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Politics and the Press: The Philippines Since Marcos

GERALD SUSSMAN

In Intramuros (the “walled city”), the preserved residential area of the former Spanish regime, Manila’s working journalists ritually gather nightly at the Philippines’ National Press Club dining room and over beer and fried delicacies share stories and rumors of the day. Hovering along one wall is the 1955 mural of the late painter Vicente Manansala that moralistically caricatures a venal politician greedily clutching money, while dominating industry, crushing workers and holding captive the country’s press corps. During the Philippines’ martial law years, the mural was boarded up but reopened and retouched in 1980. Today it starkly reminds new generations of media practitioners of the vulnerable nature of their chosen profession.

Many Filipino journalists paid the price of sticking to the canons of the trade; some, in the ruthless climate fostered by the regime, met early death. In the waning months of the dictatorship, two opposition dailies, the *Inquirer* and *Malaya*, and a few weeklies found the courage to stand up against Marcos and his media lieutenants, helping to bring about his downfall and the restoration of multi-interest politics. This note looks at the transition and state of the press from Marcos to Aquino, focussing on some of the continuing problems affecting the independence and professionalism of the newspaper industry.

POWER OVER THE PRESS

As Filipino journalists seem to concur, the “February Revolution” broke the shackles of the Marcos-controlled media and opened up the spectrum of publishable thoughts. At the same time, the ways of old are not easily altered. Most will openly acknowledge that on the twenty-six newspapers (ca. December 1987, the number changing with great

frequency)—eight national English-language dailies, four English-language tabloids, five Pilipino-language tabloids, three business newspapers, one afternoon daily and five Chinese language dailies—many of the writers and columnists are on the payroll of some ranking politician or business tycoon. Given the pay scales of most, this is not altogether surprising. Veteran journalists earn less than \$250 per month, while newcomers are paid below \$100, with other press staff usually receiving the legal minimum wage of \$2.50 or less per working day.¹

During the martial law period, efforts on the part of some to form press unions for better working conditions were brutally suppressed, with many independent-minded journalists spending days or weeks, if not years, in military detainment. More than twenty journalists were murdered under the regime for expressing opinions disagreeable to one or another provincial warlord. Marcos also penned at least eleven “presidential decrees” explicitly against press freedom, two of which, P.D. 1834 and P.D. 1835, provided life imprisonment or death by musketry for “subversive” offenses. If not incarcerated, journalists and editors who did not tow the line had to live continually with physical intimidation, libel charges or the threat of being fired. A few independent publishers, too, were shut down and their presses and printing plants confiscated.

Since Marcos’s ouster, newspaper workers have tried to use the constitutionally-sanctioned strike weapon to seek better wages and working conditions. The Aquino government’s conservative Department of Labor and Employment and the Supreme Court, however, essentially yielded to the publishers’ side in August 1987 by upholding Marcos’ Labor Code (Article 263[g]) banning strikes by mass media employees “in the national interest.”²

Whereas collective bargaining agreements might raise the living standards, and perhaps professional standards, of press workers, the publishers, have not been wont to see it that way. Most own other, nonunionized businesses and have refused to recognize independent press unions, busting the few that existed, creating their own or simply selling out to new ownership or closing down altogether. Another disruptive element to the union cause is the fact that so many of the press corps prefer to augment their livelihood by sidelining—often in public

1. Antonio Ma. Nieva, “The New Imperatives in Media Unionism,” speech before the KAMMPI (media unions association) assembly, Manila, 22 November 1987.

2. Ibid.; Antonio Ma. Nieva, “Media and the U.S. Factor,” *Philippines Despatch*, 17-24 July 1987, pp. 28-29.

relations, ghost writing, influence peddling or outright bribe solicitation, and, some suspect, in serving foreign embassies.³ In May 1987, the National Press Club adopted its first ever "code of ethics," which threatens suspension of any member found in violation of professional journalistic conduct.

