

METHODS

Democracy in the Philippines¹

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Democracy in the Philippines is a superficial form of government. On the surface, the Philippines's democracy has a popularly elected president who is both the Head of Government (HOG) and the Head of State (HOS). Chief executive and commander in chief are two phrases that are commonly used to describe the President of the Republic of the Philippines. The paper explains why liberal democracy poses a problem for Southeast Asian states in late modernity. It uses a seven-question democratic framework to determine the existence of democracy in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Republic of the Philippines, democracy, checks and balances, separation of powers, political science, public policy, corruption, poverty, Southeast Asia

Framework for analysis

The framework for analyzing democracy in the Philippines uses the following primary seven questions: (1) Are there regularly held elections that are free and fair in the country? (2) Are there external or foreign observers of the elections? (3) Are the ballot boxes stuffed openly or secretly? (4) Are the voters bribed in any way before or during the elections? (5) Is the vote secret? (6) Are there secret police operating beyond the law? (7) Are there opposition parties that can freely take part in elections with low barriers to entry?

Introduction and literature review

Liberal democratic approaches to states, societies, and capitalism are common topics of research in the West. However, there appears to be less research interest in liberal democratic approaches to states, societies, and capitalism

in Southeast Asia. Would a liberal democratic approach to analyzing democracy in the Philippines be useful? What does the scholarly literature tell us?

It would seem that the Philippines has everything a good government ought to have, such as a constitution, a system of checks and balances, the separation of powers, and a judicial interpretation of the constitution. So, what happened, and why has it failed?

Part of the reason, as we shall see, is systemic corruption and immense poverty. But there is more. The Philippines has a fractured set of underdeveloped political parties within a weak party-political system. The so-called system is characterized by the following two words: Factions and factionalism. This is seen in the seminal work of Duverger (1), Barbara and Robert (2), Teehankee (3), and Rappa et al. (1995).

Poverty is a measure of two primary components. First, the ability to sustain a living for any human person from childhood to adulthood, and second, mortality. These are usually related by scholars to education, health, disaster relief, poverty reduction, aging, wealth, finance, and political

¹This paper is dedicated to Frank Cibulka, my former teacher at the National University of Singapore's department of political science many moons ago. Frank Cibulka was a friend, teacher and mentor to us all. His powerful intellect, charisma and brilliant teaching style helped many of us useless

students understand and analyze the meaning of nepotism and corruption in useless countries where merit is often mistaken for ability; and ability often mistaken for ineptitude.

culture. Other areas or subareas include agriculture, land reform, local governance, and the like. Almost all of these have to show their relevance and often, the best way to do so is through public policy analyses. The methods used may involve social science and political science surveys; data and statistical analyses of variance (ANOVA) and multivariate analyses. These are captured in the following works as well.

From American colonialism to Philippines nationalism

Under the guidance of the American colonialists, led by President Aguinaldo, the Philippines's Malolos Constitution was proclaimed on 22 January 1899, creating the First Philippine Republic, with its president. Therefore, it was always a sort of representative democracy based on the US Presidential System. President Aquino adopted the 1987 constitution to re-establish the presidential system with a bicameral legislature and an independent judiciary.

The poor survey methods used by capitalist survey companies indicate the level of superficial captures for the degree of democracy thereby making Philippines one of the most democratic states in Southeast Asia, which, in fact, is false. Some surveys indicate that the country scored a high score of nine for its electoral process and pluralism and a high of eight for political participation and civil liberties. Anyone who has visited the Philippines for a few weeks over a decade will report that the high level of crime and corruption in government even among the senatorial class indicates clearly how democracy is either superficial or has led to higher levels of poverty.

Then, of course, there are other major social issues such as the widening income gap between the richest of the rich and the poorest of the poor; high levels of illiteracy especially in science and technology; illegal substance abuse; prostitution, and vice-related crimes. These make the dangers of environmental disaster even worse for the Republic or so-called Republic because the Filipinos are emotional people who love to live in danger-prone areas rather than to move to more expensive but safer places. This has been the case for at least the past 350 years. It has nothing much to do with the advent of American colonialism and more to do with the kind of political culture that exists among Filipinos.

