

Hedman, Eva-Lotta E. 2006. *In the Name of Civil Society: From Free Election Movements to People Power in the Philippines*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, xiv + 268 pages. ISBN 0 8248 2921 2

# On the independence of civil society: the case of the Philippines

NIELS MULDER

Over the past two decades, countless pens have been put to paper by the idea of a self-organising civil society as a check on state power and, from a Tocquevillian perspective, an indispensable condition for democracy. While the idea has merit, too often it leads to a mechanical opposition of civil society and state. In the case of the Philippines, state-society dynamics have been obfuscated, even as many analysts have attempted to get at the roots of what is at first glance a strikingly mismanaged state unable to provide basic services (education, health, justice, security, infrastructure). How, many analysts asked, could such an apparently 'weak' state maintain itself?

By asking the right question, namely how bourgeois minority rule is possible under conditions of liberal democracy (in which everybody has a vote), Hedman seems to have found a way that will inspire many to break with the hackneyed schoolbook wisdom that makes much of the study of Philippine politics so depressing. Inspired by Antonio Gramsci's careful observation and critical analysis of Italian state dynamics between 1870 and 1920, her study resulted in a powerful, historically grounded theory to elucidate the vicissitudes of democracy in the Philippines.

## The dominant bloc and its appendages

Following Hedman's introduction to Gramsci's theorising of civil society and her subsequent analysis, we learn that 'the ensemble of organisms – civic, religious, professional – called "private"' helps to maintain the hegemony of the bourgeois capitalist state by facilitating rule through the mobilisation of consent. The capacity of its 'universalistic' leadership to mobilise consent through what Althusser called the 'ideological state apparatuses' – school, church, civic associations, even parliamentary opposition – is an adjunct to the power of a dominant bloc of social forces whose acceptance hinges on active participation in ritual performances such as Roman Catholic Mass, elections, and – particularly important in this book – election watch movements and People Power demonstrations.

Seen in this way, popular protest is far less spontaneous than the demonstrators think it is, as the participants, whatever the urgency of their personal motives, have been mobilised *in the name* of civil society. Given endemic electoral manipulation, fraud, violence, graft and venality, the second incisive question thus becomes why this mobilisation is remarkably infrequent and when, where, by whom and how it is mounted.

In the second chapter, Hedman identifies the dominant bloc as composed of the American government, the Catholic

Church and the capitalist class, whose interests are thoroughly intertwined. Since independence, this bloc evolved and was 'Filipinised' so as to absorb societal contradictions and to appeal to active citizenship and civic participation when its authority and companion institution of oligarchic democracy were under severe threat. Such threats, or crises of authority, typically emanated from presidential aggrandisement that infringes on the powers of Congress, and from extra-parliamentary popular mobilisation (the old Communist party and the Huks; the new Communist party and the New People's Army; restive labour and student movements). Although both threats are expressions of 'abiding tensions' in the Philippine polity, they rarely lead to acute mobilisation in defence of liberal democracy.

## Moments of mobilisation

The author identifies four, nearly cyclically occurring moments of mobilisation in recent history: the 1953 organisation of the first National Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) against President Elpidio Quirino's re-election campaign; the Citizens National Electoral Assembly's monitoring of President Ferdinand Marcos's 1969 electoral shenanigans; the revived NAMFREL in response to Marcos's 1986 'snap' election and the subsequent People Power demonstrations that sent him packing; and the 2001 People Power demonstrations against President Joseph Estrada's gross abuses of his office.

Hedman analyses these critical moments relative to the role of each component of the steadily evolving dominant bloc. As a result, we witness the fluctuations of American foreign policy in response to the international situation and its role in the Philippines; the Vatican's comparable adjustments and the Filipinisation of its personnel; and the economic transition from an agricultural to an industrial and service base, even as the business class becomes less foreign and more indigent.

## A tedious but ultimately rewarding read

In the six chapters that follow, the 'when, where, by whom and how' of these four moments of mobilisation in the name of civil society are painstakingly described. The author has accumulated a plethora of diverse data and effectively uses it to illustrate her theoretical points. We see how action was born, the obstacles it had to surmount, and its structure in terms of the main players, the outreach of mobilisation and the role of international support.

Despite the addition of chapter two, on 'transformism, crises of authority, and the dominant bloc', the study remains very much the dissertation it once was. This is not only evident from the 44 pages of end notes and 21-page bibliography, but also from the steady repetition of the theoreti-



One of four moments of mobilisation: 2001 demonstrations against President Estrada's gross abuses of his office.

cal argument and reminders – up to eight per page – that the study is about the Philippines. This can be tedious, but the reader is ultimately rewarded with a sophisticated and plausible interpretation of how bourgeois minority rule maintains itself, and with a simultaneous demystification of the idea of civil society as a purposive

watchdog. Because of these qualities, the book might be most useful in presenting final year undergraduate or graduate students with an enthusiastic, theory-inspired investigation. At the same time, however, it offers anyone interested in the Philippines and all those who argue about civil society a refreshing and sobering exposition. ■

[ a d v e r t i s e m e n t ]

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