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**FILIPINO PUBLIC OPINION ON THE  
ISSUE OF AMERICAN FACILITIES IN  
THE PHILIPPINES**

**by Felipe B. Miranda**

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## FILIPINO PUBLIC OPINION ON THE ISSUE OF AMERICAN MILITARY FACILITIES IN THE PHILIPPINES

Felipe B. Miranda\*

This compilation of materials includes two articles by the present author recently published in the *Newsday* and a set of charts prepared from survey data generated by the Social Weather Stations in the last two years.

The articles and accompanying charts make the following make the following points:

1. Public opinion on the issue of American military facilities in Philippine bases, more popularly referred to simply as the American military bases, shows a decreasing support for maintaining these facilities in the country as well as a firming up of opposition to their continued stay here.
2. A plurality of Filipino respondents nevertheless continues to be supportive of the status quo option as regards these facilities.
3. A crucial bloc of people, those who would retain or terminate these military facilities depending on what the Americans are willing to offer for their continued use, appears to hold the balance between those who are anti-bases and those who are pro-bases.
4. A national referendum on the bases at this point in time cannot be confidently predicted as going either for the retention or rejection of these military facilities.
5. While some differences in degree might be noted for the public opinion profiles in Metro Manila and nationwide, there appears to be an increasing convergence of these profiles especially within the last year.

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## THE AMERICAN MILITARY BASES: VOX POPULI

Lately we have had a spate of pronouncements by government officials and other influential people on the issue of American military facilities in the Philippines. The President, the Vice-President, cabinet officials, senators, congressmen, mayors and journalists have aired their positions (and non-positions) on what is popularly referred to as the American military bases issue.

What about the general public? What ideas do they entertain regarding this concern? In a country purportedly transiting towards a democratic order, political as well as other opinion leaders might consider asking the people on crucial issues rather than simply telling them. Otherwise, one might suspect that a general disdain for public opinion prevails and that, instead of a much trumpeted democratizing polity, there persists an oligarchic regime.

Legitimate public opinion probes have to be done with great care, with all the competence and conscientiousness that academic social science demands. Otherwise, they degenerate into incompetent and often prostituted instruments in the service of vested, oligarchic interests.

No less crucial is the imperative for surveys of public opinion to be reported on by competent newsmen. Lately, largely ignorant columnists authoritatively pontificating on the basis of either grossly misunderstood or non-existent survey findings disgraced the pages of some of the better papers in Metro Manila. This sad state of affairs has no short-term remedy, unless newspaper editors are willing to assume stern reporters. One cannot be overly optimistic in this regard. It is like chasing the wind, as the sage in *Ecclesiastes* says.

The Social Weather Stations (SWS) has the most extensive, non-proprietary survey data available on American military bases, with five of its national surveys since March 1987 tracking related public sentiments. Using a sample of 1200 voting age respondents, implying an error margin of plus or minus 3%, SWS surveys in the last two years asked whether respondents are aware of the existence of American military bases here and whether they believed the bases ought to be removed immediately, removed by 1991, removed or retained indefinitely depending on what the Americans are prepared to materially offer for the use of the bases, or retained because the Philippines already benefits enough from status quo arrangements with the United States.

Clearly the first two options are anti-bases while the last is a pro-bases option. The third might be referred to as the depends-on-benefit (DB) preference. The last is basically a status quo (SQ) option.

Between March 1987 and February 1989 (the latest SWS national survey), about 7 in 10 respondents affirmed awareness of the military bases used by the Americans here. All over the country,



aware urban respondents outnumbered their rural counterparts, with Metro Manila respondents predictably showing the highest proportions (80% to 90%). Together with urban locality, socioeconomic class and sex showed definite influence on the probability of respondent awareness, with the socio-economically better off and the males being more aware than the poorer and female respondents.

In the last two years, the anti-bases sentiments have been remarkably stable, with remove now and remove by 1991 averaging about 22%. The status quo (SQ), pro-base option has been running at around 46%, while the depends-on-benefits (DB) option accounts for 27% on the average.

