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Bob East

472 Days Captive of the Abu Sayyaf: The Survival of Australian Warren Rodwell

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472 Days Captive of the Abu Sayyaf: The Survival of Australian Warren Rodwell

Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015. 164 pages.

Since executing major counterterrorism operations in 2006, the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) has diminished the operational capabilities of the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG). While some ASG members are still at large, the frequency and sophistication of their attacks have generally decreased due mainly to the loss of key leaders Khadaffy Janjalani and Abu Sulaiman. In this sense it is unclear if the group has any central leadership left to reestablish its unity, decisiveness, and external networks. The absence of core leadership, along with the diminished funding of the ASG, has driven the group to revert to kidnappings for ransom as seen in their preference for high-profile terrorist attacks. In effect the ASG has abandoned whatever limited ideological pretenses it had.

In *472 Days Captive of the Abu Sayyaf* Bob East, an independent researcher from Queensland, Australia, recounts the intolerable experiences that former Australian soldier Warren Rodwell suffered in the hands of a degenerating ASG. Drawing on official documents from the Australian Federal Police and numerous interviews, the author reconstructs the events that transpired during Rodwell's captivity. Rodwell was born on 16 June 1958 in Sydney, Australia. He was a world traveller, having journeyed to most continents and visited the Philippines more than three times prior to his kidnapping in 2011. Even with his global exposure, he chose to settle down in the Philippines partly because of the warmth and resilience of the Filipino people, especially during natural disasters and crisis situations (1–2).

Despite the fair amount of information on the ASG's methods and practices, the book focuses on the physical, mental, and psychological aspects of Rodwell's survival. Given this emphasis, the book's eight chapters can be divided into three general themes: capture and transfer (chapters 1 to 2), life in captivity (3 to 5), and the breaking point (chapters 6 to 8).

The first two chapters narrate thoroughly Rodwell's experiences during his capture, particularly at the start of his captivity. Despite indications of impending danger, East reveals that Rodwell continued to stay in his

house in Ipil, Zamboanga Sibugay. This situation led to his kidnapping on 5 December 2011, when ASG members injured and seized Rodwell, transporting him swiftly by boat to Sacol Island, Zamboanga City, and eventually to Basilan, where he was held for one month.

It was during this period when Rodwell was introduced to members of the ASG, which allowed him to start categorizing the different militants based on what he perceived was their role in the group (44–45). He classified ASG members into three: the susceptible, the vulnerable, and the incorrigible. The susceptible were generally young, had no combat training, and were easily intimidated by superiors. The vulnerable were older and had families, had limited combat training, but were generally sympathetic to prisoners' needs, allowing Rodwell to establish some rapport and elicit information about the group as well as the circumstances of his captivity. The incorrigible were jungle-hardened fighters, who Rodwell believed were founding members of the ASG and were thus with the group when it was still a highly disciplined paramilitary organization. These categorizations were useful in understanding the context of East's narration and the ASG's composition.

Chapters 3 to 5 document Rodwell's life with the ASG in various locations in Basilan and Tawi-Tawi. Four salient points emerge from these chapters. The first is Rodwell's deteriorating health as manifested in his wounded right hand, weight loss, depression, spasms of vertigo, and the arthropathy that affected his feet (51). His condition was problematic for both the ASG and the AFP. On the one hand, the ASG addressed his physical condition grudgingly since they needed him alive to demand ransom. On the other hand, the stakes were higher for the AFP because losing a foreign hostage to the ASG would be an international embarrassment.

The second point pertains to the ASG's alleged purchase of high-powered weapons from government sources. East narrates that Rodwell's guards claimed to have bought M16 assault rifles from members of the AFP and the Philippine National Police and showed the official government markings on the weapons as evidence (61–62). East argues that these claims "do not have much validity," the lack of empirical validation preventing any conclusion from being drawn and eliciting more critical questions about the ASG's capabilities and sources of weapons (62).

The third point concerns East's assertion that the current ASG, or what he calls the "neo-Abu Sayyaf," has no supreme commander or clear

command structure (65). This observation is tenuous as it is based on limited information provided by just two primary sources: documents from the Australian Federal Police and interviews with Rodwell. It is difficult to develop conclusions about the command structure of a militant group without drawing on more primary sources from the Philippine government and other studies about political violence and terrorism published in academic journals on the subject such as *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* and *Terrorism and Political Violence*.

The fourth and last point is on the proof-of-life videos that the ASG periodically released (84, 105). These videos were crucial in confirming Rodwell's condition and establishing some level of communication between the ASG and potential negotiating parties. Although East mentions that the Philippine and Australian governments employed a media blackout, he does not provide any explanation as to why this policy was adopted and, therefore, the reader cannot reach conjectures on its consequences.

The last three chapters describe the captivity's breaking point. On the one hand, the constant lack of food and the miserable living conditions increased Rodwell's distrust of the ASG and his desperation to survive and escape from them (128, 139). On the other hand, since the ASG could no longer provide adequate sustenance for their prisoner, they were motivated to release Rodwell given the right amount of money. Due to this situation, more proof-of-life videos were released within the period of one month, which indicated that some progress was being made in securing Rodwell's eventual release (116, 125). After 472 days of captivity with a terrorist organization, Rodwell was finally released in Pagadian City on 22 March 2013. Based on East's narration, Rodwell's release was made possible not by government authorities, but by the persistent efforts of his estranged Filipino wife, Mirafflor Gutang, and his family in Australia. These circumstances are unfortunate given the strong counterterrorism discourse articulated by the Philippine and Australian governments. If both governments have clear policies of nonnegotiation with terrorists, what would then be the strategy in the event of future kidnappings by the ASG in light of this episode that seemingly contradicts this position?

472 Days Captive of the Abu Sayyaf is a useful book for stakeholders in the national security community and people generally interested in the study of security and terrorism. Its main contribution lies in the operational details about the ASG's operations as well as Rodwell's survival techniques.

However, the book could improve on four key areas. First, it could have been situated within the wider literature on terrorism and the ASG. Previous studies by Alfredo Filler, Zachary Abuza, Steven Hutchinson and Pat O'Malley, Lesley Brown and Paul Wilson, Eduardo Ugarte, and Renato De Castro have provided valuable insights on the organizational dynamics, perceived ideology, networks, and the leadership of the ASG. The book could have built on these studies to give readers a better understanding of the group's history and motivations. Second, the assertions made in the book would have been more convincing if these had been supported by citations or clear sources of information. For instance, East's assertions about the ASG's command structure and its purchase of weapons from Philippine government forces required citations to establish credibility. Third, the book could have been more comprehensive if the author had made an assessment of the different government responses (Philippines and Australia) to Rodwell's kidnapping. Despite the media blackout, additional interviews in both countries could have supplied the needed information for the author to make this assessment. Fourth, the author could have offered recommendations to improve the counterterrorism and antikidnapping efforts of the Philippine government, including appropriate responses to situations such as the capture of Warren Rodwell.

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JONATHAN CORPUS ONG

The Poverty of Television: The Media of Suffering in Class-Divided Philippines

London: Anthem Press, 2015. 215 pages.

Why only now? As with studies that seek to fill in the gaps of existing literature on a certain subject matter, the book necessarily comes late. But reading through the work, one senses the consequences of being able to only belatedly think about Jonathan Corpus Ong's subject matter—the "poverty of television." After all, he is not simply writing about television, but