

Introduction

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Introduction

The study of Philippine local politics has attracted the attention of more than a few researchers during the past few decades. One reason is that the country's local politics have been relatively active. The Philippines started to conduct local elections at the beginning of the twentieth century, being initiated by the American colonial government.¹ Elections have been held regularly up to the present day, except for the period of martial law under President Ferdinand E. Marcos. This environment of regular elections has created an atmosphere of tough political competition and active politics at the local level, and the dynamism of Philippine local politics and its vivid political activity have been a major reason for attracting the attention of researchers. Another reason is a matter of research expediency. Local politics is tangible. It is easy to identify particular political actors, concrete individual relationships, and the socioeconomic conditions surrounding localities. These tangible aspects give researchers relatively easier access to concrete data through observation and interviews. The range of issues and scope of objectives that need to be dealt with are also limited due to the localized size of research sites. For such reasons, Philippine local politics have been a favorable topic for empirical studies, and a relatively large amount of research has been accumulated on the subject.

The particular concern regarding Philippine local politics in this study is the mechanism of local power. There are essentially two questions that need to be examined: What factors are decisive for a political leader to hold onto power? And how such a mechanism for sustaining power is maintained?

These questions have often been asked in previous works since these are the main issues in studies on local politics. This study also tries to tackle the same issues, and they will be addressed in detail in the following chapters.

The accumulated research on the issues shares common approaches since it has been sociologists and anthropologists who have done most of the research on Philippine local politics, especially the early formative studies. Sociologists have tended to pick up social structures, like family, kinship (both actual and fictitious), and landlord-tenant relations as the main factors defining the patterns of local politics, while anthropologists have paid more attention to culture, more specifically, the values of the traditional society like patron-client relationship. Although the former are structural explanations and the latter cultural explanations, both are often combined as they are seen as complementary each other. The combination of such society-centered structural approaches and cultural approaches may be regarded as sociocultural approaches, where values are considered as ties to organize social structures. And it should be pointed out that sociocultural approaches have been dominant not only in the studies on Philippine politics but also in those on the politics of most developing countries in the world.

Although such sociocultural approaches have been dominant, they have certain limitations. Close observations of local politics indicate that social structures do not necessarily guarantee political ties. Nor do cultural values necessarily define the behavior of leaders and residents. Family feuds, political behavior neglecting fictitious kinship relations, and other kinds of actions beyond social relationship and culture can sometimes be seen in actual politics. Such observations indicate the sociocultural approaches may be missing something important in local politics.

This study emphasizes the significance of the state and institutions instead of social relations and culture. While sociocultural factors certainly play a role in defining the patterns of local politics, this study tries to bring in important factors unaccounted for in sociocultural approaches, and it will present an alternative explanation for the mechanism of local power. The study sees the state-centered structure (i.e., the state and its institutions) as a key independent variable. It also considers the socioeconomic (not sociocultural) situation as important, which should be discussed in combination with the state.

The state is important in Philippine local politics because the state holds more political resources than the society does. The state's resources range from its financial power to its regulatory authority, and this study considers that access to such resources is decisive in deciding who will hold power in local politics. At the same time, institutions are important because they define the way that state resources are utilized. In the case of the Philippines, the

“democratic” institutions introduced under American rule play a crucial role. American institutions give elected officials a great deal of discretionary control over state resources. One of the significant institutions is the spoils system which gives elective officials the power to control government through their power to appoint civil servants.

This study examines local power and the political machine in a provincial city² in order to illustrate the role of the state and institutions in local politics. Conventionally the political machine, as well as the other kinds of local political organizations or relationships, has been explained within sociocultural perspectives, especially in developing countries. It has been perceived as a transformation of patron-client relations which are supposed to exist in the traditional society. It is usually viewed as the transformation of the sociocultural situation under the impact of urbanization. But the sociocultural factor is still seen to retain basic features inherited from the traditional society.

This study takes issue with the above perception and tries to explain the political machine in a different way. By looking at the state and institutions, the political machine is explained as a political leader’s strategic choice within the institutional framework of the state as well as within a given socioeconomic situation, i.e., urbanization. In other words, the study perceives the political machine as an elite-centered institution for maximizing the elite’s political control, and it is defined by the institutional setting of the state, but not within the line of evolution of the traditional culture. The socioeconomic setting cannot be disregarded, and both the institutional setting and socioeconomic situation are considered to be main factors for explaining the emergence of the political machine.

The case study taken up in this work is Naga City in the Bicol Region located in the southern part of Luzon Island. The reasons for choosing this city are: (1) it has a long history dating back to the time of Spanish rule, therefore researchers can avoid the uniqueness of the new cities established by American colonial authorities or by migrants from other part of the country; (2) there is less direct intervention by the central government in the city’s local politics unlike the cities of Metro Manila, so the local power mechanism can be expected to function more freely and be more readily observable; (3) Naga City can be treated as a typical provincial cities in terms of socioeconomic features, i.e., population density and economic complexity, since it shows a high degree of urbanism as indicated by Arce (1987); (4) the city’s industrial structure is dominated by the commercial sector which is also a typical feature of a regional Philippine city; and (5) Naga City has a strong political machine under Mayor Jesse Robredo, which offers a good example of a political machine for research purposes. One additional reason is that Mayor Robredo’s

so-called “progressive governance” may give some indications about the “new generation” of local politicians.