Clearly, while the SQ sentiment comes near expressing a national sense (reckoning this to be at least a majority of respondents choosing the option), the question of the bases is not a foregone conclusion even if a national referendum were held today. The DB respondents could go with the anti-bases vote should they feel that the United States has failed to put together a viable package of benefits in return for the use of the bases. (Or should they be lead into believing that the United States simply has not seriously considered what could be fair returns for the bases. American officials making careless remarks about Philippine ideas of fairness just might be the most effective anti-bases sentiment builders.)

Americans have reason to be concerned about Filipino public opinion on the bases. There is a good probability that the 46% pro-bases, SQ bloc of public opinion could erode, as has already happened in Metro Manila. (From March 1987 to February 1989, SQ respondents in Metro Manila dropped from 52% to 37%.)

Awareness appears to be negatively correlated with SQ responses. (In February 1989, Metro Manila at 91% had the highest proportion of aware respondents compared to 56% and 57% in low awareness areas like the Visayas and Mindanao.) In terms of pro-bases SQ responses, however, Metro Manila posted only 37%, about 2/3 to 3/4 of the proportion of SQ respondents observed in Visayas and Mindanao.) A campaign might be launched by interested parties to inform the remaining 30% of voting-age Filipinos who are still not aware of the bases. A higher awareness profile could facilitate a national distribution of respondents which followed the Metro Manila pattern more closely, with a consequent depreciation of the SQ option.

Metro Manila has been the main political trend-setter for the rest of the country. Historically, lag times between what takes place in the metropolitan area and its adoption by the rest of the country could be as much as two years and as short as six months. Perhaps, with the growing criticality of out times as well as technological advances in communication, the lag time might even be significantly reduced, say to three months.

A more intensive analysis of Metro Manila public opinion on the bases, with some very surprising findings for those who hew to conventional wisdom and superficial journalism, deserves a separate write-up. Such analysis sharpens the challenge between the protagonists of the debate on the bases, delineates the probable soft targets of pro and anti-bases campaigns, and will be the subject of my next article.



## AMERICAN MILITARY BASES: THE VIEW FROM METRO MANILA

Conventional wisdom has always pointed to Metro Manila as significantly different from the rest of the Philippines. Politically, Metro Manilans are supposed to be trend setters, initiating developments which take the rest of the country anytime between six months to two years to manifest.

Conventional wisdom may not be completely reliable on the point of innovation nowadays. (Much of the conceptualization and implementation of autonomous government ideas, for instance, is undertaken beyond Manila. The same thing might be said of military as well as CPP-NPA attempts to innovate in insurgency-related strategies and tactics.) Still, it is not so much on this point that conventional wisdom might be found wanting, as in its apparent inability to appreciate the much accelerated rate of diffusion of any political development, from whichever focal point in the Philippines.

Following this line of thinking, one might anticipate that political developments in Metro Manila and the rest of the country would tend to differ more in terms of degree and not of substance. Opinion profiles, for instance, would be recognizably the same all over the country, with temporary and not too large differences across areas in the proportions of respondents subscribing to any specific survey choice.

This is probable already happening in the case of public opinion on American military bases in the country.

Metro Manila largely reflects the national patterns of public opinion as presented in this author's immediately-preceding article on the American military bases. As indicated by average values based on data from five Social Weather Stations' surveys in the last two years (March 1987 to February 1989), national opinion on the bases is split three ways. The anti-bases group (composed of those who would remove the bases now or, at the latest, 1991) accounts on the average for about 22% of all respondents; the pro-bases, status quo (SQ) group for around 46%; and those who would decide to remove or retain the bases after 1991, depending on the benefits the Americans would offer for use of the bases (DB), about 27%.

The comparable statistics for Metro Manila are 28% for the anti-bases group, 28% for the DB group, and 42% for the SQ group. Superficially, the Metro Manila opinion distribution is not distinguishable from that of the nation. A close analysis of the two-year survey data reveals otherwise.

There is at least a sustainment and probably even some build-up of the anti-bases group. For those demanding an immediate removal of the bases, the proportions are from 9% in March 1987 to 12% in February 1989; for those who would remove the bases by 1991, the increase is from 16% in March 1987 to 20% two years later. (Nationally, no significant change is reflected for this combination of anti-bases groups, with those calling for removal in 1991 even showing a marginal decrease from 19% to 16%.)



