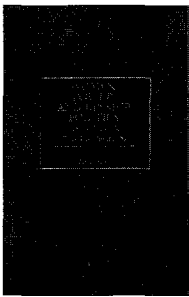


Review Essay

Recognizing Female Power in Politics

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Women, Power and Kinship Politics:



Female Power in Post-War Philippines. By MINA ROCES. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1998. v, 214 pp. ISBN 0-275-96006-4

Filipino feminist scholarship, according to Roces, still unquestioningly embraces the Western feminist framework about female political power—i.e., that women cannot be effective political agents unless they occupy formal political positions. The author challenges this claim by presenting in this book four types of power that Filipino women in postwar Philippines have effectively exercised: unofficial power, moral power, official power and the rebel power of political activism. The author likewise disagrees with most Filipino feminists that Philippine politics/power is male dominated. Her perspective is that 'Philippine politics/

power is *not* male dominated but gendered; men generally exercise official power while women exercise unofficial power via their kinship and marriage ties to male politicians.' She stresses that unofficial power 'is by no means less effective, less powerful or less real than official power'.

Roces notes the limitation of theoretical models used by feminist anthropologists to explore the gender systems of cultures in Southeast Asia. Gender systems are prestige systems and in Southeast Asian prestige systems, the work and other social as well as political activities of men are accorded greater cultural capital than women's activities. The author agrees that the notion of cultural capital 'is a very useful analytical tool' to explain women's marginalization from official power. However, 'it does not grapple with the gendering of power; neither does it explore the possibilities of women's power outside the symbol of power'. 'By focusing on the ways women have deployed power (though women have primarily and most

effectively exercised power unofficially), this book seeks to modify existing assumptions that women have not been powerful political agents.'

UNOFFICIAL POWER

To substantiate the aforementioned arguments, the book presents a wealth of empirical data mostly about women from rich, influential families who were either responsible for getting a male family member (husband, father or brother) or themselves into politics. Through the exercise of unofficial power, the women, acting as wives, sisters, mothers, daughters and even mistresses, were able to win votes, raise campaign funds, and earn small and sometimes big political favors. These women come from some of the wealthiest families in the country—Pacita Madrigal Gonzales, Judy Roxas, Imelda Marcos, Corazon Aquino, Gina de Venecia and Tingting Cojuanco (whose husband Peping incidentally lost the last elections despite her vigorous support during the election campaigns). No less than the political adventures of Baby Arenas, the rumored one time mistress of a former president of the country, were discussed at length in the book to prove the awesome power of women's unofficial power.

At best, the book succeeds in putting together the vast and rich experiences of many women who went into politics as voters, campaign supporters, candidates and 'inspirations' of husband-leaders. We learn for example that Mrs Macapagal, a medi-

cal doctor, received public praise for not moving into the palace until it was thoroughly cleaned and for 'personally supervising the rehabilitation of the rooms.' When Eulogio de Guzman Sr ran for re-election as governor, the women in the family had to cook lunch for 50 people every day. Gina de Venecia, on the other hand, had to oversee the catering of breakfast, lunch, *merienda* and dinner for up to 200 people every day during the election campaigns. As Roces notes, 'women usually took over the harrowing legwork in order to *free the men for more pressing tasks* (italics mine), such as networking with prominent local leaders or addressing larger crowds'. All the First Ladies, including Imelda Marcos (whose exercise of unofficial and later official power is known to have resulted in many human rights abuses and diversion of government funds) were expected to take charge of redecorating the halls of Malacanang for entertaining dignitaries and influential people, and to be involved in civic work and community service. Though carried out outside of official power, these activities make the women as powerful as the men in initiating political changes.

WOMEN IN POLITICS

How about the women who became politicians themselves? The author admits that there have not been many women in local and national politics. She did not offer any reason for this. Is it perhaps because unofficial 'feminine' power is not awesome enough for

them to overcome the very macho ('goons, gun and gold') nature of local elections? The author submits that since national and local politics is a largely male-dominated milieu (contradicting an earlier claim), the women politicians have to use feminine 'practices and appeal to male gallantry' in order to maximize their exercise of official power. Some had to use their charm (*cariño* and *lambing*) while others like former President Corazon Aquino had to rely on 'prayer power' to withstand the most virulent forms of sexism that characterize Philippine political culture.

Despite their small numbers, Roces claims that some women local politicians have succeeded in transforming the 'traditional patriarchal (male) characteristics of governance'. They did so by extending their mothering and housewifery roles and skills to the upkeep of the entire town or province. She says that these local politicians 'took a unique approach to peace and order, appealing to Filipino macho gentlemanly behavior, and used their charm to gain the necessary funds for their projects'. They capitalized on stereotypical notions about the femaleness of acts of cleanliness, orderliness and attention to detail, thereby making significant contributions to welfare and health programs.

