

# THE TRANSITION OF POWER IN THE PHILIPPINES: AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. RICHARD J. KESSLER

*FORUM:* What have been the fundamental political and social changes in the Philippines recently, and what has fundamentally stayed the same? When Marcos came to power in the 1960s, everyone had great hopes for him, as many do now for Corazon Aquino. Are we seeing sort of a pattern, a 25-year cycle or something?

*KESSLER:* No. I think it's important to note that Cory Aquino's triumph is a historical anomaly in the Philippines. She's a historically unique personage. We don't often have that in our lives, where you can see one individual who will stand out for the rest of history, and she stands out. Her personal triumph fulfilled the Filipinos' longing for their own "revolution." It is in that sense that she's unique historically. No other Filipino leader, going back hundreds of years in terms of the revolts against the Spanish, has been able to accomplish what she has done. It's a fulfillment of the frustrations of the Philippine-Spanish war and the Philippine-American War. Past revolutionaries were frustrated by their own ambitions, their own ineptitude, and by the Americans. That's what's important about understanding the potential for the situation to improve, whereas it didn't under Marcos. She brought together a constellation of modern forces; although members are drawn from the traditional elites, the bulk of her support is across the board. It isn't based on traditional political forces in the Philippines; these are people who want change in their society. Really, what Marcos did in 1972 [the year he declared martial law] was to cut off growth. The country had been modernizing slowly, developing a more rational base for policy and politics. She provided an opportunity for those forces to come together again. Now the challenge for her is to take those forces and develop a modern political party system in the Philippines, before it falls into the traditional pattern of political leaders forming their own individual groups.

---

Dr. Richard J. Kessler is a Senior Associate at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington, D.C.

*FORUM:* Isn't she already beginning to run into that traditional politics pattern to a certain extent?

*KESSLER:* It's nothing she's running into; it was there all the time. It was there with her alliance with Salvador Laurel and the Unido party. What she has done early on is to make an appeal to "people power," which is really an appeal to a mass-based political party. If she can take that and create a modern political force in the Philippines, she'll change the way politics operate there. I think that's her primary challenge: fundamental change of the political process. All the other issues, the economic issues, the military issues, the insurgency issues, are all derived from changing the political system; if she can accomplish that, she'll be able to move into these other areas with a great deal more freedom than Marcos or any other political leader had in the past.

Marcos in 1965 was seen as a modern leader, but I think that was partly p.r., partly a failure of U.S. perceptions. His real political heritage and his formative years were in the pre-World War II period, a time in which Filipino leaders were oriented towards the United States. This is the second most important change in the Philippines, which will affect our relationship also: Cory Aquino is a leader in her own right. She's independent of the United States, and has more leverage in dealing with the United States than any other Filipino president has had. Part of that leverage is derived from her ability now to lead the Philippines in Third World forums, which it has never been able to do in the past. It was always seen as a puppet of U.S. interests. She can take the podium beside any Third World leader now and declare an independent policy, and no other Philippine president could do that and be perceived as doing it legitimately. That gives her a lot of stature and a lot of independence in dealing with the United States.

*FORUM:* Is it possible, though, that her strength as a person with great moral authority in the Philippines is also one of her weaknesses, if she really does need to transform the political process fundamentally? After all, that process has, in the Philippines, traditionally been based on personal ties, on personalization of political institutions. How is she going to be able to translate her personal charisma into creating political institutions which do not reward personal charisma?

*KESSLER:* Well, all political institutions reward individuals. The Democratic and Republican parties reward individuals all the time. There's always some sort of political payoff. The question is, when is the larger good ultimately served, rather than any particularistic value? That is her

challenge, and I think she has great potential to form a modern political system, partly because of her moral integrity. She came to power owing very little to people, particularly owing very little to anybody in the United States. That gives her an independence and authority that other Philippine politicians lack; they lacked it in the past, and they lack it now. Her allegiance with the church gives her an alternative source of power, if you will; she can make those appeals through the church, which can sidetrack some of the traditional political problems. Whether she will or not, only time will tell. Certainly I think all the indications now are very promising.