The more remarkable thing is the significant erosion (from 52% in March 1987 to 37% in February 1989) among the SQ group or those who would retain the bases after 1991. (The national data does not show as sharp a reduction in SQ proportions, from 48% in March 1987 to 43% in February 1989.)

Neither the anti-bases nor the pro-bases group is able to muster a majority sentiment, unless either is supported by the more pragmatic, depends-on-benefit or DB group.

The criticality of this DB group is further suggested by the fact that, between March 1987 and February 1989 (and up to July 1989, relying on the data of the yet officially unreleased Social Weather Stations survey of July 1989), the margin enjoyed by pro-bases SQ respondents over those who are anti-bases are almost always less than the proportion of DB respondents. (The only exception in the last two years is March 1987.) **What this means is that status quo oriented, pro-bases interest groups cannot safely presume that any referendum on the bases will be decided in their favor by Metro Manilans, or be Filipinos in general should the Metro Manila pattern of opinions become the national pattern within a relatively short time from now.**

Yet another consideration can upset the complacent pro-bases party. When opinions do get to change from one option to another concerning the bases issue, the opinion changes reflected in the last two years do not bode well for SQ sentiments. Those who are for removing the bases in 1991 appear to be able to change towards DB and SQ (as reflected in survey data from March 1988 to August 1988), but their clearest and most recent movement (from February 1989 to July 1989) is towards remove the bases now, a clear hardening of their anti-bases position.

On the other hand some DB and SQ sentiments can change into remove by 1991, as reflected by opinion changes from October 1987 to March 1988. Furthermore, among among the SQ respondents in July of 1989, as many as 12% of the total SQ proportion of 38% might be considered vulnerable to switching to remove by 1991 or DB; these 12% are those who believe the bases could continue to stay in the Philippines after 1991, but for a period less than five years. Should much controversy attend the discussion of Philippine benefits from the bases, or should there be more insensitive foreign officials making pronouncements which sting Filipino pride, these soft SQ respondents just might make the switch to other options on the bases. And, finally, as regards the very critical DB, this sentiment has so far shown itself capable only of changing into an anti-bases, not a pro-bases, stance.

Some implications can be drawn from this analysis. First, while there is presently a plurality of people for retaining the bases (38% in Metro Manila as of July 1989 and 43% nationwide as of February 1989), this plurality is an eroded and probably still eroding plurality. Second, specifically in Metro Manila, the criticality of the DB group heightens as a combination of hardening among the anti-bases and softening among the pro-bases opinion groups takes place. Third, the DB's criticality must be interpreted as political capital for the Philippine government since it prevents interested foreign parties from making simplistic assumptions about how the bases issue must resolve in their favor. (At the very least, the crucial DB sentiment complicates the foreign calculus and induces interested foreign governments to re-think what might be cavalierly perceived as "crazy" demands by Filipinos for an improved package of benefits.) Fourth, because there is a great deal of similarity in the general profiles of public opinion nationwide and in Metro Manila, there is a good chance that some of the more critical features of the Metro



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manila profile could be integrated and within a fairly short period of time, reflected nationally. Fifth, in September 1989, there is no way one can be dogmatic about how the issue of the bases will fare in a Metro Manila or nationwide referendum.

What we have in the bases issue is a free zone, with those who intelligently maximize their opportunities eventually gaining ground over those who don't. No miracles can be expected in resolving the bases issue and neither irresponsible journalists nor opportunistic political leaders will provide a lasting answer to this national concern. Only a better informed, intelligently-organized and passionately-led people can.



