

December 15, 2005

Strengthening Democracy in the Philippines: Civil Society Solutions to Public Governance

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It has been almost 20 years since the Philippines overthrew a dictatorship and re-established democracy. The first few years of that transition were understandably painful. But after a promising first decade, the country has been lurching from one crisis to another. Arguably, the reasons for the seemingly unending crisis have been largely homegrown – they revolve around political will. In other words, they have been mainly about public governance at the national level.

Recognizing the problems democracy in the Philippines was facing, the Institute for Solidarity in Asia (ISA) designed and implemented a program that brings together public officials and civil society groups to improve governance mechanisms on the local level. City mayors participating in the program work with civil society groups to identify priorities, design solutions, and implement concrete programs to improve the economic and social standing of their cities. In the process, they also improve political institutions by strengthening participatory mechanisms. The program has been a success and continues to expand into an increasing number of cities throughout the country.

The demand for accountable democracy in the Philippines is increasing and it should be extended to call for citizen involvement in the process. ISA's governance program clearly shows that such an approach works! Governance should be a partnership between the governors and the governed. Demands on the part of the governed will not achieve the same results as active participation in the reform process. When citizens and their elected officials work together for better public governance, the outcome will be a visible improvement in the quality of democracy, both at the local and national levels.



published by the

Center for International Private Enterprise

an affiliate of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce

1155 Fifteenth Street NW • Suite 700 • Washington, DC 20005 • USA

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Introduction

I have often been asked: is there ever going to be an end to the crisis in the Philippines? Although the question is unsettling to me as a Filipino, I have to admit it is a fair one, if one goes by what is written in the papers.

Much of what the papers report about the Philippines is negative and, according to the headlines, it is one country that doesn't ever seem to get things right. For instance, in one ranking done under the auspices of the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council, the Philippines is ranked second from the top on the basis of what has been done in corporate governance reforms in the past five years. But on that same scorecard, when the rankings are made on the basis of investors' perceptions of the actual corporate governance practices, the Philippines comes out number two from the bottom.

This example is one of many that show the perceptions of the Philippines are often not so positive. And despite strenuous efforts to improve the workings of the Philippine political and economic systems, perceptions for the most part reflect reality. Philippine society is facing a lot of challenges, and the reality is that the country is a dauntingly challenged democracy.

A Democracy Facing Challenges

It has been almost 20 years since the Philippines overthrew a dictatorship and re-established democracy. The first few years of that transition were understandably painful. But after a promising first decade, the country has been lurching from one crisis to another. Arguably, the reasons for the seemingly unending crisis have been largely homegrown – they revolve around political will. In other words, they have been mainly about public governance at the national level.

After the national elections of 2004, the President declared that a fiscal crisis was looming. A flurry of discussions followed. Eighteen months later, the different institutions of public governance finally produced two measures. The first was a watered-down version of additional taxes on tobacco and alcohol, and the second was a much delayed increase in the value added tax. A

Governance and Citizenship

There is a relationship between (good) governance and (responsible) citizenship. Governance cannot go far and cannot aspire to be “good” unless it is complemented by citizens that hold themselves “responsible” for the common good of the community as a whole. In other words, governance cannot be left as a responsibility of the governors or public officials alone. It is a shared responsibility of ordinary citizens as well: they have to be an integral, crucial part of the governance process.

lot of water flowed under the bridge during those 18 months. And only in the last few days of those 18 months have the increases in the value added tax been implemented.

What experience has shown is that Philippine national institutions of public governance – from the President, through the Congress, and our judicial system – have not been functioning in the manner and at the speed that our national circumstances have been demanding. A crisis demands speed and a deep sense of urgency. What the country has been getting instead is a lot of foot-dragging – we have been entertained by long-winded debates, at the end of which we get only a whimper rather than a wham.

To the credit of the Philippine people, however, the country still adheres strongly to democracy, although now there is some debate about the form of democracy citizens and government have to practice. Good governance is an oft-repeated aspiration; it is as though it were the silver lining in the dark clouds that almost permanently hover over our skies. The challenge is clear – develop good governance mechanisms in a democracy with weak national governance institutions.

One of the biggest challenges the country must address is the strengthening of institutions in government, business, and all other sectors of society. Institutional governance has been in dire need of reform. The call for reforms in public governance and corporate governance

has been rising as understandable impatience has been building up over the inability of open, democratic processes to work effectively and quickly for national development.

While the country has made some progress in corporate governance following the Asian Financial Crisis, public governance, on the other hand, is a significantly more challenging reform field in the Philippine context. By all measures, the Philippines scores very poorly relative to the other economies in the East Asian region. The exhortation and rhetoric for public governance reforms have been shrill and frequent as a consequence. In part, to respond to the demands and to act concretely on the rhetoric, the Institute for Solidarity in Asia (ISA) was established in 2000.