*FORUM:* The *Far Eastern Economic Review* recently said that the traditional Catholic church in the Philippines is “literally fighting for its life,” and Cory Aquino was really the church’s last chance, to keep from losing its own authority to the liberation theologians. To what extent did this perception really drive the church’s leap into the political fray during the last several months?

*KESSLER:* The *Review*’s comment was a little dramatic. But certainly it drove the church into playing a much more important role. Jaime Cardinal Sin has always occupied the moderate middle of the Philippines, and there is always a force on the right and a force on the left. Over the years, the force on the right has diminished and has moved to the middle. The same has occurred with the force on the left, and I’m primarily referring to the bishops. Some of the more prominent leftist bishops, such as Bishop Claver of Mindanao, have become very concerned about the communists and liberation theology and what it does to the church’s legitimacy, and that concern has moved them to be much more cautious in dealing with the New People’s Army and moved them again towards the middle. This gave Sin a great deal of support (at least within the bishopry) to move the church into the political realm within the last few months. Certainly there are radical priests out on the left that are of concern, but the moderate church itself has also been very active in promoting things like Basic Christian Communities, and propagating views that the essential mission of the church is dealing with the poor and their problems, and income inequalities. I don’t think that will really diminish. Sin and the church now have a great deal of authority in the Philippines. There is a coalition of forces who see that the path to success right now is not through revolution or radical change.

*FORUM:* One group that does seem to have lost significantly in the last several months is the NPA. They attempted to lead a boycott of the

elections, but the effort was largely unsuccessful. They seem to have lain low; they also seem to have given covert support to Aquino, and in certain cases even guarded some of the ballot boxes in some of the precincts. What do you think was the effect on the NPA of the removal of Marcos?

*KESSLER:* I think the primary reason for the NPA's popular support is economic. In the Metro Manila area, where most of the reporters stay, certainly the middle class saw Marcos as the prime reason why they were sympathetic toward the NPA. But out in the rural areas, it's mainly for economic reasons and even deeper: it's a long tradition in the Philippines for peasants to aspire toward their own liberation. That tradition in the Philippines, which the NPA tapped early on in the rural areas, accounts for part of their strength. That doesn't necessarily mean that Cory Aquino is going to be threatened by the NPA, despite the fact that the first few years of her government are not going to show whole changes in the structure of the economy. Partly because she does have an appeal to the peasants as a figure of hope, she provides a form of counter-spiritualism, if you will, to what the NPA has been offering.

Secondly, the peasants are essentially moderates; they're not revolutionaries. Their leadership may talk in ideological terms, but they basically do not want to go out and get killed; they want to be left in peace to prosper. So what I see is a diminishment of support for the NPA. That doesn't mean that it's going to disappear. The hardcore cadre of the NPA, which probably numbers between 1,000 and 3,000, is going to remain an important force. The essential problem they are dealing with, in the debates they're having now, is an issue of strategy. Do they emphasize the political, or the military struggle? I think one of the interesting things about the structure of the NPA is that it was designed with a central committee and regional committees, in which the regional committees had a great deal of independence. Now this worked well in a military situation, but in a political situation, it causes problems, because it means more voices arguing over what should be done. This will create further problems and tensions in the NPA. Cory was very smart to release [Communist Party of the Philippines cofounder Jose Maria] Sison and [NPA member] Commander Dante; she interjected a whole new group of figures who will sit and argue among themselves over strategy.

*FORUM:* There is by no means one coherent leadership group in the NPA either. Sison has been at odds with Communist Party of the Philippines Chairman Rodolfo Salas for quite some time, I understand.

