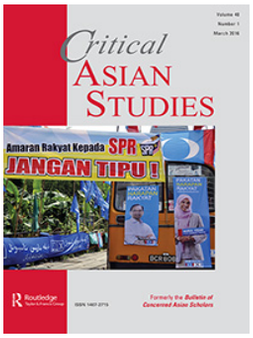

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Why the Philippines Chooses to Import Rice

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ABSTRACT: Embedded in the debate in the Philippines over food security and food sovereignty are three conventional reasons why the country is a longstanding rice importer: geography, exploitative international policy pressure predicated on the dictates of neoliberalism, and colonial history. This paper argues that these conventional reasons share two limitations. First, they attribute mono-causal reasons for perennial rice imports, either in the form of geography, exogenous power, or history. While these perspectives are not wrong, each on its own is inadequate. Multiple, contributing factors have and will continue to abound. Second, each of these arguments limits Filipinos' agency. Through a four-part argument, I show how Filipinos have had more say in the reasons for serial rice imports than these conventional accounts allow.

Keywords: food security; food sovereignty; rice imports; the Philippines; agricultural protectionism

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Introduction

For more than a century, a vigorous debate has raged in the Philippines over the country's dependency on rice imports. On one side are farmers' advocates who hold steadfast to ideals of their country as an agricultural society. They insist that with the implementation of proper government policies the Philippines is capable of ending its reliance on foreign rice. They argue this will lessen burdens on government spending and over time will help to lift Filipino farmers out of chronic poverty. Yet, given the current state of the sector's low competitiveness, a combination of high production costs, decades of public underinvestment, and subsidized rice farmers in exporting countries, this camp believes that the liberalization of the country's rice trade (scheduled for 2017) will doom millions of small Filipino rice farmers.[1] Unable to compete with cheap imports from Thailand, Vietnam, and increasingly Burma, they will face despair and bankruptcy, making the sale of their lands inevitable. As these plots are converted to gated subdivisions, golf courses and tourist resorts, or planted with export-oriented cash crops, the country's food security and food sovereignty will be threatened.

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[1]As a result of the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs negotiations in 1994, the country was granted its own schedule for the gradual liberalization of its rice imports.

Not all stakeholders share this pessimism. The neoliberal camp, as it is derisively called by farmers' advocates, dismisses the urgency of the country's rice deficit. These economists and policy-makers scoff at the idea of food sovereignty, a concept they brand a populist, leftist-inspired slogan of a bygone era rendered obsolete by the inexorability of globalization. While market liberals take the significance of food security seriously, they situate it in a context of mutually beneficial, regional trade relations.[2] From their perspective sourcing certain kinds of food from abroad makes sound economic sense. They propose that Filipinos should embrace comparative advantage and freer trade. These market liberals argue that the tens of billions of pesos which would need to be spent to reach and sustain self-sufficiency in rice is wasteful, inefficient, and more fiscally imprudent than purchasing imported rice at international prices, even at current high levels. Content with the average amount of imported rice (eleven percent) required to meet the country's annual consumption and buffer stock requirements, market liberals are adamant that the lifting of current restrictions on rice imports will bring several measurable benefits, including several billions of pesos in tariffs collected on rice imports and cheaper rice prices, from which poor farmers will gain since they also are rice purchasers.

In this article I do not propose to settle this politicized debate. Instead, I probe a related, although underappreciated, issue, the question of *why* the Philippines has been for so long an importer of rice, its key foodstuff. This is despite apparent advantages to the contrary, such as fertile, volcanic soils, long social, and cultural traditions as well as deep local knowledge of rice cultivation, and domestic research on rice productivity reaching back to the Green Revolution with its short-maturing, high-yielding seed varieties.

There are three common explanations for why the Philippines has been a longstanding rice importer: geography, exploitative international policy pressure, and a nationalist rendering of the country's colonial history. The latter is a type of path dependency where past decisions weigh heavily on future policies, making substantial policy departures increasingly difficult to enact over time. Specifically, the historical favoring of commercial crops, primarily sugar, has boxed the country into a proverbial corner of importation, where it appears destined to remain indefinitely.

This paper argues these conventional reasons share two limitations. First, they attribute monocausal reasons to the country's perennial rice importations, either in the form of history, geography, or exogenous power. While these perspectives are not wrong, each on its own is inadequate. There is no one determining reason behind the country's need to import rice. Multiple, contributing factors have and will continue to abound. Second, each of these structural arguments robs Filipinos of agency. They imply that the country regularly imports rice not because of anything Filipinos have done, but because of structural factors beyond their control. Filipinos have had more say in the reasons for serial rice imports than these conventional accounts allow.

Agency-infused reasons behind rice imports result from an interconnected, complex web of choices made by different Philippine governments and other key stakeholders. In the post-war Philippines, the calculus of choice can be broadly divided into two time periods, pre-Marcos and post-Marcos. These two periods were interrupted by the modest success of the Marcos regime in Green Revolution-influenced rice production, especially in the late 1960s (and to a lesser extent in the mid-1980s).

These choices can be further grouped analytically into two categories. The first refers to official public policies. Their importance lies in the fact that officials had to know beforehand of the adverse effects their adoption would have on rice production. The second dimension describes

[2]Clarete 2008; Tolentino and de la Peña 2011; Fabella 2014; Sicat 2014.

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Table 1. Matrix of choice-based variables in Philippine rice importations.

	Pre-Marcos	Post-Marcos
Public policy	ISI, decontrol	Underinvestment
Power politics	Competitive elections	Competitive elections, rent-seeking, smuggling

quasi-legal or illegal actions or activities taken by officials that exploit rice imports for economic and/or political gain. I label this category "power politics."

Table 1 illustrates these two periods and two categories.

In the upper quadrant of public policy in the pre-Marcos period, the implementation of import-substitution industrialization (ISI) policies, followed by the 1962 move to lift exchange controls and devalue the peso are policies that capture explicit decision-making to continue relying on rice imports. These policies shifted the country's terms of trade from the grains sector to agro-exports. The lower quadrant of power politics in the pre-Marcos period refers to the common practice of over-importing rice as a campaign ploy by incumbents, which would result in cheaper rice to voters.

In the upper quadrant of the public policy of the post-Marcos period are a host of constraints in rice production highlighted in the domestic public policy literature and that can roughly be summed up as underinvestment. This includes underspending on infrastructure, agricultural research and development, agricultural extension services and credit, and land reform implementation. The lower quadrant of power politics of the post-Marcos period refers to the dynamics produced by competitive electoral politics, exacerbated by the manipulation of key statistics regarding rice consumption, rent-seeking by import-based interests, and smuggling.

