

Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints

Volume 66
Number 1 *Historic Senate Vote of 1991*

Article 10

3-8-2018

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Recommended Citation

Espia, Review Author: (2018) "Bob East's The Neo Abu Sayyaf: Criminality in the Sulu Archipelago of the Republic of the Philippines," *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints*: Vol. 66: No. 1, Article 10.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13185/2244-1638.4278>

Available at: <https://archium.ateneo.edu/phstudies/vol66/iss1/10>

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philippine studies: historical and ethnographic viewpoints

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Bob East's

The Neo Abu Sayyaf: Criminality in the Sulu Archipelago of the Republic of the Philippines

Review Author: Juhn Chris P. Espia

Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints
vol. 66 no. 1 (2018): 111–15

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Corpus begins her exposition by referring to dance as a cultural excess but one that is increasingly gaining popularity, especially through new technologies and digital platforms. Working with the public notion that dance in the Philippines is a stereotypically female domain, the author treats *Dance and Other Slippages* as an act of reclamation, a reiteration of the strong presence of the woman in the dance, if only in the Philippine context.

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BOB EAST

The Neo Abu Sayyaf: Criminality in the Sulu Archipelago of the Republic of the Philippines

Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2016. 136 pages.

Bob East is an independent researcher with a PhD in International Peace and Conflict Studies from the University of Southern Queensland, Australia. His previous works on the topic of criminality and the Abu Sayyaf include *Terror Truncated: The Decline of the Abu Sayyaf from the Crucial Year 2002* (2013) and *472 Days Captive of the Abu Sayyaf: The Survival of the Australian Warren Rodwell* (2015).

The question of whether fundamentalism can be used as an ideological smokescreen—purported end justifying means—for acts such as kidnapping, bombings, extortion, and murder has long been a subject of intense scholarly debate, more so in the case of scholars of conflict in the southern Philippines. East's *The Neo Abu Sayyaf: Criminality in the Sulu Archipelago of the Republic of the Philippines* queries whether the Abu Sayyaf Group's (ASG) activities in Basilan and the Sulu archipelago are a case of national terrorism, national insurgency, a combination of both, or something in between. East argues that in the early 2000s the ASG's poor leadership and eventual fragmentation caused its shift from having a primary ideological motivation to focusing on profiteering from a range of criminal activities. Hence, the term "neo" or "new" Abu Sayyaf. This position is neither novel

nor uncontroversial; such has been the stance taken by some members of the Philippine security establishment, scholars studying the region, and the mainstream media long before the book's publication. What is new, however, is the book's assertion that the shift from an ideological struggle to full-scale criminal profiteering was abrupt. From its original formation in the 1990s, the ASG by 2000 had already focused on kidnapping and extortion, with the original goal of self-determination taking a back seat (3).

The Neo Abu Sayyaf is a valuable attempt at synthesizing what has been a confusing array of publicly available information on the ASG, which corresponds to the increase in the amount of violence and criminality attributed to the group. On an almost weekly basis since the early 2000s, reports of clashes, kidnappings, and brutal beheadings have abounded in both local and foreign media (especially when foreign nationals are involved), making the issue too complex for the ordinary reader to follow. In addition, until recently no dedicated work has examined how the ever-changing ASG leadership structure has shaped its activities.

This book begins by reviewing the historical antecedents of the conflict in Mindanao by looking at how the Roman Catholic Church and a slew of policies of deliberate minoritization of Muslims by various colonial and Philippine administrations have contributed to Muslim resentment and consequently have influenced the ASG's choice of victims (32). While this argument is sound, the same cannot be said for the recent conduct of local Catholic prelates; the author fails to argue convincingly that their attitude remains salient in the ASG's decision to target Christians.

Chapters 2 to 5 flesh out the main argument: that the ASG has evolved from a group of separatists dissatisfied with the peace process between the Philippine government and the erstwhile separatist Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) to a band of wily but highly successful criminals. Chapters 3 and 5 provide a comprehensive listing of kidnappings and killings committed by the group as well as of dead ASG leaders, lieutenants, and their replacements, evincing both the level of attention that the Philippine state has placed on its activities and how dynamic and decentralized the ASG has been.

What is unclear, however, is the extent to which criminal activities have replaced the ASG's ideological aim and the abruptness of this shift. This issue places the book squarely within the huge debate about the relativity and exercise of epistemic power in using labels such as "terrorist" and "terrorism."

Although the book recognizes that the labels “bandits” and “terrorists” attached to the ASG gained currency only during Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo’s presidency, it seems to have glossed over the issue of labelling. East could have dedicated a part of the discussion on who has the power to make such labels. Terrorism is asymmetrical warfare, which means that there is an explicit recognition that the primary targets are noncombatants and the means employed to achieve the desired headline-grabbing effect are violent. The recognition of the overlap between terrorism in the name of ideology and plain criminality would have helped the book balance the discussion on kidnappings and extortion vis-à-vis the continued ASG attacks against Philippine security forces.

