

## C R E D I T S

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**PROJECT DIRECTORS**

Sheila S. Coronel  
Joel Rocamora

**EDITOR**

Jose F. Lacaba

**INTRODUCTION**

Joel Rocamora

**CONTRIBUTORS**

Sheila S. Coronel  
Marites Dañguilan Vitug  
Chay Florentino-Hofileña  
Glenda M. Gloria  
Eric Gutierrez

**PHOTOGRAPHER**

Alex Baluyut

**RESEARCHER**

Vinia M. Daringuinoo

**BOOK DESIGNER**

Ramón C. Sunico

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# B O S S

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## 5 CASE STUDIES OF LOCAL POLITICS IN THE PHILIPPINES

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*With Articles by*  
*Sheila S. Coronel*  
*Marites Dañguilan Vitug*  
*Glenda M. Gloria*  
*Chay Florentino-Hofileña*  
*Eric Gutierrez*  
*and an Introduction by*  
*Joel Rocamora*  
*Jose F. Lacaba, Editor*

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# INTRODUCTION

CLASSES, BOSSES, GOONS, AND GUNS  
*Re-imagining Philippine Political Culture*

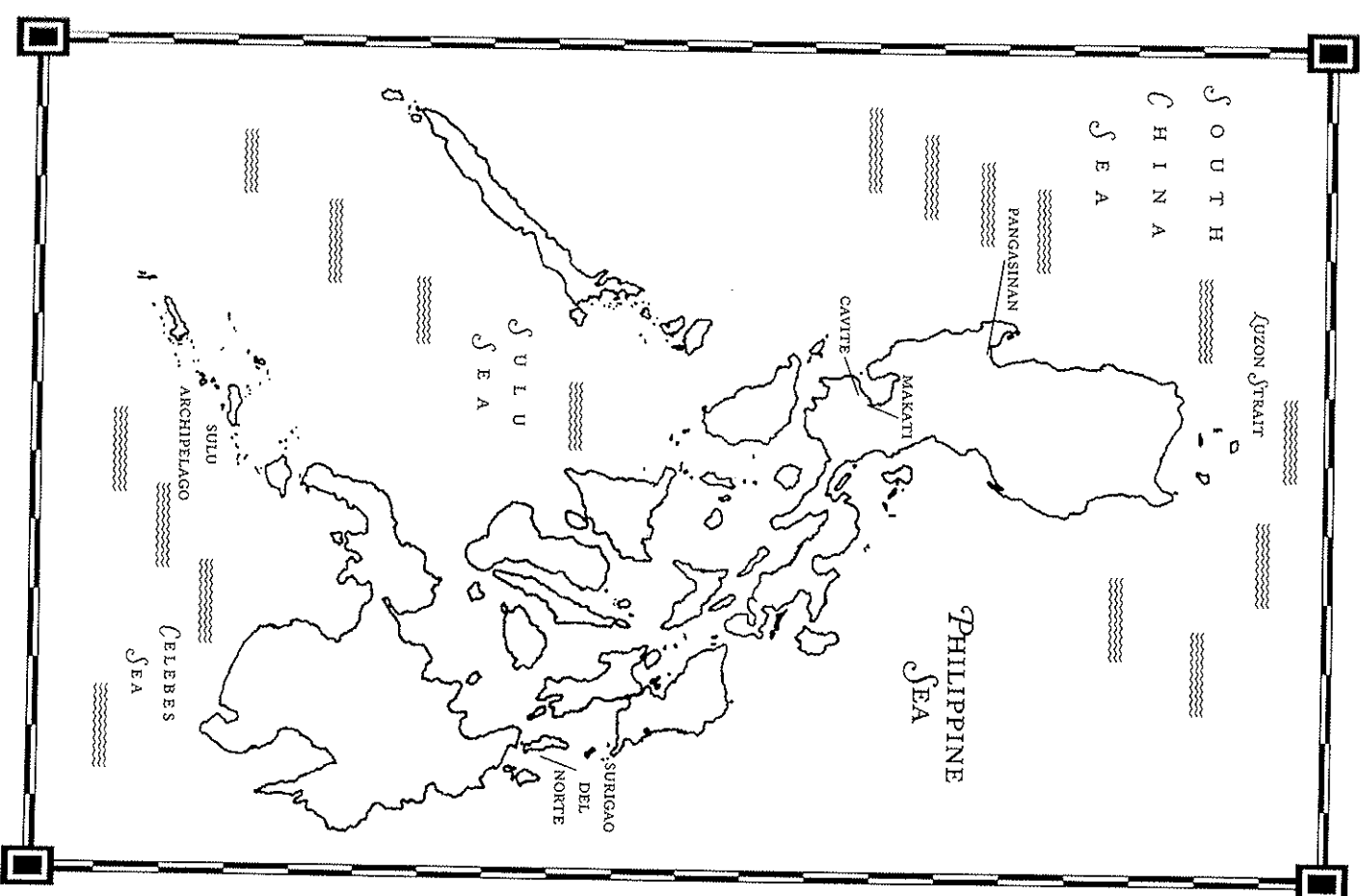
JOEL ROCAMORA

On February 28, 1995, Masbate Representative Tito Espinosa was killed on his way to a celebration of the passage of an electoral reform bill. He was killed, most people believe, by his political opponents from the violence-prone provincial politics of Masbate. Espinosa was not killed because he supported electoral reform. But it might be said that he died because of the failure of electoral reform to lessen the use of violence in Philippine electoral contests.

Successful reform means changing the way people act. Changes in political action are accompanied by changes in the way people think about politics. Unfortunately, debilitating dichotomies infect political discourse in this country. There is a big difference between what politicians and power brokers say on public platforms or in press conferences, and what they discuss among themselves in the backrooms or in the coffeshops of Manila's five-star hotels. There is an equally big difference between the language of everyday politics and the language of reform. The accumulation and exercise of power — the proper subject of politics — is only dimly glimpsed in media and academic discussion of politics.

Media reports of looming electoral battles occasionally resort to the language of cockfighting — identifying who are *llamado* and who are *deñada* among the fighting cocks, detailing how the fighters are grouped together in the grand nationwide “slasher derby” called elections. Hardly anything, however, is said about what is at stake, the amounts wagered by big spenders and penny-ante bettors.

