

Surveys suppressed by martial law

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6-7 minutes

The open reporting of surveys on the status of governance and national wellbeing, which Filipinos freely enjoy today, builds on research that was done during martial law, but was ultimately prevented by its regime from being operated for general public benefit.

The Development Academy of the Philippines (DAP), founded in 1973, was possibly the very first academic institution created under martial law. I was one of many University of the Philippines academics enticed by Onofre D. Corpuz, its dynamic president, to join the DAP fellowship.

In 1974-75, the DAP Social Indicators Project, which I directed as a UP-based consultant, was basically left alone to study principles for measuring genuine development, and make recommendations to improve government statistics. Its pilot survey in Batangas province was the first, for instance, to use the concept of self-rated poverty—finding it at 34 percent in urban Batangas, and 57 percent in rural Batangas, in June 1974.

The social indicators concept was very popular among DAP's clientele of civil service executives. In 1981, I moved full-time from UP to DAP, having been invited to head a new department called Research for Development (RfD). We began to do periodic surveys to demonstrate the actual generation of new social indicators, under a project called "Social Weather Stations."

RfD did several Metro Manila surveys in 1981-82, with 500 respondents each, and one nationwide in March-May 1983, with 4,100 respondents, funded mainly by the President's Center for Special Studies (PCSS). Thus, PCSS obtained a survey data base capable of informing President Ferdinand Marcos about poverty, his popularity, and many other matters missing from conventional statistics. But I don't know how much of the surveys were reported to Marcos; that was PCSS' job, not ours.

Naturally, the survey news was neither all good nor all bad. Metro Manilans, when asked in April-May 1981 to compare the present situation with pre-martial law, were positive on political stability (by a better versus worse score of 59-18), credibility of leadership (56-18), and clean and free elections (50-31). On the other hand, they were negative on graft and corruption (32-49), crime (31-50), and inflation (14-75). The government managers to whom we presented these findings in workshops were generally quite pleased to have such statistics for the first time.

In early 1983, a book presenting the 1981-82 surveys,

“Measuring the Quality of Life: A 1982 Social Weather Report,” by myself, Felipe B. Miranda and Vicente B. Paqueo, was about to be published when DAP suddenly changed its mind. (The suppressed book, in page-proof form, marked ISBN 971-152-000-1, is in the libraries of DAP, the UP School of Economics, and SWS.) We never knew what was objectionable about it, or who objected to it. Our gamble that the Marcos government could tolerate an open system of social indicators had failed.

Later that year, the tabulations of the DAP nationwide survey of March-May 1983 showed self-rated poverty at 55 percent. To the question of whether Filipinos could talk freely against the government, 47 percent said yes, 36 percent said no, and 17 percent refused to answer. All such findings were reported quietly to the regime, and never published. The academic freedom clause in the DAP charter was useless. I told the staff, in a closed-door meeting, that RfD had no more future.

Meanwhile, I had joined the Bishops-Businessmen’s Conference for Human Development (BBC), which takes in not only clergy and business people but also labor leaders and academics. I was in its research committee, which was cochaired by Fr. Joaquin Bernas, SJ, and banker Victor Barrios; Vic and I had been Father Bernie’s students in Latin in high school. In 1984, in a meeting where I was absent, this committee recommended engagement in sociopolitical opinion polling, on the (correct) expectation that I would accept the task. I did not tell my DAP superiors about it.

The BBC survey of April 3-24, 1984, found 60 percent opposed to Marcos' legislation by decree; in the next BBC survey of June 15-July 22, 1985, the opposition to decree-making was 61 percent. Other sore issues in 1985 were (a) 65 percent opposition to presidential power to order "preventive detention," and (b) self-rated poverty at a massive 74 percent—obviously due to hyperinflation in 1984 and 1985.

Both surveys had national samples of 2,000 adults. Their results were announced in media conferences including the foreign press, which noted the involvement of a DAP vice president. I resigned from DAP right after the 1984 BBC survey report, to minimize its embarrassment.

Yet the BBC surveys were not completely unfavorable to Marcos. His net satisfaction ratings of +23 in 1984 and +19 in 1985 were "moderate," under the present SWS classification system.

In August 1985, Social Weather Stations was incorporated as a nonstock, nonprofit institute, taking its name from the project that DAP had ceased. Our aim was to continue doing BBC-type surveys up to the presidential election of 1987.

When Marcos announced in November 1985 that he was calling for a snap election, he also cited the 1985 BBC poll as basis for expecting to win. Despite the BBC report's explicit warning that the pertinent survey item was not a voting margin, Marcos, in his hubris, misread it in his favor.

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