The comparisons between the ASG, MNLF, and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) also need to be further qualified. Unlike the other two organizations, the ASG has no political arm; its stated means of attaining its goal of an independent Islamic state are only through violence. East rightly recognizes the pitfall of this approach: once the leadership is eliminated and the core group has collapsed, it would be difficult to move forward with the same agenda (ch. 5).

Although the book refers to the role of international terror networks in the ASG’s activities (2), this allusion is confined to the “cameo appearances” (73) of a few international players working with the group and the ASG commanders’ pledges of loyalty to the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) (127). East also makes an erroneous claim that it was ASG leader Abdujarak Janjalani who brought US\$6 million into the group directly from Osama bin Laden as seed fund. Recent scholarship and declassified military intelligence reports confirm that bin Laden’s brother-in-law Mohammad Jamal Khalifa, who established a base of operations in Manila, financed Janjalani. In my opinion recent events, such as the 2017 Marawi siege, also prove that the ASG has connections with international terror networks, providing it with money, training, weapons, and even combat personnel.

The important role of kinship and familial ties in shaping the dynamics of conflict in the region is also missing in the book. The ASG initially recruited the sons of slain MNLF rebels who were disaffected by the peace process. Furthermore, the presence of relatives in an area allows ASG operatives to blend in easily, a protection far more potent than Basilan and Sulu’s jungles. The book also needs to emphasize the role of other social ties, as seen for instance in incidents called *pintakasi*, which literally means free-for-all. In

a *pintakasi* combatants, primarily the ASG, the MNLF, and private armed groups, support each other when faced with a common enemy during armed encounters mainly because of commonalities in culture, religion, history, social status, or past ties with the MNLF and MILF. The existence of auxiliary or part-time members who act as force multipliers for the ASG also helps explain the confusion in terms of the group's actual membership. To say that the local population is indifferent to the ASG's activities (127) grossly misstates the types of support that the group receives. On the one hand, there are active supporters who provide security to the ASG in return for a share of the ransom. On the other hand, the majority are passive supporters, who refuse to help state authorities out of fear of reprisal from the ASG.

Perhaps the biggest point the book misses is the role of social conditions in explaining the ASG's rise and why the thousands of government troops that have been deployed in Sulu and Basilan could not wipe out a ragtag band of criminals. While Sulu and Basilan have seen some degree of economic growth in the last decade, the poverty rate in these provinces remains high, while literacy and employment options are consistently low. The profile of ASG members who have been killed or captured shows a common thread—poor and marginalized young Muslims with minimal formal education. Poverty therefore cannot be ruled out as a reason for the ASG's genesis and expansion; the national government and foreign aid agencies have been pouring funding and other forms of aid in the region, but these forms of assistance have done little to alleviate conditions there.

As a scholarly work, the book suffers from a glaring deficiency. It not only fails to consider other seminal works on the region and the groups involved in the armed conflict, but it also relies heavily on news reports to piece together its narrative. In fact, of the four pages that constitute the bibliography, only four entries are of any scholarly weight, two of which are the author's own works. The dependence on news reports is a cause for concern because in the discourse of terrorism the media play an important role in framing what is oftentimes a biased and sensationalized version of events.

It would also have helped greatly if the statistics presented throughout the book contain proper documentation. In addition, most of the images used in the book have no citations. The last two chapters present a very detailed description of ASG activities in Sulu and Basilan in 2015. This part could have been one of the book's strong points had it not been riddled with the author's own speculation on how and why the narrated events unfolded.

Nonetheless, East has been consistent throughout the work regarding one insight: that despite the ever-increasing presence of state security forces in Basilan and Sulu, the ASG's expansion has been exponential. This observation and other recent events such as the 2017 Marawi crisis, which saw ASG involvement along with other groups, prove that the Philippine state remains weak in this part of the country. The struggle for peace and security in Mindanao has a long way to go.

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TALITHA ESPIRITU

Passionate Revolutions: The Media and the Rise and Fall of the Marcos Regime

Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2017. 276 pages.

The emergence of leaders like Rodrigo Duterte and Donald Trump has strengthened the notion that the age of populism or “irrational politics” is upon us. Astonishment, anxiety, or disgust over the supposed predominance of emotion over “reasoned” politics has characterized discourses in mainstream and social media. Notwithstanding its focus on the Marcos era (1965–1986), Talitha Espiritu's book, *Passionate Revolutions: The Media and the Rise and Fall of the Marcos Regime*, has much to contribute to the ongoing debates on the nature of democracy, populism, and authoritarianism in the contemporary Philippines. As a Philippine-born Filipino American scholar whose family was closely tied to but eventually had a falling out with the Marcoses, and having lived through the tumult of the 1970s and 1980s with friends from opposing sides of the political divide, the author seems well placed to offer a penetrating and even-handed approach to some contentious issues about the regime.

Passionate Revolutions offers a multilayered description of and explanation for the roles of political emotions in the rise and demise of Pres. Ferdinand Marcos's regime. Following the affective turn in the humanities and social sciences, the book eschews the common tendency in political science to “scientificize” political analysis, simplifying complex variables and dismissing or downplaying factors that cannot be reduced to measurable,