*KESSLER:* I think there is a coherent leadership group in the Central Committee. Rodolfo Salas definitely dominates the Central Committee. But that doesn't mean he doesn't have to contend with different forces. The head of the National Democratic Front, Antonio Zumel, and others have been arguing different strategies and what Sison adds, now that he's free, is another legitimate force, a different set of supporters to the internal debate. So the NPA in the short term, at least, is going to be diminished in terms of its influence and military ability. But it's the political issue that's the more dangerous struggle, particularly with local elections, because this is where the NPA can be effective in trying to manipulate or put their people into power. They will be very active in local elections, but this doesn't necessarily mean that they'll be successful. Filipinos are always very strong on rhetoric; declaratory policy always plays a very important part in their policy debate, disguising what their operational policy will be. So you have to discount the rhetoric, and I think that's true for the communists as well as for the conservatives.

*FORUM:* Let's turn to U.S. relations with the Philippines. There's been wide praise for the U.S. role in the last several weeks in helping to bring about the transition of government. There seemed to be a surprising amount of coherence and teamwork among members of the Defense and State Departments, the CIA, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff in doing the hard analysis, the difficult thinking, working out the policy alternatives in the last several years. Why do you think the United States did it "right" this time?

*KESSLER:* Questions like that always depend on the relevant time frame. For example, one of the interesting things that made it perhaps successful is that the Pentagon early on became concerned about the deterioration of Marcos's legitimacy and his control of the military.

*FORUM:* Do you think that the key point at which the Pentagon became concerned was the assassination of Senator Benigno Aquino in August 1983, or the reports by Admiral Crowe, the Senate Select Intelligence Committee, and others on the growth of the NPA?

*KESSLER:* I think Crowe's statement probably had a great deal of influence (and that wasn't until June 1984) in helping to provide a legitimacy to the views of the low-level and mid-level analysts within the State Department, the Pentagon, and the CIA, who had been concerned about the issue. Dick Childress, the NSC man on Asia, wrote and said to me, "We recognized that there was going to be a crisis on the Philippines

over two years ago." He wrote that to me last week. To me, the crisis in the Philippines has been obvious for a number of years, and if you want to stretch it, you can go back to 1969 in terms of the analytical framework and say, "Look, in 1969, Marcos won the reelection. This has never happened before. What does it mean? Maybe we should pay more attention to his style of rule." The same currents were very prevalent and obvious in 1972 when he declared martial law, and there were people within the government then that said, "Look, this isn't a stable situation." The same was true in 1977 and 1979. So at the low and mid levels, there's always been a great deal of awareness about the Philippine problem. The question has always been, how do you get the political leadership to understand the problem? How do you get people like [former Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Paul] Wolfowitz and [Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Richard] Armitage and then their superiors, [Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Michael] Armacost and Shultz and Weinberger, how do you bring them aboard? I think what you saw was an evolution of the policy from the bottom up, with people from the bottom gradually educating their superiors, and then *their* superiors educating *their* superiors as to the situation. They didn't have the incentive to do so until after the Aquino assassination. That provided a justification within the bureaucracy for a reassessment of American policy toward the Philippines, which was begun in 1984 and finally resulted in a National Security Study Directive in 1985.

*FORUM:* This brings up a disturbing question, though. Do we need an assassination of a major political figure, or a major and rapidly growing communist insurgency, to get the higher levels of the foreign policy establishment to sit up and take notice?

*KESSLER:* That's a very smart question. The Philippines is not unique among the countries we deal with that have problems. If we have to look at every country and have something like this occur, then we're in bad shape, because it isn't going to occur in every country before the problem happens. It didn't occur in Iran, and it probably is not going to occur in Korea, although perhaps it should have when Park Chung-hee was killed. It disturbs me because I frankly see it as a failure of the political people, not so much as a failure of the professionals. The problem is that the professionals have only two choices when they recognize a problem: report about it and try to form interagency committees and discuss it, or threaten to resign. It's interesting that in the Reagan administration there have been no resignations over policy, whereas you did find it in

other administrations. This is perhaps a disturbing development that's not just related to the Philippines, but overall, in terms of American foreign policy. I gather in the March 1986 issue of the *Foreign Service Journal* that a foreign service officer comments on the "sheep mentality" in the State Department. Because of this, then, it becomes the responsibility of the political appointees to make issues. At least within the Philippine policy, I have always thought it was a sorry sign that you did not see a diversity of debate on Marcos. Yes, there was a consensus, but it was a safe consensus. It was something everybody could agree on, it was a baseline "press for reform, but you don't cut him off. Marcos is part of the problem and part of the solution."

