

*Book Review*

Gerard Clarke. *The Politics of NGOs in South-East Asia: Participation and Protest in the Philippines*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998. 299 pages

DIANA J. MENDOZA

The publication of a number of studies on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) since the late 1980s has given rise to a distinctive literature within the social sciences. Most of these studies, however, concentrate on the role of NGOs as social development agencies. Consequently, the focus is on the socio-economic aspects of NGOs. From the political science perspective, the emphasis on the socio-economic role of NGOs obscures the significant political character of NGOs as political actors and is of limited use to political scientists in interpreting the "associational revolution" that took place throughout Asia, Africa and Latin America. Associational revolution refers to the impressive upsurge in organized voluntary activity and the creation of private, non-profit or non-governmental organizations.

More recent studies have acknowledged the political significance of the growth and political role of NGOs. Nevertheless, these studies and the political science literature in general, still fail to contribute proportionately to the growing NGO literature.

Joining other scholars in addressing this intellectual shortcoming in the contemporary NGO literature, Clarke emphatically seeks to explain the increasing political

significance of NGOs and their political role in contemporary national politics. While a discussion of South-East Asian NGOs is contained in the book, *The Politics of NGOs in South-East Asia: Participation and Protest in the Philippines* is largely about the proliferation of NGOs in the Philippines and the emergence of NGOs as an important force in Philippine politics. The political history of two of the largest and long established NGOs in the Philippines are documented in this book: the Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement (PRRM) and the Task Force Detainees of the Philippines (TFDP).

Based on Clarke's doctoral dissertation, the book has been assiduously researched and is carefully footnoted. The book is based on interviews with NGO personnel and other activists, supplemented by NGO archive material and additional research drawing on media, government, and academic sources. Most of the analysis in this volume draws upon and blends together the insights offered by both traditional studies of NGOs and the growing literature on the political role of NGOs.

Hoping to provide a comparative perspective on the political significance of NGO proliferation and the political roles and character of leading South-East Asian NGOs, Clarke has done NGO fieldwork also in Thailand and Cambodia. In both countries, Clarke interviewed the representatives of prominent NGOs and NGO coalitions about issues that he had examined with respect to the Philippines.

The book's structure is part chronological and part topical. The first two chapters set the terms of the discussion. Chapter 1 introduces the theoretical and comparative aspects of NGO political activity in the developing world, particularly the putative relationship between NGO proliferation and

democratization. It also provides an examination of the concept of an NGO and a potted history of NGOs in the developing world.

Chapter 2 presents a brief study of NGOs and politics in South-East Asia excluding the Philippines and examines the political roles the NGOs play under a variety of regime conditions. This chapter, however, deals with the issues in brief and sweeping terms. Hence, the issues are not treated with the depth they deserve. This chapter notes the changing nature of social organization in South-East Asia as social relationships become increasingly mediated by a range of voluntary organizations or NGOs which constitute a distinctive "layer" of civil society. In countries such as Indonesia, Thailand and Cambodia, however, NGOs have become an important political force and a complex pattern of NGO participation and protest has become a significant feature of national politics.

The same chapter also notes the impact of NGOs on South-East Asia politics, especially their role in the democratization process. Clarke identifies the promotion of political liberalization and democratization as one of the important roles that NGOs play in South-East Asian politics. Clarke further argues that of all of South-East Asia, the Philippines provides the clearest evidence of a relationship between NGO proliferation and democratization. He suggests five ways in which NGOs have aided the process of democratization in the Philippines. First, through participation in issue-based social movements, NGOs (and People's Organizations or PO's) played a significant role in the two and a half years of unrest from August 1983 that led to the "People Power" revolt of February 1986. Second, NGOs have represented an important source of political leaders for cabinet

and other government positions since 1986, and personnel from the NGO/PO community have been recruited to upper tiers of the bureaucracy. Third, government departments have devolved or subcontracted key tasks to NGOs (and POs) including programme design, implementation and appraisal, and by 1990, every government department had an NGO liaison desk. Fourth, NGOs (and POs) now participate actively in election campaigns, especially at the municipal and provincial level. And fifth, NGOs play an important role in contemporary social movements that push issue-based political agendas.

The chapters that follow focus on the Philippines: the history of Philippine NGO participation in politics from the late nineteenth century to the fall of the Marcos dictatorship in 1986 (Chapter 3); the relations between NGOs and the Philippine state during the Aquino and Ramos administrations (Chapter 4); the organization of the Philippine NGO community and the institutional forces promoting the proliferation of NGOs: elite philanthropists, the Church, overseas donors, and the underground left. (Chapter 5); and the specific means by which NGOs participate in Philippine politics including coalition-building, participation in contemporary issue-based social movements, electoral intervention and participation in local government structures. (Chapter 6). Clarke makes a comprehensive discussion in each of these chapters.