Meeting the governance challenge

One thing the Philippines got right in the transition process is that it passed a local government autonomy law. The reason lies in the history and culture of the country, which have always placed Philippine local officials at the very center of communities. Philippine people, at this stage of evolution as a nation, have a deep sense of identification with their town and city, and with their province as well.

Moreover, the Philippines as a country is blessed by a few competent, truly development-oriented local chief executives. The pull of cities has been so strong that now more than half of the country's population lives in the relatively few cities (116 to be exact) there are throughout the country.

Therefore, it was necessary to meet the governance challenge at the local level before it could have been improved on the national level. At the level of cities, there is also the added benefit of closer interaction between public officials and citizens, which facilitates a fruitful working relationship. At the national level, the President and Congress are too distant and too high-up for many citizens and the issues are big and complex. At the local level, on the other hand, the mayors and other public officials are much closer to the people. The issues they have to grapple with are of more immediate concern and relevance to the day-to-day life of ordinary citizens.

Therefore, the potential for citizen participation in any process aimed at improving local public governance is much higher.

Changes in the Governance Paradigm

In meeting the governance challenge at any level in the Philippines, radical changes need to be effected in the paradigms of governance.

First and foremost, people have to be convinced that good governance is not possible unless without responsible citizenship. In other words, people must responsibly advocate for reform in their respective sectors. Instead of being a nation of fence-sitters, or worse, critical spectators, the people must get involved; they must get down off the fence and get their hands dirty in the fight for the development of their community. They must be gladiators too.

Second, there is much more to good governance than simply giving hand-outs to constituents; there is also the corresponding duty of asking for civic participation and social involvement. There is much more to responsible citizenship than demanding one's rights; there is also the corresponding duty to contribute to the common good of the community.

In other words, governance should be a partnership between the governors and the governed. And that partnership must yield fruit – it must be productive. That partnership must bring about tangible benefits. But for it to be able to do so, local efforts must be united. There has to be a real pulling together of time, talent, and resources for the common good of the local community.

Third, words, slogans, and rhetoric are great, but only if they are connected with and lead to corresponding actions that produce the desired outcomes. Governors and the governed, public officials, and responsible citizens must create a system in which they can translate their common dreams and aspirations for their community to specific commitments and initiatives. Their efforts should be measured and regularly assessed as well as duly reported to the public at large.

These are the three simple changes in governance paradigms ISA has been introducing through its governance program, under the leadership of the city mayors who have decided to follow the approach we at ISA have been promoting.¹

What difference has this approach made? Let the cities that have adopted ISA's approach to good governance speak for themselves.

Nine different cities were chosen from the three major islands of the Philippines: 3 from Luzon, 3 from the Visayas, and 3 from Mindanao. These cities were chosen either because their city mayors volunteered or were recommended by their peers. In other words, mayors of the chosen cities were widely known for their competence and commitment to development.

Above all, participating mayors were willing to put their administration through an orientation program,

particularly for their city administrators, city planning officers, and sectoral leaders (typically, the sectors included business and labor, civic and professional organizations, youth and academia, media, as well as religious groups and the military).

All these cities have now produced individual "Governance Roadmaps." Each one of these roadmaps articulates the vision, mission, and core values of the city. It also outlines the strategic objectives, the measures and the targets, and above all, the commitments that city officials and the different sectoral leaders have made to actually implement those objectives.

Since measures and targets are specified, it is possible to keep score. A scorecard of accomplishment made relative to the commitments pledged can be kept. What ISA seeks to institutionalize is this scorecard, so that cities can use the highest-scoring cities as benchmarks for improvement.

Guidelines for Public and Private Governance Programs

As a governance reform instrument, both the Institute for Solidarity in Asia (ISA - dedicated to public governance) and the Institute of Corporate Directors (ICD - dedicated to corporate governance) had to ensure that fundamental governance principles would provide the basic guidelines for their approach to governance reforms. Of these principles, ten were highlighted and applied first in both institutes and the approaches they would be taking towards governance reforms.

1. ISA and ICD have to be independent of any political, business, or other group. They have to be autonomous so it would be free to promote and work for governance reforms without having to give special consideration to any specific interest, group, or party.
2. ISA, in its advocacy, has to take on the mission of reminding everyone about and stressing the necessary linked relationship of rights and duties as well as of freedom and responsibility.
3. The authority to govern is a serious duty and responsibility to ensure that others can enjoy their rights in freedom. It is a duty that must be carried out with commitment to the common good.
4. The loyalty of the governors - those with the duty to govern - is owed to the territory or institution that they govern. This can be the country, a city or region, an institution, or a corporation: the interests of any of these relevant units should be placed above personal or private groups' interests.
5. The perspective of governance is long term.
6. Fairness to all stakeholders has to be secured.
7. Transparency needs to be observed in part to ensure that all stakeholders are treated fairly.
8. Accountability has to be embedded in all systems to ensure that all stakeholders are treated fairly.
9. Ethics need to pervade all aspects of operations in any governance institution.
10. Social responsibility has to be observed in all decisions and actions.

