Philippine Political Parties, Electoral System and Political Reform

By Joel Rocamora,

The most important characteristic of Philippine political parties is that they are parties of the elite. In some senses, parties anywhere in the world are elite formations whether one defines elite in functional terms as those who lead or in sociological terms as those who hold economic and political power. But many parties at least attempt to organize regularized support from a broader segment of the population. These efforts result in a more or less stable membership, regularized patterns of interaction within and between parties, and characteristic forms of ideological or political self-definition.

In contrast, Philippine political parties are unabashed 'old boys clubs'. There are non-elite individuals, mostly men, who identify with one or another party, but all of them are followers ("retainers" might be a better word) of elite individuals. These individuals are linked together in shifting coalitions from barangays (the lowest government unit) all the way to the national government in Manila. At the core of this system are wealthy families in the town centers united downwards with dominant barangay families and upward with similar families in other towns. Some of these families are wealthy enough on their own to unite municipal political organizations and finance provincial electoral battles, or battles for congressional seats at the district level. These families constitute the provincial elite. The national elite differ from the provincial only in degree. Most importantly, the national elite are those families which "have attained a level of wealth and status practically immune from the vicissitudes of political fortune"

Other distinct characteristics of Philippine political parties, the shifting character of membership and leadership and the absence of ideological or programmatic differences between parties are linked to the nature of differentiation in the elite. Historically, class fractions have remained relatively small. No one upper class group has attained a level of economic power sufficient for it to dominate other fractions and impose its interests and its program on the state. This is in contrast with Latin America, for example, where divisions among upper class groups have been expressed in differentiation between political parties.

One of the main explanations for this pattern of differentiation in the elite is the underdeveloped and dependent character of the economy through most of the last century. Subsistence agriculture and share tenancy do not provide adequate structures for capital accumulation. Export agriculture was either small holder as in coconut exports or, as in the case of sugar, dependent on the American sugar quota and on conspicuous consumption as an extra-economic means of dominance over sugar workers and competing elites. Neither industry provided a base sufficient for capital accumulation. Commerce and trade were largely in the hands of the Chinese.
This state of economic underdevelopment meant that elites tended to be mainly local elites. Because the central government controlled access to export agriculture and had one of the larger pools of financial resources, local politics revolved around access to central government money. This, in turn, led to two key dimensions of Philippine politics, a particular pattern of local-central government relations, and what political scientists call a "weak state".

What has kept the Philippine state weak is that no one class has been strong enough to bend the state to its will. Instead, the Philippine upper classes are divided into class fractions dependent on government. Their competing demands on government have made it impossible for the central government to formulate and implement a coherent economic development strategy or to develop political institutions capable of providing a reliable regulatory framework for the economy.

The weakness of the Philippine state is also manifested in the contradictory character of local-central government relations. The Philippines' unitary and presidential form of government is, by most measures, a centralized government. But because the central government has not had a dominant ruling class behind it and has been either formally or informally dominated by foreign powers, it has historically been a weak body.

Most local politics in this century can be characterized as competition among local elites for who would be first in line for central government largesse. Tax collection is centralized and customs levies, the other main source of government revenue are collected by the central government. Until recently, local government units had minimal taxing powers. The structure of the bureaucracy has been highly centralized. But because of the weakness of political parties, the President and other national government officials are dependent on local politicians to organize votes during national elections. The national legislature, especially the powerful Lower House, is dominated by local politicians.

Pres. Ramos' rise to power provides a perfect example of the weakness of political parties relative to government, and political clans. Laban ng Demokratikong Pilipino (LDP) had been the ruling party since the 1987 elections when it won an overwhelming majority of contested seats in both national and local elections. Because Pres. Aquino, however, refused to support LDP's candidate, instead supported Ramos, campaigning for him and using the resources of the government, LDP's candidate, Mitra lost badly. LDP won the majority in both the House and the Senate, but a few months after the House convened, LDP lost most of its members to Ramos' party.

Electoral System

Together with the presidential form of government, the electoral system has set the institutional frame for the development of Philippine political parties. The current electoral system, established in the 1987 constitution, has the following characteristics:

The president and vice president are elected nationally for six year terms with no reelection allowed. The national legislature is bicameral, with a lower house of 200 representatives elected in single member district constituencies for three year terms,
plus sectoral representatives appointed by the President. The 24 member Senate has senators elected for six year terms nationally, half elected every three years. Representatives are limited to three terms, senators to two.