However the active undermining of the goal of rice self-sufficiency has not happened in a vacuum divorced from history, geography, and world power imbalances. These structural factors matter considerably. Combined, they make achieving self-sufficiency in rice a formidable challenge; they also narrow the range of choices that policy-makers have. Yet, the gap between annual rice production and consumption demands for the most part has not been especially large. Since 1999, it has averaged 11.3 percent, and since 2011, six percent. Compared to Malaysia's gap of about thirty-three percent, it would appear that the Philippines's demand versus import ratio is surmountable. In other words, policies and political decisions have the capacity to make a difference, but more often than not key actors have chosen to act otherwise. Market liberals are right in maintaining that the implementation of these policies would be costly, but reducing the level of corruption in government would go a long way towards lowering associated costs.

Colonial Experience

In the mid-to-late nineteenth century the Philippines went from enjoying a rice surplus to experiencing rice deficits.[3] Factors behind this change included a Spanish ban on exports[4] and the gradual loss of a key export market, as merchants in China began favoring cheaper rice imports from Siam (Thailand). This was made possible by the opening up of the latter's

[3]Veneracion 2001; Royandoyan 2012. At this time rice began to lose its spiritual properties as it was transformed into a staple food (Aguilar 2013).

[4]Although an import duty was lifted in 1857 as a means to keep wages low, the policy had a lingering, depressive effect on rice production (Mears et al. 1974, 6).

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economy by the British.[5] Moreover, a series of strong El Niño occurrences starting in the 1870s reduced rice production in the region.[6]

For economic historian Benito Legarda, however, diversions from food to cash crops were perhaps the most significant factor. This change, begun in the 1820s, was caused by a transformation of the islands' inward-looking economy. By the 1870s, its internationalization was complete. Forced collections by the Spanish tobacco monopoly in Ilocos figured prominently in this restructuring, as did an uptick in global demand for sugar, coffee, and hemp. As the specialization of the islands' agricultural portfolio materialized under the growing inroads of British and American capital, the colony's exports became more concentrated among crops "in which foreign merchants were interested for the world market … and whose production thus had an advantage over that of rice."[7]

While historians date the dramatic change in the colony's rice fortunes to the late Spanish period, most do not link Spanish polices to the rise of rice imports during this time. Instead, nationalist scholars blame the USA, and in particular its policies which favored commercial crops.[8] As such, the 1909 passage of the Payne-Aldrich Act serves as the critical turning point. This legislation gave Philippine sugar planters tariff-free access to the lucrative American market. Moreover, quotas on sugar from the Philippines were removed in 1913 by the Underwood-Simons Act.

However, the rice sector did benefit from the colony's considerable economic expansion during the American period. With increased acreage and gains in productivity, production of *palay* (unhusked rice) doubled, from 1.24 million metric tons in 1916–1917 to 2.49 million in 1936–1937.[9] Although this increase outpaced the colony's growth in population, which rose about sixty-two percent over the same time period,[10] the increase failed to overcome the need for rice imports.[11] For some nationalists, the latter was a result of the spectacular growth of the sugar industry precipitated by the Americans. Illustratively, in the composition of export crops by value, sugar grew from about ten percent in 1900 to sixty percent before the Great Depression.[12] In this sector "where millions of pesos were made by a small group of sugar barons," massive infusions of cash and credit by the country's state and private banks that were underwritten by the newly established Philippine Congress aided the process.[13] And while the health of the sugar industry has waxed and waned over time,[14] its supremacy, so this nationalist historical argument goes, has consigned the country to the doldrums of rice importation.

A striking example of this standpoint comes from a 1965 commentary written by Hilarion M. Henares, Jr, the head of the National Economic Council, Government of the Philippines. Henares's "The Rice Problem" is a scathing attack on American colonial policies, which he

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[5]Ingram 1955, chapters 2–4.
[6]Latham 2009.
[7]Legarda 1999, 168.
[8]Constantino and Constantino 1978, 326–328. At the close of the nineteenth century Philippine revolutionary forces had defeated the Spanish but the Americans intervened and by 1902 they had gained control of most of the islands after a brutal suppression of Philippine fighters.
[9]Mears et al. 1974, Appendix 2.3, 335.
[10]Mears et al. 1974, Appendix 2.6, 334–335. The population grew from 9.5 million in 1916 to 15.4 million in 1937.
[11]From 1930 to 1935, the colony averaged 11,766 tons of imported rice (Mears et al. 1974, Appendix 2.1, 330).
[12]Wong 1999, 51.
[13]Golay 1961, 56.
[14]McCoy 1983.

argued had caused widespread hunger.[15] A noted nationalist,[16] Henares dates the food insecurity problem to 1910, when:

> the Philippines became the chosen instrument of America's Manifest Destiny … Conditions were so created that it was as if the American colonial administrators said: "Don't produce what you need; produce instead what we want. We buy your sugar and you use the money to buy the rice you need."

For all of the allure of this historical argument (after all, the sugar boom generated untold wealth for a tiny few as millions went hungry) its proponents have overstated their case pertaining to the prominence of commercial crops in general and sugar in particular, in terms of the utilization of agricultural land. For instance, in the years immediately before World War II, 1.96 million hectares were used for rice farming, or some eight-and-a-half times the amount of land used for sugar cane (230,000 hectares). As the economy recovered after the war (1948–1952), this difference grew to ten-and-half times.[17] In fact, in the years immediately after World War II coconuts, not sugar, were the most widely planted export crop, with 990,000 hectares under cultivation on average from 1948 to 1952. And, unlike sugar, the coconut industry for much of the twentieth century was dominated by poor small-holders.[18]

All told, as of 1957, "no more than 14 to 15 percent of the [country's] area [of] cultivation [was] devoted to export production."[19] This figure hardly amounts to a fundamental obstacle to achieving self-sufficiency in rice. Rather, it suggests that for political effects Henares and others overstated blame for a domestic food predicament on American agro-business policy and interests.[20] For instance, he glossed over the competition for land between rice and corn, a non-export crop.[21] Revealingly, in 1966, a year after Henares wrote this editorial, approximately thirty-five percent of the country's land devoted to agriculture was sown with corn.[22]

Geography

In 2006 the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) published an edited volume, provocatively entitled *Why Does the Philippines Import Rice?*[23] David Dawe, an agricultural economist, provides a parsimonious answer to this question in the title of his introductory chapter: "The Philippines Imports Rice Because It Is an Island Nation."[24] In this brief chapter Dawe lists a number of commonly mentioned alternative causes, including "faulty government policy, corruption, conversion of land to other uses, backward rice farmers, deteriorating irrigation systems, and lack of farm credit, among others."[25] However, for him, these are ancillary concerns that divert attention from the actual causes, limited land and water endowments.