In elections, voters and candidates share the cockfighting ethos. Many voters genuinely enjoy the thrill of the contest, cheering their candidates on, taking sides before and after the actual election. But there is a large chunk of discourse that is not public. Among themselves, politicians carefully discuss what is at stake — who gets what, when and how. The public is excluded from this discourse for the simple reason that it is ex-



cluded from the division of the spoils. The public is doubly excluded because the *sabong* discourse of elections quickly dies down while the jockeying for largesse among politicians continues into the next election.

Another explanation for the reticence of politicians has to do with the dichotomy between the language of everyday politics and the language of reform. When politicians are confident that they can avoid public attribution, they are perfectly happy to talk about hiring relatives and friends, about the money they can make from their elective positions, about the use of violence and threats of violence in their contests. But they have to dissimulate when talking to journalists and academics because, in the language of reform, these everyday acts of politicians translate into nepotism, corruption, and illegality. What is sad is that everyday folk relate more easily to the private language of politicians than to the language of reform.

It is difficult to locate a political death such as Espinosa's in these conflicting discourses. Espinosa's advocacy of electoral reform locates him in the national discourse of reform. But we can understand his murder only through an appreciation of the radically different languages of local politics. He might as well have been killed in Masbate, though he was in fact murdered in Manila.

In this book and in a longer, related research project, the Institute for Popular Democracy hopes to bridge some of these gaps in political discourse. We should, at least, help to enrich public discussion by bringing together separate discourses. If we can increase understanding about how politics is actually conducted, we can also contribute to efforts to move it closer to how it should be conducted.

More specifically, we want to have an impact on public discussions about the 1995 elections. We share the desire expressed by Fr. Joaquin Bernas, S.J., "to make the ballot an instrument not only of legitimization but also for overhauling Philippine political culture."

In his foreword to *1992 and Beyond: Forces and Issues in Philippine Elections*, the joint publication of the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism and the Ateneo Center for Social Policy and Public Affairs, Fr. Bernas wrote: "In the 1992 elections and those that will follow, the goal will no longer be the legitimization of state rulers but the empowerment of agents who can invigorate the state to enable it to conquer the powerful social forces that prey on the misery of the weak and prevent more equitable development. It is a formidable task."

