

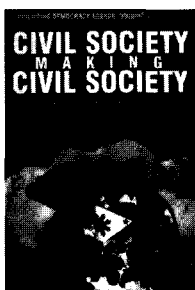
## Review Essay

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# The Redefinition of Filipino Democracy

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### *Philippine Democracy Agenda.*



3 vols. Quezon City: University of the Philippines, Third World Studies Center, 1997. *Volume I, Democracy and Citizenship.* MARIA SERENA DIOKNO

(ed). 298 pp. ISBN 971-91111-2-7.

*Volume II, State-Civil Society*

*Relations in Policymaking.* MARLON

A WUI & MA. GLENDA S. LOPEZ

(eds). 299 pp. ISBN 971-91111-6-

X. *Volume III, Civil Society Making*

*Civil Society.* MIRIAM CORONEL

FERRER (ed). 300 pp. ISBN 971-91111-5-1.

needs of certain political incumbents, a second peaceful transfer of power from one president to the next has been completed. In the interim, a new Constitution was overwhelmingly ratified and the Local Government Code of 1991 dramatically reformed center-local government relations while opening new opportunities for citizen participation. In short, the democratic rules of the game are almost universally accepted: Voter turnout for elections remains very high when compared to other nations and more people are involved in various forms of peaceful, democratic participation than at virtually any other time in the nation's history.

**T**he long and oftentimes uncertain transition to democracy in the Philippines now seems complete. Despite several early, violent attempts by military elements to gain the political upperhand, civilian supremacy is today unquestioned. Despite recent efforts to amend the Constitution to suit the

### **DEMOCRACY PROJECT**

Yet few would claim that the quality of this democracy (or any other democracy for that matter) is flawless. Disadvantaged sectors of society are vastly underrepresented in the halls of power; too many political clans find it too easy to hold on to power generation after generation. There has been no systematic

effort — no Philippine equivalent of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission — to identify the enemies of democracy and there is an unfortunate reluctance to follow the example of South Korea, and other democratizing countries, in prosecuting national leaders that have violated the law.

Hence, while the democratic transition may be complete, the democracy project is not; there is still ample space for political and social reform. And it is at this important time that the University of the Philippines College of Social Sciences and Philosophy, with support from the Office of Governance and Participation of the United States Agency for Development, chose to 'identify ways (hence an action agenda) to strengthen civil society as the arena of Philippine democracy, an author of democratic ideas and approaches, and a principal actor in the implementation of democratic strategies' (I, p. 2).

Three conferences were held over a period of five months between September 1996 and February 1997 in Baguio, Davao, and Cebu to explore three interrelated themes: (a) perspectives of democracy and citizenship in Filipino political culture; (b) Philippine state-civil society relations in policymaking; and (c) dynamics and relations within civil society. Each volume collates papers presented at one of the three conferences. Each volume begins with two or three synoptic papers which, in some combination, review the relevant literature, survey the state of the field, or synthesize the results of the conference discussions. These synoptic papers

are followed by more narrowly defined case study chapters and very brief abstracts of other papers presented at the conference but not printed in full in the volumes. In total, there are 43 chapters in these three volumes, not including the abstracts. Clearly, here was a rare opportunity to raise big questions and to engage in an extended analysis of where Filipino democracy stands today, how it arrived at this point, and what might be done to strengthen democratic values and practices.

#### **QUESTIONS UNASKED**

Yet, nowhere in the three volumes are questions raised regarding where the Philippines fits in a larger, comparative perspective. The existence of a worldwide trend toward democratic forms of political rule is seldom acknowledged and never analyzed. Presumably, if the primary goal of this scholarly enterprise is to propose a democracy agenda, it would be helpful to learn more about the experience of other countries. It is crucial if we want to separate what is uniquely Filipino from the generic trends that are occurring more widely. Readers might have enjoyed and benefited from an analysis of the impact of various global phenomena such as improved international telecommunications or widespread international migration on the worldwide circulation of ideas about democracy.

Likewise, the three volumes do not assess the wide range we find in the quality of democracy as it exists in the various subnational political units. Two exceptions to this sweeping generaliza-

tion are the chapter of Adrian S Cristobal Jr discussing Valencia, Negros Oriental and that of Jocelyn Vicente Angeles devoted to Naga City. Cristobal concludes that the municipality of Valencia, 'gauging from the views, beliefs, and perceptions of its local officials, is building a good foundation for democracy and citizenship' (I, p. 269). In similar fashion, Angeles points out that 'one important factor that has made possible a local government responsive to the needs of the urban poor is the character of the people of Naga, who are inquisitive, critical, and civic-minded. Naga also has a tradition of citizen involvement in issues like price increases, taxes and tuition fee hikes. Local residents are open to new ideas, respect other people's opinions and recognize the principle of mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence' (II, p. 102).

As helpful as these conclusions are, they do not allow us to understand why the quality of democracy is better in Valencia and Naga than in neighboring towns and cities. To achieve knowledge of that kind would require a research design that explored in systematic fashion comparisons between two local government units (LGUs) and tried to isolate causal variables that explained the differences. Drawing from the rich tradition of literature on democracy, it would be possible to develop at least three testable hypotheses that might explain why some local democracies are stronger than others.