[15] *Manila Times*, February 2, 1965.
[16] Doronila 1992, 26. Pomeroy questions his nationalist credentials, however, because of his family's business dealings (1974, 58–59).
[17] Golay 1961, 35, Table 1.
[18] Tiglao 1983.
[19] Golay 1961, 40–41.
[20] Henares was likely reacting to the expansion of sugar lands as a result of decontrol (see below). From 1960 to 1965, their annual growth surged to 6.1 percent, up from 1.9 percent during the previous five years (Treadgold and Hooley 1967, 119).
[21] That coconuts favor coastal regions less suitable for rice lessens their direct competition.
[22] Castillo 1975, 33, Table 2.1.
[23] Dawe, Moya, and Casiwan 2006.
[24] Dawe 2006, 3.
[25] Dawe 2006, 3.

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Dawe describes Thailand as the Philippines's *bête noire*. Rightly or wrongly, the former is frequently used as baseline of comparison by researchers and journalists because of its long-time association as a rice exporter to the Philippines. For Dawe, Thailand "has about four times the quantity of arable land per person" while the Philippines and other importing countries "have less arable land per person and more varied landscapes favoring such alternatives as corn, oil palm, or coconut. These countries are all islands … ."[26]

As shown above, until the mid-nineteenth century, rice was grown in abundance, so the archipelagic nature of the country might not be the primary obstacle per se. Dawe argues that the dilemma lies in the country's geographical constraints when measured in per capita terms. This indicates that overpopulation might also be a key determinant. While population growth can be conceived as a structural force, it is more amenable to policy interventions, and thus human agency, than is geography. China's decades-old one-child policy is a famous example. A less well-known one comes from Indonesia, where President Soeharto in 1994 won the United Nations' annual population award for his country's family planning program. Whether for social, economic, cultural, religious reasons, Filipinos have had large families. Yet, the widespread popular support for as the passage of the 2012 Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act under current President Benigno Aquino III also demonstrates that millions of Filipinos care about curbing rapid population growth.[27] Put differently, limits on overpopulation, while formidable, are more feasible than building large river deltas. Filipinos have more say about control over population size than their country's geography, no matter how determinative the latter is.[28]

Lacking expansive river deltas, the Philippines cannot compete with Thailand in terms of total rice production. This does not mean, however, that the country cannot close its rice gap through increased domestic production, helped by an improved management of available resources. This is eminently obtainable. Indeed, it was once accomplished under Ferdinand Marcos.

How does Dawe answer this "Marcos challenge," that is, the fact that the country achieved a modicum of self-sufficiency in rice (as well as exports on a limited basis) in the late 1960s and again in the late 1970s and early 1980s? Dawe addresses the challenge head-on: "the Green Revolution of irrigation, improved varieties, and fertilizers was able to overcome the natural disadvantages in land endowment." Yet, he continues, "nearly all Filipino farmers have already adopted this technology package, thus it cannot contribute to further growth."[29] This is certainly the case. But the Marcos period demonstrates that geographical limits can be countered through a redirection and mobilization of government expenditures, a disciplined administration, especially in the field, and a little luck.[30] Importantly, while Dawe acknowledges this brief period during which the country achieved self-sufficiency, he does not explicitly attribute its decline to geographical forces. What factors then negated the apparent success of Marcos's food production program? To answer this question, I turn to the third argument for the country's perennial deficiency in rice: neoliberalism.

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[26]Dawe 2006, 4.
[27]Our Correspondent 2013. For decades, conservative groups led by the Catholic Church had stymied public debate and government action on the matter (Reyes 2002; Abinales and Amoroso 2005, 294–298).
[28]Overpopulation's impact on food security has worried Philippine intellectuals and officials for decades (Chioco 1958, 2; Mangahas 1975, 305; Salas 1985, 153).
[29]Dawe 2006, 6.
[30]In the Green Revolution's case, IRRI and Filipino scientists did produce modern, high-yielding varieties, otherwise known as "miracle seeds." Combined with improved water control and higher use of fertilizers, these features produced a technological revolution.

Neoliberalism

Prominent activist, leftist academic and party-list congressman, Walden Bello in a recent book lambasts neoliberalism's commercialization of agriculture in the developing world.[31] For Bello, these exploitative policies, which include reductions in state subsidies and other support services, are enriching corporations at the expense of peasant welfare, thereby imperiling the social and political stability of the world's food baskets.

On the Philippines, like Dawe, Bello posits a succinct argument: "The Philippines provides a grim example of how neoliberal economic restructuring transforms a country from a net food exporter to a net food importer."[32] Also like Dawe, Bello recognizes Marcos's achievement of rice self-sufficiency, yet asks: "What happened to make this country slip into a greater and greater dependency on rice and other agricultural imports?"[33] For Bello the answer is neoliberalism.

Bello focuses on how in the 1980s structural adjustment placed an enormous debt servicing burden on the Philippine's national budget. When combined with a fiscal austerity program imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), this led to massive underinvestment, resulting in widespread deindustrialization. And as the country transitioned from Marcos to Corazon Aquino, a fall in private investment "was not met by a countercyclical effort by the government to shore up the economy, as would be expected under orthodox macroeconomic management. This was a colossal mistake, and the cause of it was external."[34] In other words, Bello blames in large part outside forces for these problems.

Bello notes that spending in the agricultural sector was sharply cut, "from 7.5 percent of total government spending in 1982 under Marcos to 3.3 percent in 1988 under Aquino."[35] Slashed state spending was felt in the field: "The amount of cultivated land covered by irrigation stagnated at 1.3 million out of 4.7 million hectares [of land planted with rice] … Crop yields sagged across the board … ."[36]

Bello's argument is a non-controversial account of the mishandling of the Philippine economy in the 1980s.[37] He is at pains to demonstrate that the imposition of neoliberal policies is what crippled the agricultural sector. A byproduct of this political imperative is a tendency to exaggerate Marcos's success in rice production in order to juxtapose it against the harm of what followed. He proposes that Marcos's policies not only precipitated a period of impressive agricultural growth, but also that the country had structurally overcome its struggle against chronic rice importations.

Bello does qualify Marcos's success in agriculture, dividing his rice production program into three components. The first was land reform, on which, according to Bello, the dictator dithered and ultimately came up short.[38] The second was rural infrastructure improvement. Land under irrigation, for example, "rose from 500,000 hectares in the mid-'60s to 1.3 million in the mid-'80s."[39] The third element, known as Masagana 99, consisted of easy credit for farmers for the purchase of the new rice seed varieties, fertilizers, and other inputs. For political purposes, Marcos, and his political backer the USA, understood the implications of raising productivity

[31]Bello 2009.
[32]Bello 2009, 54.
[33]Bello 2009, 55.
[34]Bello 2009, 57.
[35]Bello 2009, 59.
[36]Bello 2009, 60.
[37]See also Boyce 1993.
[38]Bello 2009, 55.
[39]Bello 2009, 55.

