

Oligarchical Politics and Its Implications on Regime Stability

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In 1986, with the overthrow of the Marcos government and its dramatic replacement by another headed by President Corazon Aquino, it comes easy to Filipinos to anticipate a fundamental change in the oligarchic character of Philippine politics. The expectation is towards the evolution of a more clearly liberal democratic political regime, with emphasis on greater and more meaningful participation of the citizenry in public affairs, a more publicly accountable and responsive government, nationalist and equity-thrusted operational public policies, and clearer civilian supremacy in the conduct of national politics.

After two decades of Marcos rule which violated all of the above aspirations, the contemporary expectations are understandable. Still, there is probably a pressing need to impress on most Filipinos that the successful pursuit of these ideals requires a national struggle against a tradition of at least four hundred years, that of *oligarchical politics*. This is a powerful tradition with roots that go deep into both cultural and social values, with both structural and institutional defenses which historically secured oligarchic political regimes in the Philippines.

From the advent of the Spanish conquest, through the American, Japanese and post-war periods of Philippine political history, hierarchical social organization, underpinned by authoritarian personality traits and reflected in the pre-eminence of socio-economically advantaged elements of society, together with a political culture which manifested dyarchic power relations among the politically influential and at best paternalism between them and the subject population, spelled an enduring combination for oligarchical politics.

The operational characteristics of the Philippine political system up to the time of Marcos' overthrow may be summarily presented, with an eye towards appreciating the dimensions and the magnitude of the current challenge to initiate a more liberal and democratic regime in the Philippines. These characteristics are the following:

- (a) Through Spanish, American and Filipino regimes up to 1972 (when Marcos declared martial law administration), the political system may be seen as integrating more and more Filipinos under an increasingly centralized national government authority.

After 1972, this *centralization and concentration of political power* continued and even intensified. Marcos' "constitutional authoritarianism" developed towards an imperial presidency, with all other branches of government and extra-governmental institutions like the press and the political parties domesticated in its service. With consolidated and singular control over a largely politicized military, Marcos managed to gain clear supremacy within the martial law authoritarian state.

- (b) From the mid-16th century to 1972, even as more and more Filipinos became effective subjects of the political system, the *leadership or controller function remained limited to a smaller sector of political influentials*, whether foreign or native.

From 1972 onwards, a pliable elite subordinate to the President helped to exercise political controller functions which were formerly exercised in a more liberal context, i.e., the president was central controller but performed largely as *primus inter pares*. Elite pliability was effected primarily through the cooptation of members of the traditional political elite willing to serve an imperial President and through the building up of new members of the elite, political personalities who had neither an economic nor a political base at the time they were impressed into pliable elite service.

- (c) Up to 1972, the effective participation of most Filipinos who did not belong to the political and

economic elite was largely limited to formal participation in elite-dominated, intra-elite-competed-in elections. They had little say in the effective choice of candidates running for elective office or the determination of election issues.

In the post-1972 authoritarian state, most Filipinos continued to be basically *marginalized political objects*, affirming in elections, referenda and plebiscites political decisions made by the authorities and implementing the programs operationally indicated by these decisions.

- (d) The non-formal or informal participation of most Filipinos in the political system largely placed them in a *patron-client context* as they tried to influence elite political actors for specific, largely personalistic boons.

This political context intensified in the post-1972 state, reinforcing in the minds of the politically marginalized citizenry a sense of helplessness as regards their persons and their society.

- (e) From the mid-16th century to the time of Marcos' overthrow, extralegal as well as illegal means were often resorted to by significant numbers of Filipinos to protect themselves against deteriorating economic and socio-political conditions; fairly *high levels of social unrest and significantly recurring, outrightly subversive activity* against government authorities characterized much of Philippine political history during this 400-year period. The potential for popular violence was indicated in a nationwide survey of adult Filipinos in 1985; as many as 37% of the respondents confirmed the possibility that Filipinos may resort to violence as a means of solving their political and economic problems.

