

The crisis of cash politics

Saturday 17 November 2007, by [DAVID Randy](#) (Date first published: 17 November 2007).

MANILA, Philippines — The recent exposé of the distribution of cash bundles in the presidential palace at the end of a daylong meeting with legislators and local government executives casts new light on the evolving nature of Philippine politics. In the early years of the nation's politics, the top officials of the land commanded enough awe and respect to be able to whip their followers into line without having to purchase their loyalty. This was when moral ascendancy was a key ingredient of political legitimacy, and moral power was assiduously protected against erosion. So much has changed in the succeeding years.

The concern with one's honor, integrity and trustworthiness, which characterized the behavior of our early politicians, has been replaced by an almost exclusive fixation with political capital—party machinery, funds, media popularity and political networks. A distrust rating of 46 percent, Pulse Asia's most recent finding for President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo would have compelled a Manuel Roxas, an Elpidio Quirino, a Ramon Magsaysay or a Carlos Garcia to consider stepping down from the presidency. For trust, more than solid performance, lies at the heart of the Filipino public's valuation of their political leaders. When this is low, nothing that a president reports about the state of the country merits any attention.

The fact that Ms Arroyo has seen it fit not to say anything at all about the payola scandal at her doorstep shows the level to which honor, as a value, has sunk in the present political system. From a moral standpoint, this is indeed cause for despair. But, looking at it objectively, the cash distribution at Malacañang provides interesting signs of the transition that the political system is undergoing. The system appears hopelessly trapped in its own paradox, unable to manage the problems it has brought upon itself.

The resources at the disposal of any leader, writes the sociologist Amitai Etzioni, consist basically of three types: normative, remunerative, and coercive. Of these three, the most favored and the most effective is normative power. Normative power generates moral or dutiful compliance. Remunerative power, in contrast, only breeds calculative compliance. On the other hand, coercive power brings out alienated or resentful compliance. Wise leaders basically rely on normative power, resorting to remuneration and coercion only sparingly. But the more illegitimate a leader is perceived to be, the more that leader would be inclined to depend heavily on remuneration and coercion to maintain power. That kind of power, by its nature, is short-lived.

If Ms Arroyo were confident about her grip on the presidency, it is doubtful if she would deploy the kind of powers she has lately been using. Why would she dole out cash to political allies who profess to be on her side? She might grant favors, but she would not want to appear as if she was literally buying political support — unless she is still fighting for survival and is fast running out of options.

Because of this, it is hard to imagine how Ms Arroyo's regime can avoid the fate of the despised Ferdinand Marcos regime. If it is lucky to survive until 2010, it will most likely remain the object of so much scorn that anyone it anoints as successor will not be able to proudly wear its coat of arms and expect to win in a fair election. The results of the 2007 senatorial election gave us a foretaste of

this.

Still, it is important to bear in mind that while Ms Arroyo is today the most visible symbol of a decadent political system, she is not its sole surviving practitioner. Out there is a whole set of aspiring politicians bent on capturing the presidency, and relying more or less on the same tested resources: cash, charisma and connections. Even the enlightened among them appear unprepared to go against the culture of patronage in which the whole nation is mired.

Where lies the hope then? I believe the most interesting changes are unfolding at the local level. New leaders like Gov. Ed Panlilio of Pampanga province are showing the way. He is bent on dismantling the structures of patronage in his home province. And he has done this by simply draining the cash out of the patronage kitty of politicians. When he took over as governor, the first thing he did was to clean up the system of collecting fees from the lahar quarrying operations in the province. The result is dramatic: without raising quarry fees, he collected in three months the equivalent of more than three years' worth of quarry taxes under the preceding administration. In contrast to previous practice, these funds are officially and equitably disbursed among the various municipal and "barangay" [village] units for specific projects. The channels used are institutional and all expenditures are audited. No one gets a chance to play the role of patron.

But lo and behold, the mayors of the province recently demanded greater control over quarrying, something they were content to forgo under previous administrations when they were getting a pittance. The provincial board instantly complied and passed Ordinance No. 176, effectively taking away from the governor the power to supervise the tax collection and transferring it to the mayors and the municipal and provincial associations of quarry operators. It is the old system gasping for life. It will take more than one reformist governor to overturn patronage politics. But the transition is underway, and it cannot be reversed. It is in search of energetic champions, and it is good to look at the profiles of the newly elected barangay captains to see if there has been an infusion of fresh blood.