The links of newspapers and their writers to powerful political and financial interests, true to Manansala's mural depiction, have a long and dramatic history in the Philippines. Anticolonial newspapers of the late nineteenth century, in Spanish and later Tagalog, were usually associated with powerful families. In the 1920s the U.S. colonial-era Senate President Manuel Quezon, later to become the Commonwealth president, succeeded in having business allies start up a press chain, in part, to ventilate nationalistic political propaganda, which other politicians and businessmen were quick to imitate.⁴ By the eve of Marcos' martial law declaration in 1972, virtually all of the press (and other media) were in the hands of political-business clans, the most powerful of which were of those of Vice President Fernando Lopez' family (*Manila Chronicle*, ABS-CBN broadcasting), who turned oppositionist in 1971, and of President Marcos himself (*Daily Express*, RPN broadcasting).

The Lopezes proved no match for the Marcoses in terms of their ability to summon state repression, as the vice president's family found themselves forced into exile or incarceration and their array of media and other properties confiscated by the martial law regime. Under the dictator's "Letter of Instruction Number 1," all media were shut down or sequestered, save those of Marcos's most trusted friends and fronts, such as Roberto S. Benedicto. Apart from nominally owning the *Express* chain of publications, Benedicto seized the Lopez printing presses and broadcast facilities, and also ran a domestic satellite network, a television manufacturing operation, a cable television monopoly, an international carrier service, transoceanic cable systems and the local signatory company of Intelsat as part of Marcos's secret, communication/information empire, a project which some of the president's trustees code-named "Operation Satum."

3. Rosalinda Pineda-Ofrenco, "The Economics of Journalism," in Clodualdo del Mundo, Jr., *Philippine Mass Media: A Book of Reading* (Manila: Communication Foundation for Asia, 1986), p. 91.

4. Rosalinda Pineda-Ofrenco, *The Manipulated Press: A History of Philippine Journalism Since 1945* (Manila: Cacho Ilcmanos, 1984).

Despite the regime's best attempts at telecasting its unsalvageable legitimacy in the final days following the fraud ridden presidential election of February 1986, the last phase of a prolonged crisis of confidence stemming from the assassination of Benigno Aquino in August 1983, it was the media of the streets, together with a few, business and church-backed, opposition broadsheets that formed the new political consensus. Marcos's depredations against the media and the Filipino people during his twenty years of power came to an abrupt end with his U.S.-escorted exile to Hawaii, at which point the intelligentsia and commoners alike articulated reverent faith and expectations in the new president's broad conciliatory approach to politics.

With little hesitation, Corazon Aquino initially reciprocated with a spirit of openness by ordering the release of well-known political prisoners, including leaders of the illegal Communist Party and its New People's Army, and jettisoned many of the decrees and policies that had previously fettered the media. And in a popular move, virtually all of the Marcos-controlled media and communications firms were taken over by the Aquino-appointed "Philippine Commission on Good Government," among them the three biggest newspaper groups, as the old guard, including the Roceses (*Manila Times*) and Lopezcs, returned triumphantly to recover their lost properties and prestige.

UNLEASHING OF THE MEDIA

Moreover, the armed forces, though laden with Marcos carry-overs, were now, at least ostensibly, in the hands of a reform and professionally-oriented soldier, Fidel Ramos, whose West Point training and loyalty to Corazon Aquino were critical elements in launching the people-backed armed forces rebellion against Marcos and in since defending her rule. Five coup attempts from 1986-88 (the last most clearly indicated the backing of Ramos's erstwhile ally in the February revolt, the former Defense Minister, Juan Ponce Enrile) all failed to remove Aquino from power, even if they succeeded in moving her administration politically to the right.

A second bulwark of institutional support was that of the Roman Catholic church, headed by the conservative Jaime Cardinal Sin, allied with many small, but influential, middle-class "cause-oriented" groups, which deployed over 600 priests and nuns to watch the polling places in the 1986 presidential election and to kneel before Marcos's tanks during the uprising that followed. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of the

Philippines added to the spirit of revolt by issuing a "pastoral letter" condemning the poll as "unparalleled in . . . fraudulence" and having "no moral basis."⁵ The church also made its fifty-kilowatt "Radio Veritas," one of the most powerful frequencies in the Philippines, available for Aquino's campaign coverage and for calling out the faithful to surround the rebel encampment and defend the cause. Its print organ, *Veritas*, created after the Aquino assassination by an elite coalition called the "Bishops-Businessmen's Conference," was backed by the Archdiocese of Manila,⁶ but events transpired so rapidly by this time that newspapers could hardly keep up with electronic media in presenting the "news."