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as a means of bringing stability to the countryside to curtail peasant unrest and the spread of communism.[40] By 1967–1968, the total number of hectares under the new technology almost tripled government targets of 250,000 hectares.[41] By the crop year of 1979–1980, three quarters of the country's rice acreage was planted with high-yielding varieties.[42] It was an incredible transformation.[43]

Bello describes mixed results for Masagana 99. It failed to help tenants and small farmers, as the "relatively high outlays it demanded led to large-scale credit defaults among smallholders."[44] Moreover, the majority of the new technology "has probably gone to landlords, farmers with irrigation, relatively large or progressive farmers, owners of inputs, and creditors."[45] Still, Bello concludes his discussion of Marcos's rice production program on a positive note:

> Masagana 99 … [achieved] national self-sufficiency in rice production … Massive government investment was helping agriculture grow by 5 percent a year. When Marcos fled the country in 1986, it was reported that there were 900,000 metric tons of rice in government warehouses.[46]

Yet, despite Bello's depiction, gains in agriculture were eroding *before* Marcos was forced into exile in February 1986. If Marcos is to be lauded for the success of his earlier production programs, he must also be held accountable for agriculture's decline during his rule.

Criticisms of Marcos's rice productivity programs have been longstanding. These have included lost momentum after the initial achievements of the late 1960s due to corruption and an all-consuming focus on his 1969 reelection campaign that turned out to be costly in terms of human lives and government expenditures.[47] The dip in production is what led Marcos in 1973 to introduce the Masagana 99 program. Although Bello acknowledges these missteps, he fails to report the regressive impact these inputs had on farmers' wages. He also overlooks the decline in rice production of the late Marcos period.

For example, in a 1986 paper, Eduardo Tadem cites studies that highlight the dramatic rise in costs attributable to Green Revolution technologies. In Central Luzon, for example, from 1966 to 1979, the share of material inputs to total costs rose more than threefold, "while irrigation fees (which were negligible in 1970) increased by 4122 percent."[48] As a result, farmers' income from one season of rice-planting fell from 266 pesos per hectare in 1970 to 164 pesos some ten years later (when adjusted to 1970 prices).[49] Like farmers' incomes, production under Marcos also sputtered. As Tadem notes,

> Official explanations of the 4.8% decline in production volume and the 5.9% shrinkage in harvested area in 1983 point to natural causes such as tropical storms and a prolonged drought … no word has been mentioned about the man-made causes which, unlike the weather, are controllable.[50]

[40]Cullather 2010, chapters 6 and 9.
[41]Salas 1985, 117.
[42]Boyce 1993, 62.
[43]Barker 1984.
[44]Bello 2009, 56.
[45]A World Bank report cited by Bello (2009, 56).
[46]Bello 2009, 56.
[47]Salas 1985, 186; Doronila 1992, 154.
[48]Tadem 1986, 22–23.
[49]Tadem 1986, 23. See also Herdt 1987; Boyce 1993, 25–26, Table 2.7; and Balisacan, Fuwa, and Debuque 2004, 231–233.
[50]Tadem 1986, 50.

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Figure 1. Handover of Cark Air Base, 1979. Seated from left to right are Foreign Minister of the Philippines, Carlos P. Romulo; US Ambassador Richard W. Murphy; Philippine President and Mrs Ferdinand Marcos; and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General David C. Jones. Credit: Al Ramones & Domie Quiazon.

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According to a 1984 country risk report, these man-made causes included "low usage of fertilizers … poor *palay* [unhusked rice] prices, and … NFA [National Food Authority] inefficiency." [51] They combined to threaten the supply of rice. Illustratively, in mid-1984, as reserve stocks dwindled, the Marcos government contracted to import 150,000 metric tons from Thailand and China.[52] In the following year, this figure ballooned to almost 400,000 tons, "the highest import level since the "miracle rice" era of IRRI began 20 years ago."[53]

The dire situation pressed Marcos to introduce what became his last production scheme, the Intensified Rice Production Program, which led to a harvest of 5.4 million metric tons. "This output, however," Tadem maintains, "still [fell] short by 100,000 tons of the yearly national consumption of 5.5 million tons of rice."[54] Tadem's observation does not even take into account the hundreds of thousands of tons required to maintain a buffer stock. Tadem concludes his analysis with this insightful comment that lays Bello's depiction of the late Marcos period as a success to

[51]Cited in Tadem 1986, 52. See also Fegan 1989, 138–139. On the National Food Authority (NFA), see below.
[52]"More rice from China & Indonesia," *Bulletin Today*, November 23, 1984.
[53]Tadem 1986, 53.
[54]Tadem 1986, 59.

rest: "Incidentally, unlike in the 1969 contest, Marcos [did] not [use] the rice issue to serve his purposes [in the 1985 snap elections], something which he could have done if the country were still a rice exporter."[55]

Finally, it is questionable whether the agricultural sector became the unmitigated disaster after Marcos that Bello depicts. After the IMF-imposed cutbacks of the early Aquino administration, by the late 1980s public expenditure in the sector had recovered strongly.[56] Moreover, rice production experienced a modest fourteen percent increase between 1987 and 1991.[57]

Reasons for Rice Importations

WWII to Green Revolution

The Japanese occupation of the Philippines during World War II devastated the country's economy. Strong rice harvests early on worsened over time.[58] Widespread starvation ensued. Following the war the USA provided hundreds of millions of dollars in aid to repair war damages but kept control of major economic decision-making at the highest levels.[59] As a result of a serious balance-of-payments crisis, measures such as import duties, import and foreign exchange controls, and an overvalued currency were introduced in the late 1940s and early 1950s to protect domestic industries from foreign competition.[60] Despite advances in the finishing stages of manufacturing like packaging and assembly and in nondurables, a policy of ISI failed to lift peasants out of poverty.[61] This is because, concentrated as it was in Manila, ISI failed to forge linkages with the countryside. Moreover, because key policies made access to capital relatively cheap, ISI encouraged capital-intensive activities, thereby generating inadequate employment to keep pace with population growth.[62]

Other factors contributed to rural poverty and rice shortages throughout the 1950s. Government plans were rarely implemented because of a lack of funds or political will; so-called "alien" Chinese traders were accused of price manipulation of this key food stuff; sharecropping rose; outbreaks of pests and plant disease crippled harvests; and the *Hukbalahap* Rebellion in the country's rice bowl of central Luzon crippled production.[63] While production increased in 1953 and again in 1959, this was mainly attributable to an expansion of harvested acreage, especially in the Cagayan Valley and southern and western Mindanao.[64]

Similar restraints that hampered sustained growth in the rice sector continued in the succeeding decade. Population grew over three percent per annum and state agricultural programs faltered. Although government forces had defeated the Huks, which was beneficial to rice production in the short term, the state's victory freed officials from having to implement genuine redistribution policies.[65] It also increased landowner leverage over peasant cultivators. Meanwhile, in 1960, the Philippine Congress passed the Rice and Corn Nationalization Act

[55]Tadem 1986, 61. Putzel's conclusions echo that of Tadem's (1992, 142).
[56]David 2003, 197.
[57]See Philippine Statistics Authority; available online at http://countrystat.bas.gov.ph (accessed May 11, 2015).
[58]Kerkvliet 1977, 75–76; Houston 1953, 61.
[59]These clauses were contained in the 1946 Bell (later the Philippines-USA) Trade Act (Pomeroy 1974, chapter 2).
[60]Import licenses bred "ten-percenters" among bureaucrats and legislators (Golay 1961, 77).
[61]Golay 1961, 49. Because the base was so low, some found the growth unimpressive (Sicat 1972, 5–7).
[62]Sicat 1972.
[63]Belarmino 1965; Fegan 1989.
[64]Republic of the Philippines, Bureau of Agriculturial Economics 1960, 17, Table 7; Ruttan, Soothipan, and Venegas 1966.
[65]Slater 2010, 93–102.

