

Philippines in crisis: US power versus local revolt.

Donald Kirk, 2005. Manila: Anvil Publishing. 296pp.

BOOKS on Philippine politics and current affairs often straddle the territory between academic writing and journalism. Kirk's *Philippines in Crisis* belongs firmly on the journalism side of the spectrum. This is not surprising, as the author has spent most of his life as an Asian-based journalist. The result in this case is a book long on anecdote and opinion but lacking academic context and analysis. It would be unfair to judge a book of this sort by academic standards, however, so the question is whether the material Kirk assembles provides useful ancillary information for understanding the post-Marcos period the book focuses on.

Kirk canvasses a considerable range of anecdotally based issues and events in the decade after EDSA to support his view of a nation in continuing decline. These range over the post-closure fate of former US military bases in Subic Bay, Angeles, and Baguio, the effects of the Pinatubo eruption, the shenanigans of the anti-pedophile priest Shay Cullen, the failures of the Presidential Commission on Good Government to recover Marcos loot, and the Moro and Communist insurgencies in Mindanao, among other things.

The pervasive theme of Kirk's account is the continuity between the post-EDSA regime and the dynastic political system that survived the Marcos kleptocracy to reassert itself against postdictatorship demands for social justice. It would be a mistake to suppose that Kirk supports the nationalist left, however. He dismisses the reformist senator Jovito Salonga as an opportunist, portrays Subic Bay's Gordon clan as running a dictatorship, indicts the Communist Party of the Philippines for presiding over a "rampage of killing and burning" on Negros, and accuses the exiled Communist leader Joma Sison of sleazing in the Netherlands. The MNLF leader, Nur Misuari, fares a little better, but is bought off by President Ramos as (it is implied) a sticky conduit for money going to the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao.

Occasionally the anonymous poor emerge to condemn the corruption of the elite at home or the official indifference to their plight as overseas workers, but this book is short on identified Filipino political actors or political groups that act from anything but selfish motives. The nearest Kirk comes to a sympathetic rendering of a named Filipino is his portrayal of Major Chen Almacen, actually an American citizen, but an Igorot by birth, as a dispensable American scapegoat for Filipino looting at the bases.

Expatriate actors in the Philippines, on the other hand, are usually portrayed in either a neutral or a positive way. This includes not only American diplomatic and military staff but also expatriate Australian bar owners in Angeles City, and even some foreign victims of Father Cullen's anti-pedophile campaign. A notable exception to the favorable treatment of expatriates is Father Cullen himself. This negative view of Cullen is not surprising, as he supported the closure of the bases and Kirk believes this event was more of a negative watershed in modern Philippine history than the EDSA revolution was a positive one.

The lack of a broad critical framework means that Kirk reproduces the dubious NGO/UN-originating statistics that fuel the campaigns of people like Cullen. In the Philippines the imperative to structural reform has indeed been de-ideologized into reactionary moral crusades, but the West, including the United States, must share much of the blame for producing the framework that fuels these.

It is also true that post-EDSA political leaders have been more successful in producing symbolic moral declamations rather than substantive reform, but this does not mean they share the values of the provincial warlords, as Kirk suggests. Abinales points out that Aquino was successful in getting through legislation aimed against child abuse and rape but failed when it came to measures aimed at rural land reform and against political dynasties, not because of lack of personal commitment but because the former did not threaten the provincial elites while the latter did (Abinales 2008).

To answer the question raised at the beginning of this review, this book contains some interesting anecdotal material about events relating to the author's experiences. It is also an entertaining read. But its main interest is forensic. It is a well-written compilation of complaints typical of the marginalized and dwindling expatriate population of the Philippines. By reading Kirk's book you can get a sense of these grievances at home without risking the zealous hand of Father Cullen dragging you off to jail from your bar stool.

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Reference

Abinales, P. N. (2008). The Philippines: Weak state, resilient president. In D. Singh and T. M. M. Than (Eds.), *SouthEast Asian Affairs 2008*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS).

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The anthropology of the new media in the Philippines.
Raul Perttierra, 2010. Quezon City: IPC Culture and Development Series,
Ateneo de Manila University, 235 pp. [online] Available at:
[<http://www.ipc-ateneo.org/node/71>](http://www.ipc-ateneo.org/node/71)

THE ANTHROPOLOGY of the New Media in the Philippines is published, appropriately, on the Internet, and free to download. Perttierra felt a need not only to communicate the ideas about modern communication quickly and easily, and to make it as readily accessible as possible, but also to do so by means of the same medium of which he writes.

This book examines the uses and effects of new computer-mediated-interactive-communication technology (CMICT) in the lives of ordinary Filipinos—often in unexpected ways—noting as an example that the mobile phone, as a simple, relatively inexpensive device, has transformed the lives of peoples throughout the world.