A third critical source of support for Aquino came from the U.S. media and from one important U.S. public relations firm. One might ask why the largely favorable reporting on the Aquino campaign from America's most venerated press and television institutions erupted only at this juncture, after fourteen years of little critical appraisal of the Marcos autocracy. Reports of Marcos's massive hidden wealth and corruption were legion and well known to American journalists covering the region, and documented evidence of the president's phony wartime heroics had leaked out years before. Yet, it was only in the weeks before the fateful February 1986 elections that the U.S. media decided to run headline stories on these scandals. Similarly, the widespread election fraud in previous elections, such as the 1984 national assembly poll, captured relatively little U.S. media attention compared to the 1986 event. Did the established U.S. media get a go-signal from Washington?

There is reason to think so, as the year 1985 was a turning point in U.S. relations with Marcos. A faction critical of the regime and centered in the State Department began to coalesce to try to move White House policy away from its position of unequivocal support. Numerous visits by concerned high-level U.S. officials that year, including Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director William Casey and Reagan envoy, Paul Laxalt, finally persuaded Marcos, who reportedly feared a Diem-style plot against him, to hold a "snap" election to prove his continuing mandate. Marcos was also encouraged to hire a conservative American public relations firm, Black, Manafort, Stone and Kelley, to win over the

5. Robert L. Youngblood, "The Corazon Aquino 'Miracle' and the Philippine Churches," paper presented at the Association of Asian Studies meeting, Boston, 9-12 April 1987, p. 10.

6. Rosalinda Pineda-Ofrenco, "The Press Under Martial Law" in del Mundo, *Philippine Mass Media*, p. 27.

U.S. Congress and press.⁷ In December 1985, a series of interventions involving U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz and State Department Undersecretary and former U.S. ambassador to the Philippines, Michael Armacost, brought Cory Aquino in touch with the American public relations firm, D.H. Sawyer & Associates, which proceeded to manage, free of charge, those aspects of the candidate's campaign aimed at American public opinion.⁸ It would be too much to claim that the anti-Marcos, pro-Aquino leanings of the U.S. media in that transitional period accounted for the overthrow of the regime, since large numbers of Filipinos, including segments of the Catholic church, were already turning to militant and armed opposition, especially after the Aquino assassination in 1983. Defense Minister Enrile and General Ramos, Aquino's eleventh hour allies, indeed, were part of a "reformed armed forces movement" (RAM) coup plot that was moving on its own toward a junta that would have made Enrile the head of state.⁹

It was also obvious that the U.S. media enjoyed extremely easy access to the *dramatis personae* of the Philippine political struggle. The impact of the anti-Marcos exposes and the election fraud coverage in such influential American news sources as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, the wire services and major broadcast organs very definitely filtered back and directly influenced educated Filipinos in ways that further undermined Marcos's standing among his own people. The Aquino campaign, in fact, made extensive use of foreign media reports to boost the credentials of the martyr's widow, as it did of D.H. Sawyer's Mark Malloch Brown, who not only helped fashion U.S. reception of the candidate, but who, reportedly, also wrote some of her speeches for local consumption. Ironically, in the end, it was Marcos's open door policy toward the foreign media, including the availability of his cronies' telecommunication facilities, that allowed the transmission of his public demise before all the eyes of the world. This point was not missed by the neighboring authoritarian government of Lee Kuan Yew, who, immediately after the Marcos downfall, began cracking down on U.S. (*Time*, *Asian Wall Street Journal*) and other foreign media for exposing Singaporeans to some of the dirty political laundry of the monopoly People's Action Party.

