

Philippines: The family in politics

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IF ANYONE IS STILL LOOKING FOR CONFIRMATION of the determining role that the Filipino family plays in the nation's political life, he will not find better proof than the results of this year's national and local elections.

It is the victory of entire clans that is being heralded—particularly that of the Arroyos of Pampanga, Negros and Camarines Sur; the Marcoses of Ilocos Norte, the Singsons of Ilocos Sur, the Ortegas of La Union, the Garcias of Cebu, the Dys of Isabela, the Binays of Makati, the Dutertes of Davao—just to name a few of the big winners. No one talks of how the political parties have fared, or what proportion of the votes they have captured in these elections.

Clearly, we are not the modern nation-state that we like to believe we are. We are, more precisely, a loose confederation of extended households that control local populations at various levels. These dominant kinship networks are the equivalent of an aristocracy. They perform a vital role in the selection of the monarch we call the president.

Those with a historical eye may note that this political system is not very different from the “datu-sakop” form of rule that the Spaniards found in these islands when they first arrived in the 16th century. In Mindanao, the Spanish colonizers encountered highly-organized sultanates wielding power over a broad aggregation of local communities led by local rulers known as datos. Traces of these archaic political structures may still be found today, especially in the Muslim provinces. Until recently, the Ampatuan clan ruled over the vast Maguindanao territory like the sultanates of olden times. Less visible as structures of absolute power, but no less real in their grip on the political and economic life of their communities, are the political families that have reigned over entire provinces in many other parts of the country.

Instead of being buried in the course of the establishment of the modern constitutional State, these local power centers survived the colonial years, and subsequently found their niches in the political system of the new republic. Today, we refer to them by various labels—warlords, dynasties, political clans, etc. Most of these families are really not very old, and calling them dynasties may be a bit of a stretch. Some do not last more than one generation because of the entry of new players, reflecting changes in economic fortunes and the growth of an educated middle class. It is the style of pursuing and wielding power that marks them out from modern politicians.

When the Americans came and took over the country at the turn of the 20th century, they tried to create a replica of America in this part of the world. They introduced an institutional system for law, politics, government, education, the economy, religion, the family, and so on—that was as modern in concept as the existing American system at the time. The various institutional domains were to be kept autonomous from one another. The theory (which is really what modernity means) is that these separate spheres can function properly only when their operational autonomy is assured.

Thus, law must be insulated from the short-term maneuvers of partisan politics. Politics must be kept independent from religious interference, and, vice versa, political authority must not be placed

in the service of any religion. Government must be kept separate from business, and vice versa, political power must not be used to serve business interest. The State must not interfere in private matters. And family matters must be distinguished from the affairs of the State.

In their zeal, the Americans forgot that these institutions and the ideas that underpin them are evolutionary achievements specific to Western societies. Thus, they cannot be transplanted overnight or superimposed mechanically upon another society. The American rulers may have been aware of the possible complications this would create. For, they did set out to produce, through the educational system, a whole generation of Filipinos who would embrace the logic of these modern institutions, and make them work.

That experiment is still ongoing. The positive results it produced in the early years of US colonial rule, up to the decade following independence, may have lulled us into believing we had become a modern society. But the recurrent problems of dysfunctional institutions that have beset our society in the last 40 years only show how skin-deep that modernity has been. The instability of our political system since the 1970s is a manifestation of this tension between self-description and reality.

It is time we recognized the gap between our idealized notions of ourselves and the actual functioning of our society. Unless we do, all our efforts at change will come to naught. The most crucial of these realities is the gross inequality in wealth, power and opportunity that divides our people. The ritual of voting only masks this underlying inequality. It is a delusion to think that democracy can thrive under these circumstances.

We cannot be content with merely replacing rapacious feudal lords with benevolent ones. The point is to get rid of the feudal system itself because it is no longer adequate to the complex problems we face. That can only be done if we end the scourge of mass poverty that lies at the root of our patronage-driven political system. If President-elect Noynoy is bent on turning the country around, he cannot go wrong if he takes up the goal of releasing our people from the grip of mass poverty as his first priority.

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