A lot of people on the working level realized that Marcos was never going to change his ways, and what they hoped for would be ultimately the type of crisis that in fact occurred and everybody would be forced to recognize that he would have to go. The political leaders really lacked balls. No one was arguing, as occurred in the Carter Administration over Nicaragua, in which you had the NSC advisor, Pastor, arguing that we had to deal with Somoza while he was in power, and Pete Vakey at the State Department arguing, "Look, this guy will not change; we've got to get rid of him first before we can have real reform." Nobody argued that in this administration; nobody argued that you couldn't have a fair election with Marcos in power. You had to get rid of Marcos before you could hold elections; you had to get rid of Marcos before you could reform.

**FORUM:** Do you then discount the recent changes in rhetoric, for example, Chester Crocker saying a couple of days ago that in a generic sense, the black opposition in South Africa are freedom fighters and the U.S. would support a majority black rule in South Africa, and the United States' censure of Pinochet's regime for human rights violations in a recent UN session, and even a White House statement indicating that they are now going to give more support to democratic opposition against authoritarian regimes? Is this all directed toward Nicaragua at this particular moment, toward the contra issue, or is it a sign of a bigger change?

**KESSLER:** I think it's Ronald Reagan's pragmatism, recognizing that what the Philippines showed is that the American people's essential values are supportive of democracies, not of authoritarian leaders. He's bowing to the realities of American politics. Certainly it has to be welcomed for that reason, because this is essentially what the Philippines proved, that if the United States supports basic principles first, such as democracy

and human rights and freedom of speech, and tries to craft its policy in terms of how you obtain those objectives, then it will have the support of the American people. That's why Reagan can't find support for Nicaragua, because in that instance we're supporting a group of people killing other people. Killing is something that nice people don't do, no matter what side they are on. If you're dealing with a guerrilla movement, you do not have control over those people; they're always going to commit human rights abuses. You cannot prevent it; you cannot have sound command and control over guerrilla forces. For that reason I think Reagan's going to go off the track on Nicaragua. But the principles you mentioned are the principles we should have been standing for a long time ago. When George Bush was praising Marcos for his adherence to democratic principles in 1982, that directly contradicted reality, and that was one of the reasons Marcos stayed in power for so long and ignored American pressure for reform. He believed he had Ronald Reagan's support, which in fact he did. Despite developing a consensus on a policy that was widespread throughout the government, it did not exist in the White House. The administration did not have Ronald Reagan aboard on their policy until the last moment; in fact, they probably don't have Ronald Reagan on to this day, except perhaps he's a bit irritated with Marcos calling him up all the time. I think that's what's finally turned Reagan against Marcos — being bugged on the telephone.

*FORUM:* What do you think of the efforts of Representative Stephen Solarz to help the new Philippine government to recover some of Marcos's assets in the United States?

*KESSLER:* You have to differentiate Solarz's actions from the U.S. government. I think what Solarz is doing is to permit the Philippine government to pierce the veil of secrecy that Marcos has put up: to find out what he owns and then try to resolve it. I don't think what Solarz is doing is going to hurt the relationship; what the U.S. government is doing is another question. We should never have permitted that second airplane of Marcos's departing entourage to take off from the Philippines; to me that was an error, or else it was of deliberate intent. Once it arrived in Honolulu and we realized there was a problem, if we'd been smart, we would have sent the airplane and all its baggage back. I don't think there would have been any great problems raised except from Marcos himself on this.

*FORUM:* What do you think the options are now for the administration in regard to this matter?

