

Civil Society, Populist Politics and the State – Philippine Democracy Today¹

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A. Introduction: Philippine democracy may be expressed in terms of citizen participation in economic, social and political rights.

1. The framework for democracy owes much to the Philippines' heritage of 46 years of US colonization in recognizing political and civil rights, like elections, political parties, the rule of law, majority rule with minority rights, freedom of speech and assembly, the rights of the individual and of disadvantaged groups.
2. But when the ongoing Philippine Revolution against Spain (1898-99) was abruptly terminated by American rule in 1900 (after the Spanish-American War), the American ideology of political and civil rights was superimposed on a highly skewed society of wealthy landed elites, on the one hand, and masses of Filipinos peasants, fisherfolk and urban workers, on the other.
3. Filipino elites were quick to seize the opportunities offered by the new colonial administration and quickly shored up their interests by learning English, embracing American-style education, dominating the colonial bureaucracy, while retaining their assets in land, private enterprise, and money.
4. By 1946 and Philippine independence, the Philippines could be described as an elite democracy – a society which attempts to build the principles and norms of civil and political democracy into a society with still feudally oriented power structures, wide socio-economic disparities, and a nascent middle class.
5. The rest of the 20th century has seen significant upward mobility for the lower classes through public education, some asset reallocation, small-scale enterprise, the expansion of the “middle” class (which actually falls into the highest quintile in the population),² a growing economy, the explosive growth of the population,

¹Outline of presentations made at the Institute for Asia and Africa Sciences, Humboldt University, and the Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations, Berlin, April 25, 2005; and the Institute for Asia Affairs, Asia-Africa Institute, University of Hamburg, Hamburg, April 29, 2005. Dr. Mary Racelis, a sociologist, is Research Scientist and former Director of the Institute of Philippine Culture. She served as a member of the UN Secretary-General's Panel of Eminent Persons on UN-Civil Society Relations, 2003-04.

² Filipino social scientists generally construct an image of the class structure from measures of indirect income and status, such as housing characteristics. The ABCDE system, which is based on type of dwelling, is widely adopted in the Philippines because it is simpler and more reliable than income estimates or employment-based classifications. In the ABCDE system, AB constitutes the upper class, B corresponds to the middle class, and D and E make up the lower class. D is further subdivided into D1 and D2, with the former owning the lot on which their houses are built. At one end of the spectrum, AB houses are made of

rapid urbanization and the growth of cities, and an ambivalent, contentious political system.

6. Civil society organizations (CSOs) emerged in response to the imperative of rectifying the lack of fit between, on the one hand, the Philippines democratic ideological framework and, on the other, the reality of mass poverty, wide income disparities, and the powerlessness of the poor.
7. Civil society organizations address especially those aspects of equity and democracy linked to economic and social rights: asset distribution, and access to livelihood, employment, basic services, social protection, security, and participation in decision-making, as articulated by the National Anti-Poverty Commission (NAPC).
 - NAPC's framework, as developed during the Macapagal-Arroyo Administration, has drawn heavily from its collaboration with civil society organizations, especially NGOs, POs (People's Organizations), and academia.
 - NAPC is composed of a *government sector component* (13 national government agencies and presidents of the four local government leagues) and a *basic sector component*, with representatives of 14 sectors (farmers, fisherfolk, urban poor, indigenous peoples, former sector workers and migrant workers, informal sector workers, women, youth and students, persons with disabilities, victims of disasters and calamities, senior citizens, NGOs, children, and cooperatives). President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo chairs the NAPC and is assisted by the Vice-Chairperson for the Government Sector and another Vice-Chairperson for the Basic Sectors. NAPC is supported by a Secretariat, headed by a Lead Convenor with Cabinet rank.