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(R.A. 3018) in an effort to wrest control of the perishable food marketing system from Chinese traders. Implementation was messy. As the Act went into full effect at the end of 1963, efforts to evade the law, such as the setting up of "dummy" companies in the names of Filipino wives or offspring from such unions, disrupted supply chains.[66] Perhaps the most damaging impact on the grain sector resulted from President Diosdado Macapagal's 1962 decision to lift restrictions on exchange controls.[67] Among other notable ramifications of decontrol, it favored traditional agro-export interests, who had bankrolled Macapagal's 1961 election. With the peso devalued, decontrol ignited a boom in sugar that Macapagal's successor, Ferdinand Marcos, also took advantage of (although he replaced established sugar barons with his own).[68] Labor-generating industries such as in manufacturing were unable to make similar gains. Meanwhile, alongside decontrol, Manila-based policy-makers doggedly pursued ISI. Subsidized credit and a protective tariff scheme, for example, further discouraged seizing comparative advantage in labor-intensive manufacturing.[69] The increase in inputs costs for these import-dependent manufactures as a result of a weakened peso and slumping investment rates hampered industrial growth, however.[70] So did high urban wages on account of influential unions.[71] Whatever the main cause, limited employment in manufacturing and services led to an oversupply of workers in agriculture. In 1967, for instance, the latter's work force outstripped that of the former by more than six-to-one.[72] From 1960 to 1980, agriculture's labor force as a percentage of total employment did fall from sixty-one to forty-six percent. This pace of this decline, however, was slightly slower than Indonesia's decrease (seventy-five to fifty-eight percent) and well behind that of South Korea's (sixty-six to thirty-four percent).[73]

The slow rate of employment growth outside agriculture was magnified by population growth which remained at 2.98 percent in 1970.[74] As average farm size decreased (from 2.99 hectares in 1960 to 2.71 in 1970), landowners demanded higher percentages of harvested crops from share-croppers, inducing them to plant less rice.[75] Already low yields experienced little growth.[76] As the availability of new rice fields grew scarce, boosts to production through expansion ceased to be a fallback option.[77] Meanwhile, in the late 1970s landless laborers were described as "the most numerous and fastest increasing class" in the countryside.[78] In response, more and more laborers sought employment abroad. Remittances from workers in the Middle East alone rose rapidly from US$82 million in 1975 to US$384 million in 1978.[79]

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[66]Lobaton 1963. The law's passage was merely the continuation of prolonger attempts of nationalist elites to "Filipinize" the country's commerce. This had included efforts in the grain sector (with the pre-WWII establishment of the National Rice and Corn Corporation) and the retail sectors (with the passage of the 1954 Nationalization Retail Trade Act) (Wickizer and Bennett 1941, 178–181; Hau 2014, 31–32).
[67]The IMF, World Bank, and USA supported the move (Hawes 1987, 37).
[68]Hawes 1987.
[69]Intal and Power 1991, 150, 176.
[70]Treadgold and Hooley 1967.
[71]Sicat 1972, 13. Such relevant legislation as the 1951 Minimum Wage Law excluded agricultural laborers (Doronila 1992, 63).
[72]Sicat 1972, 3.
[73]Barker, Herdt, and Rose 1985, 123, Table 9.1.
[74]See http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/philippines-population/ (accessed September 25, 2015).
[75]Mendoza 2011b, 17, Table 12.
[76]Among the lowest in Asia, yields had hardly increased since the 1920s (Mears et al. 1974, 27–29, 336, Appendix 2.3).
[77]Barker 1984, 194, Appendix 1; Wurfel 1988, 60.
[78]Boyce 1993, 134, citing Fegan 1989, 131. See also Wolters 1984, 187.
[79]Abinales and Amoroso 2005, 215–216.

Aggravating lost opportunities in labor-intensive industrialization brought about by decontrol were the politically motivated choices made by politicians to import rice in large quantities as campaign ploys.[80] During election years (1961, 1963, 1965), presidential incumbents flooded the domestic market with imports to provide urban consumers with cheap rice.[81] For example, during the 1965 election campaign, Macapagal's Liberal government imported a record amount of rice but still lost to the Marcos-led Nacionalistas.[82] Cheap rice imports depressed producers' incomes. But politicians assumed that, although rural voters outnumbered their urban counterparts by a large factor, local elites could rely on patron-client ties to induce peasants to vote for the proper bloc. Failing this, the threat or use of coercion was readily available.[83]

With these enduring, interactive variables hampering agricultural growth, one would have been hard pressed to predict that by the early 1970s the country would be exporting small quantities of rice (although at a loss because of the high cost of production). As shown above, this turnabout under Marcos's direction was attributed to Filipino farmers' willingness to adapt the Green Revolution's technological package, including short-maturing, high-yield varieties, fertilizers, and improved water control.[84]

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The Post-Marcos Period

Any analysis of the rice sector in the Philippines must take weather-related constraints into consideration, specifically destructive typhoons and El Niño-linked drought. Each inhibits rice production but in different ways. Historically there is a correlation between El Niño occurrences and low harvests. But because El Niño is sporadic, it is a less major impediment to rice production over a long period of time. While the regularity of tropical storms is a partial cause of rice insecurity, officials tend to overstate its impact, using it as a convenient excuse for missed policy or programs targets. Hazel Tanchuling of Rice Watch and Action Network, a farmers' advocacy group, has written perceptively: "While weather is really a persistent challenge, blaming the weather as the usual culprit will eventually reach its saturation point and will become unacceptable and ridiculous."[85]

Policy literature in the country typically features a list of impediments to strong growth in agriculture. Here I present one such example for the prominence of its authors.[86] While longstanding, the issues ably surveyed by Arsenio Balisacan and Leococadio Sebastian have gained particular traction in the post-Marcos period.[87] They argue that such handicaps can be improved upon through concerted government actions that focus on six key restraints: yield gaps, investment and governance, rice market policies, rural land reform, rural financing, and extension services.

