

Reform or Revolution? The Unresolved Philippine Dilemma

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1. The Centennial of the Philippine Revolution was marked by a string of conferences and scores of publications exploring the event in great, sometimes miniscule, detail. Unfortunately, there were few if any attempts to apply theoretical tools to analyze the late 19th – early 20th century Filipino upheaval and produce an overall assessment. At times it looked as if the scholars tacitly agreed that, like so many other theories (or, perhaps, like revolution itself in the present day global environment), the theory of revolution has no legitimate place in the postmodern academic discourse. They seemed to be equally disinterested in explaining why during the last one hundred years the Philippines have been demonstrably “stuck” between reform and revolution, periodically trying but always failing to make a decisive move in either of these directions.

2. Just as many historians of the Philippine revolution have avoided theoretical issues, renowned theoreticians of revolution tend to bypass the Philippines’ historical experience. Or should we rather say that they are too busy with the “Great Revolutions” – the Dutch, the English, the American, the French, the Russian and Chinese – to pay enough attention to “smaller” ones? Among the landmark works seemingly supporting this impression but actually offering useful approaches to the Filipino case is “*Revolution and the Transformation of Societies: A Comparative Study of Civilizations*” by S. N. Eisenstadt (1978). According to him, genuine revolutions (taking place, as a rule, either in Western or imperial-feudal societies) are characterized by simultaneous, mutually reinforcing shifts in various fields of human activity. The results are breakthroughs into modern civilization. In contrast, there is a whole family of events, which, outwardly resembling classical revolutions do not bring about *coalescent change*. In Eisenstadt’s view, this is fairly typical of patrimonial non-Western societies with the preponderance of clannish and patron-client networks as mechanisms of status quo maintenance and partial wealth redistribution from the top down. In such instances, socially dominant groups selectively “borrow” elements of modernity not so much to transform the existing order as to recreate it in a somewhat different, revitalized form. Instead of a breakthrough into modernity, the result is a passage to *neopatrimonialism*. In many ways, the Philippine Revolution might serve as an example. Although it subsequently led to the formal introduction of political democracy, the development of modern education and greater upward social mobility for certain sectors of the population, there was no radical change in agrarian relations and the social structure.

3. As described by Eisenstadt, neopatrimonial systems are often capable of gradual and partial modernization, but strongly resist far-reaching, all-embracing reforms. At the same time, neopatrimonialism presupposes periodic slides into political instability. Among the factors contributing to unrest and expressions of popular discontent are those painful problems (e.g., agrarian) which had not been solved by the original “non-classical” revolution, – plus the impact of the national revolutionary tradition which had emerged as a result of the latter, and reinforcements of revolutionary mood through inevitable external influences (because during the modern era classical revolutions had passed the revolutionary impulse to the whole world). One might say that neopatrimonialism is prone to producing *secondary revolutionary crises* – or at least something approximating them. The 20th century Philippines experienced several moments like that – notably, during the Huk rebellion, then on the eve of Martial Law, and, finally, in the mid-1980s, prior to the fall of Marcos.

4. Caught in the “Reform or Revolution” dilemma since the times of Jose Rizal and haunted by the specter of a Communist takeover since the times of Manuel Quezon, Filipino elites have contemplated more than once a kind of *revolution from above* – a governmental reformist initiative of such scope and magnitude that would forever exterminate the threat of a violent revolution from below. Quezon’s “*Social Justice*” program undertaken during the Commonwealth era was a preliminary, exploratory step in that direction. Next came the highly advertised attempt by Ramon Magsaysay to promote political and social renewal as a way of defeating the Huks. Less than two decades after that came the launching of Ferdinand Marcos’ “*New Society*” project. Each of these initiatives presented evidence of the typically neopatrimonialist ability of the elites to adapt to changing circumstances without initiating major transformations. Thus, by implication, the “Reform or Revolution” dilemma is left unresolved. It is worthwhile to add that American support has been invariably extended to such efforts, confirming Eisenstadt’s reference to colonial (or neocolonial) interferences as factors promoting neopatrimonialist development.

5. Among all the attempts to organize a revolution from above, the Marcos project initially seemed – at least on paper – the most promising. The “*New Society*” blueprint looked like a comprehensive plan, a set of interrelated political, administrative and economic changes. Even moderate, but definite and synchronized successes on each of these fronts could have produced something akin to that effect of coalescent change, which Eisenstadt associates with a genuine revolution and a breakthrough into modernity.

6. The collapse of the Marcos’ plan was as comprehensive as the plan itself. He failed not just in certain areas of reform activities, but in almost all of them. One might view it as a sign that from the very beginning the “*New Society*” was only an imitation of reforms. Another strong temptation is to present Marcos’ inherent immorality as a “common denominator” of his various failures. To realize that Marcos’ personal weaknesses cannot be the sole cause of the “*New Society*” crash, it is enough to take into account (1) the phenomenon of bureaucratic capitalism (better known in journalese as “crony capitalism”) and (2) the pressures for “structural adjustment” systematically exerted by the World Bank/IMF plus transnational corporations (as US proxies). Both contributed enormously to the maintenance and deepening of social polarization so characteristic of oligarchic/neopatrimonial systems, and neither came into the Filipino world through the whims of Marcos (although he contributed like nobody else to the bloom of local bureaucratic capitalism and did submit himself to the “party line” of the Bretton Woods twins).