*KESSLER:* The options for the administration are 1) to delay it as long as possible, or 2) to get the documents out and in the hands of the Philippine government, and the latter course seems to be the one which they're going to do, which is good. It's really the first test of our relationship with Cory Aquino, and we're going to need good relations when we reopen the base-renegotiations next year.

*FORUM:* Next year already? I thought it was in 1989 that the renegotiation would start.

*KESSLER:* The process of forming working groups and putting out preliminary feelers will begin much before 1989. And in 1987 the five-year renewal of the base-aid package comes up.

*FORUM:* This has obviously been a thorny issue; it strikes right at the heart of the love-hate relationship the Filipinos have for the United States, and at the issue of anti-Americanism, which in ways is tied up with political legitimacy in the Philippines. Can Cory Aquino afford to play hardball with the Americans?

*KESSLER:* Oh, she can play hardball. A lot will depend on the circumstances existing when the base agreement finally expires as to what she will do and what we will do. The best thing for Cory Aquino to do now, and I think this is her strategy, is to avoid discussing the issue, because it just gives another item for the communists to push. The best policy for us, for the same reason, is to downplay the bases as an issue. Cory Aquino's position on the bases is one that most Philippine politicians will support. She personally has questions about the bases. She raises issues about prostitution and the black market activities and how this has corrupted the Philippine culture. On the other hand, she says this is a decision that has to be taken by the Filipino people. I think in most instances everyone agrees that if it were put to the Filipinos in a referendum, most of them would vote for the continued presence of the bases. So the strategy of those people who want to maintain the bases is to not make it an issue. What may occur in the negotiations? We may end up negotiating away Clark Airfield, for example; it's all part of the package and may help alleviate some tensions. At the same time, if we can get a firmer statement out of the other countries in ASEAN about the importance of the bases to their own security, that will help diminish nationalist pressure in the Philippines against Cory Aquino. Singapore has already done so since she came to power. There are all these ways of ameliorating

the bases as an issue, and it really doesn't seem to me to be a major consideration now.

*FORUM:* How vital do you think they really are to U.S. security interests?

*KESSLER:* Vital, no. The United States would continue to exist as a government and a land without those bases. In terms of our own security, they are probably of lesser importance now. Over the years of our relationship with the Philippines, even going back to 1907, for example, Teddy Roosevelt called the Philippines America's Achilles' heel in the Pacific. In 1946, Eisenhower argued that we should get out of the bases, at least from the army's standpoint. They've come to be important only when there's an exogenous event that makes them appear important to global American strategic interests. For example, Nixon was trying to downplay the bases in his relationship with the Philippines. It was only when the oil crisis made the Middle East important and Carter developed a Rapid Deployment Force and everybody was concerned about sea lanes of communication and projecting force in the Middle East, to help supply the Israelis through the back door, that the bases became a much more important force in the post-Vietnam War period. Now this is diminishing.

*FORUM:* But even so, wasn't Carter able to get the bases for several hundred million dollars less than the figure negotiated by the Ford administration?

*KESSLER:* Kissinger put a billion-dollar price tag on the bases and this was rejected by Marcos, and Carter settled for five hundred million. I think that was a bad mistake by the U.S. government. If you want to trace the policy mistakes that we had under Marcos, the first major mistake was in 1972, when we didn't react to Marcos's declaration of martial law; the second major mistake was not reacting to the human rights conditions when he was jailing most of his political opponents, including Senator Benigno Aquino; this was 1972 through 1976. Thirdly, there was the issue of the base renegotiations, which was the first visible sign of direct American support for the Marcos government. And the fourth egregious mistake was Reagan-Bush's remarks about Marcos in their first term, which I think made Marcos confident that he could get away with murder in the Philippines; literally, murder. As much as you can say that we have a good situation now, there were a number of presidents, a number of individuals, who were responsible for

being very blind to the situation in the Philippines. And as a result, there are a number of Filipinos, including Senator Aquino, who are dead today.

*FORUM:* How crucial do you think the U.S. role was in the transition of power?

