

Book Review

## Authoritarianism and Avarice: Lessons from a Not Too Distant Past

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A review of Alex Bello Brillantes, Jr., *Dictatorship and Martial Law: Philippine Authoritarianism in 1972* (Manila: Great Books and UP College of Public Administration, 1987), 182 pages and Belinda A. Aquino, *Politics of Plunder: The Philippines under Marcos* (Manila: Great Books and UP College of Public Administration, 1987), 208 pages.

The 1986 transfer of power brought about a plethora of books and other printed materials that were critical of the previous Marcos regime. Included in this avalanche of materials as an aftermath of regained democratic space are the two books under review which were jointly published by Great Books and UP College of Public Administration.

Dr. Brillantes' work is a scholarly attempt to answer the following questions: why did President Marcos impose martial law in the Philippines?; what were the major factors taken into consideration when he made that decision?; and what sectors of society influenced the decision, one way or the other? The answers to these questions, according to the author, depends on the perspective one adopts.

For those who are in the habit of accepting official interpretations, the following explanation would suffice:

- 1) Martial law was triggered in response to various leftist and rightist plots against the government;
- 2) Martial law and the subsequent imposition of authoritarian governmental structure was a major part of political development process; and
- 3) Martial law was an adaptation of the hierarchical, authoritarian and organic view of man, society and polity.

However, for those who believe that entirely different considerations were the main factors for martial law, two alternatives were posited by the author. The first alternative is that martial law was an instrument used by the former President to perpetuate himself in power. The second alternative, on the other hand, is a Marxist interpretation which argues that martial law was imposed due to the following reasons:

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- 1) The former President's desire to perpetuate himself in power;
- 2) Pressures emanating from both the world state and world capitalist systems to preserve the (mostly) American security and economic interest in the Philippines;
- 3) Rivalry for political and economic dominance among certain factions of the ruling class; and
- 4) Efforts of the ruling elite to depoliticize certain segments of the population who were threatening their dominant political and economic position in the society.

In the concluding part of the treatise, Dr. Brillantes seems to explicate the authoritarian and martial law episode of the country from the alternative point of view. This is borne out by his findings that "martial law was not simply an instrument used by one man to perpetuate himself to power. The explanation . . . must be put in a broader historically specific context located in the world systems, without however, neglecting analysis of the classes internal to these systems."

The originator of this erudite piece on authoritarianism raised rather controversial issues as regards imperatives for martial law declaration. By taking a more encompassing and higher level of academic analysis that includes world state system and world capitalist system, his well-documented and rigorously researched study revealed that protection of foreign interest (mostly American) greatly influenced the creation of authoritarian form of government in the country. With the establishment of the Marcos dictatorship, the Philippines was integrated firmly in the orbit of US hegemonic constellation. An important feature of this state-level relationship is inequitable interaction that keeps a third world country like the Philippines in a state of limbo in the socio-political and economic sphere. This scenario occurs because of the needs of developed countries to maintain their dominance in the markets of the Less Developed Countries for their excess goods and services. Dissent, which can hamstring oppressive machinations of developed countries, is effectively muzzled and curtailed in an autocratic state. When views contrary to the interests of dominant countries are silenced, actions inimical to the interest of the Philippines can be pursued without delay and subsequently achieved sans great costs. As a willing instrument to further US interest, former President Marcos benefitted greatly by bowing to the dictates of foreign agents in terms of continued illegal hold of executive powers and the blessings of legitimacy bestowed by the US.

Dr. Brillantes further raised the inevitable question: "has martial law attained the objectives for which it was imposed?" An official apologist of the former strongman said that martial law was declared in response to the communist insurgency that was threatening the Republic. Unfortunately, by applying this test, martial law failed miserably. The insurgency has grown tenfold and made Marcos (as perceived by some) the best recruiting sergeant of the New People's Army, the military arm of the Communist Party of the Philippines. Depoliticization of certain segments of the population was an explanation postulated by those who toe the Marxist line of thinking. Nevertheless, even with state might squarely behind the martial law administrators, the articulate segments of the population reacted in an

inverse manner. Instead of depoliticization, the population became more politicized and radicalized because of long years of deprivation of basic civil and political rights.'

The only "success" achieved by martial law was extending the unwanted stay in office of the former Chief Executive beyond the legal and constitutional limits.

While the main focus of *Dictatorship and Martial Law* is on the origins of martial law, the book by Dr. Belinda A. Aquino is a post-action report that concretizes the truism of the maxim "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

The mutually inclusive connection between power and corruption was clearly validated by this former faculty member of the UP College of Public Administration when she exposed the principal ways used by Marcos and his coterie of cronies which include, but were not limited, to the following:

- 1) Outright takeover of large private enterprises, particularly those belonging to political opponents of the regime;
- 2) Creation of monopolies or state enterprises for vital sections of the economy, such as sugar, coconuts, tobacco, construction, shipping and other industries, and placing them under the control of Marcos cronies;
- 3) Awarding of government loans and other resources to private individuals or parties acting as fronts of, or beholden to Marcos or his cronies;
- 4) The use of offshore holding corporations and dummy companies to "launder" money, invest in real estate and other business ventures sheltered from taxes, and conceal profits as well as ownership of bank accounts;
- 5) Receiving or extracting kickbacks and commissions from firms and companies doing or wanting to do business in the Philippines;
- 6) Skimming off foreign aid and other forms of international assistance;
- 7) Direct raiding of the public treasury; and
- 8) Smuggling or "dollar salting" abroad.

