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Vicente Tirona Paterno

**On My Terms: The Autobiography of
Vicente Tirona Paterno**

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of oneself, by allowing us to stand not too far from the locality of the sufferer. It gives us more reason to be sensitive and ethical in our modes of caring for the suffering and a more nuanced conviction to break down the barriers in class-divided Philippines.

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VICENTE TIRONA PATERNO

On My Terms: The Autobiography of Vicente Tirona Paterno

Mandaluyong City: Anvil, 2014. 284 pages.

Having participated in a three-year research project entitled “Economic Policymaking and the Philippine Development Experience, 1960–1985: An Oral History Project,” which involved interviews of martial law technocrats, I am interested in Vicente Tirona Paterno’s autobiography, particularly with regard to his emergence and evolution as a technocrat who segued from Marcos’s pre-martial law administration to the martial law regime. This book definitely fills in a lot of details and insights that were not captured in the interview that Yutaka Kutayama, Temario Rivera, and I conducted with him in 2008 for the said project. The book’s importance becomes apparent when one traces the rise of technocrats, with a focus on their family and class and educational backgrounds and their transition, in the case of Paterno, from the business community to government service.

Paterno’s personal and professional background provides valuable insights on the country’s political economy during the 1950s and 1960s. He narrates, for example, his direct and indirect relationship with the country’s politicoeconomic elites like Vicente T. Madrigal, a member of the landed sugar elite who was married to Paterno’s paternal aunt Susanna, and his experiences in the Philippine Investment Management Consultants (PHINMA), a major investment firm in the country, and Meralco, the premier electric power company in the country owned by the Lopezes of the sugar elite clan of Iloilo and Negros Occidental. Paterno brings forth his critical insights on his personal and professional relationships, such as with the Lopez patriarch Eugenio Lopez Sr., for whom he worked when he was

in Meralco. One such insight came as a result of Paterno's decision to leave the business sector for government service when he accepted the position of Chairman of the Board of Investments (BOI), a position he held from June 1970 to July 1979. The move to the public sector was mainly due to his falling out with Lopez Sr. due to his advice to professionalize Meralco and open up its shares to the public, a suggestion that drew the ire of Lopez Sr., who believed it would lead to the Lopezzes' loss of control of Meralco (80).

Paterno presumed that he would find great difficulty in finding another job in a Philippine-based company that would not go against the Lopezzes' interest. He was concerned about this matter because he did not want to further strain his relations not only with Lopez Sr. but as well as with the latter's sons, to whom Paterno felt quite close after having gone to school with them at Harvard University. This experience gives us a sense of the Lopezzes' power and how Paterno, himself a member of the elite, had to negotiate his personal and professional interests in order to politically and economically survive in Philippine society (79–82).

Ironically this experience brought him into the arms of another, but still emerging, powerful and influential player in Philippine society, Ferdinand E. Marcos. Under the martial law regime, Paterno became the Minister of Industry from June 1974 to July 1979. My interest in this chapter of his life is in assessing Paterno as a technocrat, specifically whether he was a "typical" or an "atypical" technocrat. A "typical" technocrat is one who is viewed as "apolitical," i.e., does not dabble in politics. Apolitical technocrats are aware of corruption in the government and will seek reforms in their respective institutions to address it. However, if the leadership tolerates it, they will let it be. An "atypical" technocrat, on the other hand, is one who will not tolerate corruption and generally chooses to leave the government quietly and will not join the "opposition" against the president who hired him.

In a newspaper commentary I wrote for the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* about Paterno when he passed away last November 2014, I described him as an "atypical" technocrat based on the 2008 interview. His book elaborates further on these aspects of his professional life that made him "atypical," but it also provides details that present him as a "typical" Marcos technocrat.

Like the other Marcos technocrats interviewed for the research project, such as Cesar E. A. Virata, Placido Mapa Jr., Jaime Laya, and Manuel Alba, Paterno felt that he instituted economic policies that helped the country's development. As head of the BOI, for example, Paterno believed he made

headway in providing the institutional infrastructure to further investments in the country, such as in the crafting of an Investment Priority Plan (102).

Thus, similar to the other Marcos technocrats, Paterno felt there was nothing wrong with the economic policies he advocated despite the popular perception that their policies did not address the widening socioeconomic inequalities in Philippine society. A probable reason behind this divergence between Paterno's idealism and popular perception is that his stint in government service—in the BOI and the Ministry of Industry—mainly involved dealing with the business community and foreign investors, with minimal contact with marginalized sectors such as the peasantry. Moreover, Paterno did not mention anything about the sociocultural impact of foreign investments in the countryside. Studies, for example, have shown how foreign investments during martial law (such as the Philippine Sintering Corporation, which was 99 percent owned by Kawasaki Corporation, in Tagalona, Misamis Oriental) led to environmental degradation in the communities where these were located. Also, Paterno discusses the importance of export processing zones (EPZs), as epitomized by the Philippine Export Processing Zone Authority (PEZA) (105), yet does not talk about the political and sociocivic repercussions of these EPZs, such as the ban on labor unions and the right to strike and wages below the legal minimum.

