
Quimpo, Nathan Gilbert. *Contested Democracy and the Left in the Philippines after Marcos*. Quezon City: Ateneo University Press, 2008. 422 pp.

Writing a review of this book feels a little bit like cheating. I have worked with Nathan on the ideas of this book for years. As a result, there is very little in the book that I disagree with. Unlike most academics, we have carried these ideas into the political process. A good part of the book is about Akbayan, a progressive political party we have helped to build over the course of a decade. So if I say this book is a good read, it feels like I am recommending myself.

Contested sometimes reads like one long argument for the relevance of the Philippine Left. A part of the Left for most of his adult life, Nathan suffers the need for self-justification like the rest of us. Arguments for “protracted”-ness cannot explain why after decades of struggle, the Left still has very little power. We have lived on the margins so much that our discourse sounds like political pidgin that only we understand. But Nathan has always been an optimist. He argues, convincingly, that we should not be so self-deprecating.

Since *Contested* is a slightly reworked PhD dissertation, Nathan starts by providing a framework for analysis. After critiquing other frameworks, Nathan says: “I contend that far from being simply an elite democracy, the Philippines is a *contested democracy* in which the elite and the *trapos* strive to maintain a formal democracy with ‘free and fair’ elections that they can easily manipulate and dominate and in which large sections of the poor and marginalized classes, sectors and communities, and some sections of the middle and upper classes as well, work and fight for a participatory and egalitarian democracy” (10).

Nathan is certainly correct about peoples’ struggles being slighted in the telling of Philippine politics. But the reason is not just ideological bias. Even people on the Left follow Harold Lasswell’s simple formula, that “politics is who gets what, when, and how.” Thus, even political scientists sympathetic to the Left are hard put to say much about the Left in their texts. It has only been in very specific, short periods when the Left had power; the rest of the time the Left is on the political margins. Nathan does not say much about these periods, for example, in the year before, and immediately after the fall of Marcos in 1986.

Filling out Nathan's "contested democracy" framework is an analytical task that still needs to be undertaken. While peoples' struggles have not brought their leaders and organizations into the centers of power, their struggles have helped to shape the arenas from which they are excluded. The Senate vote against the US military bases, for example, would not have been possible without the prior work of the Left. The removal of the bases removed a major motive for American intervention. The Philippines' strong civil society, for example, is partly the result of the Aquino administration's encouragement, a policy with anti-Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) roots. Much more work along these lines needs to be done with key nodal points in Philippine history.

Nathan himself focuses less on the concrete results of class struggle than on counter posing the concepts of participatory and egalitarian democracy to elite democracy. This is the book's second major point: "the elite strives to maintain the formal democracy of a truncated type and the poor and marginalized fight for a more substantive democracy, the process of the deepening of democracy takes on the character of a struggle of democracy from below versus elite democracy" (10). In many ways, Nathan's substantiation of this point in the work of democratic Left groups like Akbayan is the most important part of this book.

One of the problems of the Left is reticence about publicly criticizing the CPP. Many feel uneasy about criticizing an organization whose people are being tortured and killed. Others worry about being put on the CPP "hit list." Some refugees from the party like Nathan and me remain defensive about a party they gave the best years of their lives to. Nathan has managed to overcome this reticence. In this and other writings, Nathan argues that the best way to serve the progressive cause is to move away from the CPP and what it is doing.

This is, of course, another area of agreement between Nathan and me: "the traditional Left—the communist movement—has exhibited both democratic and undemocratic features but has been more of an undemocratic than a democratic or democratizing force. Its instrumentalization of POs/NGOs and the social movements negates its supposed leading role in the struggle for civil society" (55-56). Elsewhere in the book, Nathan points out that the CPP has an instrumental view of democracy: it uses democratic space better to undermine democracy and replace it with a one-party authoritarian state.

Nathan's third point is that "while the CPP remains a threat to Philippine democracy, new Left parties and groups that are more democratically oriented have emerged and are now making an earnest bid to challenge the hegemony of the oligarchic elite not just in civil society but also in the state arena—elections and governance. In the Philippines' contested democracy, the emergent leftist parties are endeavoring to become true representatives of democracy from below" (56).

The bulk of the book is devoted to this argument, clearly because this way of doing Left politics is what Nathan himself favors. Five out of seven chapters (excluding the introduction and conclusion) are about the role of these Left parties in civil society, in the political party system, in governance especially local governance, and in popular education and working for political reform. These chapters are Nathan's most important contribution to the literature on Philippine politics. While there are several books on the CPP, this is the first extended analysis of democratic Left groups.

While sympathetic to this part of the Philippine Left, Nathan is not all praise. He is, we might say, "sympathetically critical." This is important because when you are right in the middle of the struggle to build Left parties, often you cannot see further than the next congress or the coming election. It is in this sense that *Contested* is not only a good read, it is actually useful. Akbayan leaders and members are probably the largest single market for the book. Nathan not only provides useful lessons, he also helps to make us feel that what we are doing might actually be important. All right, already, we are in a "contested democracy." If only it was not such an unequal contest.—
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Emmerson, Donald K. (ed.). *Hard Choices: Security, Democracy, and Regionalism in Southeast Asia*. Stanford, California: The Walter H. Shorenstein Asia-Pacific Research Center, 2008. 422 pp.

Hard Choices examines the contemporary challenges faced by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which celebrated its fortieth anniversary in 2007. In ten chapters, it looks into the competing priorities and agenda of member states with regard to the promotion of democracy and security within ASEAN. Five key issues