



## Interview with Patricio Abinales *The Philippines*

*Welcome to the Great Decisions 2004 author interview series. Today, FPA speaks via e-mail with Patricio Abinales, associate professor at Kyoto University in Japan, about the historic ties between the U.S. and the Philippines, the renewed commitment to fighting terrorism in the Southeast Asia, and the role of the Philippines as a model for democracy.*

**I just wanted to first thank you for writing such a comprehensive article. I work with a number of Great Discussion groups and have received a lot of positive feedback on your piece for providing so much insight into a nation that many Americans don't know much about. Do you find this to be strange, considering the long time relationship between the two nations?**

Not really. The World War II generation perhaps was most familiar with the Philippines, for some fought there -- or had relatives who were with MacArthur when the Japanese invaded the Philippines -- while others were in the Philippines before the war in various capacities.

It was natural for the next generation of Americans to be less interested in the Philippines because American presence there really dwindled in a way: most Americans were now found in the two huge air and naval bases in Luzon islands which were de facto enclaves that had very minimal contact with the rest of the Filipino population. Put another way, those Americans from the post-war generation who continued to be interested in Philippine affairs had either personal ties with Filipinos, by marriage most often, or were attracted to the country's history, politics and culture when they visited, often as tourists, exchange students or Peace Corps volunteers. Their numbers were small compared to those exposed to the Philippines at the time when the U.S. still ruled it as a colony.

One expects less interest among the children of this post-war generation. We can probably attribute this indifference to the reduced interest American leaders had in the country after the withdrawal of the U.S. bases from the Philippines. But there may also be the possibility that interest might perk up again, this time coming from young Filipino-Americans who may be curious about the land where their parents were born, or where they lived before migrating. I am informed that the enrollment numbers for Filipino language classes in the University of California system and schools with Southeast Asian Studies Centers have risen dramatically. So too have visits by these young Filipino-Americans to the Philippines. The interest might just be revived after all, led by this huge minority group in your country.

**In an interview for the Great Decisions television series, host Ralph Begleiter asks Assistant Secretary of State for Asian Affairs James Kelly about the impact of what you call “active disinterest” in the Philippines throughout much of the nineties. How would you define this period in terms of events? Did it help the country move closer to democracy or away from it?**

I think the U.S. did not take it well that the Philippine Senate voted not to renew the U.S.-Philippine Military Bases Agreement in 1991. President Reagan was also not entirely that happy with the unceremonious ouster of his dear friend, our dictator Ferdinand Marcos. President George H.W. Bush was clearly more concerned with China than with a now-less strategic Philippines, and President Bill Clinton’s lack of coherent policy towards Asia in his first year in office simply aggravated the Philippines’ marginalization. This was, in my opinion, good for the Philippines, for it forced the country’s leaders to broaden their outlook and depend less on the United States. President Fidel Ramos did just that – he gave more serious attention to ASEAN and East Asia, as well as Europe and the Middle East. Filipinos used to deride Ramos for being the most-traveled president, but he really had no choice – in the post-bases period he knew the Philippines must learn to stand on its own.

Did it help the Philippines move closer to democracy? I think so. But I think this “re-democratization” was more the product of the Filipino experience of fighting the Marcos dictatorship. It was not anymore the same “democracy” that they inherited from the Americans, but a democracy that is, in a way, more Filipino – good and bad.

**Despite a long history of corruption, President Bush and others have said that the Philippines can serve as a real democratic model for the rest of Asia. Do you agree?**

This is a difficult question to answer. Southeast Asian leaders like Lee Kuan Yew actually point to the Philippines as the model of what “too much democracy” can do to a society. While spending a few days in Kuala Lumpur three years ago, an opinion piece in one of the local newspapers actually warned about how the popular uprising that ousted Philippine President Joseph Estrada signified some form of mob rule.

Having lived most of my young life under authoritarian rule, I am not exactly a big fan of the Singaporean or Malaysian way of political development. But I am also aware that the restoration of Philippine democracy has not led to any significant and lasting economic progress a la Singapore or Malaysia.

Philippine democracy is far from perfect. So perhaps a better way of putting this would be to say that there are certain aspects of the Philippines that are worth emulating – the exercise and defense of basic freedoms, a vigilant press, the commitment of government to give the poor or their representatives a voice in policy-making, and the high premium Filipinos give to suffrage.

**What is the current role of the AFP in terms of its relationship with the**

## **government?**

The AFP supports the present government, and with the failure of the July 2003 mutiny by young officers, I doubt if those who are disgruntled will try the coup again. Many officers are increasingly realizing that they can achieve much more politically if they run for political office.

## **Terrorism is obviously the main issue that has brought the U.S. back to the Philippines. What kind of reaction is this renewed military engagement getting from ordinary Filipinos?**

The poll surveys made during the second Balikatan Exercises showed that over 80 percent of Filipinos support the return of American troops. Nationalist criticisms of the decision by President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo to allow American troops back were expected, but these pale in comparison to the enduring goodwill Filipinos have of their former colonizer. And this included even in southern Mindanao where “international terrorism” is supposedly most active.

