State, Patronage and Local Elites

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The standard approach to the study of local politics has been to view power relations in terms of patron-client networks.[1] The patron-client relationship is conceived as a specific form of power arrangement which involves the informal linkage between a political leader (patron) who is able to provide material goods and services for his political followers (clients) who, in return for benefits received from the former, reciprocate by rendering personal support and loyalty to their patron. Mutual benefits are supposed to be derived from the relationship of the two parties of “unequal status”. Reciprocity, affectivity and solidarity are assumed to permeate the relationship among patrons and clients.[2]

The particularistic ties and face-to-face contact, which characterize patron-client linkages, are normally forged within the context of rural and peasant-based economies where landownership constitutes the major source of wealth and patronage in society.[3]

Factionalism is seen to be a major component of political systems dominated by patron-client relationships. In the specific case of the Philippines, it has been argued by Lande that local alliances are shaped in large measure by kinship or clan affiliations.[4]

Changes in Patronage Politics

Changes in the political economy, however, serve to underscore the need to re-examine the continued usage of the patron-client concept in explaining the realities of contemporary local politics. The advance of capitalist forces, urbanization, and state expansion, among others, have resulted in corresponding alterations in patronage politics at the local levels of power in the country.

Under peripheral capitalism, land ownership had ceased to be the only major resource base for sustaining local elite rule in many parts of the country. Consequently, the old landed elites who were not able to economically diversify in the face of capitalist transformation were eased out from the political scene by new political elites who are linked to the modern sectors of the economy.[5]

With capitalist penetration of social relations, the system of exchange among leaders and followers have become more contractual rather than reciprocal. Ritual kinship ties, expressed for instance in the “compadre system,” had become less important in defining political alliances.[6] Likewise, new social forces (e.g. working class and middle class) which cannot be simply subsumed within narrow patron-client loyalties, have emerged out of the womb of capitalism to challenge old patronage ties.

The related phenomena of rapid urbanization, population growth and internal migration, on the other hand, have placed under severe doubt the continued applicability of the particular contention within the patron-client analysis that there exists some kind of proximity or face-to-face contact among local power-holders and their supporters beyond the barangay level. At the same time, the above-mentioned conditions have largely transformed the character and composition of the electorate in many towns and provinces in such a way that a simple reliance on kinship ties would not suffice to ensure the continuity of local clans in power. In this regard, the political machine has replaced the clan system as the primary mode of political mobilization especially for electoral purposes in the country.[7]

The expansion of the role of the state in the post-colonial period has greatly diminished the autonomy of local power in the country.[8] By
virtue of its control over capital resources which could be used for local development projects, the state had assumed the role of chief patron in Philippine politics through the practice of fund allocations based on factional considerations. State patronage is thus a crucial factor to consider in explaining the rise and fall of local political factions in the country.[9]

In the light of the inadequacies of the patron-client framework of analysis to account for changes in the mode of formation and reproduction of local elite power, as well as in the character of patronage politics in many Philippine provinces and municipalities, it is but proper to look for an alternative approach to the study of local politics in the country.

Towards a Historico-Structuralist Approach

It is contended here that any effort at investigating contemporary dimensions of patronage in local politics has to be guided by a historico-structuralist approach. The application of this framework to the study of local politics would enable us to assess the structural conditions which allow for the emergence or dissolution of distinct forms of patronage relations within particular historical conjunctures. The concept of patronage, in this sense, has to be regarded not simply as a device in representing the power structures of insulated local settings, but should rather be seen as a product of a definite social formation.[10]

The focus should therefore be on the structures of inequality which allow for the persistence of patronage politics in society, rather than on the ahistorical notion of reciprocity advanced in the patron-client concept.[11] An election, for instance, under conditions of poverty and inequality, is normally perceived by the poor as an occasion for them to partake of society's wealth by selling their votes to the highest bidder.[12] Sandbrook observed that "for the poor, clientelism offers, or seems to offer, an individual solution to the generic problems of mass poverty".[13]

In a large sense, patronage politics could be better understood as an expression of class relations.[14] Patronage politics after all is a product of a class society where the few who command wealth and property are privileged to fight it out for the political loyalties of the many who command nothing but their labor power. At the same time, patronage politics also contributes to the reproduction of class society since it retards the development of horizontal solidarity among the poor, whose inability to satisfy their subsistence needs drives them into the waiting arms of competing political patrons who are prepared to redistribute the surplus they have accumulated, especially with the onset of elections.