Indeed, it is. Not just because those "agents who can invigorate the state" remain weak and need a whole lot of "empowerment," but because their weakness is partly the result of inadequate understanding of those

"powerful social forces that prey on the misery of the weak," and why the weak participate in their oppressors' legitimization in elections.

Through this book and subsequent publications, we want to contribute to political reform by focusing attention on structures of power in local areas. The choice of local instead of national power structures was determined by several considerations: the 1995 elections are mainly local, much less attention has been devoted to local politics by media and academic studies; and, given the weakness of the forces of reform, it makes all kinds of practical sense to begin reform in local areas.

The main purpose of this essay is to provide an introduction to the case studies that follow. This is necessary because we have only a few case studies, which were chosen more on the basis of availability of writers and their interests than for their value as representative case studies from a predetermined typology of local power. This introduction partrakes of a similar infirmity. It is based on the limited case studies it is introducing and the unsystematized remains of three decades of reading and thinking about Philippine politics.

Apart from its practical value as an introduction to a specific set of studies, writing this introduction prior to the main bulk of research allows a certain degree of intellectual adventurousness, of floating theoretical balloons. The more arrows launched to shoot down these balloons, the better. Subsequent to the publication of this book, we will undertake a range of other case studies which will hopefully allow a more systematic essay on the nature of local power.

#### CENTRAL AND LOCAL

In an influential study of nationalism several years ago, Cornell University professor Benedict Anderson wrote of the nation as an "imagined community." By that phrase, he did not mean that the nation is only a figment of the imagination, but that how we think about the nation shapes how we act within it.

In our case, we tend to think of national and local as a dichotomy, as opposites, instead of imagining the nation as nothing more than the sum of its local parts. When we think "national," we think of Metro Manila—the central government, the financial and corporate center.

Because Metro Manila is also where the top universities and the editorial offices of media are, where basketball, movie, and other entertainment stars live and play, we see it as the center of sophistication. Everything outside of Metro Manila is *probinitya*. Worse, *probinityana, badya*. This view is not altogether inaccurate. Popular perception tends to follow

the actual distribution of power, the centralization of economic and political power in Metro Manila. It is the extension of power relations into the realm of cultural putdowns that is problematical. It does not help to tell a real *probinsyano* that, to a New Yorker, Manila is *banay*.

Our bias against the "local" helps to legitimize centralization, to extend and intensify it. Because Manila is "where it's at," people, especially talented and ambitious people, gravitate towards Manila and deprive local areas of key human resources. Because of the overwhelming presence of Manila in our consciousness, we tend to think of the relationship between Manila and the provinces — more accurately, between "central" and "local" — as an immutable reality. In fact, the relationship has changed over the years. It has a history.

#### NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL

One of the functions of nationalism is to facilitate the distinction between "us" and "them." One inescapable element of our "nationhood" is that what we are — our "us" — was shaped by "them" — by our Spanish and later American colonizers. Our territory is, pure and simple, what was conquered by the Spaniards and later, the Americans. Manila was started on its odyssey as our primate city, our center, by the Spanish decision to locate its central colonial administration, both political and ecclesiastical, in Manila. The Americans only surrendered to the historical momentum set by the Spaniards. By independence, our leaders really had no choice.

In the beginning, everything was local. In the early 16th century, Manila was backwater compared with Jolo. Manila was a village like all the other villages that dotted the archipelago. These small communities had rudimentary economic and political structures. Only Muslim Philipines had developed more sophisticated economies based on long-range seaborne trade, and built larger and more complex political organizations buttressed by Islam. It is understandable, therefore, that the Sulu and Maguindanao sultanates offered more effective resistance to Spanish colonialism than the small *barangay* federations in the rest of the country.

While already the capital by the late 16th century, Manila did not play a major economic role in relation to the rest of the country for most of the next two centuries. Colonial administrators were preoccupied with the galleon trade, which was in Chinese goods exchanged for Mexican silver. Manila played a role as an entrepôt, but not for the rest of the country. Outside Manila, change was slow. Villages were consolidated around plazas centered in churches and *municipios*, the better to collect tribute and

enforce Catholicism. Still, the gulf between Manila and other municipalities, which were both slow to change, was not great at the time. Limited transport and communications also limited popular consciousness of differentiation.