7. From the perspective of his own plan Marcos’ political shortcomings are hardly less important than moral. A seeker of compromises, a master of intricate maneuvers and gradual, step-by-step movement towards desired objectives, he displayed many traits of a cautious and clever reformer. After 1972 he basically stayed true to his style (although the switch to Martial Law was accompanied by a series of drastic, repressive measures and some dramatic rhetoric). But was it enough to transform a society as badly and chronically polarized as that of the Philippines? On the other hand, while Marcos claimed that his adherence to reforms justified his authoritarianism, becoming a dictator eventually limited rather than expanded his potential as a reformer. Having gained political supremacy at the price of sustained and painful efforts, he valued this achievement too much not to pay considerable attention to preserving status quo. Among other things, this attitude should be pushing him to a truce with major segments of the “old oligarchy”, to nurturing of new oligarchic groups and to backtracking whenever there was a possibility that consequent action would sharpen social tensions. It proved extremely conducive to the preservation of neopatrimonial behavior patterns, to the growth of corruption and bureaucratic capitalism – and to bringing the economy into such a poor state that a rescue by the World Bank/IMF seemed the only option left.

Paradoxically, in a certain sense Marcos' reforms failed because he was too much of a reformist, while the revolution from above could not materialize without the coalescence of successful reforms.

8. Breaking out after the Aquino assassination, the 1983-1986 crisis provoked an attempt to overcome the fateful dilemma at the non-governmental level. The forces, which might be loosely defined as Non-violent Christian Democratic Centrists, tried to outplay both Marcos the Failed (or False) Reformer and the Revolutionary Left by finding a "Third Way" between them and taking the country along it. The search for this kind of alternative culminated in the *EDSA Revolution* of 1986 – a popular unarmed uprising in Manila bringing Marcos down and marginalizing the Communist Party of the Philippines.

9. Through the prism of national history it looked as a Rizalian solution to the dilemma. The thinker, whose agony over the choice between reform and revolution was vividly depicted in "*Noli Me Tangere*" and "*El Filibusterismo*", did hint in the final passages of his second novel at something like a non-violent revolution being the best option. The triumph of EDSA also seemed to confirm the insights and prescriptions of Fr. Horacio de la Costa: way back in the early 1950s, in a six-page essay "*Riding the Whirlwind*" this prominent Jesuit historian warned that only a "strategic alliance" between Liberalism and Catholicism could stop Communism and lead to a genuine revolution in the Philippines. In a bigger sense the events of February 1986 testified to a worldwide loss of legitimacy by "traditional" (that is, violent or, if you wish, Marxist) revolutions as means of social transformations. With its uniquely Filipino features the EDSA Revolution was not an isolated episode but a link in a chain of Third World and East European, mostly non-violent uprisings. Deposing a batch of rightist dictatorships and Communist regimes, they signified the end of the Cold War era and helped to clear a political passage into the Age of Globalization.

10. A well-developed philosophy and a superb technology of resistance, active non-violence has not inspired so far a clearly defined socio-economic project. In this sense, the Non-violent Christian Democratic Centrists of the Philippines had been ill equipped to consolidate their temporary success and preserve a mass following. By prevailing over Marcos and the NDF/CPP/NPA in February 1986, they had essentially opened ground for another revitalization of the local oligarchy – this time in the framework of a "born again democracy" and liberalized economy, perfectly tuned to the so-called Washington consensus. Early in the 21st century there are enough reasons to interpret this revitalization (with all the differences in personnel, style and substance between the Aquino, Ramos, Estrada and now Macapagal Arroyo administrations) as a common and dominant theme of the whole post-Marcos period.

11. With due respect to the 20th century progress of the Philippines, it is worthwhile to emphasize that modernization, taking place within the limits of a basically neopatrimonial structure, could not be completed exactly for that reason. Today, like a hundred years ago, the agrarian problem awaits a comprehensive solution. Social cleavages are as striking as ever. Globalization, with its tendency to make the rich richer and the poor poorer, seems only to contribute to the widening of income gaps: according to the "*Far Eastern Economic Review*" (May 17, 2001, p. 24), in 1997 the top 10% of the Filipino population earned 24 times more than the bottom 10%, up from 20 times in 1993. "It's like Mount Pinatubo, we are sitting on a social volcano that we are not addressing", commented Edgardo Angara after the May 2001 riots in Manila (Ibid.). Quoting him, the Hong Kong magazine did not mention that Marcos had been exploiting the "social volcano" cliché already in the 1960s, and for very serious reasons. In other words, the prospect of disturbances had been and remains permanently there – which is not to say that revolution in the full sense of the word is probable (especially now, in the absence of a New Revolutionary Idea replacing orthodox

Communism). But, once again, can reform alone do away with that kind of social injustice that had been prevalent in the Philippines throughout the past century and is powerfully sustained by the current global trends?

12. Imitating Rizal – not just a novelist, but also the author of “*Filipinas dentro de cien años*” – and thinking about the 21st century Filipino agenda, present day scholars might ask themselves whether in the postmodern environment the “Reform or Revolution” dilemma retains its significance. If the answer is “no”, then some other historical theme will probably come to the fore. Which one? If the answer is “yes”, then where are the social forces capable of real solutions? Irrespective of ways and means, their task will be nothing short of taking the country out of the neopatrimonialist trap. It is a work *revolutionary* in nature and proportion.