Chapters 7 and 8 present the case studies of the PRRM and the TFDP respectively. Clarke hinted that Chapter 7 is significant in part because it is the first independent study of PRRM available to the public since 1961. In these studies the contemporary roles of NGOs in the Philippines and the

political context upon which these roles are situated are examined in greater detail. In each case, the means by which NGOs engage in Philippine politics as discussed in Chapter 6 are analyzed.

Both PRRM and TFDP played a central rôle in engaging the Philippine state particularly in the post-1986 period. Their engagement, however, was based on an elaborate blend of participation and protest and illustrates the complexity of NGO political interventions in the Philippines.

Advocacy, through the building and support of NGO or social movement-based coalitions is one important mechanism through which PRRM engages the Philippine state. PRRM has become one of the leading NGOs in attempts to build broad NGO-PO coalitions. Beyond grassroots organizing and coalition building, participation in elections and local government structures have been the other important means by which PRRM engages the Philippine state. However, PRRM is found to more vulnerable in these arenas.

In alliance with the Philippine Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (PAHRA) and the Free Legal Assistance Group (FLAG), TFDP has played a central role in government structures designed to protect and promote human rights, hence, establishing human rights as a key issue area in which NGOs have achieved significant influence over government policy. Electoral participation and participation in local government structures have also been two important means by which TFDP has engaged the state. Since 1986, TFDP has become increasingly active in electoral campaigns, primarily by monitoring human rights violations. In 1992, TFDP became involved in a wide range of local government structures, though

by late 1993 it has remained cautious and skeptical. While these case studies remain relevant and valuable, it is difficult to generalize from them.

The strongest part of the book is that it sets itself apart from the other comprehensive accounts of Philippine NGOs. In the *NGOs, Civil Society, and the Philippine State: Organizing for Democracy*, Siliman and Noble noted that unlike other works on Philippine NGOs, Clarke's book consciously situates NGOs in Philippine politics. The earlier in-depth studies of Philippine NGOs include: the 1993 volume of the *Philippine Sociological Review; A Strategic Assessment of Non-Governmental Organizations in the Philippines* edited by Antonio Quizon and Rhoda Reyes; and *Trends and Traditions, Challenges and Choices: A Strategic Study of Philippine NGOs* edited by Alan Alegre. While these studies remain valuable, they do not contextualize NGOs in politics as clearly as Clarke does.

Clarke also integrates theoretical and historical perspectives in analyzing NGOs and their role in politics. He draws insights from major works in both the political science and NGO literature, and displays a strong grasp of the voluminous secondary literature on the subject.

Moreover, Clarke explores the relevance of the concept of "associative democracy" in South-East Asian politics in general and in the Philippines in particular. Associative democracy is a concept that dates back to the nineteenth century and the work of English political theorists and has been used by its proponents and critics alike to analyze institutional arrangements in more developed countries with liberal democratic regimes. Clarke, however, notes of the possibility that it can be used to study actual institutional arrangements

in developing countries and specifically to assess the political roles and impacts of secondary associations such as NGOs.

In his analysis, associative democracy, to the extent that it exists, is not as “thick” or as “socially embedded” in the Philippines compared with the United Kingdom. The reason is that Philippine NGOs (and POs) have yet to achieve the important role in the economy played by the voluntary sectors in many developed states. A point for further research, Clarke proposes to look in detail at NGO relationships with the state and with civil society in the Philippines to further explore the relevance of associative democracy in a Philippine setting.

The book also poses a lot of questions worthy of future research. Why is the political prominence of NGOs increasing? Are NGOs significant or merely marginal political actors in developing countries? Is there a correlation between NGO proliferation and political change? Can the NGO community transform relations between the state and civil society? Can it help to empower the millions traditionally marginalized from political participation? Does it suggest a new institutional arrangement that can be loosely described as “associative democracy”? It raises so many questions and it is hoped that the book will provoke much discussion.

Overall, Clarke accomplishes three important things. First, he highlights the political dimension of the work of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in South-East Asia in general, and the Philippines in particular. Second, he provides an analytical framework for studying NGOs. Third, he makes a useful synthesis of the work of many other scholars who have studied NGOs and their political roles.

Indeed, Clarke has produced an important work for both scholars and students interested in the politics of NGOs in the region and the Philippines in particular. ♣