

Take the Money and Run? 'Personality' Politics in the Post-Marcos Era

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This essay argues against the conventional wisdom that the results of the 1998 elections reflect the triumph of 'personality politics' and pathological features of Filipino 'political culture'. Instead, the essay situates the recent elections within a historical and institutional context and locates the role of 'personality' within a complex nexus of money and machine politics. Changes in local and national politics are linked to gradual processes of capitalist development and subtle shifts in the linkages between state office and capital accumulation. Both the role and the discourse of 'personality' in Philippine politics, the essay concludes, have served to sustain rather than to challenge the entrenched system of bossism in the country.

IN THE MONTHS AND WEEKS LEADING UP TO THE MAY 1998 ELECTIONS in the Philippines, much of the commentary in foreign and local newspapers and magazines rehashed, in lurid detail, the familiar theme of the country's supposed political pathologies. Predictably enough, Imelda Marcos's zany pontifications and Joseph Estrada's intellectual limitations were in focus. Filipino politics, such commentators concluded, was not just personalistic — as political scientists have argued for decades — but 'personality politics'. Hence the long list of film stars, basketball heroes, and other celebrities who won office in the elections. How else to explain this pattern, such commentators implied, but to conclude that Filipinos get the government they ask for (and thus deserve), that Filipinos are politically 'immature' and thus responsible for the shortcomings of their political system?

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THE CULT OF 'PERSONALITY'

THIS essay attempts to offer something of a counterpoint to such arguments or assumptions, in the spirit of what Raymond Williams once described as the 'unlearning of the dominant mode'. For much everyday political commentary today eerily echoes the conventional wisdom spelled out by Jesuit-trained sociologists and American political scientists in the 1960s: the notion of a peculiarly 'Filipino' political culture, one which stems from the putative cultural proclivities of Filipinos: *utang na loob*, *pakikisama*, smooth interpersonal relationships, *compadrazgo*, and an attraction to leaders who project a certain kind of culturally distinctive form of charisma (see Lynch & de Guzman 1973). At its best, such a mode of analysis captures something of both the discourse and the lived experience of contemporary Filipino politics. At its worst, thinking along these lines is based on an essentialist, even racist, portrait of Filipinos, and an unthinkingly condescending, conservative, blame-the-victim logic of (a)historical explanation and political (in)action.

In fact, what is most striking about so much of Filipino politics has been how little it has revolved around personalistic loyalties or discernible personalities. Vote-buying, fraud, and violence have long been decisive for shaping electoral processes and outcomes, and political machines have been oiled at least as much by monetary and coercive inducements and pressures as by the 'clientelist' linkages so frequently highlighted, fetishized, and reminisced upon in the academic literature. Political turncoatism is likewise notoriously common, rendering so-called 'patron-client networks' feeble bases (or mere *post-facto* recastings) for (largely money-driven) political machine mobilization. The vast majority of candidates, moreover, have long been bland machine politicians, varying only in degrees of ruthlessness, greed, and guile.

BOSS POLITICS

THIS kind of crass money politics is hardly unique to the 20th century Philippines, much less to Filipino 'political culture'. Local bosses in the Philippines, after all, have had their counterparts in the rotten pocket boroughs of 18th century Old Corruption England, the urban political machines and rural county courthouse cliques of the 19th and 20th century United States,

the *caciques* of Spain and Latin America, the mafia of southern Italy, and, most recently, the *chaophos* (godfathers) of Thailand.

This commonality is historical rather than cultural. It reflects a common conjuncture in state formation and capitalist development: the subordination of the state apparatus to elected officials against the backdrop of what might loosely be termed 'primitive accumulation'. 'Primitive accumulation' here refers to a phase of capitalist development in which a significant section of the population has lost direct control over the means of production and direct access to means of subsistence, and been reduced to a state of economic security and dependence on scarce wage labor (i.e. prior to the achievement of 'full' employment and modern welfare capitalism); and in which considerable economic resources and prerogatives remain in the 'public' domain and secure (private) property rights have not yet been firmly established by the state. Taken together, these last two conditions signal both the susceptibility of many voters to clientelistic, coercive, and monetary pressures and the centrality of state offices and state resources for private capital accumulation. Some form of 'boss politics' invariably emerges and flourishes under these conditions.