** From Inquirer. Last updated 04:30am (Mla time) 11/17/2007.*

http://opinion.inquirer.net/inquireropinion/columns/view_article.php?article_id=101427

PUBLIC LIVES

The culture of cash politics

MANILA, Philippines—WHAT HAS drawn sustained public attention to the recent distribution of cash gifts to congressmen and local executives is not so much that unaccounted money was given to politicians, but that it was done on such a scandalous scale and right in the presidential palace itself. No one believes this can happen without the knowledge or permission of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, who is known to micro-manage things.

As a sociologist, what I find truly remarkable about this is that it could easily have passed on as a non-event. If Pampanga Gov. Eddie Panlilio had not spoken to media, no one among the recipients would have made a big fuss about it. Yet, even the much admired governor's first statements about the money were quite naive. They suggested an initial readiness to keep the money so long as it was

not in exchange for anything and was to be used for social projects in the province.

It is exactly how our culture assimilates and neutralizes bribery. The clever briber never explicitly asks for anything in exchange. But the whole context in which the act is performed leaves no doubt about the briber's intention. The demands of conscience or face, if they should arise at all, are quickly eased because the bribe is represented as a small gift, a token, a contribution to one's favorite charity, or assistance to one's constituency. Bribing etiquette typically requires that some distance—in time or space—be placed between the principal and the receiver. This is to avoid any possible awkwardness.

In this regard, the cash-giving in Malacañang last Oct. 11 was extraordinary. It was done right at the official residence of the President, and immediately after the breakfast and lunch meetings hosted by Ms Arroyo, at which the main item for discussion was the filing of another impeachment complaint against her. It showed an absolute disregard not only for the law, but also for political form. Without her intending it, it served to dramatize the contempt with which Ms Arroyo regards her own allies.

Our politicians do not seem at all offended by this treatment. Indeed they welcome it, believing it to be an integral part of our politics. Maybe they are not far off the mark in this belief. An Inquirer item the other day reported former Maguindanao Rep. Guimid Matalam as saying that being given gifts, including cash allowances, was not unusual even in the first post-martial law Congress of which he was a member. "Matalam said aside from funds from Malacañang, congressmen also received 'lobby gifts' from some company executives." I do not doubt this.

It may well be that the only thing that distinguishes the Arroyo presidency from any other is the manner in which cash-giving has become so much a part of the standard operating procedure of her office. No other administration has been known to resort to buying political favors so literally, as brazenly, and as routinely as Ms Arroyo's. If this is what it takes to awaken us to the glaring discrepancy between the laws we profess and the dirty practices by which we conduct our national life, then surely we have her to thank.

In our quest for reform, we tend to ignore the realities that constrain our politicians and our electorate to behave in particular ways. We are engrossed in the easy moralism that permits us to express our disgust for the failings of our leaders in government. We cling to the belief that if only we can rid the nation of the present bunch of politicians, the country will surely be better. I think we forget that our leaders, like many of our voters, are no more than actors in a political stage governed by the hidden scripts of social inequality and dominance. We expect great things when we replace old actors with new ones, unaware that without a fundamental revision of the script, the performance will not be very different.

That script, the one that animates what we call traditional politics, provides not for the roles of government and opposition, as in the modern stage, but only for a set of patron and client roles. Under its terms, political power in our society is to be contested not by alternating majorities and minorities, but by a very small ruling class. Unchallenged in its dominance, this class creates the illusion of plurality and choice through the constantly changing composition of its factions.

What does all this tell us? It tells us that the modern institutions by which we are supposed to conduct the governance of our nation will never function properly so long as the masses are trapped in poverty. It tells us that the choices offered by our present political parties, including those that purport to represent the poor, are false. It tells us that political parties that are not themselves financed by their members are a sham. It tells us that public officials who buy their way into public office are no more than merchants or agents; they are not the leaders. It tells us that voters who are hungry and needy cannot be political subjects in a democracy.

This political culture is bound to change, albeit slowly, as more and more of our people get out of poverty, largely by finding work abroad. The change is becoming visible in our growing intolerance for money politics and in the impatience with which we scan the horizon for new leaders.

** From Inquirer. Last updated 08:51pm (Mla time) 11/09/2007.*

http://opinion.inquirer.net/inquireropinion/columns/view_article.php?article_id=99959