

## The Place of the Ghosts: Democracy in the Philippines

### DEAD SEASON

#### *A Story of Murder and Revenge*

ALAN BERLOW

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Reviewed by Paige Tan

If I had to assign one book to teach students about politics in the developing world, that would be Alan Berlow's *Dead Season*. I use Berlow's book every year in my Asian Politics course at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. Bright high school students could enjoy it as well. *Dead Season* unmask politics in a country that is formally democratic, and it conveys to readers in an unforgettable way what politics feels like for many in the developing world.

The author, Alan Berlow, is a former Southeast Asia bureau chief for National Public Radio. His book reads like a novel, yet it is actually a work of non-fiction where he presents his reportage on three interrelated murders from the late 1980s in Mambagaton (the Place of the Ghosts), deep in sugarcane country on the Philippine island of Negros ("Neg" rhymes with egg, "ros" with the Spanish for two, *dos*).

Berlow's interest in the area was sparked by the massacre of the peasant de Los Santos family, five of whom were shot to death by the Philippine military under murky circumstances. Reynaldo, known as Moret, the father, was a peasant leader involved with the Catholic Church lay organization, the Basic Christian Community. Once Berlow began investigating the de Los Santos family deaths, he discovered other murders that seemed to be related—the "suicide" of Gerry de Los Santos, a member of the military unit involved in the de Los Santos killings (he was no relation to the de Los Santos family), and the murder of Serafin "Apin" Gatuslao, a wealthy local plantation owner.

In *Dead Season*, Berlow shares the rumors that surround the murders and crafts his book as a murder mystery. The book jumps back and forth in the style of novels like the *Da Vinci Code*. Conflicting tales about how the murders occurred allow Berlow to portray the land and people of Negros, the area's colonial history—both Spanish and American—the role of the Catholic Church in everyday life, the rhythms of the sugarcane fields, the popular culture, and the economics and politics of the Philippines.

In the end, Berlow does appear to come down on the side of a particular view of each murder that is backed up most strongly by the evidence. Gatuslao, the wealthy plantation (or *hacienda*) owner, was assassinated by the Communist New People's Army (NPA) for "crimes against the people." He was even shot in the foot as poetic justice for his habit of kicking his workers. With methods such as these, the Communists often portrayed themselves as Robin Hoods,

striking out against the rich for the poor. But, the NPA let many wealthy plantation owners live. Gatuslao's most proximate error was failing to pay ever-escalating NPA taxes and instead lending his support to the army and vigilantes battling the Communists.

Moret de Los Santos and his family were killed by an elite unit from the army, taken out because Moret was believed to be a Communist. His involvement in the progressive Basic Christian Community of the Catholic Church was a poor cover for his Communist sympathies. The massacre of the de Los Santos family was likely a revenge attack to hit back at the Communists after the Gatuslao killing several months earlier. Lastly, Gerry de Los Santos' "suicide" was anything but. We are left to understand that Gerry was killed by his own unit, perhaps by his own captain, out of fear that he was going to go public with the real facts of the unit's participation in the massacre of the de Los Santos family.

The unfolding story of the three murders paints for the reader a portrait of the state of democracy in the Philippines. The events described in the book take place several years *after* the ouster of dictator Ferdinand Marcos, and the People Power Revolution of 1986. What we see, though, is that in Sugarlandia, as Negros is known, democracy has shallow roots.

From the Greek, democracy means "rule by the people." This is usually realized in a system that guarantees meaningful elections, that has an independent judiciary and the rule of law; that has majority rule and protection of minority rights; and that ensures freedoms of association, speech, and the press.

Berlow describes elections in Negros as affairs in which the people have a choice of "planter 'A' or miller 'B,'" who are members of the elite, thus there is no candidate with the peasant population's interests truly at heart (143). In the area where the story takes place, all local officials—mayor, governor, and congressman—come from elite families. This is widespread in the Philippines. Visit the Web site of the Philippine Congress or Senate, where elite names like Lacson, Cojuangco, and Lopez are well represented. One will find former dictator Marcos' son, Ferdinand Jr. and former President Aquino's son Benigno, too.

Elections lead to little change in the political system. The Philippines falls short on other stipulations for a democracy, as well. The right of association is imperfect. Moret de Los Santos runs afoul of the military for membership in the leftist, but perfectly legal, Basic Christian Community organized by the Catholic Church. The Church, long a bulwark of the country's oligarchic government, has turned into a voice for the poor since the 1970s. Because empowering the peasants is tantamount to challenging the existing social order, it is easy to see how Moret was taken for a Communist and viewed as a threat. The US State Department's 2006 review of human rights in the Philippines recognizes that the Philippine military's harassment of labor and human rights advocates is a continuing problem in the country.<sup>1</sup> The press, free in principle, is controlled by the elite families. Since 1992, the Committee to Protect Journalists finds the Philippines the fifth most dangerous place in the world for journalists (in terms of numbers murdered), all while the country is formally a democracy.<sup>2</sup>

There is no rule of law on Negros. The overwhelming impression left by the book is that the Philippines state is itself a ghost. For many people, life is lived under different forces battling for control:

the military, the wealthy plantation owners, the Catholic Church, and the Communist New People's Army. The military operates by its own rules, outside of civilian control. The planters organize paramilitary vigilantes to defend themselves against the Communists. The Church organizes peasants to fight for their rights. The Communists carry out "revolutionary justice," such as the murder of Gatuslao, in areas where they are strong. Mayor Daisy Silverio, the mayor of Himamaylan, the city of which Mambagaton is a part, admits that neither she nor the police even investigated the de Los Santos family's deaths. "Laws were frequently passed in Manila that might just as well have been issued from Mars for all they mattered" (182). Because the massacre of the de Los Santos family turned into a major news story in the Philippines, a national commission of inquiry was eventually convened and surviving members of the family compensated.

