

## Conclusion

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# Conclusion

The 1998 elections in Naga City took place in an atmosphere mixed with expectation and speculation, since Jesse Robredo was barred from running for mayor because of constitutional prohibition against locally elected officials having four consecutive terms. With Robredo not in the running, opposition candidates tried to take advantage of the situation. However, Robredo continued to stay in the center of Naga politics through the election period, and his candidates captured all the elective offices in Naga City, from the congressional seat to City Council. This was repeated in the 2001 elections, which means that Robredo's party has swept all the elective seats in the city for four consecutive elections, namely, the 1992, 1995, 1998, and now the 2001 elections. This proves that Robredo's way of holding power has been tremendously effective.

What does this case study of Naga City tell us? For one thing, it reveals the limitations of the conventional sociocultural approach. Sociocultural factors like the cultural values of patron-client relationships or private wealth are less decisive for the holding of power in Naga City politics. Grassroots leaders under both Luis Villafuerte and Raul Roco easily shifted their support to a newcomer, Robredo. The relationships between grassroots leaders and politicians are not as firm as patron-client relationships are supposed to be. Furthermore, Robredo does not possess huge personal wealth since he is neither a landlord nor capitalist in the city. Wealthy families in the city do not even fully support him, yet he has been able to maintain a great deal of political power.

This implies that private wealth is not crucial for gaining and holding political power.

The discussion in the chapters of this study can be summed up as follows. Chapter 1 presented the state-centered framework, and Chapter 2 provided background about Naga City. Chapter 3 showed that local power holders in Naga City have enjoyed access to the state resources historically. Ramon Felipe and Vicente Sibulo, who were the city's first power holders after local elections began, achieved their political clout through their networks with national political figures as well as their careers as state officials. However, when they lost their monopoly over state resources in the city under President Ferdinand Marcos's dictatorship, they were forced to withdraw from Naga City politics. The second power holder, Villafuerte, came to power with the backing of President Marcos when the president set up his authoritarian regime and centralized control over state resources. Chapter 4 dealt with the third power holder, Jesse Robredo, pointing out that he first came to power with the backing of Villafuerte, but then expanded and consolidated his power by means of his position as mayor and his ties with President Fidel Ramos. Following the rift in their relationship, Villafuerte challenged Robredo at least twice to take back power in Naga City, but Robredo's firm control over state resources prevented Villafuerte from succeeding. The key to success for all these power holders and gaining control of city government was access to and monopoly over the state resources in their bailiwick.

Chapters 5 and 6 dealt with the micro-level mechanism sustaining Robredo's power. Chapter 5 showed that as mayor, the legal institutional framework gives Robredo a great deal of discretion over city government resources. At the same time, Robredo has managed the city government efficiently and demonstrated good performance. The middle class especially has welcomed this aspect of his administration. Chapter 6 examined how Robredo has secured support from the urban poor. Using his prerogatives and resources pointed out in Chapter 5, Robredo was able to incorporate the city government and sector-based organizations into a strong political machine. These sector-based organizations, it should be emphasized, were set up on city government initiative.

Finally, Chapter 7 described the political elite and grassroots-level leaders in the city. Robredo controls these groups based on his position as the final decision maker on resource utilization. Neither the political elite nor grassroots leaders depend on personal relations with voters or on personal wealth to maintain their political positions. They maintain their positions only through their access to state resources, which is facilitated by the mayor. The grassroots leaders are basically intermediaries or brokers between the city government

and the residents. These leaders are controlled through a balanced use of rewards and sanctions. But the good performance of the Robredo administration also motivates the elite and grassroots leaders to support the mayor for both realizing moral ideal of good governance and increasing the availability of resources.

This case study showed clearly that the presence of the state is extremely important in Naga City politics. There are two reasons for this. The first is that the state holds relatively more resources than the society does. Basically late industrialization causes the state to hold rather more resources while causing a scarcity of resources in the society. The second reason is that state institutions define the rules of resource utilization. Philippine state institutions were set up on the American model and give elected officials many prerogatives in controlling resources in both personnel management and financial matters. Therefore, holding an elective position is a requisite for attaining power. Holding an elective position also means having to survive regularly held election, and this compels power holders to set up and maintain systems for distributing benefits in order to win elections. In the case of Naga City, this system for distribution is Robredo's political machine. Finally, local power holders need to have smooth relations with state officials at the national level in order to monopolize the resources in their bailiwicks. This is because local government institutionally divides state resources into national and local ones. Pork barrel projects of the president, senators, and congressmen as well as the president's discretion to allocate other resources play a significant role in the monopoly that local power holders have over resources. The rise and downfall of Felipe and Sibulo and Villafuerte's gaining and losing power in Naga City, and the rise and continued strength of Robredo are all related in one way or another to their networks with national power holders.