*KESSLER:* I don't think it was that critical. There were two important, helpful activities. The first was helping to establish conditions and the criteria for a fair election, with all the various observer groups that went over there and studied the election process; that helped keep the media and public pressure on Marcos. Secondly were the activities of the Pentagon in the last few weeks of Marcos's rule, in which we tried to deal with each of the Philippine military commanders and suggest to them that if they engaged in violence and killed Filipinos, it would be very difficult for us to ever allow them to come to the United States, should Marcos fall. In the final analysis, my view was that the Philippine military was always fragmented and wouldn't stand behind Marcos when the going got tough; I said this as early as 1979. When Marcos finally left, he was going anyway. The helicopters provided him with a way out, but he was going one way or the other, it was very clear. The U.S. role in the last few weeks was minimal, and I think this is one of the reasons why Cory Aquino has very few obligations to Reagan; in fact, Reagan exacerbated the relationship with remarks which still carry great currency in the Philippines, his Monday comments to the press and his Tuesday night press conference.

*FORUM:* Those were the times when he stated that there was fraud on both sides and that there was already a strong two-party system.

*KESSLER:* All of that was incredible. There's a lot about this that is only going to slowly come out about the Philippines. We're focusing on the hidden wealth. Marcos acted in a great deal of ways, some obvious and some not so obvious, in trying to influence American politics. In a way, too, I think if you want to say where the U.S. had the most influence, it might have been, paradoxically, in Reagan's remarks, because he provoked the American people, he provoked Congress, and he provided an opportunity for the State Department officials to bring in Philip Habib and take over the policy. At that point, it was all over; Marcos was going anyway. It's probably true that we contributed to lessen the violence; whether we really helped get Marcos out of there sooner is probably doubtful. But Reagan's remarks were really serendi-

pitous; he could have phrased those words in a much different way which would not have created the outcry that it did.

*FORUM:* In the past and certainly in the future, we have had and will have to deal with the issue of what to do with authoritarian leaders who have been friendly to the U.S., and to whom we feel we owe a favor, who are about to be deposed and need transport outside of their country or need asylum here in our country. We seem to run into this problem repeatedly, with the Shah of Iran, with Somoza, with Duvalier, with Marcos. How should we balance the competing pressures that we have with asylum? On the one hand, our efforts to provide an escape hatch for these leaders may help to prevent violence and may hasten the willingness of these dictators or leaders to step down, but on the other, we end up having terrible difficulties when these leaders end up on our soil.

*KESSLER:* First, I think these have been our people. As Henry Kissinger mentioned the other day, Marcos was our person, whom we supported through both Democratic and Republican administrations. The same is true of Baby Doc. If you want to support these types of people, you should pay the price of bringing them to the United States. That doesn't mean they should be immune from any prosecution, nor should they have an ability to charge anything they want in the base PX. But it does mean that you should be willing to accept them or to provide transportation when they're on the way out. Today's argument that once they're here, we should give these people protection against lawsuits because then other dictators won't want to come, I think is rather silly, first because it goes against American principles and law, and secondly, these people aren't leaving because the United States offers them transportation; they're leaving because they don't have any ability to govern in their countries anymore. If the United States doesn't give them a way out, they're either going to go out horizontally or they're going to go out through some other means. So it's really a specious argument on that account. Perhaps it's a fitting price that Reagan should pay for being his friend all these years and turning his eyes away from all the problems that Marcos had. Marcos is going to continue to provide a number of problems for the U.S. government as long as he lives. It's highly unlikely that he's going to find any place to go in the world that isn't going to cause the United States problems. The two most likely points at this time are Mexico and Morocco. I have doubts whether Mexico would accept him; if he went to Morocco, that would end up causing problems

for King Hassan. If he went to some other Caribbean country, his wife and family aren't going to enjoy it there and Marcos is going to continue to cause problems. So in many ways, he's stuck in Honolulu. Perhaps in world politics there is sometimes a poetic sense of irony and justice.

