

The CIA and Namfrel: A tale of father and son

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First of 2 parts

First word

IT's just as well that Namfrel (National Citizen's Movement for Free Elections) has created a fuss about its decline of accreditation by the Commission on Elections (Comelec) as an election watchdog during the elections on Monday.

Without the fuss, there would be no compelling reason to review the history of Namfrel and its performance as watchdog in Philippine elections.

I was intrigued by the reaction of reader Jose Oliveros to the Manila Times editorial yesterday (May 10), "In protesting too much, Namfrel could face unwanted review."

Mr. Oliveros wrote: "The earlier history of the election watchdog is many times more colorful. Indeed, a former CIA operative in Asia, in his book *Portrait of a Cold Warrior*, categorically identified Namfrel as a CIA creation intended to ensure the defeat of Elpidio Quirino in the 1953 election and the victory of Ramon Magsaysay."

"Namfrel non-partisan? After the 1986 snap elections, the top officials of Namfrel were appointed by Corazon Cojuangco-Aquino to positions in her government, among them, Vicente Jayme as finance secretary and the late Jose Feria as Supreme Court justice."

Based on this information, I, together with a research assistant, conducted research on the operations of the CIA in the Philippines, and the history of Namfrel as election watchdog.

Compelling accounts

I was surprised that there are plenty of materials that help illuminate an inquiry into these subjects.

I will discuss three of them here:

1. An article in the *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, titled, “Counter-insurgency in the Philippines” by Stephen R. Shalom.

I discuss it together with an extract from the book, *Portrait of a Cold Warrior* by James Burkholder Smith (New York, 1976).

2. The text of a lecture by UP professor Roland G. Simbulan titled “The CIA in Manila: Covert Operations and the CIA’s Hidden History in the Philippines.” The lecture was delivered at the University of the Philippines Manila on Aug. 18, 2000.

3. The book titled *The Tancangco Report: The Anatomy of Electoral Fraud*, by Luzviminda G. Tancangco (Matrix, Manila, 1992).

A former Comelec commissioner, Tancangco discusses, among other topics, Namfrel’s activities as election watchdog in several national elections, including the 1986 snap presidential election.

Taken together, these publications provide a compelling portrait of the genesis of Namfrel, and the history of CIA covert operations in the Philippines.

The birth of Namfrel

In his article, “Counter-insurgency in the Philippines,” published in the *Journal of Contemporary Asia* in 1977, Shalom recounted the steps undertaken by the United States to defeat the Huk insurgency in the early 1950s.

It relates the rise of Magsaysay, first as defense secretary under President Quirino, and then as elected president in the 1953 elections.

A week after Magsaysay's appointment as defense secretary, the CIA's Edward Lansdale arrived in Manila. Lansdale promptly set up a desk in Magsaysay's office.

Quickly, plans began to run Magsaysay in the presidential election in 1953.

Shalom also wrote this curious paragraph in his article: "Before the 1953 off-year elections, a good government organization called Namfrel — National Movement for Free Elections — was set up with the help of US government funds and officials. Namfrel members conducted a mass publicity campaign urging clean elections. The civil affairs office of the Philippine Armed Forces distributed leaflets exhorting the population to vote for Magsaysay."

Magsaysay decided to run for the presidency in November 1953, under the Nacionalista Party.

Nanfrel, though theoretically nonpartisan, secretly started working for Magsaysay's election,

In June 1953, Lansdale confided that in spite of instructions from Washington to avoid politicking, he would raise contributions for Magsaysay from American firms,

Time magazine reported: "Despite a Filipino law which forbids foreigners from contributing to election campaigns, US business interests raised some \$250,000 at a time when Magsaysay's Nacionalista Party was seriously short of funds."

Magsaysay won an overwhelming victory, capturing more than two-thirds of votes cast.

In his Portrait of a Cold Warrior, James Burkholder Smith, a 22-year veteran CIA covert action specialist, confirms the CIA's role in the 1953 Philippine election and CIA activities in Asia using Filipino operatives.

He recounts agency efforts in the 1957 election, when Magsaysay died in a plane crash, and how it directed much effort to defeat Claro M. Recto's bid for the presidency.

Smith says there was even a plan to assassinate Recto.

Carlos Garcia won a full term as president in the 1957 election.

The CIA in Manila

Simbulan's lecture on the CIA's covert operations and hidden history in the Philippines was delivered at the University of the Philippines Manila on Aug. 18, 2000.

The lecture is an attempt at a comprehensive report on CIA activities in the country. It assesses the extent of CIA activity and the high importance of the CIA's Manila station.

Simbulan wrote: "For a long time, Manila was the main station, if not the regional headquarters, of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) for Southeast Asia. This is perhaps so because the Philippines has always been regarded as a stronghold of US imperial power in Asia. Since the Americanized Filipinos were under the spell of American culture, they were easy to recruit without their realizing they were committing treason to their own people and country. And from the beginning of the 20th century to 1992, there were the US military bases, the mighty symbols and infrastructure of American power."

Simbulan's revelations are extensive and explosive. I cannot cover them all in the space of today's column.

Consequently, I will conclude this subject in my next column.