It is conceivable that the differences could be largely reduced to the quality

of the local chief executive, on the assumption that the commitment of the executive to democratic participation spreads rapidly throughout a bureaucracy and the community. Alternatively, it may be possible that earlier patterns of organization and political mobilization remain deeply embedded in the values and consciousness of the population and that they will engage in local governance regardless of the quality of the local chief executive. Or, it could be argued that the complexity of the underlying economic base and the way in which the community is integrated into larger economic and social ambits guarantees that any form of governance other than democracy might be incapable of maintaining order for very long. Clearly, it would seem that one of the remaining tasks for scholars and practitioners interested in the quality of local democracies is to engage in systematic comparisons that would begin to isolate causal variables and provide more general theses of how functioning democracies develop at the local level.

#### **QUESTIONS OF METHODOLOGY**

But in fairness, the organizers of the conference and the editors of the series did not set out to test hypotheses. And a reviewer should hold a product up against its proclaimed goals, rather than pointing out where it failed to meet his or her unique needs. There are chapters in the three volumes that are extremely useful for anyone interested in the status of Filipino democracy and the editors are to be congratulated for bringing

coherence to a wide range of papers.

The synoptic papers are often excellent overviews that provide the readers with a useful framework for interpreting what follows in the other chapters. Fernando Zialcita's chapter in volume I, 'Barriers and Bridges to a Democratic Culture', synthesizes a wide range of literature, both historical and contemporary, in a way that helps us understand how local culture(s) and values contribute to Filipino democracy. And Patricia Ann Paez's 'State-Civil Society Relations in Policymaking: Focus on the Legislature', in volume II must be read by anyone setting out to engage the legislature and hoping to have an impact on legislation.

Many of the very best papers, in my subjective opinion, were written by authors with a deep involvement in the democratic struggle but have taken a brief step back from the day-to-day skirmishes to reflect on their experience or that of a larger organization. This raises an important point about research methodology, especially as it relates to our understanding of how democracy is practiced in everyday life. How do we measure or evaluate commitment to democratic values and practices?

In too many of the papers, there was a willingness to accept the content of the written document or the spoken word as an indicator of fealty to democracy. Authors tended to justify this leap of faith by referring to the limited amount of time that was available for research or the few people that could be reached for interviews. These constraints are understandable, but it is

difficult to see why a researcher sensitive to the challenges of conducting face-to-face interviews or the limitations of content analysis as a methodology should accept on face value what they read or hear. The only recourse, if you want your data to be taken as reliable is to observe behavior and then to juxtapose behavior against the spoken and written word.

This is why the richest and most valuable papers were written by people who have had the chance to observe democracy in action. Their observations provide the context and data to evaluate how people confront challenges and implement their values. In this category it is possible to mention the chapter by Karl Gaspar, '*Abante, Atras, Abante,*' (volume III), Pi Villanueva's the 'Influence of the Congress for a People's Agrarian Reform (CPAR) on the Legislative Process,' and Juan Climaco Elago II's 'The Role of Local Governments in Eviction and Demolition Cases of Urban Poor Residents' (both volume II). There are other papers that also admirably combine analysis and observation.

#### **INTELLECTUAL FOUNDATION**

The editors and conference organizers explain that in putting together these three volumes, 'the preliminary syntheses of the conference exchanges were circulated to the writers and participants for comment before they were finalized. The agenda presented in each of the volumes is therefore drawn from the conference discussions. We also presented the agenda and other initial

findings in a separate forum as a part of our validation process.' (I, p.3). From this process emerged the following agenda for future action, *Democracy Agenda* (I, pp. 34-36):

(a) improve the political and social environment and reduce poverty through structural reforms in order to foster a sense of community and enable citizens to exercise their rights and fulfill their obligations;

(b) continually re-examine societal institutions responsible for value formation so that they inculcate, rather than indoctrinate, democratic and citizenship values;

(c) incorporate cross-cultural activities in public and private sector programs, including those of schools, churches, non-government organizations (NGOs) and people's organizations (POs), so as to recognize ethnolinguistic and cultural diversity in the country and encourage the sharing of experiences;

(d) further promote the uses of Filipino and Philippine languages in all transactions so as to enable the

articulation of citizenship and democratic views and values; and

(e) continue to harness institutional as well as informal mechanisms that open up space for the exercise of citizenship and democracy.

These volumes deserve a wide readership because they provide the intellectual foundation for and explain why these recommendations are crucial if the quality of Filipino democracy is to be strengthened and the current trend toward the institutionalization of democratic values is to continue. The volumes also deserve to be read because they illustrate where there is still a need for additional research that is methodologically and analytically rigorous.

Finally, the editors and publishers deserve our thanks for creating a product that is of exceptionally high quality. There were very few misprints or editorial lapses. Unlike many books today the three-volume *Philippine Democracy Agenda* is highly readable because the lay-out is well done, the paper is excellent, and the standard of craftsmanship is admirable.