B. The Philippines as "NGO heaven"

1. Civil society roles (Edwards)³
 - As part of society
 - Organized groups between the family and the state, outside the market or private sector

heavy and high quality materials, well maintained, located in executive villages or stand out in mixed neighborhoods, and have sprawling lawns or gardens and expensive furnishings. At the other extreme, E houses are makeshift and dilapidated, and found in cramped neighborhoods or slum districts. Using the ABCDE classification system, the Social Weather Stations, Inc. (SWS), one of the largest opinion polling institutions in the Philippines, estimated that during the 1998 presidential elections, the voting population nationwide could be classified as follows: 10% came from ABC; 72% belonged to D; and 18% were from the poorest E class. Source: Maria Cynthia Rose Banzon Bautista, "People Power 2: `The Revenge of the Elite on the Masses'?" in *Between Fires: Fifteen Perspectives on the Estrada Crisis*, ed. Amando Doronila (Pasig City: Anvil Publishing, Inc. and Philippine Daily Inquirer, 2001), 1-2.

³Michael Edwards, *Civil Society*. Cambridge, England, Polity Press, 2004.

- Composed of community-based organizations (CBOs) or POs, NGOs, trade unions, cooperatives, religious and faith-based groups, academia, the media, and possibly indigenous cultural communities.
 - As a kind of society
 - Emphasis on values and norms, like poverty eradication, human rights, equity, environmental sustainability, gender fairness, institutional reform, etc.
 - High levels of generalized trust and cooperation, or social capital
 - Partnerships and alliances; engaging with or confronting government
 - As the public sphere
 - Civil society becomes the arena for broad-based debate and institutional collaboration; internal partnerships and networks create and guard public spaces in which societal differences, social problems, public policy, and government actions are argued and sometimes resolved, in terms of the public interest, with particular reference to the lives of poor and powerless groups.
 - Civil society promotes a diversity of views over government dictation and espouses a strong democracy.
2. Rise of civil society: from Martial Law to Macapagal-Arroyo
- Non-collaboration with the state during Marcos dictatorship characterized by arbitrary governance, crony protection, profligate living, gross human rights violations, near economic collapse by 1985
 - Massive mobilizing for non-violent protests; civil disobedience, noise barrages, fasts, boycotting crony businesses, prayer vigils, rallies, etc., led to People Power Revolution (EDSA I) and overthrow of President Marcos in February 1986; distinguish NGOs from the Extreme Left groups, exemplified by the Community Party of the Philippines/National Democratic Front/New People's Army (or CPP/NDF/NPA) working to overthrow the state; sometimes in conflict with civil society
 - Strong support and protection of NGOs by the Catholic Church, bolstered by liberation theology
 - Exponential rise of NGOs/POs after 1986
 - Opening of political space with restoration of democracy under President Aquino
 - Large amounts of external donor funding
 - The Asian Development Bank described the NGO situation as follows:⁴

⁴Asian Development Bank, "A Study of NGOs: Regional Overview Report," 1999. Typescript.

“The most open and enabling legal framework for NGOs in Asia exists in the Philippines, which institutionalized the role of NGOs in its Constitution of 1987. Between 1987 and 1989 at least seven bills were filed in Congress specifically to implement the constitutional provisions on NGOs and POs. The Local Government Code of 1991, the 1988 Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law, and the Medium-Term Philippine Development Plan all recognize and highlight the role of NGOs and define rights and opportunities for NGOs to participate in the country’s development.”

- Critical collaboration with government – from President Corazon Aquino to President Fidel Ramos
- Growing distaste for President Estrada’s regime led to mobilizing against excesses of the Administration, leading to People Power/EDSA II, January 2001, and his overthrow; assisted by modern communication technology – email and cellular phones