Change only accelerated in the 19th century. British and American capital spurred export agriculture. Food production, often centered in friar estates, increased to feed those engaged in the production of export crops, as well as the growing population in town centers. Manila grew faster than other town centers. But its power and prominence as the Spanish colonial capital was limited by the leading economic role of English and American merchant houses. After ports other than Manila were opened to international trade, export products could flow out of towns closer to production areas. Cities such as Cebu and Iloilo competed with Manila as economic and cultural centers.

It was not until after the Americans took over from the Spaniards that Manila began its headlong plunge into being the Philippines' center of everything. At the turn of the century, Manila had less than a million inhabitants, some 2.9 percent of the enumerated population. By 1992, with an estimated 8.1 million people, the metropolitan Manila area contained some 12.6 percent of the country's population. The concentration is even more pronounced in the economy. Manila — or, more accurately, the Metro Manila area that is now officially known as the National Capital Region (NCR) — accounted for P216 billion of the gross domestic product, just a little less than a third of the country's total P712 billion GDP in 1992.

The unification of economic and political control in one colonial power had an emphatic centralizing effect. Both economic domination and political power were now in the hands of the Americans, and Manila was their political and economic center. The acceleration of economic activity exaggerated the centralizing tendency, more so because the burgeoning export trade quickly focused on the American market. The rapid establishment of a public education system spread the use of English much more widely than Spanish. This provided a powerful cultural tool linking the rest of the country to the center.

The conscious American effort to shape a Filipino national elite probably had the most long-term impact on central-local relations. Where the Spaniards had violently resisted the attempts of a nascent Filipino elite to be integrated into the national colonial structures of power, the Americans carefully orchestrated this integration. Because few Filipinos held economic power that stretched beyond the local, it made sense that the Ameri-

cans began the process with municipal elections. Provincial elections became occasions for coalitions of municipal elites. By the time a national representative body was formed, the coalitional pyramid which became the characteristic structure of Philippine politics had been set.

This structure carried at its core a contradiction between central and local which continues to this day. The structure of representation put in place by the Americans was supposed to translate local to national power through the agency of elections for a national executive and legislature. There was a "national elite" at this time made up of Filipino leaders of the national legislature and top bureaucrats. But American control of the apex of the colonial economic and political structure set limits to this national elite's power. This situation continued even after independence because of the national elite's continued dependence on the Americans. The contradiction might be explained this way: the translation of local to national could not be clinched because the source of national power was as much international as it was local.

The situation can be illustrated by looking at the political role of the "sugar bloc," widely acknowledged in the 1950s and 1960s as kingmakers in national politics. The sugar bloc — comprising the *hacendados* of Negros and Panay — might be said to have been "local," but it had "national" political power in that it had the financial resources necessary to bankroll presidential and senatorial electoral campaigns. This financial capability was based on sugar exports to the American market at premium prices higher than world market prices. The economic power of the sugar bloc, therefore, depended less on domestic factors than on the sugar export quotas allotted to the Philippines by the US government.

American political intervention was often more direct. Few people remember today that the "independence" granted by the Americans in 1945 was heavily hedged. The problem was not just the infamous parity amendment. The exchange rate between the peso and the US dollar could not be changed without the consent of the US treasury. The Armed Forces of the Philippines could not buy armaments except from the Americans. The Americans intervened in elections by means fair and foul. CIA operatives ran President Magsaysay's presidential campaign, drugged President Quirino, and reportedly distributed damaged condoms in nationalist Senator Claro Recto's name.

This "unsettled" relationship between local and national was exacerbated by the adoption of the American presidential form of government, with its powerful chief executive. Through control over national budget

formulation and disbursement, government contracts, and licensing authority, the chief executive controls much of the economic resources of the Philippine state. The president also dispenses the major part of the patronage resources of the government through control over line agencies. But without effective political parties, the president is dependent on local elites for electoral mobilization. As a result, local elites can negotiate effectively during elections and, between elections, through the Congress, the bastion of local power in the central government.

