

Filipino Politics in the Electronic Age

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Filipino politics is in the midst of a sea-change. Defining the general characteristics and trend-directions of this change, at midcourse, is not an easy task. The points of discontinuity may be marked, but the trajectory of changes can only be anticipated.

There are at least three major factors compelling a profound change in the sphere of politics:

- a.) the rapid reconstitution of Philippine civil society;
- b.) the changing global order with its inevitable ramifications on the domestic socioeconomic order; and,
- c.) revolutionary changes in the technological environment with its implications on the way we do and see things.

The impact of these three major factors mentioned above are hastened by strategic policy changes sponsored by the state: the rapid liberalization of the economy and the consequent dismantling of the protectionist framework upon which the traditional political elite was based; the bold decentralization of the institutions of governance allowing grassroots communities and geographical regions more

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substantial roles in the decision-making process; the job-creation program hinged on the encouragement of investment flows in the new economic sectors; and, the encouragement of labor migration as a response to international “pull” factors and domestic “push” factors.

Domestic Reconstitution

The massive urbanization of Philippine society holds tremendous political potential.

Much of what has been described as “traditional” politics rested on the abilities of landed political elites to deliver blocked votes from communities that depended on the big families for access to land production and were bound to the same by long ties of patronage. National electoral competition was largely organized around alliances of local landed elites projecting factional allies to national power.

The majority of the Philippine population today resides in cities or highly urbanized towns. They are engaged in economic activities that only marginally relate to land-based production. The agrarian reform program, notwithstanding the criticisms levelled against it, has succeeded in making tenancy virtually extinct.

More significantly, the economic share of agricultural production has declined dramatically in proportion to the manufacturing and service sectors. Electoral financing now depends on contributions from

the urban-based economic sectors, reflecting in the dramatic disappearance of the "sugar bloc" and the "tobacco bloc" that used to play controlling roles in the selection of national political elites. The shift in the comparative densities and economic significance of contending constituencies will continue to reflect in the changing profile of the political class. Power shall shift even more decisively from rural/agricultural constituencies to urban/middle class social groups. That shift will convert into a change in expectations about what the political system is supposed to deliver and what sort of policies will enjoy priorities over contending alternatives.

Globalization

The new realities of the global economy and our conscious movement towards increased engagement with the mainstream of international trade will have profound implications on the sources and distribution of power in our systems of governance.

Increasing engagement with the global trading mainstream alters the relative significance of our economic sectors, and by extension, the distribution of social power. In the past, the most influential political factions drew their power from extractive natural resource industries and plantation agriculture. Today, export manufacturers, service sector entrepreneurs, and a rising middle class have begun to exert more decisive power in the selection of the political class and in the key policy decisions adopted by the state. The shift is irreversible, even if major personifications of traditional politics remain on-stage.

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undermines traditional ideologies. The large number of Filipinos who have gone abroad on labor assignments have produced a stratum of influentials who remain a vulnerable segment of the tenuous middle class. The social complexity is heightened by the rapid expansion of the service sector. Increasingly, the Filipino political terrain has begun to exhibit the sort of single-issue politics that we now see in societies with highly specialized economic roles and large service sectors.

Technological Environment

The information revolution has impacted on the Filipino political terrain. As technological innovation deepens, it shall have even more profound effects on governance and politics in the coming years.

Cable and satellite technologies have taken their toll on the much-vaunted insularity of Filipino public opinion. Television penetration has become extensive and today figures as a critical factor in the shaping of electoral decision-making. Radio has, for many years, enjoyed comprehensive influence in the shaping of public opinion. The impact of the rapid advancement of communications technology shall be even more dramatic in the next few years as Philippine society more thoroughly enters the information age.

The wider and more intensive accessibility of information shall abet the marked trend towards autonomous individual decision-making that we have already seen over the last few years. This trend derives from the increased vertical and horizontal mobility of the population, the decline of traditional production organizations and the expansion of the new, urban-based employment opportunities.

The increasing influence of communications technologies in the formation of political opinion will also tend to make voter decision-making more transient, more 'moody,' and increasingly a product of the issues of the day that cut across the increasingly smaller and more defined constituencies. It will be less based on set-piece ideological programs. In most countries, this trend has already reflected in dramatically declining political party affiliation and a less consistent party-identification among voters.

Instead of seeing the consolidation of political party formations based on ideological identities (the model for these being the European parties of the earlier decades of this century that have now themselves largely shorn off their 19th century ideological identities), we are likely to see the proliferation of smaller, issue- or personality-based grouping entering into the sort of "rainbow coalition" type of arrangement that now actually exists in the House of Representatives.

Rather than see the formation of political parties with definite ideological identities, the trend is toward personification of certain advocacies and coalition programs that will attempt to address the broad and varied concerns of single-issue groups. This trend has been described as "post-modern" politics in the case of the successful Clinton 1992 campaign. It might also be described as the increasing "existentialism" of the electorate where the sense of co-identification with electoral actors begins to shorten until it approximates the attention span catered to by television.

Signals from 1992

The 1992 national electoral exercise is pregnant with indications about where our political practices are moving. That election produced an

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unconventional winner: a president coming from a career in the civil service, a Protestant who wins in his first electoral outing.

The most prominent explanation of the results of the seven-candidate presidential derby sees this exercise as representing a decisive shift in voter opinion against "traditional" politicians (understood, most conventionally, as political figures surviving from pre-martial law politics and inclined towards *lider*-centered voter mobilization). While this explanation is not entirely wrong, it fails to capture the steady undercurrent and the many nuances revealed by voter choices made during this exercise.

