

*In the Name of Civil Society: From Free Election Movements to People Power in the Philippines.* By Eva-Lotta Hedman. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2006. 268 pp.

There is much to admire in Eva-Lotta Hedman's new book. The elegance of the model employed and the clarity of exposition are some of its best traits. The basic premise that the basic contours of the Philippine political system can be made visible by analysing the history of "free election movements" is quite novel. The main idea of the work is that the Philippine oligarchy has repeatedly called upon the "people" at various times in history to defend "free elections" and "liberal democracy" in order to shore up and stave off threats to actually existing "oligarchical democracy". Its conclusion that the appeals to the "people" coming from above "in the name of civil society" have historically "crystallized" and taken on this "transformist" or co-optative role is quite perceptive in describing the contemporary role of civil society discourse in the Philippines.

Despite its positive aspects and undoubted contributions, there seems to be three major weak points in the book.

The first problem is Hedman's apparent overestimation of the role of "moral and intellectual leadership" and even of "ideological hegemony" in maintaining the stability of oligarchical rule in the Philippines. One has very great reason to doubt that the reason why the Philippine oligarchy has been in power for so long is because the masses genuinely believe that they are being "represented" by the "best elements" of a "universal class". It may equally be the case that decades of political, cultural and linguistic marginalization, alienation and exclusion from a system which is formally democratic but monopolized and dominated by a few elite families belonging to the ruling classes have rendered the mass of people fatalistic or even apathetic regarding political processes in general. For instance, some political theorists have observed that the decreasing sense of representation of people living in advanced capitalist countries and their general apathy in relation to "politics" as such does not

necessarily mean that these societies are on the brink of revolutionary upheaval. This particular issue can only be satisfactorily clarified by undertaking empirical research, perhaps using surveys and focus group discussions, on the existence or non-existence of such a “moral and intellectual leadership” in the Philippines.

Looking at a particular example, which Hedman cites, of the participation of the radical national democratic movement in the Estrada Resign Movement, it would be certainly too much to say that their participation meant that they were effectively under the sway of the “moral and intellectual leadership” of the “dominant bloc”. A cursory reading of documents written during this period would show that the leadership of the national democratic left viewed the conflict between Estrada and other segments of the ruling oligarchy as an instance of intensifying internecine conflict and struggle within the ranks of the ruling classes. From their perspective, it would be too confusing to just say as Hedman does that the “dominant bloc” as a whole “launched a frontal attack against Estrada”. The latter, after all, belonged to a segment within the dominant bloc which had assumed ascendancy at one particular moment but whose rule was threatened and successfully cut short by other, temporarily disenfranchised, segments of the dominant bloc. Such conjunctures are viewed in the classical Marxist literature as moments where the ruling classes are weakened by factionalist infighting, which therefore represent opportunities which can be exploited for the benefit of the insurgent classes. Whether or not the Left did succeed in making the most of this particular opportunity to further their cause is another question. But the fact is that their sizable and indispensable participation in these mobilizations does at all not indicate that they were under the spell of the “moral and intellectual leadership” of the dominant bloc. The anti-Estrada forces consisted of diverse and often fundamentally opposed political forces united at a tactical level to achieve a short-term minimum goal. They were, one might say, horizontally integrated in a very fluid and temporary fashion rather than vertically unified under the “universal leadership” of the “best elements” of the oligarchy.

One of the reasons why Hedman's assumption regarding the role of ideology in the Philippine context is so inadequate is because her approach only gives a perfunctory acknowledgment to the actual language of the participants in the historical events she discusses. This is most striking in relation to the term "civil society". It is a fact that the term "civil society" itself would only attain very limited circulation among some segments of the Philippine intelligentsia after the four main events analysed in her book had already taken place. Writing that people were mobilized "in the name of civil society" as Hedman does is quite different from saying that people were mobilized under the flags of "equality", "brotherhood" and "liberty" since these latter are terms which were actually used by the movements espousing them. Literally calling upon the Filipino people to mobilize "in the name of civil society" would probably produce nothing more than looks of bewilderment or consternation. A more careful approach would be to study the actual languages or idioms of mobilization in use among the different organizations, movements and class strata in relation to electoral politics. Some aspects of these languages could then be parsed and analysed and perhaps eventually brought under the general conceptual rubric of "civil society". One could then see the actual significance and role of the ideological hegemony of the dominant bloc in maintaining its power over subaltern classes and groups. Lacking such a procedure, we are left only with Hedman's word that the movements she studied had all appealed to the people "in the name of civil society".

The second problem with the book is Hedman's belief that "caesarism" represents a challenge from above "to the domination and reproduction of a historic bloc of social forces." Such a notion seemingly fails to take into account that "caesarism" and "transformism" are both equally valid methods by which the dominant bloc may be able to maintain itself in power. Hedman's view that dictators "threaten" or "challenge" the rule of the dominant bloc itself rather than representing the chosen form of rule of a temporarily ascendant fraction within the dominant bloc is difficult to understand. Isn't it rather the case, as the Marcos period has amply demonstrated,

that the form of rule of the ascendant classes and groups within the dominant bloc may equally take the form of a dictatorship as much as oligarchical democracy? Aside from its ideological efficacy, “oligarchical democracy” has no inherent attraction in itself such that it could be considered the only viable form of rule on the part of the dominant bloc. Historically, as Hedman herself has demonstrated, it has been the relative strength of the radical mass movements in the Philippines which has ultimately determined the corresponding means by which the dominant bloc has been able to hold on to power. The fraction of the ruling classes which had pursued a widely ignored call for clean elections in 1969 was not representative of the “dominant bloc” but was only a minority within it which preferred to root for the “transformist” path of “oligarchical democracy”. The greater majority of members making up the “dominant bloc” at that same historical period were perfectly happy with or perhaps just resigned to Marcos’ authoritarian solution. It could not be said that Marcos had “challenged” the interests of the oligarchy or the dominant bloc per se. The greater part of big business, the Church and the U.S. Government were not simply “half-hearted”, “ambivalent”, or “disinterested” in relation to Marcos’ “usurpation of power”, they were in fact actively supportive of his rule. He could not have stayed in power for so long otherwise. The dominant bloc did not simply “fail”, as Hedman puts it, to “reassert moral leadership in the name of civil society” in the face of Marcos’ challenge. On the contrary, they thought at the time that they had found just the right formula for the “stabilization” of oligarchical rule in Marcos’ constitutional authoritarianism. Hedman repeatedly conflates a means of exercising power, “oligarchical democracy”, with the interests of the dominant bloc itself. This is patently not the case.

Finally, Hedman’s implicit attempt to integrate the contemporary discourse of “democratic transition” with the Gramscian theory of “transformism” produces a paradoxical mixture. This contradiction comes strikingly to the fore when Hedman writes on one page that she favours “a depiction of civil society as a zone of contestation between opposing social forces and a realm within which a dominant

bloc seeks to exercise hegemony and subaltern forces endeavor to mount counter-hegemonic challenges,” while on the page immediately following she writes of the “mounting challenges by the forces of uncivil society to the hegemony of a dominant bloc of social forces.” The latter quote belongs to the neo-conservative discourse of “democratic transition,” while the former belongs properly to Marxian political theory. Their attempted combination gives rise to the strange paradox of a radical social force which is neither inside nor outside “civil society” but both at the same time.

In spite of these shortcomings, Hedman’s work is very much to be welcomed and should be required reading for students of Philippine electoral politics.

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