Balisacan and Sebastian advocate for advances in biotechnology to help fill the gap between the country's actual and potential yields, which they report to be five tons per hectare in the wet

[80]Apiraksirikul and Barker 1976.
[81]Retail prices, especially in Manila, often increased anyway because retailers anticipated the pattern and restricted supplies (Mangahas 1968).
[82]Editorial 1965.
[83]Landé 1964; Sidel 1999.
[84]Barker, Herdt, and Rose 1985, 254–255.
[85]Tanchuling 2010.
[86]Balisacan and Sebastian 2006. Balisacan has since become the Socioeconomic Planning Secretary in President Benigno Aquino's cabinet; Sebastian at the time headed the state's Philippine Rice Research Institute (PhilRice).
[87]Balisacan and Sebastian 2006.

season and approximately six tons per hectare in the dry season. Other advances in biotechnology encompass increasing the nutrient qualities in rice (known as golden rice) and developing draught and/or flood-resistant varieties.[88] Such advances require funding, but the latter has been a persistent problem. According to Sebastian, in 2001 the Philippines had the second lowest agricultural research intensity ratio in Asia at 0.23 percent, well below that of Thailand (0.69 percent) and Malaysia (0.58 percent).[89] For the economist Christina David, underspending in agricultural research and development constitutes a grievous missed opportunity; estimates of its social rate of return can be as high as forty to sixty percent.[90]

There has also been clear underinvestment in rural infrastructure and other support services. Their contribution to gross value added fell from an already low 0.24 percent in 1995–1999 to 0.07 percent in 2000–2005. In this context, Balisacan and Sebastian single out the importance of irrigation, which they project can contribute some 25 percent toward a 2.05 percent increase in rice productivity. Yet, there was no rise in the percentage of irrigated rice lands year-round (forty-nine percent) from 1995 to 2010.[91] Moreover, as of 2010, roughly one quarter of the 1.53 million irrigated hectares was characterized as non-operational.[92]

With these figures in mind, it is little surprise that President Benigno Aquino in his 2013 State of the Nation Address criticized the National Irrigation Agency (NIA) for its underperformance.[93] This specific rebuke was caused by frustration of a different source, however. Having declared full self-sufficiency in rice a top priority, Aquino was irked over considerable shortfalls in NIA targets for new lands under irrigation, rehabilitation, and restoration, despite his administration having allotted record levels of public funds for the agency.[94] This illustrates why Balisacan and Sebastian refer to this specific constraint as "investment *and* governance" (emphasis added).[95]

Balisacan and Sebastian's rebuke of faulty government intervention strategies in the management of rice prices follows a tradition of similar criticism.[96] As with governments elsewhere,[97] those in the Philippines have sought to provide stable and high rice prices for cultivators and stable and low prices for consumers, contradictory goals that have remained elusive for successive post-Marcos governments. Unsurprisingly, Balisacan and Sebastian highlight the costly role played by the Philippines's food parastatal, the NFA. The NFA's mandate is to market rice and other grains to keep supply and prices steady. For Balisacan and Sebastian, however, NFA operations have "increased the volatility of domestic prices, reduced the welfare of both consumers and producers, discouraged the private sector from investing in efficiency-enhancing distribution and storage facilities, and bred corruption and institutional sclerosis."[98] Unlike other scholars,

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[88]Balisacan and Sebastian 2006, 5.
[89]Sebastian, Bordey, and Alpuerto 2006, 46. The research intensity ratio compares the total research and development financing of a commodity with its gross value added. The standard recommendation for developing countries is one percent.
[90]David 2003, 203.
[91]Ordoñez 2010.
[92]David, 2003, 202.
[93]See http://www.gov.ph/2013/07/22/english-benigno-s-aquino-iii-fourth-state-of-the-nation-address-july-22-2013/ (accessed May 11, 2015).
[94]The marked increase in spending on irrigation was seen as a reaction to the 2008 rice crisis. The NIA's 2012 budget of 24.4 billion pesos was three times its budget ten years earlier (Basilio 2012). For specifics of its shortfall, see Serafica 2013. The NIA's poor performance is in contrast with its success under Marcos (Ricks n.d.).
[95]Balisacan and Sebastian 2006, 6.
[96]Ortigas 1953, 120–121; Unnevehr 1985.
[97]Timmer 1989.
[98]Balisacan and Sebastian 2006, 6. Clarete estimates that the cost of the government's rice price and import policies averaged 22.77 billion pesos annually (2008, 188, Table 7.6).

however, Balisacan and Sebastian do not support full liberalization of the rice sector.[99] Market reforms in their view will only lead to broad-based growth in agriculture if accompanied by improved public expenditure on research and development, rural infrastructure, and extension services.[100]

Turning to land issues, Balisacan and Sebastian also decry the slow implementation of the 1998 Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Package (CARP).[101] Its latest extension was agreed upon in September 2014. As debate over its extension intensified, so did arguments over the thorny problem of equity versus efficiency in land management.

Market liberals insist that the state should rest on its laurels for a job decently done and allow CARP to lapse.[102] They condemn its burden on government expenditures, cast doubt on its inability to generate welfare gains, and scoff at its inability to raise agricultural productivity. Ultimately, they see CARP as a temporary obstacle to the inevitability of land consolidation that one day will restore efficiency and productivity to land management and the agricultural sector.[103]

In contrast, CARP proponents cite evidence that shows improved welfare gains for agrarian reform beneficiaries (ARBs) who reside in specialized villages known as agrarian reform communities (ARCs).[104] Moreover, they contend that most ARB's only have been granted Certificates of Land Award, an administrative milestone but one that falls short of full ownership title. This ambiguity over the ownership of their means of production discourages farmers from further investing in their plots. Such hesitancy in turn compromises their land's productivity and the country's food security.[105]

On the key question of whether improved tenure security leads to increased rice productivity, research had shown little correlation between tenure status (owner-cultivators versus lessees versus share tenants) and rice productivity. One study did, however, find that the income of owner-cultivators was consistently higher than that of share tenants and lessees. Recent research demonstrates a six-to-ten percent improvement in average rice yields produced in ARCs.[106] Such gains, if applied expansively, would contribute to the closing of the country's rice deficit significantly. The qualifier here is *if applied expansively.* The number of ARBs who live in ARCs is quite limited. The majority of the rural poor, including landless laborers, are neither ARB nor ARC residents.[107]

The Green Revolution also exposed the institutional inadequacies of the country's farm credit system. Introduced technologies required the extensive use of such expensive inputs as modern seed varieties and fertilizer.[108] Since the demise of Marcos's Masagana 99 program, the situation has hardly improved. If big banks lend to the grain sector, they do so to rural or cooperative banks, which rarely lend to poor farmers. In fact, banks often choose to pay fines than to fulfill a government mandate that requires them to commit one quarter of their loan portfolios to the agricultural

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[99]Clarete 2008; Sicat 2014.
[100]Balisacan and Sebastian 2006, 13.
[101]Putzel 1992; Riedinger 1995.
[102]As of mid-2014, CARP had achieved eighty-four percent of its redistribution target of 5.37 million hectares, or some sixteen percent of the country's total land area with approximately 2.6 million recipients having received on average 1.2 hectares (Fabella 2014, 1).
[103]Fabella 2014.
[104]Monsod and Piza 2014.
[105]Royandoyan 2012; Ibon 2012.
[106]Monsod and Piza 2014, 2.
[107]The DA does not publish data on ARBs in ARCs. The general belief is that the number is one-third to one-half. (Interview with Roehlano Briones, Philippines Institute of Development Studies, Manila, June 13, 2014.)
[108]Palmer 1975.

