

What's New and What's Old in Philippine Politics

It would be interesting to see how Aquino III will be able to transcend his class background and political orientation. In Philippine politics, promises are bound to be broken unless elected leaders begin to walk the talk.

By the Policy Study, Publication, and Advocacy (PSPA)
Center for People Empowerment in Governance (CenPEG)
July 1, 2010

Something new happened in the Philippines' election system last May and this was the use of automation for the first time to generate quick election results. Despite the new technology, however, the elections hardly changed the country's political configuration. Political dynasties remain in power and not a few people's hopes of promoting reform politics were dashed with the defeat of reform-minded officials particularly in Pampanga and Isabela.

The staying power of the old, feudal politics as symbolized by political clans will make basic reforms in the country's social and economic conditions such as endemic poverty, wide income gaps, and weak governance highly remote. Token "reforms" may be expected from the new administration corresponding to its campaign pledges. But the large majority will be left to fend for themselves - as it has been for countless decades in a class society where a few families rule exclusively, politically, and financially.

In the elections marred by vote buying and fraud, partial results show some 270 political families dominating the May 10 automated elections each with two or more multiple positions gained. In the country's 80 provinces, at least 53 governors and 26 vice governors come from these political families. (Philippine Collegian, June 9, 2010) The same partial results also showed the Ilocos and ARMM having the highest number of families winning with 22 families in each region gaining at least two seats in all the municipalities.

Political clans kept their dominance in the House of Representatives with at least 130 seats or 60 percent of the

regular membership. Traditional opposition and pro-Arroyo politicians also used the Party-list system, which is constitutionally reserved for the marginalized sectors, to gain additional seats in the lower House.

Senate

Meanwhile, the new Senate will have 16 (67 percent) of its 24 members coming from political clans. The last elections saw seven winners having family members and relatives also taking seats in the House as well as provincial posts.

The latest configuration of national positions underscores how deep the entrenchment of political dynasties is. The new president, Benigno "Noynoy" Aquino III, comes from the powerful clans of the Aquinos and Cojuangcos, whose roots date back to the 19th century. His mother, Corazon Cojuangco Aquino, ascended to the presidency as a result of the People Power I uprising of February 1986 that saw the fall of the Marcos dynasty. His father, Benigno Aquino, Jr., who was assassinated in 1983 is from the Aquino clan of Tarlac.

Even with the ouster of Ferdinand Marcos in 1986, the Marcoses were never out of power with their political, military, and business cronies rehabilitated under Corazon Aquino's administration and themselves eventually taking elective positions. The Marcoses are now back in full force: Ferdinand, Jr. is a new senator, mother Imelda, now 80, is also back in Congress, and daughter Imee is the new Ilocos Norte governor.

In southern Philippines, the Ampatuan clan of

Maguindanao rose to power during the Marcos dictatorship and one of their members was appointed acting municipal mayor by President Aquino. It was during the Macapagal-Arroyo presidency (2001-June 2010) when the Ampatuans' political clout grew giving them control in many of the province's municipalities with a well-armed private army of more than 1,000 men to boot. The Ampatuans delivered crucial votes to Macapagal-Arroyo in the rigged 2004 presidential elections and to her senatorial slate in the 2007 polls. They backed the administration's counter-insurgency campaigns in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). In the tradition of patronage politics, Macapagal-Arroyo extended political and military support to the Ampatuans.

With the Ampatuans now facing criminal and rebellion charges for the November 2009 mass murder, their power has been cut by the rival tribal clan of Mangundadatus with Esmael "Toto" grabbing the governorship of Maguindanao. Still, the Ampatuans cannot yet be counted out with at least 10 clan members getting elected despite being implicated in the massacre.

Macapagal-Arroyo

The outgoing president, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, will remain in government this time as a congresswoman from her native province of Pampanga. Son Datu Arroyo has been reelected as a Camarines Sur representative while another, Mikey, is trying to claim back his congressional seat through the partylist Ang Galing Pinoy (AGP). Brother-in-law Igee Arroyo has also been reelected congressman from Negros Occidental. Mrs. Macapagal-Arroyo's Lakas-Kampi-CMD coalition has won at least 120 seats in Congress and a big number of local government posts. Consistent with traditional politics, the coalition's ranks are being dissipated with members jumping ship toward Aquino III's Liberal Party, which garnered only 40 legislative seats in the May elections.