When we speak of social reproduction, the role of the state cannot be neglected. In peripheral societies like the Philippines, the state often finds itself intervening in the process of class formation. Given its critical role in securing an economic base for the expanded reproduction of the ruling class, the peripheral state usually takes a predominant position in civil society.[15] In this respect, state patronage assumes a major role in shaping the parameters of factional competition in local politics.

Colonialism, Patronage and Local Politics

Class-based patronage politics was not possible in the pre-colonial barangay system because of the existence of a communal system of property ownership in most parts of the archipelago.[16] With the entry of Spanish colonialism in the 16th century, a pattern of local politics which was closely patterned after Mexico (another Spanish colony during that period) was introduced in the country. The barangay was incorporated into the Spanish colonial administration as the smallest unit of local government. The head of the barangay called datu during pre-colonial times became the hispanized cabeza de barangay.[17]

Under Spanish colonial rule, the datu or cabezas were constituted into a privileged political class called principality. They were tasked to collect tribute for the colonial administration. Just like the Latin American caciques, they were exempted from paying the tribute as well as from rendering forced labor.

With the establishment of the pueblo de Indios in the 17th century, the forerunner of the present-day municipio, the native principality gained access to town power. The pueblo, constituted by several barangays or barrios, was headed by a gobernadorcillo (equivalent of today's town mayor) who was recruited from the ranks of the principality. The gobernadorcillo was selected through a process in which three
nominees were made by 12 senior cabezas de barangay in the presence of the retiring gobernadorcillo and the parish priest. The final choice was made either by the Manila-based central government in the case of pueblos close to the capital or by the Spanish alcalde mayor (provincial governor) in the case of pueblos located in outlying provinces.[18]

The Principialia and the Development of Political Clans

The development of local clans in politics was initiated with the cultivation of the principalia, initially composed of the coopted datus and their families, as a privileged local elite under Spanish rule. Unlike in the pre-colonial barangay set-up where political leadership was decided on the basis of communal consensus, the principalia under colonial tutelage evolved into a hereditary class with political succession (e.g. cabeza leadership) passing from father to eldest son. This practice of recycling political power within the family circle provided the impetus for the emergence of political clans in Philippine society.

Through colonial patronage, the principalia began to acquire private property, especially in terms of landholdings. Consonant with their privileged status, the principalia began to attach the title "don" before their names just like the Spanish hidalgos of Castille.[19]

The principalia settled themselves in the poblacion or cabecera, which became the geopolitical locus of power in the municipality.[20] They also acquired Spanish education and learned how to speak Spanish -- things that were denied to the ordinary indio. Lastly, through inter-marriage with the Spaniards and the Chinese, the Philippine local elite assumed a distinctly mestizo character.[21]

Caciquismo and Landlordism

As the political intermediaries of the Spanish colonial administration in dealing with the natives, the principalia became the local implementors of such oppressive impositions as the tribute, forced labor and the bandala system. In the exercise of their powers, the cabezas and gobernadorcillos started practicing a system of rule known as caciquismo. In broad terms, a cacique is a leader who exercises "boss rule".[22]

Cacique rule was sustained not only through the exercise of local political power but also through the possession of landed property acquired through colonial patronage. Caciquism and landlordism thereby went hand in hand. It should be noted however that during the Spanish period, the religious orders had, in the 18th century become the biggest owners of landed estate in the Philippines.[23]

With the transfer of the reins of colonial rulership from the Spaniards to the Americans at the turn of the century, the vast hectares of land owned by the Spanish religious orders, amounting to some 400,000 acres, were expropriated by the American colonial authorities and auctioned off to the public. The local elites, by virtue of their education and wealth, were the ones who succeeded in acquiring most of these lands, and thus expanding their landholdings.[24]

Philippine Elections: Consolidation or Liberalization of Power?