# **CHARTS**

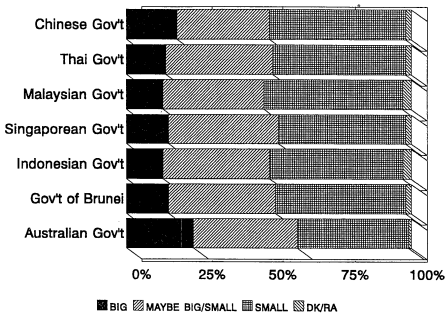






## TRUST IN FOREIGN GOVERNMENTS

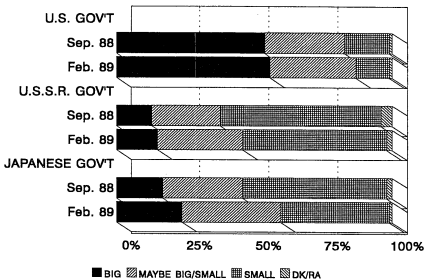
Total Philippines, February 1989





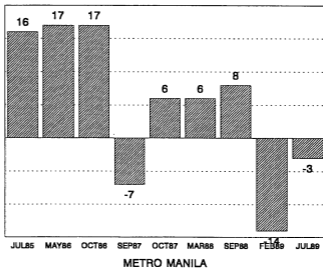
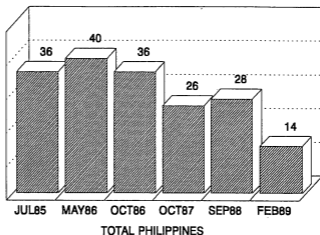
## TRUST IN FOREIGN GOVERNMENTS

Total Philippines



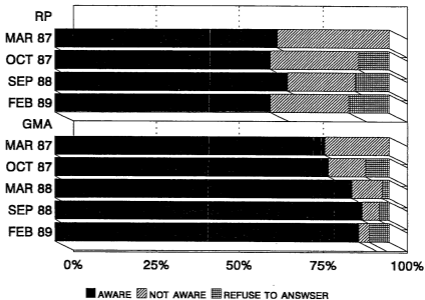


## MARGIN OF CONFIDENCE IN THE AMERICAN GOVERNMENT



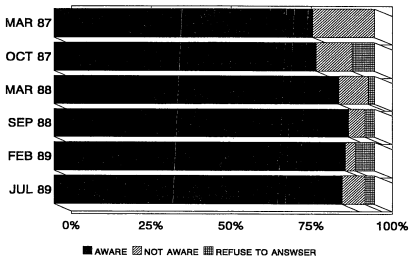


## AWARENESS OF U.S. MILITARY BASES





### AWARENESS OF U.S. MILITARY BASES Metro Manila





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**HOW LONG SHOULD MILITARY BASES  
STAY IN THE PHILIPPINES?**

Metro Manila, July 1989  
(Base: Status Quo Opinion)

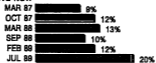
<b>≤ 5 YEARS</b>	<b>10%</b>
<b>6 - 10 YEARS</b>	<b>21%</b>
<b>&gt; 10 YEARS</b>	<b>69%</b>



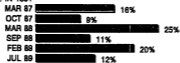
## OPINIONS ON U.S. BASES

Metro Manila, Base: Total Aware

### REMOVE NOW



### REMOVE IN 1991



### DEPENDS ON BENEFITS

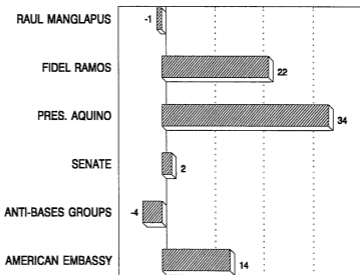


### STATUS QUO





**MARGIN OF TRUST IN THE RECOMMENDATIONS  
OF THE FOLLOWING WITH REGARD TO US MILITARY BASES**  
(Base: Total aware of U.S. bases)

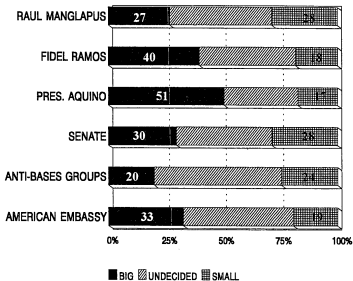


Metro Manila, July 1989





**TRUST IN THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE  
FOLLOWING WITH REGARD TO US MILITARY BASES**  
(Base: Total aware of U.S. bases)



Metro Manila, July 1989



## TRUST RATINGS OF FOREIGN GOVERNMENTS

Margin of Trust