Yet if boss politics thrives under such conditions, it does so typically in uneasy coexistence and competition with other forms of electoral mobilization. Rural plantation owners and urban gangster-politicians are found throughout South Asia and South America, for example, but alongside leaders of parties who mobilize followers less via vertical (clientelist, criminal, and monetary) networks than on the basis of horizontal solidarities, be they religion, ethnicity, or class. Such horizontal solidarities may reflect the legacies of pre-electoral struggles, as in the case of many early post-independence democratic experiments in Asia and Africa in the 1950s and 1960s, or the emergence of powerful, self-conscious working classes, as in some countries of South America during the same period.

In the case of the Philippines (as in Thailand, it should be noted), history has left few obstacles to boss politics in its wake. As Michael Cullinane and Ruby Paredes (1989) have shown, a 'colonial democracy' was established in the archipelago in the first decade of this century in such a way that the local elite who had led the Revolution became the building blocks of party mobilization, and parochial, particularistic interests and issues

came to dominate electoral competition. Under highly restricted suffrage, municipal mayors were elected first, in 1901, followed by provincial governors the following year and a national legislature by 1907, thus entrenching small-town and provincial notables — such as Manuel Quezon and Sergio Osmeña Sr — in both local and national offices, and extending the purchase of local patronage politics upwards to the country's legislature and its cabinet. While the franchise expanded considerably in subsequent decades, the early, inaugural pattern has endured to this day. 'All politics is local,' the saying of long-time US House Speaker Tip O'Neill, has thus proved especially apt in the Philippines.

THE USES OF 'PERSONALITY'

UNDER these circumstances, the role of 'personality' (and of celebrated 'personalities') in a largely money-driven political system can be understood in at least two ways. First of all, 'personality' functions as something of a residual category for understanding how Filipino politics is organized, when electoral competition does not revolve around class or other group cleavages and parties are weak and fluid. Filipino politics is thus by definition 'about' nothing more or less than individuals, rather than discernibly broader interests or ideologies; its impact is experienced by voters in distinctly personal ways, given how many local elected positions are up for grabs and how much (and yet how little) is typically at stake. In this sense, Filipino politics is, in fact, very much 'personalistic', if not quite 'personality', politics.

Secondly, and perhaps less obviously, 'personality' functions as a mechanism by which individual politicians attempt to secure something of a hold on the flows of money, muscle, and machine manpower that are essential to electoral victory. After all, even a mayoral campaign in a medium-sized municipality is an elaborate and highly labor-intensive operation, involving the mobilization of dozens of local leaders, watchers, and enforcers, the dispensing of thousands (if not millions) of pesos, and the mastering of a long, tedious, and legally complicated process that stretches from the registration of voters to the final canvassing of the results. What guarantees that a candidate's machine will run effectively, when it is based so precariously on followers who, in all their human frailty, will face countless challenges and temptations? What is to keep a low-level flunky in a far-flung

barrio from pocketing the money intended for a few dozen voters in his precinct, from backing away from confrontation with a rival's goons, from nodding off in the crucial late-night hours of the counting?

As with so many other informal and illegal transactions, fear invariably plays a part, and on a very local level there is always personal loyalty (and the above-noted personal consequences) to consider, but for the successful supra-local candidate something like a self-fulfilling prophecy must also work its magic. After all, if the congressman is a sure winner, it is all the more important (and perhaps all the easier) to have played a positive role in his victory, and all the more dangerous to have betrayed him. If he's a sure loser, why not take the money and run?

In this context, a politician's 'personality' is crucial: to win, he (or occasionally she) must convince both backers in Manila and followers in the precincts that he is invincible, that he will win, and, for those who play a part, carry them with him. To this end, the politician works to project his power and prowess as far and widely as possible, to promote the notion of his omnipresence and omnipotence. Hence the ubiquitous but invariably uninspired bumper stickers and posters, the seemingly obligatory attendance and sponsorship of weddings, funerals, and cockfighting matches, and the occasional, sometimes spectacular, political assassination. Virtually all publicity, it seems, is in fact good publicity. As one scholar of the Sicilian mafia has noted, 'the more robust the reputation..., the less the need to have recourse to the resources which support that reputation' (Gambetta 1993).

For the local politicians, what matters is essentially 'reputation'; for the national politician, something more akin to 'personality' is at stake.