The remarkable thing about these features of the Philippine political system is that their operation through four centuries indicates a logic of progression. The authoritarian state in Marcos' time is a logical development of the growing concentration of governmental powers and resources and a corresponding decline in the ability of the citizenry to exercise accountability from their government authorities. This anti-democratic political development has been attended by both economic and social conditions which spelled impoverishment and inequity for the greater majority of Filipino.

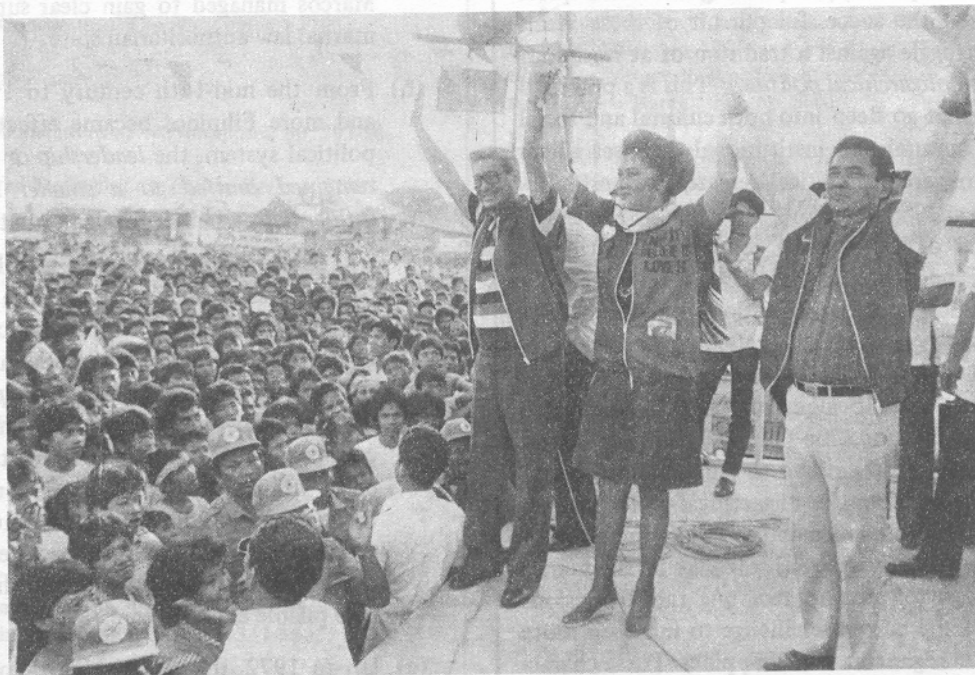
In 1986, Aquino's rise to political power gives hope to many Filipinos that the anti-democratic historical trend could be arrested and eventually, reversed. Political stability is presumed to be an inevitable outcome of this critical reversal.

Dimensions of Political Stability

The growth of state power and the strengthening of the position of government authorities often lead to greater political stability. The history of both the United States and China among the big powers and Cuba, Vietnam and Singapore among the smaller states are illustrative examples. However, the Philippines is typical of another genre where the opposite result may be observed. As the Philippine state accumulated and concentrated political power, as government authority became increasingly concentrated in the imperial presidency of Marcos, greater political instability ensued.

The signs of a highly stressed political system were already clear by 1981, when Marcos' authoritarian government nevertheless felt strong and secure enough to at least formally declare the lifting of martial law. Spurred by economic hardships, growing unemployment and increasing popular skepticism for government, the challenges to government authority building up in the latter 1970s became more pronounced and more open.

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Labor unrest intensified, multisectoral protest actions bloomed, peace and order conditions deteriorated, and insurgency worsened. Indicators for these concerns all showed critical levels, with record statistics being reached by 1985.

These summary statements reveal the essential nature of political stability in developing countries like the Philippines. *Integrative as well as delivery functions must be served if the political system were to stabilize and endure.* The integrative function has to do with the consolidation and, up to a certain point, the centralization and concentration of governmental powers. (Governments in Third World countries, it has been persuasively argued, must first of all govern.)

