the unproven allegations of opposition forces.

When I asked how was it possible that the Marcos past has been so cleanly erased from the contemporary blackboard of Filipino awareness, I received various answers: "They have lots of money" "They never lost popularity in their home province where lots of development took place while Marcos governed" "The past no longer matters; it is the present that counts" "the oligarchy still rules the country and includes all leading families regardless of their political affiliations."

There are attractive aspects of this experience of 'reconciliation without truth,' that is, without some formal process of reckoning and accountability, at least the palliative of a truth and reconciliation commission. Such a spirit of resigned moderation is in some respects the opposite of the sort of polarization that afflicts so many countries at present. It is not only that the Marcos's have been allowed to participate prominently in the political

system without being compromised by their past, but also those on the far left who in the Marcos period were 'underground' and enemies of the state are now to be found in the Congress or even in the cabinet of the president. Perhaps, the Philippines is quietly experimenting in the practice of 'pluralist democracy,' while ignoring the more radical features of 'substantive and restorative democracy.'

A similar pattern of 'conscious forgetfulness' is evident in relation to the colonial past for both its Spanish and American versions. There is no bitterness despite the cruelties and harshness of the Spanish colonial legacy. Catholicism is as firmly rooted in the country as it was when it was a willing partner of the Spanish rulers in the oppressive past, and continues to flourish in a manner that has not occurred in any other post-colonial Asian country. When Pope Francis visited the country in January it was the largest celebratory event in the country's history. This status of Catholicism is also remarkable considering the Church's persistent opposition to birth control for poor families that are continuing to have large families that they are unable to support; over 30% of Filipino children are reported to be stunted due to the effect of malnutrition and hunger.

Despite the bloody counterinsurgency war fought by the United States in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War of 1898, which crushed the Philippines' expectations of national independence that had been promised by Americans as part of their own anti-colonial identity. Most absurdly, the American president at the time William McKinley, actually justified administering the Philippines as part of its responsibility to Christianize this most Christian of countries. The decision to break the American promise of independence made to anti-Spanish nationalist leaders in the Philippines were articulated in the brazen spirit of Manifest Destiny, putting a moral and religious face on America's first flirtation with undisguised colonialism. McKinley's words are memorably revealing: "...there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all, and to educate the Filipinos, and uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and by God's grace do the very best we could by them.."

My initial contact with the Philippines was as a supporter of the 'Anti-Bases Coalition,' which in the 1980s was seeking the removal of the two huge American military bases at Subic Bay and Clark Air Force Base. This has been a struggle with strong nationalist overtones, and engaging leading political figures in the country. The bases were eventually closed, but consistent with the tendency to exhibit the truth of the French adage '*plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*' [the more things change, the more they remain the same] the strategic relationship with the United States was sustained, even deepened, and certainly continued. There were American Special Forces units operating rather freely in the country as part of the global war on terror, and there were intimidations that the role of the United States in the Mamapasano incident was responsible for the bloodshed that generated a political crisis in the country.

Of course, there are explanations for this seeming contradiction between getting rid of American military bases and maintaining military cooperation. The government in Manila was benefitted by the assistance of the United States in dealing effectively with its domestic insurgent challenges from the left. Beyond this, the Philippines turned out to be one of the anti-Islamic battlefields in the post-9/11 'war on terror,' and the United States exerted pressures on the government in Manila to give its consent to counter-terrorist operations within its borders. In the background, but not very far removed from political consciousness, were the flaring island disputes with China and the overall security concerns associated with the regional rise of China. In this geopolitical setting, the United States was seen as a necessary friend to offset the more immediate and direct existential threats posed by China.

In important respects, these patterns can be understood as the post-Cold War securitization of Asian relations in the shadow of the transformative impacts of the 9/11 attacks.

The Mamapasano incident is emblematic of these realities. Under apparent pressure from the United States to capture or kill a much wanted terrorist known as Marwan, the Philippine elite special forces units were persuaded to carry out the operation. In the process 42 of these highly trained troops were killed, along with Marwan, and there were many repercussions. The United States role was at first disguised, but investigations revealed involvement, including a drone watching and maybe guiding the operation, along with the allegation that the Filipino soldiers were 'sacrificed' to spare American lives in a situation where heavy armed resistance should have been anticipated. Some blamed the president, and there were demonstrations during my days in the country demanding his resignation, despite his popularity remaining quite high. It is not clear what will be the outcome, whether there will be a downgrading of cooperation with the United States and some accountability imposed on those who are alleged to have bungled the operation. Yet if the past is any guide, the crisis will pass, and continuity of U.S./Filipino relations will prevail in the security domain.

The Mamapasano incident is a clear instance of the new global security paradigm: the centrality of non-state actors, the role of covert operations by foreign special forces, the transnational dimensions of political conflict, the erosion of territorial sovereignty, the primacy of information and surveillance, and the hierarchical relationship between the United States and most governments in the global south. To make this last point evident, it is inconceivable that Filipino special forces would participate in an operation to capture persons residing in the United States suspected of affiliation with insurgent movements in the Philippines.

There is a complex redesign of world order underway, with one set of developments reshaping the political economy of globalization by way of the BRICs [but see acute skeptical analysis in William I Robinson, "The transnational state and the BRICS: a global capitalist perspective," *Third World Quarterly*, 36(NO.1): 1-21 (2015)] and the Chinese initiative with respect to investment banking, [Asian Infrastructure Initiative Bank]; another set of developments concerned with securitization, ranging from the global surveillance apparatus disclosed by Edward Snowden to the incredible American global presence featuring over 700 foreign military bases and special forces units active in over 150 countries; and still another, is preoccupied with the rise of religion and civilizational identity as a political force, and what this means for stability and governance.

We still lack a language to assess this emergent world order, and possess no regulatory or normative framework within which to distinguish what is legitimate, prudent, and permissible from what is illegitimate, imprudent, and impermissible. Neither international law nor the UN has been able to adapt to the contemporary global agenda, and show few signs of an ability to do so. While this fluidity and normative uncertainty persists global warming worsens, the risks of nuclear war increase, and leading states shape their policies without accountability. It is not a time for complacency. Such a state of affairs is dangerous, and likely unsustainable. And yet what can be done remains elusive.

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[\*Rapporteur\*](#) on “the situation of human rights in the [Palestinian territories](#) occupied since 1967.” Since 2002 he has lived in Santa Barbara, California, and taught at the local campus of the University of California in Global and International Studies, and since 2005 chaired the Board of the Nuclear Age Peace Foundation. His most recent book is *Achieving Human Rights* (2009).

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