Local government officials (governors, provincial councils, municipal and city mayors, municipal and city councils) are elected to three year terms, with a three term limit. Senators, congressmen and local government officials are elected in mid-term elections, but during presidential election years, everyone is elected at the same time. During synchronized elections, more than 17,000 positions are filled. Elections for barangay government, the lowest level of government roughly corresponding to rural villages and urban neighborhoods are held separately.

The system has been "first past the post", whoever wins the most number of votes, wins. Voting in the Philippines has required writing down the names of individual candidates. This has created problems especially during synchronized elections when voters have to write down anywhere from 32 to 44 names on the ballot. Another set of problems occurs as a result of the long period required for counting and canvassing of votes cast. Votes are counted by hand at the precinct level, then precinct returns canvassed at the municipal level, municipal returns at the provincial level, and only then added up at the COMELEC in Manila, a process that can take over a month.

Elections are supervised by the Commission on Elections (COMELEC), a constitutionally mandated, independent body. Although it is supposed to be an independent body, the COMELEC is invariably accused of being pro-administration in nearly every election.

Parties are required to register with the COMELEC with a verified petition with attachments including a constitution, by-laws, platform, and such other information as may be required by the COMELEC. They are required to have chapters in a majority of regions, and within each region, a majority of provinces, down to towns and barangays.

Cheating is a well-developed art in Philippine elections. Local politicians are adept at manipulating the process from beginning to end. Cheating begins during the registration process when politicians work to remove supporters of competitors and pad the voters list with "flying voters" (those who vote more than once in several precincts). During the campaign "guns, goons, and gold" are used extensively to intimidate competitors' supporters, and to literally buy support. Cheating does not end at the time of the actual election. Election return canvassers, often public school teachers are bribed to manipulate the results. If cheating before and during the election is "retail" cheating, at the canvassing stage it is "wholesale" cheating which occurs.

If cheating is a normal part of elections, so is protesting election results. Politicians say there are only two kinds of candidates in the Philippines, winners and those who are cheated. In the 1995 senatorial elections, a sophisticated nationwide network for dagdag-bawas (adding-subtracting) resulted in the election of reportedly as many as three senators who would not have won otherwise. One of those edged out of the winning slate, former Senator Aquilino Pimentel, filed a protest with the
COMELEC. Based on a recount of only 15 percent of the precincts identified by Pimentel as those where dagdag-bawas occurred, at least two of the winning senators should already be removed. But because the recount process takes forever Pimentel believes that the COMELEC will not push the issue further.

This electoral system, and the actual practice of elections have been one of the most important factors shaping political parties. The intensely personalized character of parties derive partly from the fact that individual candidates are elected in a "first past the post" system. "During elections, it is not so much the political parties that are the real mobilizing organizations but the candidate's electoral machinery and network of relatives, friends, political associates and allies." (David, 1994:1) Because at the base of the electoral system, the municipality, the power and status of families are at stake, all means are availed of including cheating and violence to achieve victory.

**Presidential Politics**

The other major institutional factor shaping political parties is the presidential form of government. The Philippine presidency is an extremely powerful position, even more powerful than its model, the American presidency. Because of the centrality of patronage for Philippine political parties, the most important powers of the president are his appointing powers and his control over the disbursement of government funds in a highly centralized form of government.

The Philippine president appoints a large number of people in the bureaucracy, over a hundred thousand positions by some estimates. Local politicians, anxious to find positions in the bureaucracy for their followers, have to lobby with the president. Since officials appointed by the president often have the power to appoint their own staff, the patronage opportunities available in this process are extensive and crucial for local politicians. The main intermediaries in this process are congressmen.

The president's control over government finances is similarly extensive. Although Congress theoretically has the "power of the purse", the President's line item veto, and control over disbursement gives him much greater power than Congress. Congress persons are adept at allocating themselves large amounts of pork barrel. In the 1990's, pork barrel is euphemistically called "Countryside Development Funds", amounts allocated equally to members of both the House and the Senate, and congressional insertions in the budgets of government departments (called CIA's, Congressional Initiative Allocations) which, by agreement, congress persons can allocate. None of these amounts can be availed of unless the President disburses them.

This system of allocation of power gives the President and his political party a hold on local politicians. It is one of the most important reasons why political parties have difficulty maintaining their membership. Soon after a presidential election, members of opposition parties gravitate to the party of the president. When the Ninth Congress convened in 1992, LDP had 81 out of 204 members in the House, and 16 out of 24 senators. They soon lost 47 congressmen and three senators. In 1997, LDP had only 7 senators left. Even more local government officials have moved into the ruling Lakas-NUCD. In July 1995, after the May 1995 national and local elections, then Speaker Jose De Venecia claimed that as much as 93 percent of all elected positions were controlled by the Lakas-NUCD and its allied parties.
The ability of a president to allocate rewards to provincial factions is, at the same time, one of the main factors limiting the strength and long term growth of a party's power. The new administration attracts more and more factions often with conflicting claims until the time comes when the number of factions who get disappointed because its allocation is less than it expected is greater than those who are satisfied. At this point, usually in the run-up to the next presidential election, members of the ruling party start moving to the party of the presidential candidate with the greatest chance of winning.