Eduardo Cojuangco and Ramon Mitra, who placed third and fourth respectively, organized their campaigns around a large organization of ward leaders and broad candidate-presence in the localities. Jovito Salonga, in a slight variation of this traditional method of electoral mobilization, relied on the organized support of cause-oriented groups, unions, and non-government organizations. He placed sixth, ahead of Salvador Laurel but behind Imelda Marcos who ran a tight-budgeted, whimsical campaign.

The more significant campaign in this contest was run by the second-placer, Miriam Defensor-Santiago. Apart from a good performance in her home region (explainable by the residual regionalism of rural Filipino voters), she drew heavily on urban and young voters. She had no campaign organization to speak of, and reached voters largely through the publicly sponsored television debates. She delivered a simple message, unencumbered by elaborate ideological refinement. But that message caught the mood of the diverse public to which she appealed for support: more determined law-enforcement to curb criminality in the streets and corruption in the public service.

Santiago's performance sounds the death-knell for the traditional methods of electoral organization based on the alliance of local power-brokers. It is a measure of the rising importance of the mass media in brokering voter decision-making. It is indicative of the unsatisfied expectations of young voters, the significance of the urban constituency and the extent of independent voting among a population that, in the past, based their electoral choices on the opinion of the big families, the

local power-broker or the parish priest. This is a glimpse of how electoral politics will be in the age of cable and satellites.

Demands of Decentralization

The decentralization of government is now an irreversible process. As this process deepens, it will produce major alterations in the political class and in the composition of the successor-generation of political leaders.

As local government units wield greater policy-making powers, they become real sites of state power. The prosperity or poverty of regions and provinces will increasingly depend on the professionalism of local executives and the effectiveness of local institutions of governance. As this inevitability dawns on the electorate, there will be greater expectation for a new breed of professional state managers at the local level. They will choose candidates increasingly on the basis of managerial skill and less on the traditional consideration: the ability of the local politician to "bring home the bacon" from a patrimonial national state. This expectation is now evident in the rise of such administrative-type politicians as Gordon of Subic Bay, Pagdanganan of Bulacan, and Lacson of Negros.

As access to national authority becomes less important than competent management of the resources and potentials of the locality, there will be more definite voter pressure for political leaders of a new type. Local executive posts will be the new launching pads for careers in national elective offices.

The Minimalist State

The trend mentioned above shall be heightened by rising expectations for better state management at the national level. The regulationist state, that is now being dismantled, encouraged electoral

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competition for the spoils of regulationism and protectionism. Political power meant the prerogative to award forest and mining concessions, jobs, and preferential state policies in exchange for political support. The new liberalized regime reduces the incentive for this sort of electoral competition.

On the other hand, the environmental crisis, problems of managing large metropolises, garbage disposal, provision of adequate infrastructure support for economic development and other similar problems now on the list of priority governmental action will alter the competence profile expected of political leaders. This will be a major factor altering the composition of the political class. It will hasten the phasing out of traditional forms of political leadership.

The trend towards a minimalist state is heightened not only by the pervasive liberalization orthodoxy but also by the concrete challenges to governance. The shift in the center-of-gravity of the economy from land production to trade will require less regulatory mechanisms and greater movement of people and goods. The state will play a less decisive role in making economic decisions and play an increasingly supportive role to private sector initiative. From the spearpoint of the development process in the state-led development model of the seventies, the state shall play the role of a catalyst and provider of infrastructure support to growth.

New production technologies indicate a shift away from highly centralized production organizations to dispersed and smaller-scale industries. This general trend will reduce the tendency for large cities to further enlarge due to rural-to-urban migration of workers. It will mean

increasingly localized production and the restoration of stable communities that participate in global production through the information highway. This trend will abet the general condition favoring a minimalist national state and effective local governance.

Smaller Government, Better Governance

A conceptual distinction will soon have to be drawn between government and governance. As new technologies raise the capability of civil society for greater self-regulation and better social administration, more functions traditionally assigned to the state will either dissipate or be transferred to society by means of privatization. With new technologies, better methods of administration, and reduced state functions, the bureaucracy is bound to decline in terms of its absolute mass. Unproductive public sector jobs will be replaced with more productive private sector employment.

The diminution of government as it is traditionally understood will not mean the erosion of effective governance. More and more governance functions currently performed by the civil service -- from garbage collection to strategic visioning for the national society -- will increasingly be contracted out to private sector enterprises. Revenue generation to cover the cost of governance will be increasingly a function performed by enterprises in the sphere of production, exchange, and consumption rather than one directly performed by state agencies chasing after individual tax returns. Computerization of all business transactions and reforms in the taxation process such as gross taxation and the value-added tax will pave the way for this shift.

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Conclusion: Porousness of the Political Sphere

It is, as this paper mentions at the onset, difficult to draw hard and fast projections on what Filipino politics will be like in the next century. Within the limitations of this brief essay, we can only make broad brush strokes. But we can say with confidence that it shall be very different from how it has been traditionally conducted over the last few decades.

A new politics will definitely dawn, forged not by the stubborn effort of ideologues and mass movements but by the changes in the objective conditions characterizing our society. This is not to deny visionaries their role: but the imaging of the political future will have to be premised on the larger trends of the present rather than induced from utopian exercises.

The Filipino political future and its institutions have suffered much from the caricatures drawn about it. Its flexibility has often been underestimated. Its receptiveness to change and propensity for transformation have often been understated.

The change that is now underway will require us to reinvent, not our politics, but our understanding of it. The change in actuality, thus far, has overtaken academic interpretation of it. The practitioners of contemporary politics, much as they may be reviled by those in the ivory tower, have shown themselves to have a better grasp of the

transformation in attitudes and dynamics reflecting the political terrain.

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At the bottomline, there is little danger that our political institutions and practices will lag too far behind real economic, structural, and sociological changes in our society so that the political system will become a liability in the process of social change. That has rarely happened elsewhere. It will not happen here.