7. Raymond Bonner, *Waltzing with a Dictator: The Marcoses and the Making of American Policy* (New York: Times Books, 1987), pp. 355-84; Lewis M. Simons, *Worth Dying For* (New York: William Morrow), pp. 203-22.

8. Bonner, *Waltzing with a Dictator*, pp. 395-97.

9. Simons, *Worth Dying For*, pp. 257-77.

A fourth pillar of support for Cory Aquino, albeit in part surreptitiously, came from the U.S. government itself, although the available evidence suggests that there existed considerable division of opinion and strategy among the highest circles of state power. Some sources have argued that Marcos's ouster was planned from 1985 by the U.S. government.¹⁰ As for President Reagan's position, investigations on the "Iran-Contragate" scandal had still failed by early 1988 to establish his precise role in that conspiracy, or, for that matter, to what extent his foreign policy advisers had ever kept him informed of U.S. interventionist initiatives, including the option planning going on for the Philippines. Ronald and Nancy Reagan, both personally close to the Marcoses, apparently held out almost to the bitter end for the regime, even as the State Department and the CIA were clandestinely involved in designs that would remove their friends from power. By late 1985, both State and the CIA not only knew of RAM's coup plans but had trained many of its officers.¹¹

The National Citizens' Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL), a poll watchdog group that had been instrumental in exposing the electoral machinations of Marcos' political party, KBL, in 1986, was originally a creation of the CIA in the 1950s to help bring to power the pro-U.S. administration of former Defense Secretary Ramon Magsaysay. Revived before the 1984 national assembly election that gave about one-fourth of the seats to the opposition, NAMFREL was again funded through channels by the U.S. government for the 1986 poll with a contribution of at least \$300,000 from the U.S. Agency for International Development, with additional funding coming from other private, conservative American institutional donors, together with the Japanese government and private sector. Part of the money went to the RAM forces of Enrile and associates.¹² The U.S.-RAM connection did not end there. In October 1987, an embarrassed new U.S. ambassador to Manila, Nicholas Platt, had to abruptly ship home his assistant military attache, Victor Raphael, and another Embassy officer when it reached the foreign and Manila press that both had actively intervened on behalf of RAM officer, Colonel Gregorio Honasan, the leader of the August 1987 coup attempt against Aquino, who was later captured and allowed to escape by sympathetic

10. See for example Leonard Davis, *The Philippines: People, Poverty and Politics* (London: MacMillan, 1987).

11. *Ibid.*, p. 207.

12. Bonner, *Waltzing with a Dictator*, pp. 408-09.

military officers, and possibly, according to one Philippine news report, with the complicity and protection of the U.S. embassy.¹³ Raphael was reportedly Honasan's *kumpare*, godfather of one of Honasan's children.

The U.S. government and the CIA had also reportedly intervened in financing the Catholic church's Radio Veritas and in providing technical backup that allowed the station to keep functioning when Marcos' forces knocked out its main transmitter during the February upheaval. The CIA's involvement was somewhat of a replay of the "hearts and minds," anti-Huk (guerilla army led by the Communist Party) propaganda in the 1950s, which included U.S. distribution of single frequency radio sets, the setting up of "educational" television by the Agency for International Development, funding a Philippine government National Media Production Center, which was later reorganized to serve as Marcos's major image-making organ, and helping establish the Philippine National Press Club, all identified with anti-communist political objectives.¹⁴ In the 1986 sequel, the CIA managed Enrile's and Ramos's disinformation strategy, which successfully lured the Marcos generals over to their side, and tapped Marcos's military radio communications, passing on vital information to the coup leaders.¹⁵

Explanation for U.S. behavior in dumping an old ally and turning to an inexperienced and unpredictable new force is probably best summed up in the old maxim that powerful nations have no permanent friends nor permanent enemies, only permanent interests. Responsible for poor economic performance, an unacceptable degree of market protectionism, the outrageous corruption of his family and friends, a rapidly expanding, communist-led "New People's Army" fostered by poverty, landlessness and military abuses, a demoralized local business community and a volcano of social discontent, Marcos had simply outlived his usefulness. As one noted scholar on U.S.-Philippine affairs has suggested, the dumping of Marcos was part of a shift in U.S. foreign policy, turning toward a "decompression" of explosive conditions in several allied Third World countries under ultra right-wing repression, including Haiti, El Salvador, South America and the Philippines.¹⁶