This pattern of behavior is also the reason for the pre-election maneuvers of the ruling Lakas-NUCD. By raising the possibility that Pres. Ramos would remain president after the May 1998 election by amending the Constitution to enable him to circumvent the term limit, Lakas-NUCD prevented its members from moving to the opposition. In September 1997, only eight months before the May 1998 presidential election, the direction of movement of politicians was still towards the Lakas-NUCD.

The powerful presidency combined with weak parties has meant that the initiation of government policy has mainly been in the hands of the president. This does not mean that the legislature is completely powerless in policy-making. The particularities of the legislative process in the Philippines, a process shaped over almost seventy years of practice, determines the character of executive-legislative dynamic and the role of political parties. While the majority party can control leadership in both houses, opposition congress persons who have long experience in Congress tend to have powerful committee chairmanships. Negotiation on policy issues of national significance, more often than not, cut across party lines.

**Party System**

The structures of all major parties are almost all the same. The basic party unit is at the municipal level. Party units then go up the ladder to the provincial party committee, then the national convention or directorate. These bodies are made up of prominent leaders of the party, former and incumbent elected officials. Within these bodies there are central/executive committees made up of a smaller number of top party leaders. Except for the ruling party, none have permanent party headquarters or paid staff except during elections. In between elections, party headquarters are usually at the party leader's home or office.

The party candidate for president and the key national players in the party have the most say in candidate selection down to local candidates. The centralization of the process of candidate selection has increased in recent years because of two developments: one, the synchronized national and local elections mandated by the 1987 Constitution, and second, the increasing importance of money in elections. Synchronized elections make local candidates dependent on national candidates and their parties in contrast to the past where local officials, already in place in local elections held earlier, are needed by national candidates in subsequent national elections. Although local candidates still have to have their own campaign resources, the rapidly increasing cost of election campaigns have made national party organizations stronger because they have more access to larger pools of campaign donations.
Following Pres. Aquino's example in the 1992 elections, Pres. Ramos 'anointed' Lower House Speaker Jose De Venecia as Lakas-NUCD presidential candidate. To soften the undemocratic image generated by "anointment", Lakas organized two "consultations" of party members. In the midst of the second consultation, however, the party leadership decided to undercut the process and leave the selection of the party's national candidates to Pres. Ramos. Pres. Ramos and Speaker De Venecia have also played key roles in determining Lakas candidates for local positions especially in situations where two or more party members contested the same position.

Candidates are selected on the basis of their performance, political machinery, popularity (name recall/public acceptance), geographical base/support, adequate financial resources. The importance of these elements vary from national to local candidates. For national candidates, it is generally accepted that if the presidential candidate comes from Luzon and its Tagalog speaking population, the vice presidential candidate has to come from the Visayas and its Cebuano speaking people. Popularity, increasingly determined by performance in surveys, is more important for national than local candidates. For local candidates clan/family connections are very important.

While sectoral groups do not play important roles within political parties, they are increasingly perceived to be important for mobilizing votes especially for national positions. Because presidential candidate Joseph Estrada's PMP is a minuscule party, his campaign handlers started organizing a parallel organization called JEEP which has fancy words in its meaning but is generally known as the "Joseph Ejercito Estrada for President" movement. Although other presidential candidates have tried to organize similar groups, JEEP is generally recognized to be way ahead of the pack. Stronger parties see less need for parallel organizations targeting sectoral organizations, preferring instead to win over leaders of these organizations with bribes and favors. Because of its extensive organization among local politicians, Lakas has not made much of an effort to organize a sectoral base.

Party Finances

If in the past patron-client ties limiting effective participation by the electorate was the most serious problem corrupting democratic representation, today rapidly growing election campaign expenses is the key problem. Running election campaigns have become so expensive that only rich people or those dependent on rich financiers can run. Qualified, popular candidates without money and without financial backers cannot win. Even when relatively honest people do win, they have to spend so much money to campaign that they invariably become corrupt in order to recover their expenses or to return the favor of financial backers.