Yet if for the local politician, what matters is essentially 'reputation', for the national politician something more akin to 'personality' is indeed at stake. In the pre-martial law era, the combination of a presidential system and electoral rules (i.e. on the counting and canvassing of votes) favored a two-party system in which the political parties, all their limitations notwithstanding, exercised a centripetally disciplining power. With precinct-level boards of election inspectors and municipal and provincial boards of canvassers including only Liberals and Nacionalistas, party affiliation did mat-

ter for local candidates, and the consequences of two-party electoral competition at the national level loomed large for local bi-factional rivalries. The only votes counted were invariably Liberal and Nacionalista votes, and the zero-sum logic of the two-party system encouraged Liberal mayors to fight hard for Liberal governors, congressmen, senators, and presidents, with votes for Nacionalista candidates at these levels only serving the cause of local (and, by definition, Nacionalista) rivals.

In the post-Marcos era, by contrast, new electoral rules have removed the administration and 'the dominant opposition' parties' representatives from boards of election inspectors and canvassers, thus encouraging multi-party competition and reducing the internal disciplining powers of national-level party bosses. Senatorial and presidential candidates can no longer depend upon a party machinery disciplined by the zero-sum logic of multi-level, but consistently bi-factional, competition. It is in this context that 'personality' comes into play: as one key basis for promoting the notion of a candidate's invincibility and of his victory's inevitability, and thus for developing the momentum, the virtuous cycle of bandwagon effects, the dynamic of self-fulfilling prophecy that keeps all the cogs in a political machine fully oiled and running smoothly.

POST-MARCOS LOCAL POLITICS

How then to interpret the trends in post-Marcos politics and the results of the recent May 1998 elections? At the proverbial 'local level', it is often assumed, little has changed over the years: we still see the same old faces (or new generations of the same old families) using the same old methods ('guns, goons, and gold') for the same old purposes. Yet beneath the surface of continuity may lie a little-noticed sea-change of sorts, one driven not by changes in voters' attitudes or by the institutional reforms enacted in the Local Government Code, but by the gradual process of capitalist development and concomitant shifts in the political economy of local bossism.

Since the first years of this century, the spoils of local elective office have consisted of discretionary powers over the resources and prerogatives of state agencies and their personnel. Mayors have selected municipal police chiefs, and thereby exercised control over the (selective) enforcement of laws and thus the maintenance of private monopolies over local rackets such as *jueteng* and smuggling. Mayoral (or, for that matter, gubernatorial)

discretion over the appointment of other local officials has likewise spelled control over the disbursement of government funds, the awarding of local contracts, and the use of government property. The successful local mayor (or governor) thus entrenched himself when and where the resources and prerogatives associated with municipal (or provincial) office were significant enough to allow for the intimidation, cooptation, or marginalization of potential challengers with independent economic bases, such as large private landholdings. The successful local politician, in short, stayed in power by amassing economic power commensurate with his office (Sidel 1995).

Against this backdrop, what seems to be changing, at least in some municipalities and some provinces, is the linkage between state office and capital accumulation on a local level. Instead of trying to own a provincial backwater, what has begun to prove more lucrative for municipal mayors and provincial governors is to sell — in both senses of the word — their localities to investors from Manila, Taipei, and Tokyo in search of sites for industrial estates, golf courses, and tourist resorts. As authors of zoning ordinances, enforcers of local strike bans, brokers of real-estate deals, and builders of local feeder roads, local bosses in provinces like Cavite and Cebu now serve as the gate-keepers for big capital, earning enormous perks and percentages for their efforts (Sidel 1998).

Yet if the infusion of capital into new localities has yielded dramatic profits for local elected officials, it has also led them to cede some of the freedoms of yesteryear. If, in the past, the governor (or his cronies) secured the contract for the provincial road but could not be bothered to complete its construction, today the road must be built more or less to specification to handle the flows of traffic and to entice investors to expand their factory operations, golf course developments, and residential subdivisions in the province. Otherwise, better roads and government services in neighboring provinces will attract investment elsewhere, depressing local real-estate prices and construction booms. Local bosses now worry not just about rival politicians in their own bailiwicks, but about their counterparts elsewhere in the archipelago, and this new pattern of competition exerts, however subtly, the disciplining powers of capital.