13. Luis Mauricio, "The Americans' Current 'Niño Bonito,'" *Malaya*, 9 April 1988, p. 4.

14. Simons, *Worth Dying For*, p. 286; Bonner, *Waltzing with a Dictator*, p. 41; Gerald Sussman, "Telecommunications Technology: Transnationalizing the New Philippine Information Order," *Media Culture & Society*, No. 4, pp. 377-78.

15. Simons, *Worth Dying For*, p. 286.

16. Walden Bello, "Perspectives on the Philippines" (a review article), *Third World Quarterly* (October 1987):1329-38.

PRESS FREEDOM UNDER AQUINO

With Marcos out of the picture and the press, Philippine newspapers have since largely recovered the verve that made them in pre-martial law times one of the liveliest, though not necessarily the most representative, in Asia. The editorial and political orientation of the dailies covers a conservative to liberal nationalist spectrum, with the small-circulation left-wing sheets to be distributed underground. The once independent, left-leaning daily, *Malaya*, was taken over by a new ownership group in mid-1987, in part because of staff efforts to unionize the paper, and moved to a pro-Aquino stance, forcing out the nationalist-oriented head of the editorial staff, Renato Constantino, who is also the favorite national historian on the country's university and college campuses. With so many competing papers, but perhaps only one of the 26, the 250,000 circulation *Manila Bulletin*, turning a respectable profit, reporters feel compelled to play strictly by the rules. As a result, says one of Manila's most respected newspaper (*Manila Chronicle*) editors, "reporting tends to be very superficial."¹⁷ As one Filipino union organizer, a former president of the Philippine National Press Club, sized it up, the current situation "has resulted in lower than average wages, scimpier benefits, sweatshop conditions, and a pervasive sense of vulnerability and helplessness."¹⁸

Unlike Marcos, Aquino herself does not instill fear and intimidation, nor does she "invite" (as the Filipino euphemism goes) independent-minded reporters in for military interrogation. On the other hand, she is known to use connections with publishers, directly or through her press secretary, Teodoro Benigno, to discourage stories unflattering to her administration. Moreover, the big business linkages of the newspaper owners themselves, though not nearly as pervasive as they were under Marcos, encourage self-censorship, within the context of an age old Filipino art of patronage politics that weds elite factions and induces courtship of the powers that be.

One Filipino newspaper editor, requesting anonymity, believes that another constraint in political and investigative reporting is the direct pressure of advertisers and the U.S. CIA. According to this source, advertising agencies, some of them foreign-based, organized a *de facto* boycott of the formerly left-leaning daily, *Malaya*, from 1986 to 1987,

17. Interview with Amando Doronila, 25 March 1988, Cambridge Massachusetts.

18. Nieva, "The New Imperatives."

that succeeded in bringing new conservative owners and management to that newspaper. The CIA, with a long, documented history of intervention in the Philippines, is seen as planting stories in the local press, through at least one domestic press agency, that are intended to raise anti-communist fears and to discredit socialist governments, in particular the Soviet Union.

Others have argued that a "democratic space," long closed by Marcos now exists, even if media freedom still has its limits. The Aquino government shut down one sequestered newspaper, the once pro-Marcos *Daily Express*, and temporarily closed three radio stations for expressing sympathy or broadcasting *on camera* interviews with Col. Honasan after the abortive August 1987 coup attempt. Aquino, herself, brought a libel case against a popular newspaper columnist who wrote that the president had hid timorously under her bed as the August episode unfolded. Violated canons notwithstanding, if measurement by the ASEAN region standard is a useful criterion, the Philippine press clearly stands out as the most colorful and free-wheeling. But given the increasingly repressive character of most of these governments, Filipino journalists would probably not be very flattered by the comparison.

