

## The Death of Cacique Politics

THE DECOMPOSITION OF THE OLD conservative power blocs was hastened recently by the open break of Salvador Laurel from the Aquino camp.

The stuff of traditional Filipino politics was composed of wheeling-dealing politicians revolving around the major cacique of clans. Electoral parties provided the mechanisms for linkage of the clans, the petty politicians dependent on the former's patronage, the entrepreneurs of power and occasional intellectuals intending to guide policy with longer vision.

The above pattern of politics was significantly altered during the Marcos dictatorship. The installation of a powerful technocracy within the framework of autocratic rule insulated the planners from dependence on big clan patronage. Many of the major clans were marginalized by the consolidation of power around the Marcos faction. New business and financial elites lobbied directly with executive power. Most of the old politicians were coopted into the corporatist mold fostered by the autocracy.

Popular democratic resistance to the dictatorship produced new leaders and new alliances that dominated the post-Marcos period and modulated the revival of the old conservative power blocs. The stigma of association with the deposed regime prevented the re-entry, in force, of the old politicians into electoral mainstream. This, in turn, inhibited the rehabilitation of the old clan-and-patronage patterns of political competition.

Salvador Laurel represents precisely this type of politics.

The first real test of strength between the old political alliances and the new political forces came two years ago, when Laurel attempted to put out a separate bid for the presidency when snap elections were called. As the anti-Marcos forces gravitated around the candidacy of Cory Aquino, Laurel was forced to choose between instant obsolescence or a vice-presidential role in the Aquino-led coalition.

When the new government came to power, Laurel tried to build a base from which he could constitute a new patronage network. His attempt to secure the Office of the Prime Minister found little support from the military factions, the non-politicians in the executive branch, business leaders identifying with the Aquino camp, the cause-oriented groups and church personalities—the significant variables in the new political equation. The Prime Ministership was unceremoniously abolished.

Repudiated in the initial effort, Laurel sought support from the most ideologically conservative sections of the dominant alliance: the grumbling military factions. He tried to drive a wedge between the ideological conservatives and the progressives by launching a shrill anti-communist witchhunt at the highest levels of government. The strategy caused Laurel to be identified with rebellious officers and to adopt doubtful positions during situations of crisis when the new government came under threat of coup d'etat.

The collapse of the military adventures against the new government diminished Laurel's political stock. Last year, he was relieved of his post as Foreign Affairs secretary.

Without a voice in the Cabinet, distrusted by business leaders satisfied with the performance of the economy, abandoned by his followers for more promising alliances and repudiated by the middle-class groups, Laurel's political disposition became increasingly untenable. He has become a man of disproportional ambition grasping for straws.

Among those last straws is the lone opposition senator who is without an organized base, a band of miserable losers from the last two elections and aging personalities from the old Marcos machine.

The misfortune of Laurel is not entirely his undoing. He personifies the slow death of a pattern of elite rule that has now been transcended. He has become a pathetic figure swimming against the historical tide.