These are among the main sources of weakness of the Philippine state. The government, in particular the central government, is the dispenser of economic power — export quotas, contracts and licenses, subsidized loans. But the central government has at best weak control over those chunks of the economy controlled by foreigners or those local business people whose success depends on foreign ties. This, plus the central government's dependence on local elites for its authority, has made it difficult to capture larger and larger portions of the economic surplus through taxation and other means. Without such resources, the central government can only dispense largesse; it cannot finance economic growth. The constant scramble for government largesse, moreover, compromises the uses of planning to promote economic growth, because even the best economic plans cannot be implemented.

The political uses of violence can be best understood from this perspective. One of the defining characteristics of a state is control over the legitimate uses of violence. The prevalence of violence in local Philippine politics is an indication of how weak the Philippine state is. In Sulu politics, for instance, competing political clans fight pitched battles with hundreds of heavily armed men on the streets of the provincial capital. As Eric Gutierrez's study shows, even attempts by the central government to control local violence end up exacerbating it. Successful government efforts to win over commanders of the Moro National Liberation Front in the 1970s only served to create new local political warlords in the 1980s.

The greater incidence of violence in Sulu politics is partly a function of Moro history. Centuries of successful anticolonial warfare helped shape Moro consciousness and social structure around a well-developed capacity for violence. The same anticolonial resistance attenuated the region's connections with the rest of the archipelago. The weakness of local-national connections is expressed today in the limited economic and social services of government in the province of Sulu. Another way of putting it is that the central government's writ does not go very far in Sulu. If Moro history

is a source of Sulu particularity, the weak central government capacity to impose its will establishes a connection with other areas. Sulu, in this sense, illustrates a more general condition.

Political violence is directly related to the intensely personal character of Philippine politics, especially at the local level. As such, it is inextricably linked to the continued dominance of political clans. In Masbate province, for example, the clan to which the assassinated Representative Tito Espinosa belonged has been dominant for most of the last three decades. Challengers have apparently felt that they can only break this dominance through violence. Tito Espinosa's brother, Moises, was himself killed in the middle of his term in Congress. Most people in Masbate believe that the subsequent murder of political opponent Jolly Fernandez was political revenge.

From the perspective of the "national" — the central government's monopoly over the legitimate uses of violence — the solution to Tito Espinosa's killing should be simple: find the killers and "bring them to justice." Murder is an individual's crime, that of the killer and his co-conspirators. In our judicial system, there is no such thing as a "clan murder." But if the national government cannot "solve" Tito Espinosa's murder in ways that make sense to people in Masbate, the locals will seek a different kind of "justice" in the resumption of the long-running cycle of violence in the province's clan politics.

#### CENTRALIZATION, DECENTRALIZATION

It was this logjam in local-national relations that President Marcos tried to break. One of the first things he did after he declared martial law was to abolish Congress, the bastion of local politicians' power in the central government. He then moved against two of the main sources of local political power: he did away with local elections, and he made the first determined effort by government to control unlicensed firearms. At the central government level, Marcos consolidated civilian and military power around the office of the president. Marcos not only increased the military budget and personnel, he also made the military the arbiter of civil and political rights under the guise of counterinsurgency. This unprecedented centralization of power is best described by the characterization of the Marcos post-1972 regime as a dictatorship.

Marcos complemented his political moves with efforts to control the economy. The most important of these efforts was the establishment of quasi-government monopolies in the main export industries, sugar and coconut. Although his key move was against the sugar industry, symbol-

ized politically in his attack on the Lopez family, Marcos also established control over smaller export crops such as bananas, and over the external and domestic trade in grains. Using the massive inflow of foreign loans, Marcos tried to set up industrial conglomerates similar to the *chaebol* of South Korea and the *zaibatsu* of Japan to serve as foci of industrialization. These agricultural monopolies and industrial conglomerates were placed under businessmen whose economic power was mainly dependent on Marcos's monopoly control over the central government.

Marcos's audacious political experiment collapsed because, despite his tremendous political skills, he failed to develop a core of lieutenants capable of implementing his grand vision. His economic and military cronies and his relatives were, in the end, corrupt petty tyrants who were unequal to the task. This became clear when most of his cronies' industrial conglomerates fell like a deck of cards in the aftermath of the collapse of the money market in 1981. Marcos's room for maneuver was then erased by the onset of the Third World debt crisis, which removed foreign sources of financing in 1982. The brazen murder of Ninoy Aquino in 1983 served as the emotional focus of upper-class disenchantment, which had already been brought on by the deep economic crisis. That it took still another two-and-a-half years before the regime collapsed was a measure of the weakness of the elite anti-Marcos opposition.