The nagging question of course about women's exercise of influence within the spaces allowed by patriarchal culture is their failure to get into other spheres of often more important political struggles. It is common

knowledge, for instance, that local women politicians, because of gender tracking, have not been able to participate in the areas of infrastructure development (i.e., the construction of roads, irrigation dams, bridges) or land conversion. These fields, dominated by male leaders, are most decisive in influencing the direction and pace of progress of local communities.

Roces forcefully validates what feminists and students of Philippine politics have known all along—that the most significant factors in women's access to formal power are kinship connections and wealth or class position. In fact, the disadvantages posed by being female may be neutralized by one's class or even ethnic background. The book, in fact, has amply shown that women, specially in the fifties and sixties, were asked to help in political campaigns not mainly for their charm and beauty (movie actresses now do the job) but because of their family wealth and connections. With wealth, women can join civic organizations and contribute funds for social causes, thereby creating their own spheres of influence.

ACCESS TO POWER

But what is sadly missed in Roces' discussion is access to political power by poor women who constitute the majority of the female population. Can feminine attributes like being *maganda* or *cariñosa* be reappropriated or subverted for better access to power? It is hard to imagine, for example, a female union leader or a woman farmer with

leathery face and hands reinventing herself as *maganda* to be able to exercise political influence. What are the cultural representations of female power among the poor? How can poor women reconceptualize feminine constructions of female power to be able to influence societal changes? These questions should have been given as much attention by the author.

It is true that women exercise everyday forms of power. They wield influence over their children, friends, family members and even the men inside and outside of formal power. Women can capitalize on patriarchal culture, turn their sources of weakness into strength, for momentary gains and triumphs. But everyday forms of resistance to patriarchy both weaken and strengthen patriarchy itself. In fact, socialist feminists in the country are very wary of the unofficial (more so, official) power of rich women. Many of these women have been instrumental in the disappearance of contraceptives in many local city and barangay health units. As strong supporters of the prolife movement they have joined hands with the Catholic hierarchy and their husband-politicians in depriving many poor women of their reproductive rights.

Roces missed a very important point—that Filipino feminism does not deny women's access to unofficial power. In fact, it very well recognizes female power that springs from one's class position. It also recognizes the awesome effects of feminine (patriarchal) power. However, the exercise of

everyday power along the grid of strong/weak or *malakas/mabina* (another Western, dualist model of imagining power) is not enough to counter women's control of cultural capital. A beautiful and young 'entertainer' (a popular euphemism for a prostituted woman) may exercise power over a very rich male customer, in the process earning for herself an income equivalent to a whole year of earnings. But once the relationship is over, and this is how the story often ends, the life of the woman may not have changed much. She will continue in the flesh trade, under the control of her pimp, the bar manager and male clients who will occasionally leave her with a bruise or sexually transmitted disease. Similarly, the nuns who bravely faced the canons in EDSA in 1986 succeeded in getting a dictator out of the country, but failed to stop the massacre of peasants in Mendiola a year later by the same soldiers who received their offerings of flowers and prayers.

It is hard to imagine how unofficial power can have as much impact on political change as official power. The exercise of power is more effective when supported by the apparatuses of the State—when backed up by law, human and material resources, police and not just moral force. During the past two congresses, women's groups with the support of a few gender-sensitive male and female legislators endorsed some 70 important bills to improve women's status and protect their human rights. These included

proposed legislation against domestic violence, rape in marriage and sexual harassment and legislation for the decriminalization of prostitution and post-abortion care and others. To this day, very few of these bills have been passed. And even with the backing of civil society groups and support from some of the most beautiful and charming women legislators (thanks to the macho brand of Philippine electoral politics), it was not possible to retain the progressive elements of many of the pro-women laws. The current law against sexual harassment does not cover religious leaders, abusers who have the same office rank as the victim, or abusers who happen to be a sibling or cousin. And while the amended rape bill now recognizes other forms of sexual assault (not just penile penetration) as criminal offenses, the male legislators deleted the provision on rape in marriage. It is

interesting to note that the male legislators in the committee were not disarmed by the charm of the female proponents of the bill and the feminist activists who defended it during the many congressional hearings.

During the 5th Women's World Conference in Beijing in 1995, one of the speakers forcefully articulated the feminist standpoint on female power. She said that it is not enough for women to aspire for political (official) power. What is important is to transform power for the ultimate betterment of humankind. In the end, the issue is not whether women are inside or outside of official power, or whether unofficial power is just as important as official power. The issue is whether female access to power will help solve the persistent problems of poverty, gender violence, militarism and social injustice.