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Grant K. Goodman

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The Japanese Occupation of the Philippines: Commonwealth Sustained

GRANT K. GOODMAN

It is perhaps ironic that I have chosen for this note a title which seems historically contradictory. We all know, of course, that the Commonwealth of the Philippines was maintained by a government-in-exile in Washington D.C. from Quezon's arrival there via Australia in 1942 until Osmena's return to Leyte in 1944. Yet I will suggest in this note that there were, in essence, two Commonwealth governments operating from the departure of Quezon from Corregidor to the recapture of the Philippines—one in Washington, though with the Commonwealth's name a mere shadow of its former self, and the other in the Philippines, without the name "Commonwealth," yet holding the fort in a very effective and ultimately a very significant way on the political front line.

I would argue further that it was the latter Commonwealth which by continuing to provide a socio-economic-political power base for almost the entire prewar oligarchic Filipino elite paved the way for the relatively smooth resumption of the Commonwealth itself and for the birth of full Philippine independence on 4 July 1946. Therefore, in my view, the Commonwealth, taken to mean the socio-economic-political elite or oligarchy which had historically taken full advantage of the American colonial presence to entrench themselves for an uncertain future, was sustained and in certain ways reinforced not only by the government-in-exile in the United States but even more by the indigenous regimes which held actual power during the Japanese occupation.

INTERREGNUM

Many years ago in an article in the *Yale Review* the late and very distinguished Prof. Harry Benda coined the term "interregnum" for the Japanese period of occupation of Southeast Asia. While the term has

subsequently come into relatively frequent usage among Southeast Asian historians in the United States, it is perhaps not, after all, an appropriate one for the Philippines specifically. In fact, I would argue that the period of Japanese presence in the Philippines was a period of a remarkably high degree of historical continuum. Indeed, certain factors determining the nature of Japan's rule in the Philippines were quite different from the factors elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

The prewar colonial experience of the Philippines was unique, especially when contrasted with the colonial experiences of the British, French and Dutch possessions in Southeast Asia. A relatively mature indigenous bourgeois nationalist movement had emerged in the Philippines in the nineteenth century and had to a large extent succeeded, despite the presence of two colonial powers, in concentrating socio-economic and ultimately even political power in the hands of a small indigenous elite.

During the American colonial period that same elite had, very astutely, I believe, with American encouragement and support, practically monopolized the slogans and shibboleths of twentieth century Philippine nationalism. Moreover, they had created under their firm control "moderate" nationalist political parties along ostensibly proto-American lines thus almost precluding the emergence of significant revolutionary ["peasant-type"] socioeconomic nationalist movements. In short, "Americans in the Philippines did little more than legitimize the existing elites while giving them a handy target for attacks that let them appear as selfless Filipino patriots." (*Asian Wall Street Journal*, 25 April 1985) Accordingly, United States ruling authorities and the dominant Filipino oligarchy developed ties which were probably unique in colonial history. As David Sturtevant has written, the Americans, by virtue of their emphasis on "political fundamentalism" "strengthened the social legacy of Spain: elitists derived augmented powers; peasants inherited mounting squalor.

Japan had developed a relatively sophisticated binational relationship with the Philippines while the Islands were still an American colony and especially during the immediate prewar Commonwealth era. This had occurred for four principal reasons. The essentially permissive nature of American colonial rule, which out of guilt and out of fear as well as from a theoretical commitment to laissez-faire economics, allowed the Japanese meaningful leeway for their growing economic activities in the Islands. There were the doggedly persistent and consistently cooperative efforts of the Japanese business community and the Japanese diplomatic representatives in the Philippines and the general responsiveness

of the Filipino elite to Japanese diplomatic and economic blandishments in the light of the understandable desire of that elite to sustain its privileges as American power in Asia waned and Japanese power expanded. Finally, there was the seemingly remarkable ability of both Japanese consular personnel and businessmen to operate successfully on the very personally intimate level expected in Philippine society. The only major colony of Japanese immigrants in prewar Southeast Asia was in the Philippines, about twenty-five thousand by 1940.

Japan believed that the United States fully intended to carry out the provisions of the Tydings-McDuffie Act of 1934, granting the Philippines full independence in 1946 after the ten-year transition period of Commonwealth status, and Japan's economic and political interests were developed accordingly, following many of the same trends with which we are familiar today.