Like the other Marcos technocrats interviewed, Paterno felt that he did his best to shield his agencies from politics. For Paterno, politics involved the giving of favors to particular politicians who in return would grant political favors to the president. He believed this practice could produce corruption. He would then bring such cases to Marcos's attention, and the president generally supported him in his stance regarding the granting of political favors. However, Paterno also revealed that by late 1978 there was already pressure on him to grant political favors to presidential friends (137).

Thus, for him there was no recourse but to leave government service. He was, however, prevailed upon by Marcos to stay on as Minister of Public Highways. Paterno regarded this ministry as one of the most corrupt government agencies at that time, but he agreed to continue serving as minister on the condition that he would stay for one year only. He finally left government service in November 1980 as he did not want to be part of the anomalies that the Marcos cronies were perpetrating (167). Such a stance paints Paterno as an "atypical" technocrat in contrast to the other technocrats who stayed on with Marcos. An exception was Gerardo Sicat,

who resigned from his position as director-general of the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) in 1981. But unlike Paterno, who remained in the country, Sicat left in 1983 to join the World Bank. Paterno does say that Marcos stole from the government but notes that the amount was probably not as much as what Suharto embezzled in Indonesia. The difference between the two cases, Paterno opines, was that Marcos's thievery caused more harm to the Philippines than what Suharto did in Indonesia because the former stashed the loot abroad while the latter invested his in Indonesia (272).

Paterno did not seem to hold it against Marcos that he was replaced in the Ministry of Industry, which became the Ministry of Trade and Industry, by Roberto Ongpin. Paterno did not share Ongpin's view that there was a need to bring in large industrial projects into the country, projects that Paterno thought would only mean "big bucks" from government-guaranteed foreign loans and thus a source of corruption for the presidential cronies (142). Paterno also preferred to focus on medium- and small-scale industries. Such a perspective came out in the 2008 interview with him, which depicted him as "atypical" of the Marcos technocrats who were often open to large-scale foreign borrowings. Furthermore, Paterno highlighted that he did not fully agree with the "tenets of globalization and free markets" (128) to which other technocrats generally adhered.

Paterno seemed to have shared with fellow technocrats like Virata, Mapa, and Alba an ambivalence toward Marcos. Paterno showed this ambivalence when he relayed how Marcos warned him that, should he (Paterno) leave government, he would be too big to be president of a corporation. In other words, it would now be difficult for him to find a job that could sustain his and his family's lifestyle. Paterno, however, pointed out that Marcos was probably aware of his financial needs as he (Marcos) instructed Philippine National Bank (PNB) President Panfilo Domingo to give Paterno a position as PNB board director as a way of helping him and his family (162).

Paterno was the only Marcos technocrat who broke his ties with the dictator when he resigned from the Kilusang Bagong Lipunan (KBL) because of Sen. Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino's assassination in August 1983. He was also the only technocrat who joined the antidictatorship movement. Paterno, however, seemed to have absolved Marcos of any responsibility for Ninoy's assassination, putting the blame instead on Armed Forces Chief of

Staff Fabian Ver (274). Paterno came to that conclusion because Marcos was already debilitated by lupus at that time and no longer in control of the country. Such a view was also shared by the other technocrats interviewed in the research project. In this regard, Paterno was a “typical” technocrat.

Moreover, Paterno was “typical” in that he did not seem to have been bothered by the human rights violations and the political repression that happened during the martial law period. He said he was aware of these cases of abuse of power, but thought that such was not enough reason for Marcos’s resignation. It had to take the assassination of a member of the elite, Ninoy Aquino, to jolt Paterno into realizing the harshness of the martial law regime (167).

Paterno’s autobiography, thus, provides many nuanced and valuable insights in understanding his life as a Marcos technocrat, exhibiting both “atypical” and “typical” traits. His reflections certainly contribute to our further understanding on the role technocracy played during the martial law period.

Paterno’s experience as a technocrat is only one of the book’s many facets that will interest the reader. In this book Paterno revisits the different hats he wore as he started out as a businessman, then worked as a technocrat during the pre- and martial law periods, and even served as a politician in the *Batasang Pambansa* under the dictatorship. He reprised these roles after Marcos’s downfall, when he joined the Aquino administration in 1986 as a bureaucrat, became senator in 1987, and succeeded as an entrepreneur by bringing into the country the popular convenience-store chain 7-Eleven. This turn of events makes for an interesting comparison of the analogous careers he took before, during, and after martial law. In all of these crucial stages of his life, Paterno shares his trials and tribulations amid the contentious nature of Philippine politics and the country’s elite-controlled economy.

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