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**In Conversation with Salvador
Santino Fulo Regilme Jr. Discusses
Aid Imperium: United States Foreign
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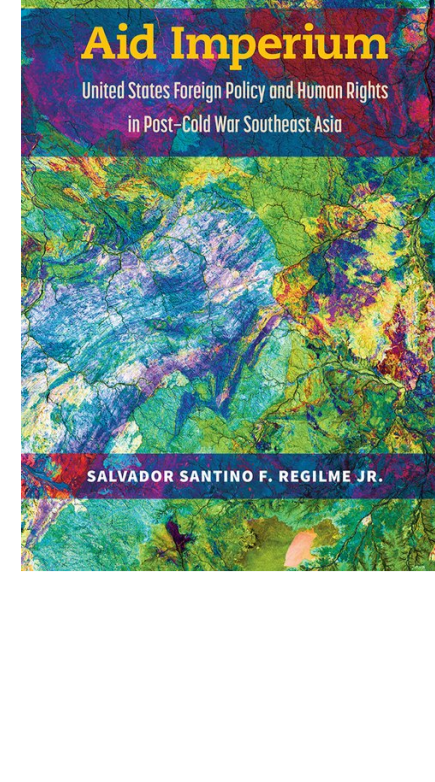
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IN CONVERSATION — SALVADOR SANTINO FULO REGILME JR. DISCUSSES

Aid Imperium: United States Foreign Policy and Human Rights in Post-Cold War Southeast Asia

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We recently had the pleasure of speaking with Salvador Santino Fulo Regilme Jr. about his latest book, *Aid Imperium: United States Foreign Policy and Human Rights in Post-Cold War Southeast Asia*.

A fascinating read, the book explains how US foreign policy affects state repression and physical integrity rights in Southeast Asia and the rest of the Global South. In an innovative argument, Regilme highlights the active political agency of Global South states and actors as they negotiate and chart their political trajectories with the United States.

Could you briefly explain your theory of interest convergence, and how it highlights the confluence of the shared interests of both donor and recipient governments and the latter's domestic legitimacy?

SSFR: My theory of *interest convergence* in foreign aid and human rights highlights the role of mutually shared interests and ideas in shaping the impacts of bilateral aid and diplomacy on physical integrity rights. In *Aid Imperium*, I investigate the variation in levels of human rights in aid recipient countries vis-à-vis the varying strategic purposes of, and amount of, US aid over time. The key hypotheses of *interest convergence theory* are simple and intuitive.

First, when the key policy agendas of donor and recipient governments converge on a comprehensive set of priorities (militaristic and non-militaristic), foreign aid is most likely to be used for democracy promotion and other socio-economic policies — especially when an aid recipient government enjoys strong legitimacy at home. Second, when the converging policy agenda focuses on militarism (e.g., counterterrorism in the post-9/11 context), then foreign aid is most likely to be used on domestic state repression, which in turn, generates killing and harassment of both armed and unarmed non-state actors — particularly when the recipient state's domestic legitimacy is weak. Third, regardless of the substantive content of the interest convergence of both donor and recipient government policy agendas, human rights abuses may persist due to a culture of impunity, which is an enduring condition primarily facilitated by corrupt and incompetent judicial institutions and coercive state agencies.

My interest in convergence theory challenges conventional theories of foreign aid. It refutes the notion that recipient countries usually do not have the political agency to shape the strategic purposes and implementation patterns of foreign aid programmes. Moreover, the theory highlights the mutually constitutive relationship between 'ideas' and the 'material dimensions' of politics. Foreign aid is neither inherently good nor bad for recipient countries; rather, converging interests and ideas about aid shape its impact on physical integrity rights. Therefore, I argue that the converging interests of donor and recipient governments, together with the domestic legitimacy of the recipient government, shape the purposes of foreign aid programmes and domestic policies.

In your research, you show how certain Southeast Asian governments exploited US anti-terror funds for their own domestic gains, as happened in Thailand in the 1990s. You also explain that the UN and international experts condemned these domestic uses. Would you say that the United States' funding of Southeast Asian counterterrorism was also designed to export critiques of its war on terror?

SSFR: US funding for Southeast Asian counterterrorism action emerged out of the shared interests of the governments and elites during the post-9/11 war on terror era (2001-2010). Southeast Asian government leaders needed financial counterterrorism aid not only to repress armed rebels (e.g., so-called armed Islamic terrorists) but, at times, also to undermine unarmed political opposition. The US turned a blind eye to the repression of unarmed political opposition, with Washington DC focusing instead on its mutual interests with partner governments — such as quelling armed rebel groups that were perceived to be undermining US interests in the region. Any form of inter-state cooperation is not a full convergence of interests; rather, their common interests should be substantial enough in a way that bilateral cooperation appears to be necessary. My book shows how, and under what conditions, mutually shared beliefs and interests can undermine or promote human rights.

How did US strategic support contribute to improving human rights in both Thailand in the 1990s and in the Philippines under President Aquino in the 2010s?

SSFR: During the 1990s, the US government's foreign aid programmes and public diplomacy efforts were generally less militaristic and focused heavily on democracy promotion, as well as good governance. Emerging civil society groups, pro-democracy politicians, and other elites demanded the collapse of militaristic authoritarianism in Thailand and the Philippines. Concurrently, the US government under Bill Clinton had an overarching pro-democracy agenda and a keen interest in socio-economic development. Taken together, those converging interests amplified the effects of pro-democracy US aid in conjunction with domestic public support in Thailand.