The historical emergence of elections as a political institution, particularly in the European context, was precipitated by the liberal demand to widen access to decision-making powers in societies which have hitherto been monopolized by political clans or dynasties. In the Philippine case, the introduction of the electoral process was certainly not meant to disturb the local oligarchies' control of power.[25]

Like the Spaniards, the American colonizers were just as interested in gaining the goodwill and support of the Philippine local elite. Hence, the first Philippine elections held in 1902 to fill municipal positions called for qualifications which only the educated and property-owning Filipinos - surely a rare species during that time - could possibly meet. Aside from these, the continuity of local elite power under Spanish rule was virtually assured in the 1902 elections.

Under the Municipal Code of 1901, suffrage was limited to males who were at least 23 years old, literate in English or Spanish, held municipal office before August 13, 1898, and owned real property worth at least $250 or paid an annual tax of $15.[26]
Parties and Congress: Creating National-Level Clan Linkages

The first political parties in history were established by the middle class to challenge the power of an entrenched aristocracy.[27] The appearance of parties in the political stage was thus meant to widen the sphere of popular participation in public life. However, the first parties which came out under the auspices of American rule, were constituted by the local elites themselves to consolidate their power. Philippine electoral parties have always been parties of the elites. In fact, there has been no instance in Philippine history where a middle-class party successfully competed for strategic elective posts.

More than anything else, the introduction of parties in the Philippine setting created a mechanism for fostering national linkages among local political clans in the country. The presence of political parties and electoral competition, at the same time, contributed to the survival of opposition factions at the local level.[28]

The birth of a Philippine Assembly in 1907 (later known as Congress) during the American colonial period opened the doors for local politicians to aspire for national power. The application of single-district representation, particularly for the Lower House, was especially beneficial to local caciques who were given the opportunity to gain access to national-level political power by relying on already existing local bailiwick support. [29] Hence, it was not surprising for landlord interests to fully penetrate the halls of Congress at its inception. The sugar bloc, consisting of the rich sugar planters and millers of the Visayas (notably those coming from Negros and Iloilo), for instance, presented a good example of local caciques extending their political influence beyond the confines of their provincial haciendas and into the national arena of Congressional politics based in Manila.[30]

Urbanization of Post-Colonial Politics

Filipino landlords have been able to sustain their control of local political power in the early half of the 20th century by depending on purely local resources. Wolters outlined very clearly the conditions which allowed for the successful participation of landlords in local elections held in the country prior to the Second World War in the following terms:

“Landlords were able to participate successfully in electoral politics because they had an independent basis for power in their landholdings. They had financed their own election campaigns, the costs of which had not been very high at the time. Since the electorate had still been limited to members of prominent families and wealthy farmers, landlords could be assured of being elected mayor or governor simply on the basis of patronage, reputation and support from relatives.”[31]

In the post-colonial period, the complexion of local politics had changed dramatically. With the rapid urbanization and migration of people which ensued in the aftermath of World War II, as well as with the lifting of suffrage restrictions, the composition of the electoral population in many Philippine localities had been altered. Landownership alone does not offer anymore an adequate basis for supporting an electoral campaign.[32]

In the face of a highly expanded and heterogeneous electorate, it was not wise for local elites to depend purely on traditional clan networks in courting political support considering the influx of new residents in the local area. This may be especially true in localities close to the urban centers where old clan loyalties have greatly diminished. The electoral debacle of such traditional clans as the Laurels in Batangas and the Sumulongs of Rizal in the 1988 local elections may be instructive in this regard.[33]

Capital and Market Penetration: Transforming the Socio-Economic Foundations of Rural Politics

Capital and market penetration of previously isolated rural economies normally results in corresponding transformations in the mode of acquisition and exercise of local political power. Pearce situated the phenomena of capital and market penetration within the context of an incorporation process which integrates local communities into the urban centers of power. He therefore came up with the following assertion:

“...But at the same time it establishes a new kind of dependence of rural social organizations on the urban centers. The obsolescence of the local economic institutions which grow up around subsistence is accompanied by the decline of other social institutions belonging
exclusively to the neighborhood, a loss of self-containment and valorative self-sufficiency. Exogamy becomes more general, local leadership diminishes in prestige and effectiveness.[34]