Cultural exchanges between Japan and the Philippines were far more advanced before the Pacific War than those between Japan and any other Southeast Asian colony. Interest in Japan among young people in the Philippines grew markedly in the late 1930s, and the Commonwealth government encouraged that interest. For certain adventuresome Filipino youth, Japan was a new, exciting, attractive Asian beacon, a country to be studied and perhaps to be emulated. So important had Japan become for the Philippines by 1940, economically, politically and militarily, that when Commonwealth President Manuel L. Quezon in August 1940 issued a new national code of ethics for the Islands, he identified Japan as his role model for what he called "Philippine bushido."

Thus, when war broke out between Japan and the United States, Japan, without any prior intention to invade or politically to control the Philippines, already had the unusual advantage of strongly developed bonds with the ruling Filipino elite. This was to be extremely important from several standpoints for both Japanese and Filipinos. Without specific plans for an occupation and with limited knowledge of the Philippines and of Filipinos, the Japanese had suddenly acquired an immense archipelago with a very substantial population. It was, therefore, the very good fortune of the Japanese that an experienced indigenous political elite, many of whom they already knew well, was willing and able to maintain, in only a minimally modified form, existing Commonwealth institutions of governance. It was equally the good fortune of the Filipino political oligarchs that their services were very much needed by the Japanese. Accordingly, at the highest level a

mutually protective cooperative relationship quickly developed between occupiers and occupied.

The Japanese were able to institute what has come to be known as an indirect occupation, first through the 1942 Executive Commission and Council of State and then through the 1943 Republic of the Philippines, both of which were totally staffed and dominated by former Commonwealth officials of the highest rank. In this regard the time and energy devoted by those men to the reshaping of the existing Commonwealth government to conform both to their own wishes (more closely perhaps than under American aegis) and to Japanese requirements is truly remarkable. Thus, Filipinos who dominated or worked under these "new" organs of government were able to maintain the continuity of their authority despite the presence of a different foreign master and despite potentially politically disruptive internal elements at both extremes of the ideological spectrum.

The Japanese were also able to utilize successfully a relatively depoliticized, firmly anti-revolutionary indigenous bureaucracy (the Commonwealth bureaucracy) which was "in place" and compliant. Impressively, therefore, that bureaucracy was enabled to sustain, under often very adverse circumstances, its traditional functions and privileges in Philippine society.

The trauma of the 1935 Sakdal uprising of what Joseph Ralston Hayden so aptly termed "the unrepresented minority" (a euphemism for the unrepresented majority?) had certainly left its mark deep in the consciousnesses of the Filipino governing elite as had the Sakdal claim to Japanese support. Thus, the intense desire of that elite to prevent any recurrence of a comparable event, I believe, was matched by the equally intense desire of the Japanese to assure the traditional Philippine leadership of their utter denial of the spurious Sakdal assertion and to try to gain the willing cooperation of all of the former Commonwealth officials.

Of course, the Japanese imperial government was no more social revolutionary abroad than it was at home, and the Filipino socio-economic-political-elite, too, was determined to maintain its dominant role by unbending opposition to revolutionary tendencies of any kind. Thus, as indicated, fairly extensive prewar interaction between official and unofficial Japanese leaders, on the one hand, and top level Commonwealth leaders, on the other, provided an unanticipated basis for intra-elite cooperation to try to maintain the status quo. Moreover, the Japanese occupation, in fact, provided an opportunity for welcomed modifications by Filipinos in the somewhat naive brand of civic

democracy and in the superficial American-style constitutional politics which the Americans had propagated during their colonial rule and which had culminated in the Commonwealth political structure. Accordingly, in structuring the 1943 Republic those facets of the Commonwealth constitution which, while never having really resulted in any limitations on elite privileges, still seemed theoretically to permit them were quickly discarded in favor of the more authoritarian preferences of both the former Commonwealth leaders and the Japanese occupiers. Perhaps this was the authentic "Filipinization" which the Japanese were so strongly encouraging.

In addition, the effort of the wartime Filipino leadership to get the Japanese to proclaim and recognize the "independence" of the Islands must be seen as in part an attempt to justify the claim of these leaders to have succeeded to the mantle of Commonwealth President Manuel L. Quezon who had risen to the top of the prewar Philippine political heap through his leadership in the ostensible fight for independence but was prevailed upon to leave the Islands in 1942 and to establish the Commonwealth Government-in-Exile in Washington, D.C. Probably the Filipino occupation regime theorized that once independence was granted the guerrilla movement would rapidly disintegrate and order would be restored to the Islands. For order above all was what the Filipino oligarchs wanted to see maintained since disorder could well mean upheaval which, in turn, had the fearful potential of sweeping away centuries of carefully nurtured privilege. This leads one, therefore, to evaluate the cooperativeness of the Filipino elite with the Japanese as neither traitorousness toward the United States nor as abject embracing of the Japanese nor as some diabolically clever method of protecting their fellow Filipinos, but as very simply their intense desire to sustain the political, social and economic status quo in so far as possible.