The strengthening of government and the emergence of the authoritarian state are often related to the demands of national integration and the creation, as well as maintenance, of political order in developing societies. Integration demands firm and evenhanded treatment of competing and oftentimes conflicting interests, particularly those which historically have interacted in a context of inequity. Government often has to intervene in situations where the majority but weak interests have to be upheld, as in the case of the grossly disadvantaged poor. It also has to be prepared to protect minorities from being systematically exploited by advantaged majorities, as in the case of ethnic groups which historically might have been deprived of appropriate shares of national resources. In these and similar situations where integration presumes the ability of a government to initiate and sustain public order, government's first priority will have to be to strengthen itself that it may effectively govern.

There can be no doubt that in the Philippines, specially in

the last 13 years, strong government and authoritarian rule existed. The imposition of public order, however, does not appear to have served the public interest. The oligarchical interests of the authorities had been the primary dynamics of government and, in the course of Marcos' administration, public order and strong government became increasingly associated with huge security forces. The military and paramilitary establishment more than quadrupled between 1972 and 1985.

In an ultimate sense, the real strength of government rests not so much on the rifles and bayonets of the military so much as on the support of its citizens. Strength may be equated with popular perceptions of regime legitimacy and confidence in government as a mechanism for progressive and just social change. This popular faith in the political system, its regime and government authorities can only result from the ability of government to deliver as regards the multiple dimensions of public welfare, from employment to income to human rights, public safety and others.

Political stability depends not only on government being able to govern; government must also govern well. For a political system to be stable, both the integrative as well as the delivery functions of government need to be executed; government must be strong, but its strength must flow from the ability to serve the public interests. The problem of political stability reduces to the presence of credible, credibly performing and delivering government.

In the specific case of the Philippines, over the past four centuries and more particularly in the last decade and a half, government and government authorities have largely chosen to be Machiavellian without heeding this Florentine's bottom

line counsel; "Those who do not build on the people build on a foundation of sand."

By the end of 1985, the oligarchical politics of Marcos' government presented a society where the well-being of most Filipinos had so grossly deteriorated, with more poorer poor people, with more unemployed and underemployed, with real wages of the employed declining, even as their productivity held, with inflation at record heights, with public safety grossly endangered in terms of rampant criminal activity and widespread insurgency, and with a judicial machinery unable to dispense justice fast enough so as not to effectively deny it.

The enduring political crisis in the Philippines, it may be pointed out, is that given a regime of political oligarchy, the authorities would rather build new societies and new republics on foundations of sand, with flamboyant rhetoric as cement.

Public Accountability and Oligarchic Politics

At least since 1972, the Philippine government has not wanted for strength. However, the last 13 years of authoritarian government have proved to Filipinos that something is needed to temper the political strength of ruling authorities. This is a mechanism for public accountability.

The institution of public accountability have a long history of formal existence in the Philippines. In no period was their number greater nor their formal specifications clearer than in the Marcos years. Public officials and government agencies were theoretically subject to the investigative powers of the *Batasang Pambansa* or National Assembly, the constitutional auditing body, which is the Commission on Audit, the *Tanodbayan* or Ombudsman, or, in cases involving electoral matters, the Commission on Elections. As a matter of fact, as part of its administrative power, every agency of government enjoyed this investigative function as regards its personnel. Erring public officials, depending on their positions, could be charged and tried in the *Batasang Pambansa*, the special court *Sandigan Bayan* for public officials accused of a variety of offenses and, in the case of the military, the military tribunals.

The imperial presidency of Marcos, however, curbed the effectiveness of all these bodies in processing public accountability cases. The President waived public audits, stopped investigations, and preempted unfavorable court verdicts by declaring national policies which rendered pending cases before these bodies "moot and academic."

Oligarchical politics and effective mechanisms for public accountability of the political authorities have proved to be incompatible realities. One appears to be alien to the other and, where the premium is on democratic politics and public accountability of public officials, at least two things need to take place. The first is the development and strengthening of an alert, responsive and persistent public opinion. The public needs mechanisms for keeping it informed on current, urgent issues and developments, and equally vital, organizations to translate its knowledge and sentiments into effective pressure on government agencies and public officials. Given the repressive character of the Marcos government, pressure tactics often meant the concerned public had to take to the streets, demonstrate, picket and be exposed to violent counter-actions by the authorities.