The biggest achievement of the Corason Aquino presidency that succeeded the Marcos dictatorship was its survival. That Aquino managed to preside over the election of her successor after six years of coup attempts, natural disasters, and economic crises was accomplishment enough. But she could have taken the central-local dialectic to a higher level by strengthening the central government while restoring democracy. With unprecedented popular support, she could have easily achieved key social reforms and bargained more effectively with the International Monetary Fund and international creditors. Instead, she chose to restore the power of local elites and unnecessarily weaken the central government.

The key decisions involved restoring the presidential form of government with a bicameral legislature, and allowing her brother Jose Cojuangco to build a ruling political party, the Laban ng Demokratikong Pilipino (LDP), anchored on coalitions with local politicians, many of them heavily compromised by collaboration with the Marcos dictatorship. Aquino could quite easily have formed a reformist political party with a capacity for social mobilization in support of reform. At a time when she could have bargained for debt relief, Aquino chose an "honorable" debt strategy that meant paying "dishonorable" loans and turning unpaid private loans

into public debt. Where Marcos accepted IMF dictation under duress, Aquino did it willingly, probably without understanding the implications of her decision.

President Aquino returned the Philippine political system to its pre-1972 structures. But the rest of Philippine society could not be similarly brought backward in time. The contradictions between economic development and the political system which served as a societal backdrop to the declaration of martial law had not been resolved. If anything, those contradictions had gotten more intense.

Government continued to be perceived as an obstacle to economic growth because of corruption, inefficiency, and its limited capacity to provide infrastructure and economic services. But the political space for dealing with this structural contradiction was not available at the time, given the tense political confrontations that marked the transition from the dictatorship. The confrontations had first to be neutralized, and this was accomplished only after the successful transfer of power from the Aquino to the Ramos regime.

#### RAMOS REGIME

President Ramos has dealt squarely with the structural problem in his speeches on "Philippines 2000" and on the issue of democracy and development. Democracy, President Ramos insists, is consistent with development. In his 1995 report to the nation, the President said: "We sailed against the authoritarian tide in Asia by striving to achieve development with democracy as our anchor and our guide."<sup>1</sup>

Close Ramos associate Jose Almonte says "authoritarianism cannot make an initially ineffectual government run by an irresponsible elite any more effective. As we saw from the example of the Marcos-regime, near absolute power makes such a regime only more arbitrary, more corrupt and more voracious."<sup>2</sup>

Despite these seemingly unequivocal public pronouncements, many people suspect that Ramos and his lieutenants continue to harbor authoritarian tendencies — not just because both Ramos and Almonte are former generals, but because of the "strong state" rhetoric that has been a constant theme running through President Ramos's speeches. In his State of the Nation message on July 26, 1993, President Ramos said:

I offer a strategic framework for development which will be guided by a strong State. By a strong State I mean one that can assert our country's strategic interests because it has relative autonomy over the influence of oligarchic groups. For

the last 47 years, we have had a political system that has been too responsive to groups possessing wealth and power enough to bend the State to do their will. Such a political system has distorted our economy and rendered government ineffectual. This is the reason why the Philippines has lagged so far behind the East Asian Tigers.<sup>3</sup>

The Ramos regime's record in struggles with "oligarchic groups" — also called "monopolies" in regime discourse — has been at best spotty. Where the regime had recourse to administrative measures to effect changes in monopoly structures in certain lines of business, as in telecommunications and interisland shipping, it has had a measure of success. But it backed down when battles with more powerful groups such as the banking cartel spilled over into other political arenas. What is clear is that in contrast to Aquino, who worked assiduously at giving away the powers of the central state, the Ramos regime is trying to regain these powers and acquire new ones.<sup>4</sup>

The contrast with Marcos's style is also instructive. Marcos dealt with building a strong state by declaring martial law and using extra-legal means to grab corporations and whole sectors of the economy. Ramos has been more careful. He has slowly accumulated power through a combination of technocratic and trapo means. This is illustrated by his so-far-successful handling of preparations for the 1995 elections. By arranging a common electoral slate with the Laban ng Demokratikong Pilipino (LDP) majority in the Senate, a trapo maneuver, the administration secured passage of the GATT treaty, a technocratic goal.