3. Roles of civil society today

- Numbers
 - In 1986, 27,100 NGOs registered as non-stock, non-profit organizations; 50,800 by March 1992; possibly 80,000 today; but only some 5,000 can be considered genuine grassroots-oriented NGOs
 - Others choose middle-class interests, as in professional associations, church-related groups, corporate foundations, welfare associations, student alliance, academic institutions, etc.
 - People’s Organizations number in the thousands, augmented by 35,0000 registered cooperatives. Uncertain numbers of unregistered community groups.
 - Only 16% of families listed themselves as affiliated with POs or NGOs, and 13% list membership in cooperatives; yet this means that 2,384,943 families out of 14,370,711 total families are affiliated (1998).
- Focus on community organizing and empowerment of poor and excluded groups for participation, and increased capacity to gain access to resources
- Policy advocacy
 - Local and national: participatory planning and monitoring at the barangay level, election education and monitoring, anti-mining that violates indigenous people’s ancestral domain rights, asset reform like agrarian reform and coastal access rights of fisherfolk, reproductive health legislation, micro-enterprise for women, urban poor land tenure security, promotion of millennium development goals, housing and basic services, peace and development in Muslim Mindanao

- International: fair trade regimes/WTO, intellectual property rights, trafficking in women and children, exploited or jailed overseas workers, sustainable environments (Kyoto Protocol), etc.
- Strategy: engaging with government in a spirit of collaboration or critical collaboration or confrontation/negotiation, or protest/non-collaboration.

C. Access, voice, and participation of the poor and marginalized: Challenging an elite democracy

1. Strengthened POs are taking positions of power through enabling and capacity building processes.
 - The organizing NGOs step back to enable POs to move forward; NGOs address new tasks, like formulating workable institutions with government, e.g. Community Mortgage Program
 - Basic sector presence in the National Anti-Poverty Commission: 14 sectors (farmers, fisherfolk, urban poor, indigenous peoples, former sector workers and migrant workers, informal sector workers, women, youth and students, persons with disabilities, victims of disasters and calamities, senior citizens, NGOs, children, and cooperatives) debate and frame their concerns for discussion by Commission made up of Cabinet secretaries and chaired by the President; the Lead Convenor has Cabinet rank.
 - Participation in local, national and international conferences, together with NGOs, especially the large UN conferences of the 1990s brought new kinds of awareness and alliances. Out-of-school young people unable to afford an education that could give them the skills they needed for decent employment, respect, and a better life.
2. The Party-List System enables marginalized, unrepresented sectors to engage in the electoral process by running for 52 allotted seats in the House of Representatives.
 - 13 organizations in the first party list elections in 1998 gained the two percent minimum threshold entitling them to one representative because they had received two percent of the total votes (4% of the votes brings two representatives); 12 more got seats by a later COMELEC proclamation on 2% compliance.
 - Successful were four peasant organizations, three multi-sectoral groups, two political parties, two urban poor groups, a veteran's and a women's sector.

- Difficult for party list representatives to make headway in Congress on generating legislations, but some successes evident, e.g. Overseas Absentee Voting Act.
 - Pork barrel entitlements (Countryside Development Funds) have enabled party list groups to fund identified anti-poverty programs and projects in their constituencies.
 - Traditional politicians hamper unity among party list groups; problems promoting participatory democracy in an elite-dominated legislature.
 - “The success of the party list system will ultimately be measured in the capability of party list representatives to nurture full-fledged political parties – those rooted in the organized poor and those that represent their interests.”⁵
3. Intense NGO/PO lobbying has strengthened democratic political institutions through progressive legislation aimed at correcting social injustices and empowering marginalized groups: Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law (1987), termination of the Military Bases Agreement (1991), the Local Government Code (1991), the Urban Development and Housing Act (1992), the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act (1997) the repeal of Presidential Decree 772 that made criminalized squatting, the Fisheries Code (1997) the Clean Air Act (1999) the Anti-Rape Law (1997) the creation of the National Anti-Poverty Commission (1998) and others.⁶
4. National government/Presidential pro-poor actions
- Land Proclamations by President Macapagal-Arroyo for allocation of unused government land to poor informal settlers residing on them; but implementing rules and regulations still to be developed; pending land schemes along Hernando De Soto lines.
 - Resettlement sites for displaced urban poor informal settlers with basic amenities and modest payments; but located on urban fringe far from places of work.
 - Community-driven development: Department of Social Welfare and Development program supported by the World Bank, promoting a competition around barangay-based project planning and funding for the winner.
5. Popular protests
- People Power/EDSA I and II: essentially mobilized by middle class NGOs with strong support from organized POs and the better educated in Metro

⁵ Jeremaiah M. Opiniano, “Party List Groups: Struggling To Represent the Marginalized, *Intersect* 18, 6: 20-24.