After going through the mechanisms employed by Marcos and his select circle of friends, the author went on to cite specific instances to authenticate the existence of such ways and means to systematically and legally pillage the weal of the Philippines.

In this worthwhile account of Dr. Aquino, a conscious effort against adopting a simplistic view towards understanding the plundering and corrupt psyche of the Marcos regime is very apparent. This is made self-evident by the fact that the author transcended the propensity of other works on the subject to stop at enumerating sinful acts of commission. Instead of following this norm, the eminent wordsmith provided some interesting general views on the dynamics of corruption - its overview, explanations, relation to presidential graft and the role of external factors in local corruption. The portion that examines the general views on corruption is especially noteworthy because the recognition of sociocultural and external factors are

vital in proper discernment of reasons to account for the rise of the kleptocratic duumvirate.

As an offshoot of power and corruption linkage, the writer properly saw the connection between power and greed. With the former First Lady as her subject, she traced the acquisition binge (legal or otherwise) of the said subject from roots of material wants and need for attention - two vital factors missing from childhood of the wilted Rose of Tacloban.

In a fitting finale to her work, Dr. Aquino described the monumental task ahead for the Presidential Commission on Good Government (PCGG) in its rather quixotic drive to recover ill-gotten wealth acquired by Marcos and his ilk.

Yet, despite its gargantuan workload, the PCGG had some accomplishments to speak of, the most prominent of which is its sequestration of substantial amount of resources in the form of stocks, real estate and other holdings by the Marcoses or his surrogates. While the PCGG might have some major coups, of late this Commission ran into legal thickets regarding issues on sequestration and morality of its fiscal agents as well as determining ownership of disputed properties and lack of evidence that is admissible in court. The road then towards recovery of any substantial amount of money pillaged by the former regime would be long and tedious, pockmarked by delaying tactics and legal nitpicking that will surely be resorted to by the lawyers of the former First Couple. At the forefront of this drive to recoup pilfered national wealth is the PCGG, which will have case loads that will ensure its continued existence well over into the 1990s.

Dr. Aquino's brilliant exposition substantiated and sustained the findings and arguments of the other book included in this review. It will be recalled that the author of *Dictatorship and Martial Law* postulated that an alternative perspective to explain the beginnings of martial rule is the covetous need of the former Head of State to prolong his reign of terror. Consequently, with power and vast opportunities for hoarding the goods of this earth, martial law was decreed in 1972 under false pretexts, not only protected the fortune he had already acquired, most illicitly over the past decade, it also served to accelerate the amassing of even more power and wealth for several more years.

Another lucid convergence of the two works under academic scrutiny is the continued intervention of extraneous factors in clearly domestic affairs of the Philippines.

Dr. Brillantes' work manifested the exigency of foreign (principally US) meddling given the increasing stridency and agitation to completely overhaul the inequitous Philippine socioeconomic structure. Any imbalances that will lead to the erosion of US dominance is clearly untenable. By not reacting to military rule in the country, as compared to that of South Korea, the US sent an unmistakable, though unverbally, signal that they favor despotism in order to stabilize and cool the volatile Philippine situation in 1972.

Following the same track of thinking, the penwoman of the monograph on systematic corruption, placed the onus of the blame squarely on US lap by stating categorically that 'the US government was a party to the Marcos plunder.' The author correctly urged that a possible agenda for further research should include among others, an investigation and exploration of the part played by the US in exacerbating the corruption of Marcos.

In their totality, the books under consideration are well written, comprehensively researched and bespeak of the deep intellectual moorings of both makers of the books. However, the piece of Dr. Brillantes seems to suffer from repetitiveness and highly academic rendition. The general reader who must be the target audience could lose interest in the book because of so much unexplained jargon that might be unintelligible to lay readers. The part of the book that delves on world class system and world state system could stand further elucidation for the benefit of interested readers but unarmed with the esoteric tools of political science. On the other hand, the work of Dr. Aquino reads like a testimonial rather than an analytical effort to explain, understand and prevent surfacing of imitators aping the Marcos larcenous career. The writer is on the right path when she clearly saw the part played by the US in the grand scale robbery of the country by their favorite satrap. Inadvertently or not, Dr. Aquino however limited her discussion to a superficial treatment of this very important aspect and consigned the same task to future researchers on the same subject.

In sum, the intellectual contributions of the two authors should be made compulsory readings for college courses in political science and ethics. The books could very well be a part of the required knowledge source for policy makers and future public administrationist of this country. This step could go a long way in ensuring that never again would this nation allow the growth of another homegrown tyrant as well as conditions favorable to extraction of national patrimony for the benefit of one or few persons.