To say that the Philippines is not a perfect democracy is an important observation that helps students see that one can have a Congress, a President, and elections, and still be lacking in one fundamental feature of a democracy—that elections offer a meaningful possibility of change to the political system. One further important question, though, is this—Why has democracy found such infertile soil in the Philippines?

Berlow offers numerous explanations, drawing on popular culture (superstitions and fatalism) and institutions (weak political parties and a flawed legal system). Of greatest importance, though, seems to be the socio-economic system—in particular, patron-client relationships and the system of landholding.

A patron-client system may come as a complete shock to American students, yet in many parts of the world, this is merely "the way the world works." In rural areas of the Philippines, the majority of the population is tied into webs of debt with their social betters through *utang na loob*, debts of honor. Peasants, unable to afford a wedding, or medical treatment, or needing a loan to get through the slow times, borrow from their patron (the owner of the hacienda on which they work, perhaps). The loan may not be paid back in cash but in other ways, particularly through acceptance of the patron's position as patron (and the borrower's as client). Within the Philippine democracy, payback is expected through client support of the patron's candidate during elections. As Berlow observes, the original debt may be just "a few pesos," but the recipient ends up paying "for the rest of his life" (82).

The patron-client system helps pervert one intention of a democratic system: that a vote represents the choice of the voter. In the Philippines, the majority do vote (turnout is usually about eighty percent for parliamentary and presidential elections, according to International IDEA<sup>3</sup>), but the majority do not rule. As long as people are tied to laboring in the sugarcane fields, there can be no political change.

This leads us to Berlow's second chief economic explanation—that the current system of landholding, particularly on Negros with its giant sugar plantations, is responsible for failures in the Philippines' democracy. Only with land reform, Berlow implies, can the people come out from under the burdens of debt and obligation that render them unable to challenge the existing social order.

Democracy rests on a belief that people are fundamentally equal. In the Philippines, while the Constitution upholds that ideal on

paper, the reality is very different. Even democratic governments like that of Corazon Aquino, who came to power after the ouster of dictator Marcos, have been unable to take action on land reform because they are members of the very elite who see themselves losing out were land reform to be enacted. Aquino, who campaigned on a program of land reform, accomplished little in this area due to loopholes that gutted the policy. Attempts since Aquino's administration to sell shares in plantations, in lieu of forcing sale of the land to the tillers, have also floundered.

The weakness of the Philippine democracy and inequality in areas like Negros may explain why, in 2007, the Philippines continues to face a Communist insurrection. According to the Philippine *Inquirer*, the size of the NPA is still estimated at 7,400 soldiers.<sup>4</sup> In 2006, the Communists conducted a flamboyant attack on Negros' Silay City airport, one of President Arroyo's priority projects. In local governance, a Gatuslao is in charge of city hall in Himamaylan.

The "dead season," Berlow tells us, is the time after harvesting, when the cane is gone and there is no work to be done. In bad years, this can literally be a time of famine and death for the cane workers. I always thought that Berlow's title suggested that the Philippines was itself living in the dead season. The harvest of democracy had come with the dictator Marcos' ouster in 1986, but the democracy was barren. "What the stories of Moret de Los Santos, Serafin Gatuslao, and Gerry de Los Santos suggest is just how difficult it is to make a true democratic revolution succeed in thousands of forgotten, out-of-the-way barrios like Mambagaton" (xv). ■

#### NOTES

1. US Department of State, 2006, "Philippines: Country Reports on Human Rights Practices," <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2006/78788.htm> (accessed August 17, 2007).
2. Committee to Protect Journalists, 2007, "Journalists Killed: Statistics and Background," [http://www.cpj.org/killed/killed\\_archives/stats.html](http://www.cpj.org/killed/killed_archives/stats.html) (accessed February 21, 2007).
3. International IDEA, 2006, "Voter Turnout," International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, <http://www.idea.int/vt/> (accessed February 21, 2007).
4. Joel Guinto and Carla Gomez, 2006, "7 Suspected Rebels Nabbed over Silay Airport Attack," *Inquirer*, October 13, 2006, [http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/topstories/topstories/view\\_article.php?article\\_id=26486](http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/topstories/topstories/view_article.php?article_id=26486) (accessed February 21, 2007).

#### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines, <http://www.cbcponline.org/index-2.html>.
- Communist Party of the Philippines, <http://www.philippinerevolution.net/>.
- Congress of the Philippines, <http://www.congress.gov.ph/index.php>.
- Negros Occidental, government, <http://www.negros-occ.gov.ph/>.
- Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, <http://www.pcij.org/>.
- Sun-Star Bacolod*, <http://www.sunstar.com.ph/bacolod/index.html>.

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