President Aquino III's (2010-2016) administration ushered in a new period, which was perhaps the 'golden era' of post-1986 Philippine society. Under his committed and competent leadership, the country recorded one of the highest economic growth rates in the region. The number of state-perpetrated human rights abuses dramatically declined. At the same time, the US government under the Obama administration supported the comprehensive socio-economic programmes and human rights reforms of the Aquino administration.

Both cases — the Philippines under Aquino III as well as Thailand and the Philippines in the 1990s — demonstrate that the shared interests amongst the US and Southeast Asian government officials to promote democracy and good governance redirected foreign aid and domestic resources to improving human rights.

As you show in your analysis, the excessive focus on (state) security seems to be coinciding with a worsening human rights situation. What role do you think security will play under current President Marcos Jr. and where do you see the recent human rights developments in the Philippines heading?

SSFR: Unfortunately, the Philippines under Marcos Jr. is headed back toward the very dark era of post-Cold War Philippine politics. Marcos Jr. may seem quite meek (especially when compared to his predecessor), but the impunity culture that was in place under Duterte appears to remain the current state of affairs. Marcos Jr., with Sara Duterte as his Vice-President, will rely on expanding the budget of the country's coercive state apparatus to repress any form of political opposition.

You can see this process of silencing the opposition through intensified, persistent, and well-funded state coercion, particularly by looking at the following indicators: the unjustifiably large confidential funding of coercive agencies (notably, Vice-President Sara Duterte handles the Education Department that allegedly needs millions worth of funding from confidential funds); widespread killings and the imprisonment of independent and critical journalists and public figures (e.g., the killing of journalist Percy Lapid, the imprisonment of former Senator Leila de Lima, as well as many others); and the widespread proliferation of 'fake news' that undermines historical facts concerning the country's history of 'fake news' (e.g., the severity of human rights abuses and the abysmal economic situation under Marcos Sr.'s dictatorship which eventually galvanised the peaceful People Power Revolution in 1986).

Physical integrity rights in the country will continue to deteriorate, and with the absence of a credible and feasible socio-economic development agenda from Marcos Jr.'s government, socio-economic rights are expected to be curtailed in a much more widespread and severe manner. As a result, the long list of social ills will continue: widespread poverty, a shrinking middle-class, uncontrollable inflation rates, economic stagnation, poor access to good nutrition, rampant killings, sustained 'brain drain' of the country's most qualified professionals, and declining quality of education.

Perhaps activists, opposition members, and intellectuals should shift from advocating for a simple human rights reform agenda towards comprehensive socio-economic justice. The Philippines has always been an oligarchic democracy, and under Duterte — and now Marcos Jr. — the oligarchic features of state-society relations will be much more visible, oppressive, lethal, and morally horrendous.

Why is it that many celebrated Filipino social scientists and self-professed public intellectuals in the Philippines (except for Walden Bello and several other respected scholars from the University of the Philippines, as well as others from outside the so-called elite private university system) seem to refrain from persistently arguing that the root cause of the problem in the country is extreme material inequality? Why is it that many scholars seem to continue operating on a business-as-usual mode, as if the country is not headed towards very difficult times? Why do many Filipino academics based in the country's elite universities (except the University of the Philippines and others on the margins) seem to turn a blind eye to the main cause of the country's ills (as in, oligarchs enjoying wealth that is produced from the blood and sweat of millions of the Filipino proletariat)?

Human rights begin with socio-economic justice, and justice should be advocated for both on a global and local scale. Academics should start their analysis with material inequalities. But I should not be surprised by the state of academia/research within the country: many of the celebrated 'intellectuals' of the country are part (if not, are aspirational members) of the enduring ruling class. How about we start our analysis by putting the needs and perspectives of marginalised communities front and centre in research?

You argue that "[n]otwithstanding the rise of emerging powers and the purported decline of American hegemony... the United States still remains the most powerful state actor in world politics today". This is perhaps true on a global scale, but in Southeast Asia the rise of China seems rather significant. What would this mean for the future of US aid imperialism in the region?

SSFR: China's ambition to become a global power will also depend on how and under which conditions it could undermine US dominance in the Asia-Pacific region. That is a very difficult bar to surpass, and one of the reasons why China has illegally built artificial islands in the disputed maritime region, popularly called the South China Sea, as a means of extending its naval and military influence beyond its traditional sphere of control. China's foreign aid record in Southeast Asia is unclear at best, and Beijing's aid programmes are not transparent, as well as limited.

Before and during the pandemic, the US, however, has actively provided effective vaccines, emergency health equipment, and humanitarian assistance through USAID. As such, the US, to date, remains the single largest country donor for long-term capacity building in the health and humanitarian sectors. Consequently, the US is increasingly being seen as a more reliable and effective aid donor than China, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The United States' effective vaccine diplomacy has undermined China's endeavour to be seen as a good development partner for Southeast Asia. I expect that countries in the region will continue to publicly appear as 'hedging' in the context of the US-China rivalry; they will continue to rely on the US for long-term security guarantees (i.e., partnership, alliance, military cooperation) and China for economic investments.

DISCLAIMER: All views expressed are those of the writer and do not necessarily represent that of the 9DASHLINE.com platform.

Biography

Salvador Santino Fulo Regilme Jr. is a tenured International Relations scholar focusing on international human rights norms, global governance, US foreign policy, and foreign aid in the context of international development. He is based at the International Studies and History section of the Institute of History, Humanities Faculty at Leiden University, the Netherlands.