Nationwide, the major political clans maintain their hold of the presidency, Congress, and local governments. In addition, there are hundreds of smaller political families with local governments as their turfs. The government bureaucracy is filled by their kin and political supporters. Many of the clans are warlords protected by private armed groups as well as by police and military forces. In the provinces, most political clans are a power by themselves and are often untouched by the law.

Political dynasties are bound to the presidency by the system of patronage that the latter dispenses in terms of pork barrel distribution, appointments, preferential treatment in local government revenues and development projects, as well as other perks and privileges. They support the political party of the winning president either as new members or as coalition partners. Ideological considerations or public service - which are nil in most politicians - have nothing to do with this traditional partnership but merely politics of convenience. This quid pro quo politics makes the president strong and provides resiliency and recovery to political clans.

Even as rivals, however, political dynasties maintain a history of reconciliation so long as these are for their own interests. For example, Eduardo Cojuangco, Jr., a business crony of Marcos who was implicated in the 1983 assassination of Benigno Aquino Jr., supported Aquino III in the last election. At some point as a member of Congress, Aquino III aligned himself with Macapagal-Arroyo on the Hacienda Luisita massacre issue and voted against the opening of the "Garci tapes" linking the incumbent president to electoral fraud.

The resiliency of political clans is exemplified not only by the Marcoses, Cojuangco-Aquinos, and Macapagal-Arroyos but also by the Singsons, whose dynasty dates back to the 1830s, Fuendebellas, Villafuertes, and others. They also trounced politicians touted to be reformist, with for instance Faustino Dy beating Governor Grace Padaca in Isabela and Lilia Pineda, an ally of Macapagal-Arroyo, winning over Governor Fr. Eddie Panlileo in Pampanga.

Economic base

Meantime, the material or economic base is important for the sustenance of political dynasties. In the past, land ownership, sugar plantations, mining and logging concessions bankrolled the grab of political power which in turn was used to amass more wealth. In recent decades, wealth provided by trade and commerce, banking, telecommunications and media, food and beverage chains, real estate, corporate law, and other new industries sent new politicians to government. The accumulation of material wealth has always been nuanced by a system of landgrabbing, exploitation and oppression, as well as the misuse of political authority and corruption thus making income inequalities more severe and economic crisis more pervasive.

Aquino III is both a product and representative of the ruling class of political dynasties and is basically, therefore, aligned with his class interest. Aside from this, he is a product of an election system that still gives an edge to popularity and name recall rather than to ideological visions and catalysts of change.

In the recent elections, he was supported by influential dynasties and media owners as well as the corporate elite based in Makati. Some of his supporters belong to the 20 richest Filipinos whose net worth of PhP900 billion is equivalent to the combined income of the poorest 11 million families. He is the current “darling” of the U.S. and other powerful countries with strategic interests to protect in the Philippines, from investments to military intervention. (Didn't they use to support Macapagal-Arroyo before?) The cabinet that he has formed recycles old faces – former Arroyo officials who will now occupy key positions – with new ones particularly in the justice post basically providing the embellishment of token reform. He can always claim he's his own man but realpolitik dictates he not only needs the support of powerful endorsers but must dance through the music of

traditional politics of trade offs and compromises if he aims to complete his six-year term.

The politics of political dynasties and oligarchic parties in the Philippines has always been against change, consistently beholden to elite interests as well as foreign powers. Because it is driven by narrow interests, it is consistently opposed to popular reforms espoused by the country's poor and marginalized classes such as land reform, decent wages, basic social services as well as sovereignty issues and economic independence.

It would be interesting to see how Aquino III will be able to transcend his class background and political orientation. In Philippine politics, promises are bound to be broken unless elected leaders begin to walk the talk by reforming the country's governance system, initiating genuine land reform, and upholding human rights, among other basic reforms. These are the same reforms that Corazon Aquino pledged to address in 1986 only to disappoint - after six years in office - the millions of Filipinos who had marched on EDSA I.

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