Indeed, the incorporation of hitherto self-contained local communities into the dominant social formation inevitably leads to the breakdown of the exclusive power monopoly enjoyed by local potentates over their clients, as well as to the multiplication and diversification of patrons at the local level.[35] In a survey made on the results of the 1988 local elections, it was observed that 23% of the victorious governors were relatively new in the field of politics since they have not held any electoral position in the past.[36]

In a large sense, the entry of new men and women in contemporary politics who do not belong to traditional landowning families, but are rather associated with the modern sectors of the economy, could be attributed to the dissolution of pre-capitalist modes of wealth accumulation. It has been contended, for instance, that the transformation from the feudal to the capitalist mode in the country was completed in the 1970s. Even in the area of rice farming, the major appropriators of surplus value now include bankers, manufacturers, and distributors of agricultural inputs.[37]

It is not being contended here that the old political clans whose original economic base was land ownership have totally vanished from the face of local politics. In fact, their success in the 1988 local elections, as in the return to power of the Singsons of Ilocos Sur, the Dys of Isabela, the Josons of Nueva Ecija, the San Luises of Laguna, the Espinosas of Masbate, the Lacsons of Negros Occidental, the Osmenas of Cebu and the Duranos of Danao City, points to the flexibility of these traditional political families.

The old clans who have survived politically are precisely the ones who were able to make use of their agrarian-based wealth to expand and diversify into the more modern commercial and manufacturing ventures. Nowak and Snyder, for instance, made the astute observation that “the Philippine industrial entrepreneurs had not developed into a distinct group, but rather tend to come from families of the older agrarian and commercial elites who increasingly diversify wealth into a variety of advanced enterprises”.[38]

From Clan to Machine Politics

Capital penetration, in all its manifold aspects (i.e., financing, production and distribution), of society consequently results in the “depersonalization” of patronage relations.[39] In capitalist society, ruptures in clan loyalties become evident. This could be gleaned from the 1988 local polls where the candidates in certain municipalities came from the same family. In Danao City (Cebu) for example, Thaddeus Durano chose to run against his father, long-time local patriarch Ramon Durano. In Pateros (Metro-Manila), on the other hand, the mayoralty race became a contest among cousins.[40] In political anthropology, this phenomenon could be viewed in terms of clan segmentation where each segment is organized into a faction which enters into political conflict to increase its control over resources.[41]

Amidst the changes in the political economy, patronage relations on the local level have become depersonalized and contractual. Even under capitalism, patronage politics have persisted because the maintenance of an economically insecure and marginalized population is very much a part of the capitalist mode. Bennehof-Thomsen asserted that “there is nothing peculiar nor new in the fact that a large area of subsistence production exists within the capitalist mode of production, where its labor power is consumed without being remunerated”.[42]

The political machine has simply replaced the clan system as the main expression of patronage relations in local politics. The term political machine refers to functional but not necessarily formal organizations, usually inserted within a political party in which power is centralized, and whose members are motivated by divisible material incentives rather than ideological considerations. These incentives, such as offers of money, gifts, jobs, contracts, favors, are employed to set up an elaborate vote-getting machine to gain electoral victory.[43] In this context, electoral politics is considered to be based on a system where candidates compete by promising direct redistribution of welfare in society.[44]
It has been argued that closely related to the rise of the political machine was the increase in the relevance of national factors, and a decline of the importance of local considerations in shaping factional politics in the municipal and provincial levels.[45] In the pre-martial law era, Congressional patronage was vital to local politicians in terms of providing electoral support (i.e. campaign funding and endorsement) to the latter, as well as in opening links through which local elites could perform patronage roles. After all, Congressmen who themselves rely on local elite support especially during elections, control the power to appropriate pork barrel funds and legislate local public work projects. Factional support provided by Congressmen was thus important in the reproduction of local elite power. This logic was, however, broken with the declaration of martial law in 1972.

