

Democratic Transition and Consolidation: The Philippines Experience

On February 25 1986, over 2 million Filipinos took to the streets in EDSA avenue in the capital of the Philippines, Manila. They managed to topple the 14 year martial law rule under President Ferdinand Marcos which oppressed and abused millions. The “People Power Revolution” had a powerful effect on Asian political transitions. The old administration was immediately replaced with a new government that pushed for democratic reforms and influenced democratic aspirations around the world. If the Philippines was at the forefront of Samuel Huntington’s “Third Wave” phenomenon (third surge of democratization among developing countries in the 1970s-1990s) within Asia, how can we explain the destabilizing and weak system that we see at present in the country? The Philippines is mired with numerous corruption scandals, armed insurgencies, unemployment issues, economic inequality, poverty, inadequate infrastructure, disorganized institutions and general disregard for rule of law. In fact, the Philippines’ mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic further reflects the weak governance in place within the country: it boasts the second highest recorded deaths and cases in South East Asia despite having the “world’s longest and strictest lockdown” (Time Magazine). The concept of democratic transition is referred to as the movement from an authoritarian regime to a democratic one. Democratic consolidation, on the other hand, is the whole process through which new democratic order becomes institutionalized and more likely to endure. Renowned political scientist Rustow identified four criterias in order to fulfill a successful democratic transition : national unity among the population, unified combat against socio-economic issues, institutionalization of democratic procedures (fair election for all, vibrant civic society, accountability of those in power, etc.), full compliance by citizens and officials on democratic rules and procedures. Nevertheless, as the democratic transition and consolidation in the Philippines was simultaneous and swift- occurring right after the toppling of martial law- these factors have not been achieved in its entirety and have impacted the current nature and culture of Filipino politics and governance. We will investigate the Philippines’ democratization by situating the country’s historical context in order to better understand the issue at hand. Then, we will examine Marcos’ authoritarian rule and the impacts it gave rise to. Lastly, we will analyze the turbulent post-1986 development of democratic governance in the Philippines.

The nearly 400 year Spanish and American colonization of the Philippines has largely influenced the nature of democratic procedures on the archipelago. Public participation within the electoral system was first introduced in the 19th century by the Spaniards through restrictive municipal elections that were only open for the local elites. During the brief period of Filipino independence in 1898, the Philippines Republic did initiate citizen elected municipal and provincial officials but any further developments were constrained by the arrival of the Americans and the new colonial administration. Colonial rule by the Americans implemented regular elections on all levels of government (local, national legislature and president during the Commonwealth era). The Americans believed that electoral competitions for native elites would ensure cooperation and facilitate American governance in the Philippines. The progressive placement of elites in positions of power during American rule would establish and legitimize the oligarchic political system of the Philippines, currently still in power today. With electoral votes as a path towards power, elite families, local bosses and provincial lords focused on ensuring their place within politics through patronage-driven corruption and vote-buying, both emblematic phenomena still in place in the Philippines. The American colonial strategy solely focused on putting in place an allure of representative electoral democracy in the Philippines which resulted in inadequate and politicized administrative institutions with little power. The weak essence of the Filipino state gave way to the flourishing of civil society in the Philippines. These groups include the Catholic Church, business groups, populist parties, political clans, warlords,

among many others, each with their own agenda and interests at play. Thus, the development of electoral democracy, influenced by colonial rule, greatly resulted in the lack of unity between different groups, as well as the persistent cleavage between religion, class and political ambitions.

During Ferdinand Marcos' 15 year martial rule (1972-1986), the centralization of the Filipino State was mainly concentrated in a few hands. Ferdinand Marcos conferred powers and resources to a few close friends and relatives. Marcos was disinterested in developing state capacities and institutional control. Instead, his main aim was self-enrichment and retaining loyalty to his one-man rule. This meant that Marcos did not have a wide support apart from those in favor of his oligarchy and elite patronage. These practices of governing were inherited from its colonial period (semi-feudal elites retained high positions in government and controlled policies in function of how it benefited them and not the population) and still persevered during the Marcos dictatorship. This implied an even more weakened state structure where its resources and competencies did not go towards expanding or developing the country but instead to the exploitation and self-interest of Marcos's close circle of friends and family. Thus, the Philippines' economic and social state worsened through time under Marcos whether it be through infrastructural projects that had no purpose, business deals that only profited crony companies, appointment of government posts to exclusive circle rather than technocrats, pork politics, etc. This exhausted the financial and economic capabilities of the states which were being siphoned off at an increasingly rapid pace and led to greater debt problems. Indeed, this reinforced the hostile sentiment among the Filipinos and pushed them to unify under a strong and organized movement. Thus, martial law and an authoritarian regime concentrated on a personalistic governance would in turn be fundamental to the collapse of the regime and lead to mass mobilization through the "Philippines People Power".

The Filipino experience of democratic consolidation and transition took place at the same time, under mass mobilization during the "People Power Revolution" of 1986. While the movement proved successful in uniting forces and resources, the aftermath of the flawed regime left many challenges to repair and various governing and management conflicts that divided parties, making the road forward difficult. The current state structure was never developed under Marcos but resulted instead in its reinforced deterioration. This signified a complete rehabilitation and re-forming of many key state organs and external sectors in order for the country to function properly: financial institutions were bankrupt, the economy was over-regulated, high inflation was present, the country's foreign and public debt was at a peak level, government assets were not managed, corrupted business deals and infrastructure projects were still ongoing etc. Cory Aquino replaced Ferdinand Marcos as president and established a new Constitution that guaranteed separation of powers, re-introduced democratic institutions and put forward market liberalization and land reforms. Nevertheless, political families within the Philippines, corruption and a weak state still remain a problem and have never been properly tackled.

In conclusion, the Philippines is an oligarchic state made up of elite families that dominate and control political and economic power in the country. They are supported by a failing political system and a largely politicized bureaucracy that allows those in power to stay in power. Officials in government do not aim for the common good of the population but for the private interests of one another, perpetuating a cycle of elite political culture. The issue is only getting worse under President Rodrigo Duterte, who has installed a climate of authoritarianism in the country, further diminishing rule of law, electoral competitions, liberty of speech and political accountability. The current nature of the Philippines' democratic governance can largely be attributed to its historical context. It has gone through colonial rule, authoritarian dictatorship and multiple unstable presidencies each marred by corruption scandals, bribes and abuse of power.

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