



Jose Maria Sison: reflections on revolution and prospects. Interviews by Rainer Werning

by Julieta de Lima, The Netherlands, International Network for Philippine Studies, 2019, 239 pp., €20.00 (paperback)

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BOOK REVIEW

Jose Maria Sison: reflections on revolution and prospects. Interviews by Rainer Werning, edited by Julieta de Lima, The Netherlands, International Network for Philippine Studies, 2019, 239 pp., €20.00 (paperback)

The newest book about the Filipino writer, activist and founder of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), Jose Maria Sison, was published in 2019. Here, Sison's worldviews are illustrated in full-length, transcribed interviews that were led by the political scientist and East and South East Asian expert Dr Rainer Werning. They discuss Sison's accomplishments, his reflections on, and prospects for, the political situation of the Philippines, as well as the development of the CPP. The book deals broadly with how societal, political and economic developments have influenced Philippine politics from the perspective of an activist and communist. Sison's analysis has always been related to his political ideology, which is based on his political understanding. He is a scholar of the ideology of socialist philosophers such as Karl Marx, Vladimir Iljitsch Lenin, Josef Stalin and Mao Tse-tung. Besides the interviews, the book also contains poems written by, and photographs of, Sison himself.

The interviews in *Reflections on Revolution and Prospects* are grouped into 10 chapters that navigate the reader through the book as they address different topics such as how major changes affected the global situation and the Philippines, how they have shaped the political "revolution", and how the different political administrations since Marcos have or haven't worked together with the CPP. Furthermore, Sison gave a personal reflection on how he had to deal with different administrations, or in his own words "regimes", regarding his status as proletarian revolutionary, internationalist and political refugee and also in the same manner how they behaved towards the CPP and the National Democratic Front of the Philippines (NDFP). Hereinafter some chapters are discussed in more detail.

In the fourth, fifth and tenth chapters of the book Sison describes how the administrations after Marcos stand towards the CPP and the NDFP. One of the most important realisations is that nothing has changed: "Of course, the last 14 years of the Marcos regime was blatant fascist dictatorship. But I describe the post-Marcos regimes as pseudo-democratic because they have perpetuated the same anti-national and anti-democratic ruling system and they have undertaken strategic operational plans to attack and destroy the revolutionary movement of workers and peasants" (p. 57). Repeatedly, he also argues that nothing much has changed fundamentally in relations with the US, despite some attempts. Cory Aquino, the successor to Marcos, undertook some positive actions, but in the end returned to neoliberal politics and reinforced the semi-feudal character of the Philippine economy under a foreign and feudal system of exploitation by the US. Further, her successors Ramos, Estrada, Macapagal-Arroyo and also her son Benigno Aquino III, conformed to the US neoliberal policy.

Sison's relationship to the current administration of Duterte is ambivalent. According to Sison, "It is possible that he bears a personal animosity towards me, because of his anti-communist bias, his reactionary interests as an oligarch and his violations of human rights. I laugh at Duterte's frequent rants against me because they are shallow and vulgar. He cannot really raise any serious issue against me. His rants have become the occasion for me to issue serious statements in the interest of the Filipino people against his tyrannical, treasonous, murderous, corrupt and swindling policies and actions against the people" (p. 68).

Interestingly, Sison has subsequently expressed a different view of the Duterte administration and politics from that he presented in the book. In February 2020, he was interviewed about Duterte's withdrawal from the Visiting Forces Agreement with the US. Traditionally, this was one of the main causes on which the CPP had campaigned. Sison, however, has changed his position quite significantly: he has referred to the president as the greatest man in contemporary Philippines politics: "If Duterte can do everything that I have said, then I will salute him as the president fundamentally different from and superior to all his predecessors in terms of patriotism and progressiveness" (cited in Mallari & Salaverria, 2020).

A strength of this book is that it shows the worldview of someone who has dedicated his whole life to communism as well as to socialism. The inner perspective allows the reader to perceive and understand the (hi-)story differently. At the same time, this is also a weakness. In this book you only hear one perspective, namely from Sison. Yet, if you want to hear the other positions or want to understand the political situation and historical developments in more detail, you need to read the secondary literature.

Some observers have argued that the book provides a good overview of Sison's insights and political work. However, scholars need to read it more critically and with caution in relation to the latest, current political events and developments, which influence the credibility of the work. Sison has been quoted as saying that Duterte might be the greatest president of the Philippines, so one has to ask how authentic the book is. Just because someone has done something that is pro-CPP, it is questionable that Sison could forget the atrocities that he had previously warned about and opposed. Therefore, concluding, I would like to raise the question of how trustworthy the statements in this book are.

References

Mallari, Jr., D. & Salaverria, L. (2020, 16 February). Duterte can be greatest president yet – Joma Sison. Retrieved from <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1229305/duterte-can-be-greatest-president-yet-joma-sison>

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