It is thus precisely in this context that the past decade has seen the emergence of countless local officials with reputations for 'good governance', 'professionalism', and 'performance', from Johnny Remulla of

Cavite to Lito Osmeña of Cebu. These local bosses are often no less ruthless, no less venal, than their predecessors (or their counterparts elsewhere). But they have recognized the enormous potential for the amassment of personal wealth and political power that the delivery of goods and services to Manila-based and foreign investors has to offer them (see, for example, Coronel 1995). And in the process they have transformed the essential nature of their roles, their ambitions, and their powers in bailiwicks once controlled by local boys on local terms.

CONGRESSIONAL POLITICS

PARALLEL trends are also apparent in Congress, as exemplified by the recent victory of real-estate and banking mogul Manny Villar in the fight for the Speakership of the House of Representatives. While many congressmen today are still large rural landowners, their primary business interests typically lie in more urban-based commercial concerns (Gutierrez 1994). As Villar company borrowings from the Social Security System (SSS) suggest, today's congressmen still engage in milking state patronage, through pork barrel funds, behest loans, public works contracts, monopoly concessions, and appointments (in the Bureau of Internal Revenue, Bureau of Immigration, Bureau of Customs, Philippine National Police) much as their hacienda-based predecessors did in earlier decades. Yet contemporary money politics in the lower house of Congress now seems to revolve less around the private appropriation of state resources than the favorable state regulation of various business activities, legal and illegal: bus routes, overseas contract worker recruitment agencies, construction companies, fishing fleets, cement factories, tourist resorts, gambling outfits, rural banks, law firms, and real-estate ventures. For most of these business activities, a congressional seat provides protection and preferential treatment in terms of law-enforcement, tax breaks, franchises, and licenses, but access to sources of private capital and ability to match market competitors are ultimately decisive, as congressmen are active in many fields, and usually outside their own bailiwicks.

Meanwhile, many congressmen double as brokers for various other business interests, offering their services in facilitating (or stalling) important legislation, lobbying government agencies, and securing franchises, concessions, and other special deals. In some instances, large family-owned

conglomerates like the Lopezes, Yuchengcos, and Chiongians have backed relatives (or in-laws) in bids for congressional seats. In other cases, conglomerate owners bank on their junior business partners in Congress, as in the case of current House Speaker Manny Villar's major benefactors. Yet what seems far more common is a pattern in which the country's biggest magnates (e.g. Lucio Tan) scatter their largesse among a cluster of congressional candidates during election campaigns, and then more widely during lobbying efforts on specific pieces of legislation.

This pattern of brokerage is replicated in the Senate as well. Up through at least the 1950s, the Senate was dominated by sugar barons and their minions, with the country's agriculturally richest (Batangas, Negros Occidental) and most populous (Cebu, Pangasinan) somewhat overrepresented. The zero-sum logic of persistent two-party competition encouraged the formation of Nacionalista and Liberal slates which matched (or cancelled) each other region by region with 'native sons' aspiring to build supra-provincial blocs, whether in Mindanao, the Ilocos provinces, or the Central Visayas. But some of the country's richest families were also represented directly, most notably the Lopezes and the Puyats.

Subtle changes in the composition of the Senate were already in evidence in the late 1960s but are much more pronounced today. By the eve of martial law, urbanization and industrialization had produced more senators drawn from the Metro Manila area and from beneath the uppermost echelons of the country's landed elite: big-time lawyers (Jovito Salonga, Arturo Tolentino) and celebrities (Rogelio de la Rosa). In the post-Marcos era, such changes are complete: with the partial exception of Juan Ponce Enrile (and the failed 1992 LDP candidacy of Jose Concepcion), none of the country's big conglomerate owners has taken a Senate seat. Neither the Ayalas and Sorianos, nor the Gokongweis, Tans, and Yuchengcos have endeavored to assume direct political power commensurate with the (national) scope of their diversified business empires. Instead, they have left this role to top-of-the-line corporate lawyers (Edgardo Angara, Raul Roco, and now Rene Cayetano), veteran machine politicians and fixers (most spectacularly, Ernesto Maceda), and celebrities (Vicente Sotto and Ramon Revilla, and now Robert Jaworski and Loren Legarda). 'Business' and 'politics', as suggested elsewhere in this issue, now appear as distinctive spheres in the national public arena.