State Expansion and Patronage

It is crucial, as Skocpol puts it, to "bring the state back in" the analysis of political change.[46] This has become imperative, especially in the case of Third World countries, where the state in the 20th century has come to assume a broadened capability to penetrate social and political life.[47]

In the particular case of the Philippines, it has been argued that even prior to the imposition of martial law, the state’s role and resource base in society had already expanded enormously. Wollers elaborated this observation in the following lines:

"In the 1960s and early 1970s, a trend had been discernible in Philippine society which tended to reinforce the power of the center and to increase the dependency of lower-level entrepreneurs on higher-level institutions... The state apparatus had become increasingly important as the provider of capital, either directly in the form of government credit programs and pork-barrel funds for election purposes; or indirectly by giving political direction for the allocation of commercial loans. In the fast growing credit system the state had assumed brokerage functions by borrowing money in the international market, and by obtaining loans and aid from international institutions and friendly governments."

State expansion in the post-colonial period was, furthermore, exhibited through its direct participation in business affairs. It should be noted, for instance, that during the years of the republic from 1946 to 1971, government income from property and entrepreneurship grew by 19.6% a year. The growth rate was even greater during the authoritarian era from 1972 to 1984, where the same type of income grew by 41.1% a year.[49]

The increased role of the state in the economy was further facilitated through the control exercised by a powerful technocracy over economic policy-making in the country. The trend towards the appointment of technocrats in key government positions began in the 1960s under the Macapagal presidency. However, it was under the Marcos administration, especially during the martial law years, where the technocrats with the full backing of a repressive state apparatus proceeded to lead the nation towards an export-oriented growth strategy fueled by foreign investments and foreign loans.[50]

What Tiglao called the image of "credit worthiness" projected by the martial law regime in its early years had largely enabled the Marcos government to borrow heavily from international lending institutions in the 1970s. With enormous capital at its disposal, the state henceforth asserted its role as chief patron by undertaking massive spending in infrastructure projects and in building the economic base of presidential cronies.[51]

In the arena of local politics, the Marcos regime decisively undermined the old patronage networks presided over by traditional political lords by demobilizing Congress and deregulating electoral competition. This emasculation of the elite circulation process under martial law effectively diminished the autonomy of local elite power. State incursion into the brokerage functions of local politicians was clearly seen when the Marcos faction, which held a monopoly of state power, began delivering development funds straight to the barangay.[52]

Efforts aimed at centralizing patronage functions within the state apparatus was furthermore shown when the martial law regime abolished the old pork barrel funds and integrated the annual public works appropriations into the regular government budget based on a national public works infrastructure plan and program.
Factional considerations, however, continued to define public works priorities, such that under the Marcos administration, it has been widely observed that the most developed provincial road systems in the country could be found in Ilocos Norte and Leyte.

The Present Dispensation

The rise of the Aquino presidency fostered the reinstallation of the formal trappings of democracy such as competitive elections and Congress. These mechanisms have to a certain extent weakened central state authority and strengthened local elite autonomy. The return, for example, of Congressional discretion on public works appropriations has dislodged the state from its martial law function of solely determining the usage of patronage funds. Nevertheless, the state by the very fact that it controls the machinery and resources to implement legislation continue to exercise a great deal of autonomy in the political arena. In the pre-martial law era, for instance, it has been noted that as of June 30, 1970, only 17.8% of the appropriations authorized since the first public works act in 1954, had actually been released.

Congressional and local politicians have developed a certain dependence on the state to gain access to resources which could satisfy patronage expectations from local constituencies. Hence, it is not surprising for the main administration party LDP (Lakas ng Demokratikong Pilipino) to have successfully recruited at the latest count 157 of the 202 members of the House of Representatives, 42 of the country's 73 provincial governors, 30 of the 60 city mayors, and 1,224 of the more than 1,500 municipal mayors in the Philippines.

State patronage could also be instrumental in breaking the might of long-standing political dynasties. Hence, we find examples of candidates who ran successfully in the 1988 local elections with strong state support against old political clans. Examples of these include Bren Guiiao who won the gubernatorial post of Pampanga, despite the strong challenge posed by the Nepomuceno, Lazatin and Lingad clans, and Raphael Colet who defeated the candidate of the Agbayani family for the governorship of Pangasinan. It appears, therefore, that state expansion into the local spheres of power is a reality that cannot be ignored.