Poverty

The Philippines is one of the poorest countries in modern Southeast Asia in 2023 and this was noted as early as the 1970s (9, 11). There are several reasons for this such as the country never recovered from the raping and looting of the Marcos era; the avarice of the five families; the problems associated with natural disasters; and the fact that arable

land continues to shrink because of global warming, poor land-use policies and a lack of a national vision that can be implemented. One good thing about the Philippines is that its government and leaders are good at writing. However, they are horrendous at implementing their own public policies. This is why the gap between the richest rich and the poorest poor (similar to Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam) is growing faster than it has before. The value of the Philippine peso is weak and the problems of land distribution that date back to the time of the Huk (*Hukbalahap*) Rebellion are ever present due to the fact that the extreme divide between the old fiefs under the old landlord system remains unresolved even after that successful but limited peasant unrest. Of course, today, no Filipino worth her or his salt would espouse such Neo-Marxist ideals, perhaps with the exception of some long-forgotten liberal theologians.

Corruption in Philippine politics

We are already aware of the fact that “corruption affects public services in rural areas in different ways than urban areas, and that corruption harms the poor more than the wealthy” (Azfar and Gurgur [(4):197]). However, corruption in the Philippines dates back much further to the very beginnings of the national party–political system itself. The Nacionalista Party (NP) or Grand Old Party, which was founded in 1907 during the American colonial era, was split twice—once in 1922 and then again about a decade later. It was the Liberal Party (LP) faction that split from the NP. This eventually worked out into a kind of two-party system made up of various economic and political elites. Rightly or wrongly, the Philippine people celebrated the era known as the Marcos era for one reason or another. Several Philippines's political scientists and sociologists say that the situation either accrues the Philippines's political culture or the hope and optimism that Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos provided the ordinary Philippine peasants. The post-war era saw the growth of Ferdinand Marcos's authoritarianism (1978–1986). Marcos's Philippines was a clear example of a strong state but in my view, Aquino's Philippines was considered a weak state [see also (5)]. One should not for any moment think that democracy in the Philippines reduced corruption over time. It was merely more apparent during the time of lavish personal and widespread conspicuous spending of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos, and their political cronies, the social elite of the day. This was made clear by the work of Katsuya (2005), Rappa and Lionel (10) as well as Teehankee (3). Marcos's authoritarian government also saw the mobilization of political resources inside and outside his political party leading to the rise in legitimizing corruption in government not only during Marcos's time but also during the time of his son and across all other

forthcoming presidencies. This had an effect in the post-Marcos era that began with Corazon Aquino in the Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (EDSA) revolution of 1986. That was one point in Philippines's history when the people rallied and showed the kind of political guts that presented itself during the American–Philippines War.

Analysis

A normative analysis of all the Philippine General Elections (GE) reveals the following:

There were regularly held GEs in the country but it remains questionable if these GEs were either free or fair. There were reports of several American foreign observers in the pre-Marcos and immediate post-Marcos eras. However, access to their reports and observations has been hard to come by even at the University of the Philippines (UP). Elections appeared to be free of ballot box stuffing in the major cities but there were allegations from opposition MPs and some senators about secret bribes in the rural areas. No known secret police appear to be present during these GEs (8). However, there was clear evidence of widespread poverty and collusion especially among the descendents of the five powerful Filipino families.

Conclusion

The former gun-slitting attitude of Rodrigo Doa Duterte (16th president) has not had a lasting effect. Crime and illegal drugs are easily available from Quezon City to Metro Manila. There are other annual troubles as well that date back to the time of the American-Spanish War, the Hukbalahap Rebellion and the Marcos era [see also (12, 4)].

The modern Philippine electorate still prefers to live dangerously in earthquake zones and other places where natural disasters annually assault. Some believe in the hand of God or Acts of God and think that God will save them from disaster and that if they or anyone should die, it was because their time was up. Or perhaps that they had committed too many sins. Such is the critical but fatalistic culture of a country where 90% are Christians.

The Philippines lends itself to being a facsimile of American democracy, perhaps with only a fraction of its

wealth. But the Filipinos are a proud and stubborn part of the Malay race in Southeast Asia. They voted Ferdinand “Bongbong” Romualdez Marcos Jr. as their 17th president as they had ballot box amnesia about his father Ferdinand Marcos Sr, who served 20 years as president, the longest-serving Philippines president in late modernity. They are proud because they prefer to subject themselves and their future to one without American help. The tourist dollar has fallen with the closure of those seedy bars that American troops helped sustain at Clarke Air Force Base (AFB) and Subic Naval Base. It was a clear case of throwing the baby out with the bathwater. However, this is with the caveat that the baby and the bathwater were filthy in any case. The future of democracy in Philippine modernity is in the hands of the current electorate and the descendants of the five families who controlled the Philippines alongside various presidents from Macapagal to the time of the political nepotism of the nefarious Marcos family.

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