The second thing which would facilitate public accountability operations is the development of an exemplary leadership, particularly at the highest levels of government. In an authoritarian political system, this is easier said than done and perhaps no formula for bringing about such a leadership exists. It may well be ultimately an act of *noblesse oblige* and Filipinos must strain to remember when their public officials in the last forty years willingly walked a direct path towards accountability to the public. The last 13 years yield no example at the highest levels of government.



The Public Pulse and Oligarchic Politics: Filipino Political Perceptions

Any society with claims to being or becoming democratic reserves a place for probes into the perceptions, the attitudes and sentiments of the citizenry. Oligarchical politics, on the other hand, systematically depreciates and provides no incentive for monitoring public opinion. Authoritarian government often turns on the principle of the authorities *a priori* knowing what is best for society, which is to say what secures the

interests of the people. As often invoked by the authorities, the "national security," the "security of the state," and comparable political doctrines serve to mask the interests of the few who are in control of government. Consequently, their pursuit often requires the corruption and even subversion of the interests and security of the people.

From 1965 to 1985, at least eight open or academic surveys have probed into Filipino political perceptions, with three being done in the last 18 months. Summarily, one may note that over the past twenty years, Filipinos largely reflected their great patience and liberal hopes for their authorities, starting in 1965 with much optimism about themselves and their country's capability to progress. By the early years of martial law administration, carried by the rhetoric of authorities about the emerging "New Society," Filipinos were ready to see their personal welfare take second place to the demands of well-being for the national community. As late as 1981, despite the harsh times of the 1970s, Filipinos still granted their political system and government the benefit of the doubt. They, on balance, were still supportive of government and other political institutions. By 1984-85, however, the national mood was one of exasperation and pessimism. At the eve of Marcos' downfall, Filipinos had largely lost confidence in their political institutions and ruling authorities and, in the midst of an unprecedented economic and political crisis, anticipated with great uncertainty and anxiety the further deterioration of both their national and personal conditions. Perhaps the most significant thing was how Filipinos in 1985, for the first time in their post-war history, by a plurality (even a majority if certain cultural and political assumptions were used in integrating the survey responses) admitted to the distinct possibility of violence being resorted to in the resolution of their economic and political crisis.

The People's Revolution: Socio-Political and Economic Implications

In February of 1986, after a series of public protest actions following the most expensive and corrupt national elections in Philippine history, most of the forces which had built up to oppose Marcos' authoritarian rule coalesced and succeeded in dramatically deposing the dictator. The triggering incident was the mutiny by his Minister of Defense and the military's Vice-Chief of Staff, initially supported by a small group of military reformists who contemplated imminent arrests by military forces loyal to Marcos.

The mutiny caught the restive public's imagination and when its leaders pledged their support to Corazon Aquino, popularly regarded as the cheated victor of the recent snap presidential elections, Filipinos by the millions peacefully protected the mutinous military. In a unique non-violent confrontation, they neutralized the Marcos military loyalists and, furthermore, eventually inspired the greater number of military men, to turn against him. In the now historical four fearful days of February, largely unorganized but spontaneously reacting millions of Filipinos thus forced Marcos and his henchmen to flee the country.

The protest call was "Sobra na, tama na, palitan na!"

("Enough is enough, there must be a change!") After two decades of Marcos rule, Filipinos had enough of political repression, economic deprivation and national psychological humiliation. "People's power," through a process of popular catalysis which up to now defies academic explanation, ousted Marcos.

After two decades of Marcos rule, the people's revolution was spurred by a sense of overly-deferred, legitimate popular expectations. Marcos's visions of a revolutionary New Society and an epoch-making New Republic sounded hollow as objective conditions of immiseration continued to attend Philippine society.