Yet the peculiar set-up of the Senate, with all 24 members elected on a national basis, presents enormous challenges to all candidates to the upper house of the bicameral legislature. If in the days of bi-factional Liberal/Nacionalista competition senatorial candidates could rely on a nationwide party machinery once they made their contribution for inclusion on the slate, today all manner of horse-trading, junking, and side-deals flourishes in the intermediate stages between voting in the local precincts and the national canvassing of votes in Manila. As election protests and academic studies (Tancangco 1992) have shown, the combination of nationally-elected senators and a post-Marcos multi-party system has facilitated fraud of enormous proportions. Without the zero-sum logic of districts or two-party competition, who is to notice — or to bother — if a municipal board of canvassers in Batanes, or Tawi-Tawi, fiddles the numbers for, say, Barbers or Biazon, when the list of senatorial candidates is so long and of so relatively little local interest? How else can we explain results which show Angara almost as popular as Sotto and Revilla, or (most recently) Cayetano as beloved as Jaworski and Legarda? Even the most popular ‘personality’ needs money to protect the votes through the counting and canvassing, with popularity only making it somewhat easier — or, perhaps, cheaper — to create the necessary ‘bandwagon’ effect.

PRESIDENTIAL POLITICS

THIS interplay (and competition) between the major currencies of national vote aggregation — machinery, money, and celebrity — has proven equally complex in the presidential arena. Comparing the fates of the Lakas and LAMMP (*Laban ng Makabayang Masang Pilipino*) tickets in 1998, it is easy to conclude that ‘personality’ trumped money and machinery, given the dramatic victories of Joseph Estrada and Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo over Jose de Venecia and Edgardo Angara, respectively. Like Ramon Mitra Jr before him, then House Speaker Jose de Venecia mistook the backslapping of congressmen for a national political machine, and saw the huge war-chest he had amassed during the campaign dissipated on election day by disloyal party-mates preoccupied with their own local bids for office. After all, under the current multi-party system, with a mere plurality sufficing for a presidential victory, what will stop a local boss from

hedging his bets and backing several horses, or from letting the chips fall as they may?

Yet, as the preceding analysis has suggested, the victory of Joseph Estrada must be understood less as a victory of 'personality' over money and machinery than as an example of how these three currencies of Philippine politics are systematically interlinked and mutually reinforcing. After all, Estrada reportedly enjoyed considerable financial backing from major business magnates like Lucio Tan and Eduardo 'Danding' Cojuangco. In addition, the machinery assembled by Ronaldo Zamora, reputed architect of the manufactured Marcos 'victory' in 1986, helped to produce and protect millions of votes for Estrada while drawing scores of defectors from the ranks of de Venecia's and Renato de Villa's erstwhile supporters.

CONCLUSION

WHAT is visibly new in Filipino politics as seen in the 1998 elections is, contrary to the dismissive commentary so dominant in the media today, still by and large somewhat heartening. Mayors, governors, and congressmen in many parts of the archipelago have developed a new set of interests that link their fates to economic growth and the process of industrialization. Instead of loggers who sacrifice the forest for the trees, or plantation owners catering to sweet-tooth Americans rather than Filipinos, today's political bosses and their business backers are more concerned with growth rates that keep real estate prices high, cement and gravel in heavy demand, and domestic beer and ice-cream sales ever rising. The diversification, both geographic and sectoral, of many politicians' business interests, and the drive to attract investment to their provinces, have introduced a measure of new competitive dynamics into a system of bossism that has long thrived on and perpetuated local monopolies and cartels. Multi-party electoral rules have weakened the chain of political-machine command once sustained by persistent two-party competition, facilitating what some have identified as new challenges to boss rule at the national level.

Yet in this context, it is precisely the residual category of 'personality politics' that has succeeded in containing the threats — and the promises — associated with pressures for economic redistribution and political reform. As so many commentators have pointed out, Joseph Estrada and his

'spin doctors' captured much of the popular energies and class resentments that under other circumstances (e.g. parliamentary system based on proportional representation, greater working-class strength and organization) might support more truly Left-populist figures, parties, and platforms. Moreover, as other analysts have noted, the past two elections have demonstrated the enormous electoral appeal of more conservative 'reformist' candidates, such as Miriam Defensor-Santiago (in 1992) and Raul Roco (in 1998), contenders whose campaigns ran with little money or machinery. But so long as the electoral system and the dominant political discourse in the Philippines encourage voters to think in the narrow terms of individual (celebrity) candidates' personal characteristics and personalistic interests, such challenges to the entrenched system of bossism in the country will remain contained within, and colonized by, the self-fulfilling, but invariably disappointing, prophecy of 'personality', money, and machinery sketched in the pages above.

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