Figure 2. Planting *palay* (unhusked rice). Credit: Bhanproud, Wikimedia Commons.

sector.[109] Today it is widely believed that as little as one percent of small farmers have direct access to loans from the state's specialized Land Bank whose official mission is to assist these very same farmers.[110]According to Balisacan and Sebastian, the unwillingness of the private sector to invest in the sector results from "perception of risks, information asymmetry, high transaction costs, and financially unviable projects."[111] In essence, the countryside has experienced capital flight, thereby forcing individual farmers to borrow from informal sources and accept "Mafia style" interest rates of 70 to 200 percent per annum.[112]

Finally, the performance of extension services, which in agriculture can serve as a proxy for bureaucratic quality, has been spotty at best. Even during the heyday of the Green Revolution, there were concerns over the services' low professionalism, lack of technical knowledge, patronizing attitudes toward farmers, and general unreliability.[113] Since then, worries over their quality have only intensified. David's characterization of the fragmented extension system as agriculture's weakest institutional link is illustrative of this situation:

> The national government … has failed to develop an effective institutional structure to provide overall leadership and coordination of the various extension-related activities conducted by numerous units of

[109]The Agri-Agra Reform Credit Act of 2009 mandates that ten percent of this must be made to ABRs (Martin 2014).
[110]Interview with Hazel Tanchuling, Rice Watch and Action Network, Manila, June 2, 2014.
[111]Balisacan and Sebastian 2006, 6.
[112]Fabella 2014, 9–11.
[113]Palmer 1975, 40–46.

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> the Department of Agriculture. Without strong and coherent support, both technical and financial from the national government … most LGUs [local government units] are unable to provide efficient and effective support services for their agricultural constituents … [A]bout 90% of [their] budget for agricultural support services simply covers salaries and wages, leaving little to spare for operational expenses.[114]

These six restraints to increases in rice production summarize the key obstacles that the post-Marcos, public policy literature addresses. But with proper financing and implementation, some economists and policy-makers believe these hurdles are surmountable. The matter boils down to a set of choices to be made by Philippine administrations. In addition to Balisacan and Sebastian's useful list, as mentioned in the introduction, a calculus of choices that resonate beyond a legal realm of public policy must be unpacked in order to shed sharper light on the powerful interests that benefit from regular rice imports.

Whatever the sources of the Philippines's weak democracy – from porous state institutions to a fungible party system – the country's national elections are clearly competitive.[115] As long as this "violently real"[116] characteristic persists, along with the corollary that cheap rice favors incumbents for electoral purposes, incentives for politicians to ensure a surplus of rice in order to drive its price down will remain. In addition, production costs remain are quite high in the country: US$96 per ton in Central Luzon versus US$59 in Thailand and US$74 in Vietnam.[117] This is why, as noted above, market liberals would prefer jettisoning the political pursuit of rice self-sufficiency.

Before securing cheaper, imported rice, however, there is an imperative to justify to the public the need for foreign-sourced supply. Determining with precision the degree to which this need is real or manufactured, however, is not a straightforward matter. An example is the continued controversy over per capita rice consumption. From 1990 to 2000 the official figure rose nearly eleven percent, from approximately 93 to 103 kilograms per person. Yet, by 2008, the Bureau of Statistics had raised its estimate to approximately 128 kilograms. While the Department of Agriculture (DA) subsequently lowered its estimate to 120 kilograms per capita, this figure was still disputed.[118] Differences in estimated per capita consumption have important implications for imports. In fact, agricultural economist Teodoro Mendoza maintains that in 2011 the country was already rice secure if consumption were calculated at seven percent less than the DA figures, or 112 kilograms per capita.[119] But this did not prevent the NFA in 2011 from importing 860,000 tons of rice at a cost of about US$372 million.[120]

The DA's elevated estimate might be justified if the income of the country's poor had declined proportionately, since a decline in income would increase their dependency on rice. From 2006 to 2009, however, one study indicates that the income of the bottom forty percent inched upwards, however slightly.[121] Instead, the DA has pointed to its legal mandate to maintain forty-five days of an emergency stockpile, a requirement that adds 12.3 percent to the country's rice needs (45 days divided by 365 days), for the jump in per capita estimates.[122] Using the DA's figure of 120

[114]David 2003, 213.
[115]Hutchcroft and Rocamora 2003; Hicken 2009.
[116]Anderson 1988, 31.
[117]Cabling and Dawe 2006, 10.
[118]Mendoza 2011a.
[119]Mendoza 2011a.
[120]"The Philippines plans to hold its 2012 import tender for 500,000 tons of rice in March." 2012 The official self-sufficiency gap that year was eight percent.
[121]Balisacan et al. 2010, 18, Table 3.
[122]Ng 2008.

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kilograms per capita, rice requirements would now amount to about 135 kilograms. This number, while high, might be plausible if it were the basis for rice import calculations. However, the NFA, the agency in charge of imports, uses a suspiciously inflated base of 131 kilograms per capita. When the required stockpile is included, this increases to about 147 kilograms per capita.[123] As if severe water and credit constraints, dilapidated infrastructure, Lilliputian farm sizes, and typhoons were not formidable obstacles enough, the bar to achieving self-sufficiency in rice seemingly can be raised infinitely higher via manipulations of key statistics by officials in the comfort of air-conditioned offices in Manila. Given the above, public outrage expressed over missing or rotten rice in NFA warehouses, which is a common occurrence, is understandable.[124]

Of course, such subterfuge benefits the NFA because of its monopolistic power over imports.[125] Regardless of the actual amount of rice the country needs to import, opportunities to extract rent from imports are enormous. Scandals over markups with imported rice are regularly featured in the media. For example, Tadem highlights several from the 1980s, as does Clarete from the 1990s.[126] Illustratively, in the late 1990s, soon after the NFA was moved from the DA to the Office of the President, it was revealed that costs for shipments from abroad included an extra US$42 per ton in "commissions." The ill-gotten billions of pesos were reportedly shared among President Josef Estrada's staff (if not himself) and NFA officials.[127]

