

The Democratization of the Philippines

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Democracy is one of the forms of governments that has been and continues to be one of the most encouraged. This ideology has led to intervention to set up democracies — whether that was the primary intention or not. However, there are also such things as “mandated democracies.” The Philippines is an example of a mandated democracy. When further observing the origins of democracy in the Philippines, democracy was set up by the United States during its intervention as a condition for their independence. While there is much debate whether the United States intervention was ethical, this paper will focus on the democratization of the Philippines.

This paper will address the following question: was it ethical for the United States to mandate a democracy as a condition for independence? Furthermore, I will argue that the United States acted unethically by mandating a democracy in the Philippines, according to just war theory. However, the implementation of this democracy was strategic according to realist thought. Just war theory applies *jus post bellum*, after the war, and the actions the United States took to “reconstruct” the Philippines, referring to the mandated democratization. Realism discusses the egoistic human nature in which states act on self-interest. Both these lenses are applied and while realist thought asserts that this was strategic, it is important to acknowledge that just war theory concludes the United States did act unethically by mandating democracy as a condition for the Phillipinne’s independence.

In the next section I provide some historical background of the U.S. intervention in the Philippines and the stated conditions for independence. Section 2 will discuss the conditions of just war theory in order for a state to be ethical. Section 2a will apply just war theory to evaluate the United State’s morality based on their intentions. Section 2b will discuss the current state of democracy in the Philippines and the morality of the United States according to just war theory.

Section 3 explains realist thought and how it will be applied to the democratization of the Philippines. The following subsection evaluates the United States self-interest in its intentions to implement a democracy in the Philippines. Section 3b reaffirms the self-interest of the United States when analyzing the state of democracy in the Philippines after the United States had left until now. Section 4 provides an explanation of how the democratization of the Philippines could have been ethical according to the conditions of just war theory.

1. Background

The Philippines was acquired by the United States after the Spanish American War of 1898. This was followed by the Philippine-American War in which Emilio Aguinaldo, Filipino nationalist, adamantly opposed the United States acquiring the Philippines and instead fought for independence by gathering Filipinos for this mission. This did not end until 1902, when President Roosevelt declared amnesty and the war was over; the United States won this war. The overpowerment of the United States because of their better militias and weapons led to the victory of the Philippine-American War. The Philippines would go on to have its first assembly in 1907 later followed by the enactment of the Jones Act in 1916, which claimed eventual independence for the Philippines. The Jones Law stated that the United States would withdraw and grant independence once a stable government was established in the Philippines; the United States made it clear that the only stable government they would accept was democracy.¹ The Phillipinne's independence was not granted until 1946.²

The eventual establishment of a democracy in the Philippines would lead to independence, which Filipinos desperately wanted. This led to little trade-off for Filipinos to choose what type of government they wanted to set up after the Spanish-American war.

¹ Kalaw, Maximo Manguiat. *Self-government in the Philippines*. Century Company, 1919.

² U.S. *Department of State*, U.S. Department of State, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1899-1913/war>.

Just War Theory

Just war theory looks at the actions before, during, or after a war between different states to evaluate morality. In the case of the democratization of the Philippines, *jus post bellum* applies since the United States began democratization after the Philippine-American War. *Jus post bellum*, after the war, asks whether the victor has a right or obligation to ensure their physical security, contribute to the resurrection of physical infrastructure, rehabilitate social institutions, coordinate institutions, and prosecute. It does have some limits to reconstruction being the following: not overstepping and not acting in self interest.³ These factors will be applied to evaluate the ethics of the democratization the Philippines underwent in the hands of the United States.

The United States was the victor of the Philippine-American War and one of the biggest reconstruction actions was democratizing the Philippines. Because this research paper asks about setting up a form of government, some of the questions do not apply. Those being: physical infrastructure, security, and prosecution. Observing the intentions of the United States on its intervention and implementation of a democracy, coordination of an institution, it is seen that the United States acted unethically by overstepping and acting on self-interest.

2a. Intentions

The intentions of the United States were clear since they first stepped foot in the Philippines. According to the U.S. Department of State, the United State's motives were rooted in their "desire for commercial opportunities in Asia, concern that the Filipinos were incapable of self-rule, and fear that if the United States did not take control of the islands, another power (such as Germany or Japan) might do so." In other words, America's desire was rooted in self-interest to expand their commerce, racism, and establishing their power. The inability of the

³ Walzer, *Just and Unjust Wars*, chs.9 and 19

Philippines to rule itself was majorly due to democracy being connected to Western society and being seen as superior. Before the United States, the Philippines were ruled by Spaniards. The history of the Philippines, being ruled by Spaniards, unfortunately perpetuated the thought many Americans had — that they were incapable of self-rule. United States' military commanders made comments like, “remember that we are not dealing with Americans or Europeans but with Malays corrupted by a hundred years of savagery. . .”⁴ It is important to note that the United States' belief that Filipinos could not govern themselves was racially motivated. While this information is known now and openly discussed as wrong, at the time the United States annexation of the Philippines was justified in more neutral terms: to expand democracy and benefit the United States economy by getting a foot into Asia's commerce.