Since patronage demands continue, in fact, increase after the candidate is elected, using the powers of one's office to reward supporters is a basic requirement in Philippine politics. "All the congressional respondents mentioned honesty as an important criterion for public judgment but conversations indicated this to be a particular kind of honesty owed only in relation to one's supporters rather than the electorate at large. A politician must deliver what he has agreed to produce for political support. He is in no way beholden to those who did not support him." This
group loyalty does not apply to political parties, only to individual political leaders. (David, 1994:1)

To win Philippine elections, candidates have to spend thrice: once to get nominated, second to garner votes, third to get his votes counted, added to, and those of his opponents subtracted. To gain the support of lower level leaders in support of his/her nomination by the party, then to organize the campaign, candidates have to spend prodigious amounts of money. The higher up the ladder, culminating in the presidential candidate, the more you have to spend. In the 1995 elections, COMELEC municipal and provincial registrars were bribed to add votes to some senatorial candidates and subtract votes from those of their nearest competitors.

In the 1992 presidential elections, candidates were allowed to spend P10 per voter. With 32,144,330 registered voters, each presidential candidate was allowed to spend a total of P321 million (US$1-28). As high as this amount is, most analysts say candidates spent more, in the area of P1B per candidate. Fulfilling COMELEC requirements, after the election Ramos reported that he spent P118 million and his party, Lakas another P98,981,281. Kilosbayan, a citizens movement headed by former senator Jovito Salonga later accused the Aquino government of spending P400 million in government funds to support Ramos' candidacy. Laws on financial contributions refer specifically to elections. They are silent on contributions to political parties not related directly to elections. These laws are so strict that if they were observed, candidates would have to self-finance campaigns. In any case, they are virtually impossible to implement. The COMELEC has no capability to validate or to dig into the business affiliations of individual contributors. Even when violations do occur, the COMELEC does not apply sanctions.

The ruling party has a distinct advantage in campaign fund raising. It can tap government resources - financial, human, institutional. In addition to government funds, the ruling party is also better placed to secure contributions from business sources because of the party's control over government contracts, licenses and other favors. Lakas reportedly has been accumulating a "war chest" many years before the 1998 elections. There are reports, however, that three months for the elections, Lakas is having difficulty getting new money from business sources because of the currency crisis and the perception that De Venecia is a weak candidate for president.

Election funds are either "legitimate" money or "grey" money. "Legitimate money" comes from businesses, especially from Chinese businessmen who "are more politically vulnerable and more prone to use cash to buy certain favors and business advantages." While corporate contributors, among others from the Makati Business Club are known sources, Chinese businessmen contribute more and make less demands. "Grey" money comes from the operators of illegal economic activities,
gambling, smuggling, prostitution and drugs. While "grey" money is generally more important in local contests, there are reports that the larger operators of illegal gambling and drug syndicates have also contributed to national campaigns.

Big contributors calibrate their contributions based on their assessment of a candidates chances. Six months or more before an election when candidates start asking, businessmen will make small contributions to a number of candidates for the same position. Closer to the election, recipients will be narrowed down to those with the biggest chances for victory and in cases where there's a clear favorite, only to one. Because of this pattern of contributions, leading candidates will incur debts to get to the homestretch when they expect more contributions to come in.

Politicians' clans invest a good part of the family fortune to back the candidacy of a kinsman. Their continued presence in the political scene is a source of social and economic leverage for the entire clan. On the other hand, businessmen and corporate groups have no choice but to place bets on the winningest candidates. Business in a rent-seeking economy flourishes not so much because of a managerial advantages but mainly because of the exploitation of political advantage. Giving contributions to likely winners is part and parcel of running a business in a country like the Philippines.

Political Reform

Political parties are not very popular in the Philippines. The media and academics are almost uniformly critical. Public opinion is not any less unkind. The popular term used to refer to politicians is trapo (from traditional politician), which literally means "dirty dishrag". While the public continues to be nervous about constitutional reform, witness the widespread opposition to cha-cha (charter change) in September 1997, there is at the same time, a palpable sense of the need for political reform.

As unpopular as political parties are, they continue to be the main political instruments for social mobility. While this is true, mobility occurs within a society that over time has become more and more unequal. While allowing ambitious young, mostly men, from the provinces to move up in the world, such movement is worked out within political parties which remain instruments of a narrow upper class. Attempts to set up political parties representing the interests of the poor majority of workers and peasants have been suppressed or more often, have been unable to survive in a political system biased against such attempts. In the end, it is not that Philippine political parties are not ideological, but rather that because they are all or mostly instruments of the same upper classes, their members share the same conservative ideology. Their political parties, therefore are not distinguishable from each other on the basis of ideology.