The politics of Naga City form the backdrop of this study, but it focuses mainly on the administration of Jesse Robredo, who was mayor of the city from 1988 to 1998 and returned to city hall in 2001. Two significant features characterize the Robredo administration. Firstly, it has shown good management of city governance, like sound fiscal management, innovative policies, and minimal corruption. Secondly, it has a strong political machine at the grassroots level, which is well integrated with the city government. These two seemingly contradicting features in the Robredo administration exist in parallel, and this fact provides the clue to understand the power mechanism of Philippine politics.

Jesse Robredo has already established a reputation as one of the best mayors the Philippines has ever had. He has received a lot of awards for his governance including the prestigious Ramon Magsaysay Award.³ “Good governance” is considered to have two effects politically. One is the matter of “norm” or “consciousness.” The way a government manages a city stimulates the image of an ideal type of local leader that exists in the perception of the people. When governance coincides with the norm of the people, it raises their support for the administration. This phenomenon can be observed within the middle class especially. The other effect is that good governance provides material benefits. If city government operates its services smoothly and efficiently, residents can enjoy benefits. In effect it satisfies the “interests” of the people. Robredo’s charisma stems from his good performance which coincides with both the norm and interests of the people.

But the case of Naga City shows that good governance alone is not enough to maintain firm political power. The political machine plays a crucial role in setting up the mechanism for controlling power through the monopoly and distribution of resources as well as the direct control of grassroots-level leaders who are responsible for collecting votes. Robredo set up his machine because he knows that a firm political power base cannot be established without such an institution, especially among the poor.

The parallel existence of good governance and the political machine is a key to understand local political power in the Philippines. Within the country’s institutional framework and its socioeconomic situation, good governance cannot be attained without the political machine, which provides a firm power basis for local power, giving it a free hand in policy making. In this sense, the dual face of the Robredo administration reflects the significant characteristics of Philippine local politics.

Most of the research for this study was conducted in Naga City and Manila

from June 1996 to June 1998. The author gathered relevant information from national and local periodicals held in the University of the Philippines Main Library, the Ateneo de Manila University Main Library, the National Library, and the Ateneo de Naga Library. He also collected public documents from the Naga City Government and other government institutions. The author also interviewed about ninety people in Naga City who were government officials, barangay officials, leaders of people's organizations, and other political figures. The author also observed the operation of the city government and the electoral campaigning of several candidates in the May 1998 elections.⁴

This study is composed of seven chapters plus this introduction and a conclusion. Chapter 1 presents the framework of the study. It will explain the differences between sociocultural approaches and state-centered approaches, and then discuss machine politics within the latter approaches. The chapter will also examine the significance of good governance. Chapter 2 deals with the geographical, historical, and socioeconomic background of Naga City which provides the basis for the later discussion on politics. Chapter 3 relates the political history of Naga City from the first mayoral election in 1959 until the 1988 elections. Chapter 4 starts the discussion on Naga politics under Mayor Jesse Robredo, relating chronologically the events under his administration. Chapter 5 deals with the city government and its relations with each socioeconomic class. It also looks at Robredo's ability to manage the city government. Chapter 6 discusses the relations between the city government and people's organizations. The combination of these two institutions is in essence the mayor's political machine. Chapter 7 focuses on the political elites, barangay chiefs, and officers of sector-based organizations in order to describe the nature of the political machine through its members. Finally, the mechanism of local power will be summed up in the conclusion based on this case study of Naga City.

Notes

- 1 Except for the experimental elections at the municipal level, the first elections in the Philippines were the provincial elections in February 1902 under the American colonial administration. The elections were held just a few months before the American government declared the end of "pacification." The elections for the first Philippine Assembly were held in July 1907.
- 2 As of 1990, the urban population of the whole of the Philippines made up 48.7 per cent of the total population (NSO 1990, Table A). This data indicates that urbanization has already risen to a rather substantial level in the Philippines.

- 3 There are many accounts on Robredo's governance. At the international level, see: Raissa Espinosa-Robles, "Investing in People: Business Buzzwords Work in the Philippines," *Asiaweek*, December 17, 1999, pp. 51–52; and Raissa Espinosa-Robles, "Pride Restored," *Asiaweek*, August 4, 2000, pp. 46–47. From local media, see: "Jesse Robredo: Naga's Prodigal Nephew," *Politik*, February 1995; and Conrado de Quiros, "It Can Be Done," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, August 29, 2000.
- 4 Interviews were conducted both in English and Tagalog. English was used for the most part in the interviews with government officials, while Tagalog was used for interviews with grassroots-level leaders. Bicolano is the mother tongue of residents in Naga City, although some people have migrated from Tagalog-speaking provinces like Batangas, Quezon, and Camarines Norte. When the author needed to understand Bicolano speeches, his research assistant interpreted.