All these reasons are rooted in the self-interest of the United States, and the implementation of democracy came at the cost of overstepping in the Philippines. In order to understand the United States' self-interest in establishing a democracy, the context of the world's events/timeline and how the United States was impacted must be outlined. As mentioned before, the establishment of democracy began in 1907 in the Philippines and they were not granted independence until 1946. This timeline coincides with the events leading up to World War Two (WW2), which heavily impacted the United States intentions in democratizing the Philippines. The United States were aware of the events building up in Germany before WW2 and had rising tension with Japan (i.e. Pearl Harbor, Japanese internment camps, etc.). One of the reasons for establishing a democracy in the Philippines was fear of Germany or Japan interfering, and implementing an autocracy in the Philippines. It was in the United States' national interest that most countries were democratic. Democracy was more important than ever in this time period

⁴ Kramer, Paul A. *The blood of government: Race, empire, the United States, and the Philippines*. Univ of North Carolina Press, 2006, 2.

for the United States. The United States could lose their image of a strong nation if they did not intervene in the Philippines' government, especially after their image had been tarnished by the events of WW2 regarding Japan and Germany.

The United States' full intentions for intervention and establishing democracy were to build their commerce in Asia, distrust of Filipinos, and establish their own power. All this occurred while overstepping on the actual wishes of Filipinos. Filipinos fought the Filipino-American war so ferociously, despite knowing that they had a smaller military, less weapons, and that there was a small chance of winning, solely because of their strong desire to be independent. This desire for independence is shown by the Philippines' involvement in sending representatives to the United States, and pleading for independence after they had lost the war. The Jones Act promised them eventual independence, in which Filipinos were ecstatic about. The Philippines had desired independence for so long, but never received any without conditions. The United States did not believe that the Philippines was capable of setting up their own government because they were "Malays"; which is an extremely racist notion. It is disrespectful to the history of the Philippines to only acknowledge the threat of Germany and Japan in the intentions to democratize the Philippines. The racism needs to be acknowledged and, while racism does not fit just war's theory of immorality, the United States' overstepping and self-interest does play the role of savior in the Philippines, and fits the definition. The United States believed that by setting up a democracy in the Philippines, they would civilize Filipinos. However, the Philippines was more than capable in setting up their own government. While they were ruled by Spaniards before, they had made a plan of what their government would look like if they did win the Philippine-American War.⁵

⁵ May, Glenn A. "Why the United States Won the Philippine-American War, 1899-1902." *Pacific Historical Review* 52.4 (1983): 353-377.

To fully prove that the United States was unethical I will further analyze the United States intentions in desiring commercial opportunity in Asia through the Philippines. The Philippines had an optimal location for this desire to come true and benefit the U.S. economy. “Business leaders [were] convinced that the home market was inadequate to the needs of expanding industrial production, persuaded the administration that an island empire would increase exports and foreign commerce and provide protection and stimulus for the China trade” (Welch, 7). The Philippines were the gateway to the Asian market and China trade specifically. The United States knew this before they fought the Spanish-American War, and had already had in mind annexing the Philippines as a condition if they won against the Spanish.⁶

2b. The Philippines’ State of Democracy

The Philippines has one of the weakest democracies and some of the weakest coordinated institutions. The institution of democracy was not coordinated effectively nor was the rehabilitation of social institutions. Not only was the government affected by the democratization but also the economy. The state of democracy can be measured by the access to positive knowledge. A democratic country usually leads to a public’s increased positive knowledge; however, that is not the case in the Philippines. Because of this relationship it is established that, “The weakness of the state could be the single most salient characteristic of the Philippines political economy.”⁷ Additionally, strong states are able to regulate social relationships in which the Philippines fails to do so.

[The Philippines] weakness is indicated in some cases by the inability or the unwillingness of the government to: a) clearly define the rules of involvement of some

⁶ Welch Jr, Richard E. *Response to Imperialism: The United States and the Philippine-American War, 1899-1902*. UNC Press Books, 2016, 7.

⁷ Miranda, Felipe. "Political economy in a democratizing Philippines: A people's perspective." University of the Philippines Press, 1997, 163.

social groups in political affairs and/or b) reduce state vulnerability to the aggressive manipulation of established business and economic interests.⁸

The weak economy and the inability to regulate social relationships is an indicator of the Philippines' weak democracy. The United States failed the Philippines in rehabilitating social institutions and coordinating institutions. Because of the failure of rehabilitating social institutions, the Philippines did not have a strong foundation to regulate social relationships. Additionally, democracy accounts as an institution; however, the Philippines has a weak democracy resulting in the Philippines inability to progress at the rate effective democracies do.