Thus, though in part for different reasons, both the Japanese occupiers and the Filipino ruling elite sought to sustain to the extent possible the extant internal Philippine equilibrium, an equilibrium which the Commonwealth had exemplified, in which order and authority would be maintained and radical social change prevented. The Filipino oligarchs quite naturally feared any erosion of their traditionally overweeningly dominant role in politics and economics, a role which the Commonwealth structure had reinforced. Therefore, opposition to seemingly pro-American and anti-Japanese guerrilla activities was from the Japanese perspective a military necessity and from the perspective of the Japanese-supported Occupation regime a socio-economic-political

necessity. In this context, then, the Filipino elite was by no means necessarily pro-Japanese but rather, like the Japanese, could be possibly best described as anti-revolutionary. Accordingly, there was a concomitance of interest between Filipino officialdom and the Japanese Occupation authorities in their mutual opposition to revolutionary or proto-revolutionary guerrilla movements. However, as recent research has shown, the wartime Filipino leaders (who had all been Commonwealth leaders) were, throughout the Occupation, politically astute enough to maintain a foothold among key nonrevolutionary guerrilla organizations and thus protect themselves in the event of a Japanese defeat.

CONCLUSIONS

Today over four decades after the Japanese Occupation of the Philippines has ended, our study of it has become, happily, another academic exercise. The hardships, the animosities, the accusations and the recriminations have faded; events have overtaken emotions. Moreover, we can draw certain conclusions which by now are fairly clear. The most significant is that the Japanese occupation of the Philippines was a remarkably successful continuum, both from the standpoint of the indigenous elite and from that of Japan as any in Southeast Asia.

The Japanese government by happy coincidence already had, uniquely in Southeast Asia, strongly developed ties with most of the Filipino ruling elite and could rely on their authority to maintain, under difficult wartime conditions, a relatively stable continuum of the prewar Commonwealth administration. In fact, the Japanese choice of Jorge B. Vargas as first head of the original Occupation-sponsored government is very revealing. For the Japanese quite properly recognized Vargas as a member of the elite and yet as one who would be politically "neutral" (which can be translated as personally far less ambitious than Aquino, Paredes or Laurel) and who would also be, at least temporarily, a stand-in for Manuel Quezon. For there is no question that from the outset the Japanese believed that Quezon himself would be the ideal figure to lead a regime under their aegis. This was as much, of course, a tribute to Quezon's overarching dominance of prewar Philippine politics as it was to the easy personal familiarity which the Japanese believed they had with him. Thus, it was logical that Quezon's subordinate alter ego, Vargas, should be designated temporary head of the Philippine government in order to try to encourage Quezon to return to the Islands

and to resume his presidency of the Commonwealth, this time under Japanese rule. Only when it became completely obvious that neither had Quezon the physical strength to get back to the Philippines nor would the United States government have permitted him to leave had he tried to do so, did the Japanese turn to Jose P. Laurel, one of their most intimate prewar contacts and an astute and charismatic Commonwealth politician whose light had so long remained hidden under the Quezonian bushel. Vargas, in turn, was effectively removed from the Philippine political scene by being named by Laurel as Ambassador to Japan.

Neither the Filipino elite nor the Japanese government sought to precipitate social revolution, and, in fact, joined forces to prevent it. In my view, they did so with so much success that the post-1946 Roxas-led republic ultimately pursued so-called collaborationist charges only against the most "disreputable" and victimized remnants of the radical and politically discredited pro-Japanese Ganap-Makapili who had joined in the last ditch struggle of the Japanese against the American reconquest of the Philippines.

Reinforced from 1944 on by the return of American military forces, the Filipino elite, or immediately that segment of it which was ostensibly marginally less directly involved with the Japanese sponsored regimes, continued in power as Commonwealth authority both in name and in fact was reestablished and, as promised, on 4 July 1946 when independence was achieved. Accordingly, both real and potential "counter-elites" were ultimately eliminated. Moreover, those members of the elite who had been mostly closely identified with the Japanese-sponsored regimes were rather quickly exonerated of so-called "collaboration," and they too resumed their traditionally powerful roles.

Finally, my interpretation of the wartime era of Philippine politics is that, because by all of the means and under all of the circumstances described in the foregoing the continuum of the traditional Filipino elite was sustained, the Commonwealth too was sustained. To paraphrase Professor Benedict Anderson: "What Philippine *interregnum*?"