In such a political structure, the political machine emerges as a strategic choice of the political elite, especially in the urbanized socioeconomic situation. Confronting an increasing number of urban poor, the machine provides the elite with a number of advantages for controlling both resources and grassroots leaders. The machine backed by state resources is effective for maintaining the support of voters in urban areas in the Philippines.<sup>1</sup>

This case study of Naga City also raises a question about the roles of morality and performance in politics. Robredo is definitely not a so-called "warlord" who is characterized by violence, coercion, corruption, and illegal economic activities. He does not possess a private army; he does not force residents to take certain actions; he has not accumulated a private wealth through public office; and he has taken a tough stance against illegal gambling and other forms of illegal economic activities. Without any doubt, he has

shown complete morality as a public official. Moreover, as described in this study, he raised the financial status of the city and pushed the rapid development of infrastructure. He introduced the "Productivity Improvement Program" which increased the motivation of city employees and the efficiency of public services. Such innovations and performance in the city governance raised him up as one of the most outstanding local politicians in the Philippines. Have his morality and performance been factors in sustaining his political clout?

The answer is "yes," but with certain reservation. It would be incorrect to understand morality and performance only in terms of normative discussions. A certain amount of Robredo's support has come from this aspect especially from the middle class which does not depend so much on the distribution of divisible benefits from the government. But he should not be put into the same category as resource-less "progressive movements" or "reform movements," which have existed in some areas of the Philippines. Robredo has a political machine and resources. If integrity itself were enough to achieve power, he would not need to spend such enormous energy keeping his machine active and cohesive. Performance is likewise important. It has brought Robredo the reputation of being an able government official. But it needs to be remembered that good performance is not merely a matter of an ideal but also as matter of satisfying citizen's material demands without wasting taxes. Moreover, good performance raises the availability of resources in the long run.

Thus, morality and performance matter, on condition that they are backed by resource. Power is maintained by the strategic utilization of material resources. Robredo himself admits to this and even emphasizes the importance of his machine by saying: "We are one of the best organized. I guess our secret really is not just our performance. I think it's an organization. Although we do perform well, I guess, but you know, even if I perform excellently, if I don't have a good organization, I cannot win on a straight ticket."<sup>2</sup> In effect Robredo uses his political machine to solidify his political foundation while adding charisma, morality, and indivisible material benefits through performance to this foundation as other significant political resources.

A crisis of power could be caused either by losing one's monopoly over state resources or by the excessive imbalance of rewards, sanctions, and demands. The former would be a conflict with national power. Such a conflict could cause a diversion of national resources to opponents which would eventually erode a local power holder's monopoly over state resources. The latter would be due to unfairness in the distribution of benefits or excessive sanctions. This could trigger dissatisfaction and contention among the residents. An example of the latter took place in one barangay in Naga City. It

arose between the city government and a group of residents over land utilization. The trouble damaged Robredo's mayoral candidate who lost the vote in that barangay though he was top in all the other barangays.<sup>3</sup>

The significance of the state and institutions drawn from this case study of Naga City should not be limited to the discussion on local politics only. Its implications should be noted for further research on Philippine politics as a whole. The sociocultural approach has dominated not only the study of local politics but also that of other areas such as the bureaucracy, political parties, and government-business relations in the Philippines. These areas have all been discussed from a sociocultural perspective which emphasizes values and social structure. However, an examination of these areas from the perspective of the state and its institutions opens up new possibilities for explaining political patterns and illuminating neglected causal relations. The accumulation of empirical research free from the conventional perspective of seeing the Philippine state as weak can open a new stage for studies on Philippine politics.

## Notes

- 1 Once a political machine is firmly established, short-term benefits provided by opponents cannot erode its influence; at least this has been the case in Naga City. This indicates that voters calculate and compare which candidates will be more beneficial to them in the long run. During the 1998 elections, there was vote buying by Robredo's opponent. It reached its peak the night before election day. The opponent's grassroots leaders visited residents, especially the urban poor, and distributed money or foods like rice, coffee, milk, and noodles. However, it did not work as shown in the landslide victory of Robredo's slate. Of course, Robredo took countermeasure by mobilizing his own grassroots leaders and the police to monitor and stop such distributions.
- 2 Interview with Jesse M. Robredo at Naga City Hall on August 19, 1997.
- 3 The conflict took place between the city government and squatters regarding construction of a big shopping mall where the squatters lived. See Fer Basbas, "The Marasigan Story: Naga's Slum Fights for Survival," *Bikol Daily*, August 26 and 28, 1997.