There are more indicators of the Philippines' weak democracy, one being able to be measured by non-governmental organizations (NGO). According to Wurfel, the Philippines has one of the highest amounts of NGOs but surprisingly lacks a strong democratization. This assumption is made on the relationship of more NGOs being an indicator of a stronger democracy because of the nature of NGOs being rooted in change and the people's voice.⁹ However, NGOs have had a small impact in the Philippines after former president Aquino. In order to measure the strength of democracy, Wurfel looks at the impact of NGOs specifically in agrarian reform and environmental protection. Agrarian reform NGOs failed on all levels to make any impact even in the budgetary process. Environmental protection NGOs also have failed to make any substantial change. As mentioned before, NGOs are supposed to be indicative of a strong democracy; however, that cannot be further from the truth in the case of the Philippines. "But [democracy] does not now feel complete, despite the contributions of a very large and active NGO community. For those contributions have not been enshrined in stable

⁸ Miranda, Felipe. "Political economy in a democratizing Philippines: A people's perspective." University of the Philippines Press, 1997.

⁹ Wurfel, David. "Civil society and democratization in the Philippines." *Growth and governance in Asia* (2004): 215-224.

institutions . . .” (Wurfel, 222). The lack of institutional support limits NGOs from impacting policy or making any substantial change. This lack of institutional support is largely due to the increasing militarization that the United States has largely contributed to. This was not experienced until more recently after the incidents of 9/11. The United States contributed to military aid in the Philippines leading to political instability which NGOs have not been able to solve with the little power they have. The United States established a democracy but also established other factors like increased militarization, inhibiting democracy to prosper and strengthen.

Another indicator of the Philippines’ weak democracy is the lack of effective political parties. Effective political parties are indicative of a strong democracy because they can encourage voters and create “political competition” (Hutchcroft & Rocamora, 259). Post 1986, many unstable and weak parties emerged because of factors like term presidencies being implemented and unsystematic characters.¹⁰ The lack of policymaking because of ineffective political parties was evident in the Aquino, Ramos, and Estrada administrations.

Corazon Aquino as elite restorationist, with little goal other than the rebuilding of democratic institutions undermined by her authoritarian predecessor; Fidel Ramos as military reformer, concentrating more on issues of economic than political reform; and Joseph Estrada as populist self-aggrandizer, building a strong following among the masses and then redistributing wealth in favor of himself, his families, and his friends (Hutchcroft & Rocamora, 281).

¹⁰ Hutchcroft, P., & Rocamora, J. (2003). Strong Demands and Weak Institutions: The Origins and Evolution of the Democratic Deficit in the Philippines. *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 3(2), 259-292. doi:10.1017/S1598240800001363

Despite three different leading styles, there was little to no change and political parties remained weak. There were no institutions to truly hold these leaders accountable and prevent their corruption/representing the people.

Looking at the political economy, regulation of social relationships, impact of NGOs, and political parties' strength, all which indicate a democracy's strength, point to the Philippines having a weak democracy. The Philippines has all the pieces in theory to have a strong democracy, but in practice has one of the weakest democracies. The United States was only interested in establishing a democracy for their own self-interest and backslid in setting up an effective democracy. The United States left before they set up a strong democracy because the Philippines had served their purpose: economic entrance to Asia's market and reinforcing the U.S. strong image.¹¹ The United States was fully aware that they were leaving the Philippines with a weak democracy, and to this day experts state that the Philippines is one of the most serious cases of backsliding" (Lorch, 82).

As mentioned before, the Jones Act would only grant independence to the Philippines if they adopted a democracy. The Philippines independence came at the tradeoff of democratizing, and received ineffective help from the United States to set up a strong democracy. Not only was the United States unethical by not coordinating effective institutions, democracy, and social rehabilitation institutions, they also did this while overstepping and acting on self-interest. The Philippines democratization was doomed when the United States purely acted on self-interest. The United States annexation and democratization of the Philippines was a strategic move rather than one being concerned about the ethics of it.

2. Realism

¹¹ Lorch, Jasmin. "Elite capture, civil society and democratic backsliding in Bangladesh, Thailand and the Philippines." *Democratization* 28.1 (2021): 81-102.

Realism theory refers to human nature being innately egoistic — in which states act on self/national interest.¹² “The essence of international realism is its belief in the primacy of self-interest over moral principle” (Forde, 62). Realist thought asserts that mandating democracy in the Philippines was strategic and came at the cost of the United States acting immorally.