Similar reports have since proliferated, accusing politicians and high-ranking NFA and DA officials of raiding NFA coffers in order to finance electoral campaigns, among other things.[128] In one such report submitted to the Benigno Aquino administration by a former head of NFA, Lito Banayo, the author revealed that rice imports from 2001 to 2010 were overpriced by an average of US$60 per metric ton. Worse still, from the 2008 rice crisis to the run-up to the 2010 elections, overpricing soared to US$125 per metric ton. This means that about US$306.3 million in illegal payments were generated in 2010 alone (on 2.45 million metric tons of rice).[129]

In addition to official imports, however inflated in terms of costs and amounts, a popular and well-worn mechanism to supply cheap rice to the Philippine populace is smuggling. While few accuse Aquino of profiting personally from the markups on rice imports in the way Presidents Estrada (1998–2001) and Arroyo Macapagal (2001–2010) have been accused of doing, Aquino's opponents do claim that his administration benefitted politically from the extralegal supply of rice that flooded the domestic market.[130] Artificially low rice prices, so their argument goes, helped to bolster mass support for the administration's policies. When his popularity was at its peak during his presidency's first two years, for instance, critics estimated that 16.6 billion pesos worth of rice (approximately US$36.3 million) was smuggled into the country.[131] Others insist that administration officials had to be involved in the smuggling rackets that came to light in sensational fashion in 2012 and 2013. This is because rice is a cheap commodity that

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[123]Official estimates also fail adequately to discount the country's sizable corn-eating population (approximately 7.5 percent) and the some eleven million citizens working abroad (Mendoza 2011a).
[124]Dedace and Edep 2010; Ubalde 2011.
[125]In late 2011, the NFA began auctioning a limited number of licenses to importers. Outcomes are perceived to be largely predetermined.
[126]Tadem 1986, 43–44; Clarete 2008, 181–184.
[127]Reyes 1999.
[128]Among others, see Adraneda 2007; Rice importation "premature" 2010; Bondoc 2014.
[129]Bordadora 2011.
[130]Tiglao 2012.
[131]Meanwhile, farm-gate prices had fallen from 15 pesos in 2010 to 13.5 pesos per kilogram. Although retail prices remained flat at thirty-one pesos, the international rice price had risen about twenty percent from 2010 to December 2011 (Tiglao 2012).

needs to be shipped in bulk to make smuggling profitable, making the possibility of secrecy improbable.[132]

Rice smuggling is not wholly motivated by politics. The size of price differentials between international and domestic prices plays a large role in determining its extent. For example, the Philippine government adheres to a minimum access volume (MAV) of annual rice imports as part of an agreement with the World Trade Organization on quantitative restrictions (QRs). This mechanism provides smugglers with an easy benchmark to determine how much rice to contract in exporting countries such as Vietnam.[133] From 2005 to 2012, MAV requirements averaged 350,000 metric tons annually.[134]

Smuggling tends to reduce the incomes of already impoverished farmers. Not only do they receive lower farm-gate prices, but they also experience difficulties selling their harvests to warehouses and mills that are full of (illegal) rice.[135] This takes the shine off the record levels of unhusked rice the country's farmers have produced for each year from 2012 to 2014.[136]

It is fair to speculate, however, how the impact of the QR's removal, scheduled for 2017, will affect smuggling. In theory, as tariffs which are supposed to be lowered over time replace QRs, the volume of smuggled rice should decrease as price differentials are reduced. There is doubt, however, whether domestic prices will fall proportionately. As shown above, flooding the market with cheap "electoral" rice in the 1960s did not lead to lower prices because of the anticipated actions of private traders.[137] In a more recent example, in 2014 the price of garlic, a commodity whose trade is now liberalized, increased six-fold in a span of a few months. In the Philippines it is popular to accuse cartels of being behind such adverse price behavior.[138] This viewpoint persists despite the fact that recent research has shown that the existence of thin marketing margins do not support the notion that cartels are influencing domestic rice prices in any meaningful way.[139]

The smuggling of rice cannot be ended, but it can be contained if authorities make a concerted effort. Illustratively, it tapered off in mid-to-late 2014 after the Aquino administration, in concert with the notoriously corrupt Bureau of Customs, vowed to restrain the illegal supply.[140] But smuggling is a scourge that always lurks. It is akin to a faucet that can be turned on and off by influential parties, keeping the elusive goal of rice self-sufficiency just that – elusive.

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Conclusion

Three conventional accounts, history, geography, and neo-dependency, are typically used to explain why the Philippines imports rice regularly. Each of these, however, limits Filipino agency decision-making on rice imports. These structural explanations imply that the country must import rice not because of anything Filipinos have done, but because of factors beyond their control. To more fully explain the country's rice deficits, it is imperative that structural factors are supplemented with agency-oriented variables embedded in a multi-causal framework.

[132]Anonymous interview with former NFA Head, Manila, July 24, 2014.
[133]Pefianco 2003.
[134]Tolentino and de la Peña 2011, 165, note 6.
[135]Abelgas 2013. This is not to deny that coconut and corn famers on average are worse off than rice farmers.
[136]The totals are: 18.0 million metric tons in 2012, 18.4 million in 2013, and 18.9 million in 2014. See Philippine Statistics Authority, http://countrystat.bas.gov.ph (accessed May 11, 2015).
[137]Mangahas 1968.
[138]Wong 2011, 602–604.
[139]Cabling and Dawe 2006; Ramos 2000; Hayami and Kikuchi 2000, chapter 8.
[140]Macairan 2014.

As such, I have offered a four-part argument divided along pre- and post-Marcos time periods in the post-war Philippines, further split into activities that are either characteristically illegal (or quasi-legal) or official (such as public policy). Given the relatively small rice gap in the Philippines, I have suggested that concerted efforts in key areas have the capacity to produce positive outcomes, although such attempts will be costly and will require difficult reforms, such as tackling corruption.

Here a word on the infamous weakness of the country's state institutions is in order. It is commonplace to bemoan the state's lethargy (except in the wealth defense of its oligarchy[141]) and decry its inability to coordinate economic planning activity and penetrate society to enact structural change. But fixating on state weakness replicates the monocausality of the three structural arguments this paper challenges. Moreover, the state weakness perspective loses some of its analytical traction if the problem of rice imports in situated in a comparative perspective. Market liberals in the Philippines cite Malaysia as an exemplary case of progressing along agricultural supply chains and supporting agribusiness as a means of earning foreign exchange through high-valued exports and strong domestic production linkages. Yet, the Malaysian state has spent billions of dollars on input subsidies and production bonuses without inducing a meaningful rise in the productivity of the country's rice fields in its eight designated granaries since the early 1980s. The country's rice gap has grown inexorably.[142] While the Philippine state has shown a marked incapacity to engineer structural transformation and pursue complicated developmental tasks,[143] this paper also has shown that reliance on rice imports cannot be isolated to a single cause. If multiple key actors choose to implement crucial policies, narrowing the country's rice gap is possible.

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[141] Winters 2011, chapter 4.
[142] Arshad 2007.
[143] Hutchcroft 1999.

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