The 1987 constitution's "Bill of Rights," adapted from the U.S. charter, states that "No law shall be passed abridging the freedom of speech, of expression, or of the press. . . ." However, this freedom is broadly circumscribed by laws such as those in the Revised Penal Code that punish newspapers whose "false news . . . may endanger the public order" (Article 154) or are held responsible for "inciting to sedition" (Article 142). Adding substance to these laws, the senate president, Jovito Salonga, proposed a "Senate Bill 119" in late 1987 that, in time of rebellion, would allow the executive to shut down broadcast media. It is also a crime to publish "obscene literature" or "doctrines openly contrary to public morals" (Article 201). Conservatively interpreting these latter "doctrines," the Philippines' Bureau of Posts has, for example, banned the distribution of *Playboy* magazine but otherwise not proscribed the distribution of western news weeklies.¹⁹ Other issues, such as the abuse of libel law and illegal payoffs, which contributed to the notorious image of the Philippine press in the past, are addressed in a new "code of ethics" adopted by the National Press Club in May 1987. NPC members hope that the general language of the code and its professional brandishings will

19. Manuel F. Almario, "Law and Ethics in Mass Communications," *The Filipino Journalist* (October 1987).

substitute for the repressive government intervention that their state suffered for fourteen years under the dictatorship.

That dictatorship is over. The glorious memories of the "February Revolution" have now all but faded. Ninoy Aquino had warned that the first post-Marcos power holder would be blown out of the water within six months, which likely would have been the scenario had not his own martyrdom established the basis for a longer, more legitimate succession. Nonetheless, Corazon Aquino came to power with a legacy of political and economic polarization, concentration of land and wealth, bureaucratic corruption a bloated military and distorted political conventions of extravagant perquisites and privileges assumed with high office. She also inherited a technocracy long beholden to transnational industrial, banking and developmentalist advisers. Thus far, her options appear to be a path of slow and diluted reforms that may please no one, or a radical restructuring of the society, which inevitably would invite severe retaliation. Under pressures from the four pillars that sponsored her ascendancy and other conservative interests that back her administration, Aquino has backtracked from much of her initial program of conciliation. What some prematurely interpreted as a victory of strategic nonviolence is now clearly an increasingly hard-line posture that sanctions a beefed-up armed forces and military-backed, armed and savage brutal, anti-communist vigilante groups, which have largely foreclosed her earlier, negotiation-style, nationalist and reform-minded commitments.

For their part, most newspaper publishers, many of them in the red, have found common cause with the president, on the one hand fearing another authoritarian regime coming to power and ordering closures, confiscations and tight censorship, and on the other facing underpaid employees and militant unionism demanding more secure working conditions and, in some cases, more decision-making responsibilities and power sharing. At this point, Aquino appears to believe that she needs the publishers more than pronoun journalists, and is willing to make concessions to the former, such as discouraging collective bargaining and ignoring the constitutional violation of the Lopez clan owning multimedia in the same market. Her administration is besieged by military coup threats, demands for a renewed U.S. bases agreement, western embassies', transnational corporate and IMF/World Bank insistence on privatization and deregulation of trade and investment, a huge debt burden (over \$28 billion), uncertain, though momentarily improved, economic indicators, massive poverty and unemployment, and

expanding New People's Army, a level of violence surpassing the worst days of Marcos and growing reports of government scandals and First Family nepotism. It will be hard pressed to remain in power until its mandated termination in 1992.

As Marcos' 1972 coup and subsequent destabilization efforts have made evident, political upheavals target the pluralist press and other media, as one of their first victims. And as Philippine Supreme Court Chief Justice Claudio Teehankee, in 1986 speech to the National Press Club, also succinctly observed, a "bumper crop of newspapers" is assuredly "no adequate proof that freedom is being exercised to the full."²⁰ The year ahead will likely see a shakeout of many of the twenty-six Manila dailies, and, more importantly, test the government's tolerance of an American-style press in the context of continuing crisis and the emerging remake of the situation in El Salvador.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 30.