

The rehabilitation of the Marcos dynasty in the Philippines

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**Review of “False Nostalgia. The Marcos ‘Golden Age’ Myths and How to Debunk Them”,
Author: JC Punongbayan
Publisher: Ateneo de Manila University Press, (Philippines)**

Economist JC Punongbayan debunks many of the myths that allowed the Marcos dynasty to retake the presidential palace in the Philippines 50 years after former dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr. – a regime at least as brutal as Pinochet’s Chile. For example, systematic use of disappearances, political executions, and widespread torture of activists and dissidents.

It seemed both unthinkable and predictable when, in 2022, Ferdinand Marcos junior could call himself the 17th president of the Philippines. A few months before the 50th anniversary of Ferdinand Marcos senior’s imposition of martial law in the Philippines – and 36 years after the Marcos regime was toppled by a popular uprising – the dictator’s son could occupy the presidential palace as the culmination of decades of work to rehabilitate the family’s reputation.

The greatest sufferings in the country’s history since colonial times.

In the book *False Nostalgia. The Marcos ‘Golden Age’ Myths and How to Debunk Them* economist JC Punongbayan examines 50 of the Marcos family myths that have made it meaningful for enough voters to put their faith in the political dynasty that has inflicted the greatest suffering on the Filipino people in the country’s history since colonial times.

Ferdinand Marcos junior – popularly called Bongbong – is his father’s son in every way. Like most of his family, he does not believe there is anything to apologize for when it comes to Marcos senior’s regime. The systematic use of disappearances and political executions, the widespread torture of activists and dissidents, the use of labor exports as a valve for political discontent, and not least the looting of public funds to finance their own manic consumption and stabilize political alliances with other criminal dynasties in the Philippines – that part of Philippine history is in full swing being erased and falsified respectively.

A long list of myths

The vacuum of historylessness that has been created through the purposeful undermining of quality in the education system has recently been filled with noise from social media, which is extraordinarily deafening in the Philippines in particular. A large number of myths abound here about the time during the Marcos regime from 1965-1986. For example, that the Philippines was the richest country in Asia, that agriculture flourished, that no one was poor and no one went hungry, that the health sector and infrastructure were developed for the benefit of the entire population, that the oligarchy came under control, that law and order prevailed.

In the more bizarre department, the myth is that the Marcos family owns a million tons of gold (more

than is documented in the entire world), which they have hidden in strategic places to be able to distribute money to the people of the Philippines when the right moment arises. It never happened, but that obviously doesn't stop a surprising number of people from believing in that story. Or the exculpatory narrative that the Marcos family indeed looted public resources, but only to prevent the funds from falling into the wrong hands.

False Nostalgia is built around 18 chapters that examine a chain of claims from the narrative that the Philippines actually lived through a golden era under the Marcos regime. That these claims are either false - and often to a grotesque degree or grossly misleading - JC Punongayan substantiates with both arguments and solid data from various sources.

Ferdinand Marcos And Family After Winning The 1965 Election

Arsenal of lies

Nobel laureate Maria Ressa, editor-in-chief and co-founder of the independent Philippine online media Rappler, has written of the book that it is a "powerful antidote to the poisonous myths and lies that surround the disputed legacy of the Marcos dictatorship." Unfortunately, I'm not so sure she's right about that. *False Nostalgia* can become an important contribution to truthful teaching in economic and political history, if it is then allowed to find its way into the curriculum - which in the current situation is unfortunately quite doubtful.

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But despite the great work Punongayan has put into matter-of-factly and patiently refuting the arsenal of lies that the Marcos family and its allies have systematically spread since the 1990s - and more recently with social media - it is hardly a book that will budge a single current Marcos loyalist. As Punongayan himself acknowledges in the introduction, there are very few people who allow themselves to be convinced by data once they have allowed themselves to be spun into (false) narratives.

In the book's epilogue, Punongayan himself makes a few suggestions about how these myths and lies about the Marcos dynasty have been allowed to take root in large parts of the Filipino population. The fatal flaws of the education system (especially history education) play a big role here, as does the Marcos dynasty's long and targeted campaign to pave the way for both the dictator wife Imelda Marcos's political comeback and her son Bongbong's political career.

The subsequent governments

But what Punongayan fails to address is the significance of successive governments since 1986. Including their failing will and ability to purge the Marcos loyalist elements at the top of Philippine politics, military and business. Their failing ability and willingness to take a real stand against the Marcos dynasty itself, including effectively prosecuting the crimes - economic as well as human rights - that took place especially from the early 1970s. And their failing ability and willingness to take a radically different path socially, economically and in terms of human rights.

Nor does Punongayan address the significance of the fact that the Marcos regime's old arch-enemy, the Maoist-Communist movement, entered into a strategic alliance with Bongbong's predecessor in the presidential palace, Rodrigo Duterte, despite Duterte's contribution to the Marcos cult and the Duterte regime's insane and murderous so-called war on drugs. Duterte, of course, had no loyalty to either the communists or workers and peasants in general once his mission of expanding from a regional to a national power base was accomplished.

In other words, the myths and lies about the Marcos regime have also been able to take root because there has never been any compelling alternative narrative. The Filipino people have never had reason to trust any of their governments - or any of the opposition leaders. And not after the fall of the dictatorship either.

As little as the Marcos era was golden, the Aquino government that followed represented little of a real democratic revolution. Admittedly, there have been shades of gray in the darkness that the Philippines has been ruled by over time. But in a social reality where everyone who has or comes to power is guilty of lies and deception, failure and abuse, one myth can often be as good as the other. No data or arguments help here, only mobilization of social change from below.

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