Conclusion

Basically, it has been argued that the structural conditions of poverty and inequality have influenced the persistence of patronage politics in the country. However, the manner in which patronage relations are expressed, especially in local-level politics, has changed because of the numerous developments in the political economy of the country. In this regard, the dynamic impact of urbanization, capital penetration and state expansion have to be carefully assessed in order that we can arrive at a more profound reading of contemporary local politics.

NOTES

1. The standard application of the patron-client framework to the study of Philippine local politics could be found in Carl Lande, Leaders, Factions and Parties (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1965).


3. It has been pointed out that the patron status is highly correlated with land ownership and the client status with poor tillers dependent upon the patron's land for their livelihood. See John Duncan Powell, "Peasant Society and Clientelist Politics," in Jason Finkle and Richard Gable (eds.), Political Development and Social Change (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1971), 2nd ed., pp. 519-537.


5. See Thomas Nowak and Kay Snyder, "Clientelist Politics in the Philippines: Integration or Instability?" American Political Science Review 68 (September 1974): 1147-1170. In this article, the
authors describe the effects of economic differentiation on clientelist politics.


7. K.G. Machado, "From Traditional Faction to Machine: Changing Patterns of Political Leadership and Organization in the Rural Philippines," Journal of Asian Studies 33 (August 1974): 523-547. According to Machado, the old variant of the local political faction, which is the family-centered organization, has been replaced by the political machine.

8. It has been noted that local governmental authority in the Philippines was historically circumscribed by a strong tradition of centralism. See Romeo Ocampo, "Local Executives and Central-Local Relations in the Philippines," Local Government Bulletin 18-20 (1985): 1-11.


11. Alavi argued that the landlord-tenant relationship, which in the patron-client approach has been viewed as a bond based on mutual benefit, is governed by dependence rather than reciprocity because of the unequal status of these classes. See Hamza Alavi, "Rural Bases of Political Power in South Asia," Journal of Contemporary Asia 4 (1974): 413-422.


18. Ibid., pp. 124-125.

19. Ibid., p. 122.

20. This has been termed as the "plaza complex" by Hart. It evolved into the strategic center of the town where the municipal hall, church, market and schools could be found. See Donn Hart, The Philippine Plaza Complex: A Focal Point in Cultural Change (New Haven: Yale University, Southeast Asia Studies Cultural Report Series, 1955).

21. It was noted that unlike its Mexican and other Latin American counterparts, the Philippine principality's mestizo character was a product of the racial mixture not only of the natives and Spaniards, but included the Chinese as well. See Dante Siluan, A Study of the Socio-Economic Elite in Philippine Politics and Government, 1946-1963, Ph.D. Dissertation, Australian National University, 1963.

22. Ibid., p. 49.


32. Ibid, p. 188.
33. Benjamin Laurel, nephew of Vice-President Salvador Laurel, lost the race for Batangas governor to Vicente Mayo. Victor Sumulong, nephew of Rep. Francisco Sumulong, on the other hand, was defeated for the Rizal gubernatorial post by Liberal Party candidate Reynaldo San Juan.


40. The candidates in Pateros were Cesar Borja (PDP-Laban / Lakas ng Bansa), Benjamin Borja Jr. (LP), Francisco Borja (Ind.), Apolinario Flores (PDP-Laban) and Damaso Flores (Unido). See Dee Batnag, "All in the Family," Manila Chronicle (January 13, 1988).


47. According to Migdal, state capability includes the capacity to penetrate society, regulate social relationships, extract resources, and appropriate or use resources in determined ways. However, states (like the Philippines) are characterized by a certain duality - their unmistakable strength in penetrating societies is accompanied by their surprising weakness in effecting goal-oriented social changes. See Joel Migdal, Strong Societies and Weak States (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).


49. Elpidio Sta. Romana, "Breakdown and Reconstitution of a Nation-State: Political Crisis in the Philippines, in Transnationalization, the State and the People: The Philippine Case, Part II, Southeast Asian Perspectives Project, United Nations University, 1985, pp. 266-298.


54. Ilocos Norte and Leyte are the home provinces of former President Ferdinand Marcos and his wife Imelda Marcos respectively.