⁶Anna Marie A. Karaos, “Civil Society: Building or Subverting Institutions?” *Intersect* 18, 6: 14-19.

Manila's urban poor communities.⁷ Extensive use of cellphones and email to call out the crowd was notable. However, possible contradictions in that poor people who do not possess electronic ICT items may be marginalized in socio-political processes

- The urban riots of May 1, 2001 (“EDSA III”) at Malacañang Palace in support of deposed President Estrada was more heavily supported by poor unorganized urban groups in informal settlements and less educated residents of Metro Manila's poor neighborhoods. The evidence indicates that the riots were orchestrated by groups close to the Estrada political machine, which articulated the class argument as a motivating force, provided transport and food to participants, and sometimes money as well.
- Whether paid or not, the ability of political party groups to mobilize fairly large groups of young men especially, and a few women, suggests the possibility that an incipient class-conscious social movement may be forming, but ironically led by upper-middle class political leaders pursuing their own interests.⁸
- This phenomenon may draw its strengths from poor people's growing disillusionment with democratic institutions like the courts, elections, and the rule of law (versus corruption), the legislature (law-making achievements very limited,) the remoteness of the Catholic Church from urban slum dwellers, the police who are supposed to protect, but who in reality often victimize the poor, out-of-school young people unable to afford an education that could give them the skills they needed for decent employment, respect, and a better life, and the failure to punish powerful persons who brought widespread suffering to the populace as a whole.⁹
- The power structure of urban barangays in city politics highlights the strong position of the barangay captain, unlike traditional and more politically diverse rural communities, where the barangay captain is only one among several established elite figures and powerful families.
- Regularly resorting to “people power,” or citizen action when dissatisfied with a key office holder may, ironically undermine the democratic institutions through which those concerns would normally be funneled, e.g. recall through petitions or referendums, impeachment, etc.

⁷ Maria Cynthia Rose Banzon Bautista, “People Power 2: ‘The Revenge of the Elite on the Masses?’” in *Between Fires: Fifteen Perspectives on the Estrada Crisis*, ed. Amando Doronila (Pasig City: Anvil Publishing Inc. and *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 2001), 1-42.

⁸ Anna Marie A. Karaos, “Populist Mobilization and Manila's Urban Poor; The Case of SANAPA in the NGC East Side.” Prepared for the Institute for Popular Democracy, Quezon City, 2003. Typescript.

⁹ John J. Carroll, S.J., “Entomb Them Alive? Reflections on the Philippine Socio-Cultural Situation,” *Intersect*, 18, 6: 4-8.

- The dynamic of urban protests taking place largely in Metro Manila, the seat of the national government and the President, gives urban poor populations high visibility in government circles. Apprehension that further riots may occur and indeed topple an Administration gives urban poor demands a hearing and enhances their negotiating power vis-à-vis their interests. The lack of unity among POs and the unorganized urban poor, however, hampers the development of genuine social movement among the urban poor that could bring significant benefits to them. Urban protests thus remain geographically identified rather than class conscious.
- Interviews with urban poor groups have demonstrated a low level of class consciousness in the sense of the poor “blaming” the upper income groups for the plight of the poor. The majority of respondents felt that when a family does not get ahead in the city, this stems from laziness, ill health or ineptitude on the part of family members. Views of the rich are that they look down on the poor as they live luxurious lives.

D. Conclusion

Philippine civil society is alive and well. However, it recognizes the many challenges that still lie ahead for the country, such as poverty and inequality. NGOs and POs are continuing their struggle toward genuine social transformation, engaging government and to a lesser extent the private sector in the process.