Steps in ISA's Local Governance Program

- Get mayor's "buy-in" and sign ISA's Solidarity Covenant.
- Conduct an orientation seminar for public officials and civil society on the meaning of good governance and responsible citizenship.
- Civil society groups organize coalitions and present governments with a "Charter Statement" for the city, which includes their vision, a mission statement, and a list of core values.
- ISA advisory team conducts a working session on public governance systems in the city for civil society groups and public officials. During the session, participants come up with a concrete strategy to meet the objectives outlined in a city's "Charter Statement." Policy measures, targets, and specific initiatives are also included.
- The document created as a part of this process is called a "City Governance Roadmap."
- City governance roadmaps from all participating cities are presented at a national media event in Manila.
- The scorecard is developed and institutionalized. The scorecard allows the city to track the implementation of the governance roadmap and evaluate the effectiveness of its programs.
- Monitors visit cities to evaluate the implementation of the roadmaps.
- Evaluations are conducted for civil society groups and public officials, and both sides present their accomplishments.

Any city mayor knows that a significant breakthrough has been made when the citizens themselves ask that taxes be increased. This has happened in Naga City where the merchants in the city market proposed that the taxes levied on them be raised so the market improvement program of the city can be implemented. This is an impressive sign of trust in government.

The leaders of different civil society groups know that a significant breakthrough is possible when the mayor estimates that the ambitious objectives they set for their city to accomplish by 2015 can be accomplished by 2010. This was the case in the city of Marikina.

Everyone knows that a significant breakthrough is being made when criticisms abate and public discussion shifts to debates on which sector has achieved outcomes above and beyond commitments made and pledged. The city mayor of Samal, for example, was happy to report on the way the tone of the public discourse in his city changed after beginning work with ISA.

As a result of the program's success, an additional 11 cities volunteered to join the original set of nine cities. ISA

did not have to facilitate their participation; the mayors volunteered or were recommended by the leadership of other cities, mainly based on their development-oriented commitment to reform. At this rate, in three more years, half of the cities of the Philippines will be participating in the program.

Moreover, momentum has now been created such that at the national level, a coalition of the same sectors working closely at the level of cities has been forged. This national coalition has taken a successful first step toward improving public governance throughout the Philippines: it has formulated a National Governance Roadmap. The national roadmap is in the process of being distributed to all sectors involved in its development so that they can make their own contributions to its fulfillment. Sooner rather than later, if this initiative is sustained, governance at the national level will be positively influenced.

Other Governance Initiatives

Two other pathways have been opened: one for the youth sector, and another for countries in Southeast Asia that are also struggling with governance challenges.

Youth leaders, on their own, are taking the initiative to reach out to their own peers. And their message is simple and straightforward: the Philippines is in need of radical change, and that change has to start in the hearts and minds of the people, particularly of the future leaders. The Solidarity Movement for the Youth is well worth supporting and encouraging for the sake of democracy and for the sake of democracy working for the development of the people.

Governance advocates from other countries in the Southeast Asian region have taken note of the Philippine approach to public governance reform. Colleagues from Thailand and Indonesia have agreed to work with their peers in the Philippines to provide support and share lessons learned.

Conclusion

Under the dark clouds that seem to permanently hover over the Philippine horizon, it is easy to see nothing but darkness. This would be an exercise in hopelessness. Indeed, there are already far too many Filipinos and friends of the Philippines who are nearing the point of total despair.

However, that would be a mistake. For underneath the dark clouds, sparks of change have been kindled. They are being spread, slowly but surely, silently but systematically. Paradigms of governance are being changed at the grassroots level. In several cities, and the number is rising, good governance is being complemented by responsible citizenship. Rights are being complemented by duties. Freedom is being complemented by responsibility. Bells are being rung for integrity, discipline, sustainability, openness, team work, and flexibility.

The demand for accountable democracy in the Philippines is increasing and it should now be extended to call for citizen involvement in the process. Governance should be a partnership between the governors and the governed. Demands on the part of the governed will not achieve the same results as active participation in the reform process. When citizens and their elected officials work together for better public governance, the outcome will be a visible improvement in the quality of

the Philippine democracy, both at the local and national levels.

¹ISA's public governance program was modeled on the Institute of Corporate Directors' approach to improving corporate governance.

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The Institute for Solidarity in Asia, an independent, non-partisan, not-for-profit institution, seeks to improve the practice of public governance in the Philippines at all levels of government, gradually aligning the standards of public governance with global principles and best practices.

This article is based on a presentation given by Dr. Estanislao on November 3, 2005 at the Center for International Private Enterprise.

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