3a. Intentions

Reviewing the intentions of the United States they were all based on national interest. As mentioned earlier, the intentions were: potential commerce opportunities in Asia, establishing their power against Japan and Germany, and believing that Filipinos were incapable of governing themselves. The United States was under a lot of pressure and threat at the time amongst Japan and Germany. WW2 was on the brink of occurring and tensions were rising. For example, the attack on Pearl Harbor by Japan in 1941 raised tensions because not only was the U.S. physically attacked, which resulted in casualties, but the image of the United States as a strong nation was threatened.¹³ Because of various events that threatened the “strength” of the United States as a leading nation inflicted by Japan and Germany it was integral for the United State’s image to democratize the Philippines.

Democratizing the Philippines served as a symbol of the United States reclaiming their spot as a leading nation. If the United States granted the Philippines independence with no conditions it would have made the U.S. look weak, especially in a time that democracy was threatened by the autocratic rule Germany and Japan were promoting. The United States acted strategically to benefit their own image after it had been tarnished by Japan and Germany. Not only were they able to reconstruct their own image by the democratization of the Philippines, but

¹² Forde, “Classical Realism”

¹³ Silbey, David. *A War of Frontier and Empire: The Philippine-American War, 1899-1902*. Macmillan, 2008.

they were able to open a door to pursue commercial opportunities in Asia by having power over the Philippines.

3b. Democratization of Philippines

The United States established a weak democracy in the Philippines. The institutions and systems set into place were and continue to be ineffective. Whether the United States intended or did not intend in establishing a weak democracy, they acted on self-interest after the Philippines had served its purpose. The United States was able to get its foot in the door in Asia's commerce and were able to establish themselves as a superpower.

The Philippines independence was granted in 1946 after the United States had evaluated that a "strong enough" democracy had been established. Truthfully, the United States knew they had not set up a democracy that would thrive. This was a year after WW2 ended in 1945. The Philippines were no longer useful because Germany and Japan were no longer a threat after they had lost the war.¹⁴ The actions of the United States, and the state in which they left the Philippines, confirm that the United States acted primarily on self-interest as a strategy to not be deemed as weak and benefit the U.S. economy.

How it could have been moral

Just war theory makes it evident that the United States was unethical to mandate democracy as a condition for the Philippine's independence. However, there are measures that the United States could have taken for the implementation of democracy to have been moral. To outline this, the conditions of just war theory to consider the victors ethical are ensuring their physical security, contributing to the resurrection of physical infrastructure, rehabilitating social

¹⁴ Parsa, Misagh, and Parsa Misagh. *States, ideologies, and social revolutions: A comparative analysis of Iran, Nicaragua, and the Philippines*. Cambridge University Press, 2000.

institutions, coordinating institutions, and prosecuting; all whilst not overstepping and not acting in self-interest.

The biggest critique which evaluates the United States as acting immorally, is that the U.S. was driven by self-interest and overstepped in their endeavors regarding the Philippines. The United States could have been more considerate of what Filipinos wanted, which was independence with no conditions. This was evident when the Spanish American War was followed by the Philippine American War; which was initiated by Filipinos to gain their independence as a sovereign nation.¹⁵ However, that was not granted. If Filipinos had consensually agreed to democratize the Philippines, there could have been more measures taken for the democratization to be ethical. Consensual agreement to the democratization of the Philippines would have avoided the overstepping of the United States in Filipino government affairs. For example, setting up strong systems and institutions and rehabilitating social institutions which was one of the biggest failures of the United States and resulted in the Philippine's weak democracy. To be more specific, setting up stronger political parties, NGO's, etc. These measures would have lead to a stronger democracy in the Philippines and would have classified the United States' actions as ethical.

Conclusion

The intentions of the United States and the state of democracy in the Philippines suggest that the United States acted on self-interest and it came at the cost of an effective government. The Philippines has one of the weakest democracies despite having systems in place that, in theory, should build a strong democracy. These systems have been proven to be ineffective. The United States backslid in the end, leaving the Philippines with weak institutions/systems.

¹⁵ Shaw, Angel Velasco, and Luis H. Francia, eds. *Vestiges of War: The Philippine-American War and the Aftermath of an Imperial Dream 1899-1999*. NYU Press, 2002.

The forced democratization of the Philippines was unethical according to just war theory; however, it was a strategy in order for the United States to benefit from when applying realism. The United States chose to establish a weak democracy rather than grant the Philippines the independence they so desperately wanted.

The research question of this paper is: was it ethical for the United States to mandate a democracy as a condition for independence? While this paper comes to answer that it was not ethical, it opens a more general conversation about democracy. Democracy is often praised as being one of the best forms of government and a necessary action to take. In the case of the Philippines, it came at the cost of their independence for so many decades and resulted in a weak democracy. It can lead to bigger questions about democracy: At what price does democracy come, is democracy always the right answer?, etc. While this paper does not answer these bigger questions, it does begin by concluding that the forced mandate of democracy in the Philippines was unethical. Today, the Philippines' weak democracy is often a reminder of the intervention of the United States and their inability to establish a strong democracy.

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