

Philippines: Thoughts on new politics

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MANILA, Philippines — Akbayan, one of the first left-leaning groups to take up the challenge of electoral politics through the party-list mechanism, held a forum last week to mark the 10th year of its founding. I was one of the invited speakers. A restrained and reflective mood pervaded the occasion.

On its very first electoral bid, the group won a seat in Congress, doubling this in 2001, and attaining the maximum of three seats in 2004. The elections of 2007 brought Akbayan face-to-face with the harsh realities of traditional politics. The votes it raised were enough to send only one nominee to the House of Representatives. This outcome has provoked a lot of soul-searching within the party. In particular it has raised the question of whether it is at all possible for a modern ideological party to win anything in a traditional political system without giving up most of its own self-imposed standards.

At this gathering of comrades, many of whom had cut their teeth in politics as student activists and as mass movement militants, I thought it relevant to address the dilemmas of new politics in a transitional society. I want to share portions of what I said.

The paradox of new politics is that, in theory, it is perhaps the only type of politics that can offer a nation any hope of survival in a complex world. And yet, at the same time, in transitional societies like ours, its practice seems to offer little promise or meaning unless it bows to the norms of traditional politics.

Traditional politics aims to preserve the existing order of society — its inherited hierarchies and inviolate norms. Its methods are well-known — the fostering of dependence and patronage through the exploitation of customary values, like *“utang na loob”* [debt of gratitude], paternalistic rule that combines benevolence with calibrated intimidation, the obsession with consensus and disdain for free debate, the unaccountable disposition of public wealth, and the unchecked exercise of public power.

In contrast, new politics aims to reform institutions and revise existing routines and procedures in accordance with the pressures for change already manifest in society, careful not to embark on comprehensive programs of transformation that cannot be sustained by existing objective conditions. Its thrust is more evolutionary than revolutionary, more to strengthen the foundations on which to build the new than to invent something completely new. Its immediate objective is to end mass poverty and political illiteracy as a condition for the progressive democratization and modernization of society. Its favored instruments are: the formation of self-sustaining electoral parties with clear ideologies and programs, mass mobilizations centering on clear-minded advocacies, and community organizing for popular empowerment.

In transitional societies like ours, the problem has always been how to build something different on what exists, while avoiding assimilation by conservative forces. The temptation to make peace with the old order is very strong because of the advantages and resources offered by the latter. At the

same time, the romantic promise of revolutionary politics lurks like a dream and refuses to go away. Here lies the paradox of new politics.

New politics finds itself struggling to survive in a political system that has its own code of acceptable behavior, its own mode of legitimation, its own procedures for using power — all of which are rooted in the structural principles of the society in which it is embedded. Traditional politics thrives in highly stratified societies where political roles are woven into networks of patron-client relations.

The good news is that societies undergoing the wrenching transition to modernity are witnessing the erosion of the social base of these old hierarchies. The bad news is that this does not always lead to democratization. In many instances, it only paves the way for new forces sliding into the same patronage roles vacated by the old elite. For example, the exit of landed families from the political stage has not paved the way for the entry of professional politicians reared by modern political parties. It has only created space for moneyed individuals thrust into power by a gambling or drug economy, or popular celebrities projected by the mass media.

The dilemmas I refer to here can be seen in the practical day-to-day problems faced by individuals who have taken upon themselves the role of new politicians and have actually won public positions. People like Mayor Jesse Robredo of Naga City and Gov. Grace Padaca of Isabela province come to mind. The case of Fr. Eddie Panlilio, the Catholic priest who has won as governor of Pampanga province, is particularly worth studying. Much can be learned from the circumstances that brought them to power, and the realities they have had to deal with once they assumed power.

We cannot change politics without basic organizing. To politically organize does not mean just being able to herd people for mass actions or electoral campaigns. It means, above all, providing them with the skills necessary for modern politics — i.e., to be able to manage community meetings, to be able to speak intelligently about issues, make decisions, raise funds, and draw systematic plans and programs. In short, everything that has to do with the formation of accountable leaders suitable to a modern democracy. Max Weber's words speak to us urgently: "Only the orderly guidance of the masses by responsible politicians can break the irregular rule of the street and the leadership of demagogues of the moment."

P.S.

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