## **What about increased funding for development?**

Americans should be proud that their money is well spent in the southern Philippines. USAID has been doing an excellent job helping former Muslim rebels adjust back to a life of normalcy, introducing new cooperative schemes, teaching new skills – all through the Growth and Equity in Mindanao (GEM) Program. What is equally admirable about this is that USAID is doing it sans the fanfare, and with Filipinos and Muslims given the opportunity to lead the projects. The funding is not enough, of course, but in its current amount, it has done much.

## **What is the current economic relationship between the U.S. and the Philippines?**

I think the U.S. is still my country’s leading trading partner, but the goods being traded are not the “traditional” ones anymore. Philippine sugar, textiles and coconut oil now have to compete with other countries in the American market. American exports have also shifted away from manufactured goods to new investments like labor outsourcing.

## **Many people seem a bit confused as to the various agendas of groups like MNLF, MILF and Abu Sayyaf. Are these groups fighting for autonomy or something more?**

I understand their confusion. Perhaps a way of clarifying things is to think of the MNLF as the “elder brother,” the MILF as the “second brother” and the Abu Sayyaf as the “black sheep of the family.” All are organizations that operate mainly from the southern Philippines. The MNLF launched its war against President Marcos in 1974, vowing to separate the islands of Mindanao, Palawan and the Sulu Archipelago from the country and create a “Bangsa Moro Republic.” It failed and made peace with the government of President Ramos.

The MILF is a breakaway group from the MNLF that was, at first, more moderate than its elder brother even if its leaders were much more committed to Islamic teachings -- the MNLF leaders were more secular in their political approach. It was actually open to accepting autonomy. But because the Philippine government preferred to talk to the MNLF, the MILF was forced to take a more hard line stance. It displayed its military firepower in the mid-1990s, prompting the AFP later on to launch an offensive against MILF camps. There is now a lull in the fighting as the Philippine government and the MILF are about to engage in peace talks – aided by Malaysia and the United States.

Members of the Abu Sayyaf come from the MNLF and MILF, but the group is nothing but an extortion racket. It was, as Filipino journalist Marites Vitug and Glenda Gloria noted, suspected to be a creation of the AFP; a “new Muslim group” that would “challenge” the MNLF’s hegemony. But after the MNLF signed the peace agreement with the government, the AFP had no use for the Abu Sayyaf. Its leaders had to find means to support the troops – the kidnapping of tourists, missionaries and ordinary people became that new source of income.

**Last week, what President Arroyo called a “Madrid-style attack” in Manila was foiled by her government. What kind of impact might this have on upcoming presidential elections on May 10?**

It might swing voters in Metropolitan Manila and other urban centers towards Arroyo. The Filipino middle class may also set aside its contempt for Arroyo and decide that she may be more capable in handling future terrorist trade than his rival, the inexperienced ageing movie star Fernando Poe, Jr.

**What kind of impact might this have on international terrorism in Southeast Asia? Are there links to terrorist activities in Indonesia?**

It signifies one thing that Americans may have to seriously take note of: the porous border between the Philippines and Indonesia due to the inability of their weak governments to police the border, which has been very much limited or corrupted. As CNN Southeast Asia Bureau Chief Maria Ressa explained in her book, *Seeds of Terror* (The Free Press, 2004), the Philippines and Indonesia are crucial nodes in Al Qaeda’s network.

**Finally, is the U.S. shift towards re-engagement with the Philippines a necessary shift in policy? Do such events justify the new U.S. engagement with the Philippines?**

I think so given the extent to which the Philippines and Southeast Asia have become an arena for global terrorism. Does the United States need the Philippines? As someone who is watching up close the growing resentment towards the United States here in the region, I do think the positive experiences of American presence in countries like the Philippines count a lot in at least presenting another view of the U.S. in Asia. As a virtual “combat

zone” against global terrorism, whatever happens in the Philippines will definitely affect the United States in many ways.

But I doubt if this could translate into a popular sentiment. Americans, after all, are often more comfortable with isolationism. But if they do think that engaging the world has become necessary now, that – in the light of events in the Middle East – public diplomacy must occupy center stage, they may have to recognize that in the case of the Philippines, they may have to do more than just build roads, provide military advise, and help former rebels live normal lives. As I laid out in my paper, the Philippines is also a country where the political elite is more concerned with their own interest rather than the nation, where the government is seriously corrupt and inefficient, where the gap between rich and poor continues to widen, and where – because of all of this – more young people are either leaving the country or joining a communist insurgency.

In short, U.S. commitment to the Philippines may entail getting one hand’s dirty with the task of reforming a decrepit system and rebuilding the state. This may mean confronting the corrupt, the inefficient and the avaricious by supporting reformers inside and outside government. This means being engaged in a project that the U.S. twice tried in the Philippines with uneven results – in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when it was the colonial ruler, and in the first two decades after Philippine independence when it helped in reform efforts to prevent a communist takeover.

The policy analyst Francis Fukuyama has recently come to that conclusion. This may be a belated and unoriginal observation from the author who once claimed that history has ended with the fall of the Soviet Union. But it is nevertheless relevant. The question is, will Americans agree to this when it comes to the Philippines?