The ouster of Marcos and the rise of Aquino to the Presidency must be contexted within this environment of liberated popular expectations. Socio-economic improvements and significant liberal political change will be popularly demanded. Even as some allowances will be made for the difficult circumstances within which the Aquino government started its operations, there will be a natural expectation by the public that the deterioration of their economic and social well-being will be arrested and in time reversed. Employment opportunities will have to be increased, real incomes improved, peace and order secured, and an over-all perception of greater social justice maximized.

Even more vitally, popular expectations will anticipate the stabilization of a political system through greater democratization, devolution of overcentralized governmental powers, and effective neutralization of the traditional socio-economic grounds for which breed insurgency in Philippine society.

The popular pressure, in brief, will be towards a regime where political oligarchy is progressively replaced by a liberal democratic style of government and where, at the same time, a productive economy increasingly attends to equity objectives. No trickle-down strategy of development will be sufficient or credible. The Aquino government, to survive and continue to hold the faith and support of Filipinos, will thus have to maximize its delivery function even as its integrative capabilities remain intact.

Towards Long-Term Political Stability

A new government, and even more fundamentally a new political regime, needs to address current, short-term challenges, before it can realistically hope to endure. Particularly in a situation where political authorities are not partial to undertaking radical means to effect the emasculation of social and political forces which a repressive regime has fostered and opportunistically built-up for its self-protection, *a new government must cultivate legitimacy before the eyes of its citizenry.*

The first challenge of this government will be to address the economic crisis and materially improve the status of the majority of its citizenry. Both national and foreign resources need to be synergistically combined in economic recovery programs which will, even in the short term, alleviate the economic hardships of the people. Where national resources prove inadequate, foreign assistance will be vital. The lynchpin of any economic recovery strategy with a strong foreign assistance component is a policy that emphasizes nationalist con-

trol over the terms of foreign assistance and the equitable distribution of the inevitable costs of that assistance among the various sectors of the Philippine economy. Imperialist debt traps have to be avoided, as well as superficially attractive schemes which promise immediate relief from external debt difficulties but bind Filipino national interests to the security interests of superpowers. (A current campaign is being waged by some finance people in the Philippines to service the huge external debt of the country by effecting twenty-year military bases agreements with the United States.)

An equally vital challenge of the Aquino government is the consolidation of its national political authority, a problem resulting from the continuing presence of political elements whose vested interests lie with the resurrection of Marcos' political supremacy. Regional political warlords with their private armies as well as Marcos elements in the military have to be neutralized.

In addition, doctrinal subscribers to radical ideologies and secessionist programs have to be resisted and overcome and their non-doctrinal armed followers and mass bases recruited in service of national government programs. A double-edged program of counter-insurgency, combining both a forceful response to the irreconcilable and socio-economic and political benefits to the non-ideological insurgents, will have to be designed and judiciously implemented.

Even within the ranks of the Aquino government, a challenge to political stability must be situated. Short-sighted policies which entrench the influence of any sector, whether economic, political or religious, threatens in the long run to destabilize the present government by rendering it vulnerable to perceptions of favoritism or sectarianism.

Finally, challenges must also be located in the various efforts by foreign governments, either to perpetuate historical political privileges and imperialist influences or to initiate ideologically suspect relationships which eventually reduce countries to the status of client states or surrogate polities.

The long term political stability of the Aquino government (as well as that of the Philippines) can only be assured through the effective support of its final constituency, the Filipino people. Such support flows from the popular perception that indeed government has successfully worked to further the people's material interests. Their interests are best served by a government whose political directions have consistently been the democratization of the political system, the safeguarding of republicanism, the clear pursuit of enlightened nationalism, the implementation of equity programs prioritizing the traditionally marginalized and, not least, the maintenance of civilian supremacy in its political administration. As earlier noted, these are indeed revolutionary directions relative to the general thrusts of Philippine governments in the last 400 years.

Shorn of these directions, no government can escape being another Marcos government in the Philippines. Nor can it long escape the wrath of another people's revolution, one which probably will be conducted with organized people's power and which could well be attended by a level of revolutionary violence hitherto unrecorded in Philippine history. **K**