"There are several reasons for the dim prospects for a peasant-labor third party in the near future. The most important reason is that the traditional socio-political structure has tended to persist in spite of its transformation and disintegration in some parts of the country and that, even where the traditional structure has disintegrated, a new structure that is conducive to class-based politics has not yet developed sufficiently. This is reflected in the fact that only a relatively small portion of the
peasants and workers are organized and the unorganized peasants and workers are not generally sympathetic to peasant and labor candidates. Even those who are organized are not necessarily solidly behind those candidates. Also, poverty-stricken peasants and workers are vulnerable to short-run material inducements such as offers of money, jobs, various kind of donations and instant assistance, etc., which most peasant and labor candidates cannot afford and to provide. Furthermore, the organized peasants and workers are seriously fragmented under their divided leadership. In addition, the electoral system under the new constitutional adopted a single-member district system for the lower house, which makes it extremely difficult for minor parties to translate their votes into congressional seats". (Kimura, 1990: 59-60)

If the clan and faction-based Philippine political party system has managed to remain impervious to class-based politics, it may be unable to resist pressure to change based on the more complex functional requirements of the economy. One of the functional requirements of the current economic situation are political parties capable of aggregating interests and translating them into policy.

While change has been slow, parties have moved from the clan-based elite circles at the turn of the century to local party machines in the 1950s and 1960s to the more centrally controlled post-1986 parties. These changes have occurred less because of conscious efforts by party leaders than as often unconscious responses to developments occurring outside of parties.

Other forces are also pushing more accelerated change. Movements for electoral and political reform such as the Consortium for Electoral Reform (CER), and the NAMFREL (National Citizens Movement for Free Elections) are campaigning for electoral reforms. By limiting opportunities for cheating, electoral reforms such as continuous registration, tamper-proof voters' identification cards, and counting machines will significantly change electoral behavior and, of necessity, political parties.

Other political reforms mandated by the 1987 constitution such as those providing for recall and referenda, for sectoral representation in the Lower House of Congress, and for party list elections in the 1998 synchronized elections will also add pressure on political parties to change. The party list law provides for the election of 20 percent of the members of the Lower House by proportional representation. While the implementing law (RA 7941) has many infirmities which will weaken the impact of the concept, providing for an alternative to the single member district constituencies of the Lower House will encourage the formation of new types of political parties which may, over time, acquire enough strength to challenge the old parties.

Akbayan (Citizens' Action Party), a newly established party participating in the party list elections is an interesting example of the type of new party that may be formed in the coming years. Akbayan is a progressive party built on the organizational base of the progressive movement, the social movement groups and NGOs. At the same time, Akbayan leaders say that they cannot become a significant party unless they recruit outside of the organized base of the progressive movement, among ambitious young professionals and business people who are tired of old-style politics.
Akbayan is different from existing parties not only because it comes out of the progressive movement, but because it is being built on the basis of its assessment of the functional requirements of alternative politics. By taking the party platform process seriously, by making it the core of party activity, Akbayan leaders believe that they are developing capability which will be required of all parties in the coming years. Since political parties capable of identifying interests in society, aggregating them and translating them into policy can best develop in the context of a more participatory democracy, Akbayan's progressive thrust fits well into its functional capabilities.

The most important challenge to political parties may come from ongoing efforts to amend the constitution and shift from a presidential to a parliamentary form of government. Such a shift, if it happens, will force political parties to radically alter themselves. Unifying the executive and legislative branches through a ruling party will force political parties to take on a stronger role, and develop greater capability in policy-making. If a shift to a parliamentary system is accompanied by an electoral system based on proportional representation, changes in electoral behavior will bring about even bigger changes in political parties.

The push for a shift to a parliamentary form of government in the last few years has come mainly from the ruling Lakas-NUCD party. A new draft constitution formulated by a team headed by the National Security Council which was exposed by the Manila Times (September 5, 1995) shows that a powerful core group within the Lakas party wants an authoritarian parliamentary system similar to that in Malaysia and Singapore. All indications show that Lakas leaders want to change the political system in such a way as to enable it to become the ruling party in a quasi-parliamentary one-party state.

The implementation of these plans via changes in the constitution which would have enabled Pres. Ramos to extend his term past 1998 was stopped by a powerful popular movement led by the Catholic Church and former President Corazon Aquino. Whether or not constitutional reform will be pursued by the new administration in July 1998 depends partly on who will get elected and how soon after the election such a move is made. Doing it soon after the election will lessen fears that charter change is only being used to extend an administration's term. It will not be easy because there are many who fear that charter change will be used to serve other political agendas. While these fears are certainly justifiable, forgoing political reform, including those that would radically alter the political party system because of these fears may be a case of serving short term goals at the expense of long term reform.