The regime faces massive obstacles, one of them in the sphere of national-international relations. The closure of US military bases, the decline of American economic and military assistance, and the shift to domestic concerns in the Clinton administration has ended almost a century of intense American intervention. But low domestic savings and investment and large foreign debt service payments keep the economy dependent on international financing. The gatekeeper of international financial flows for weaker developing economies such as the Philippine is the IMF. The Philippines holds the record for having the largest number of agreements with the IMF.

The IMF impinges on the Ramos regime's "strong state" ambitions by keeping it bound within narrow fiscal and monetary parameters. A state operating within the restrictive budgetary limits set by the IMF cannot be an activist "strong state." The budget surplus in 1994 was achieved at the expense of public investment. The government's Reaganomic monetary

policy has produced an overvalued peso which facilitates foreign debt service payments (some bilateral loans were actually prepaid in 1994) and the inflow of foreign portfolio investment. But it also inhibits exports and pushes imports, the main sources of a massive balance-of-trade deficit in 1994 that threatens a Mexican-style crisis a couple of years down the road.

The President apparently does not feel too hemmed in by the IMF because he agrees with the technocratic efficacy of IMF impositions. As long as the economy is buoyant, there isn't too much public pressure against the IMF-imposed policies. The regime is riding on the crest of the economy's 5.5 percent 1994 GNP growth. Implementing the administration's social reform agenda will require a lot more effort because the agenda's goals can only be achieved by going against the momentum of economic growth set by the neoliberal policies of stabilization and liberalization. If the regime is serious about social reform and taking its anti-monopoly campaign further than what has been achieved, it will have to pay much more attention to its political base.

The President and his closest lieutenants are not *trapos*, or traditional politicians. They come out of either technocratic or military backgrounds. The technocrats derive their power from their international connections and from the more modern sectors of the economy, such as banking. The military is an interesting political base, not just because of the political uses of its monopoly over the legal uses of violence, but because it is one of the few truly national institutions in the country. The removal of the Philippine Constabulary, the only garrison force in the armed forces, from the military structure strengthened this "national" character. Apart from the military's ideological affinity with technocracy, this "national" character is what separates the military from the *trapos* who are quintessentially "local" political animals.

President Ramos is less dependent on *trapo* support than other presidents in the past because of his base in the military. The fact that he won with less than a quarter of the vote in 1992 has made him less beholden to *trapos*. Since *trapo* support mainly went to other candidates, he had fewer political obligations to repay. He used his political capital to piece together a "rainbow coalition" in the lower house. The recently concluded coalition between Lakas-NUCD and the LDP has given the administration control over the Senate, thus completing a two-and-a-half-year struggle to secure a compliant legislature. The administration's control over elective local government positions is even greater because local politicians trooped to the administration party soon after the elections in 1992. This control over elective local positions and the national legislature is likely to increase after the May 1995 elections.

## CONTRADICTORY TRENDS

At midterm, President Ramos might, with some justification, say that he has gone some distance in strengthening the Philippine state. As long as the economy is moving forward, he can negotiate for more room to maneuver from the IMF and other international creditors. He has strengthened the executive in its relations with Congress and local governments. He has reversed the transfer of power from the central government to local politicians that had begun during President Aquino's time. But these trends are occurring against a backdrop of deeper economic and political developments that seem to contradict them. Many people believe that the locus of economic and political change in the coming years will be away from Manila.

The precise character of these changes has not yet been defined. We hope to contribute to this crucial research task through the larger research project on local structures of power that this book is a part of. But the main outlines of these trends are already clear. Because there just isn't more room physically for industry in Manila, industrial growth is going to be located outside — in the Calabarzon area, in Subic and Cebu, and further afield in places like General Santos City in Mindanao. The dispersal of industry feeds into internally generated growth in these places to spur much faster growth. During the six-year period of the Aquino regime, regional GDP growth in Central Luzon and Southern Tagalog was considerably higher than in Manila. Province-level comparisons will probably show even faster growth in places like Cebu and Davao.

These developments could potentially reverse the political economy of central-local relations in the past century. The agro-export economy built by the Americans centralized power in Manila where the central government controlled access to international markets. This continued into the postwar period, when foreign financial resources and revenue that had been sucked out of local areas added to the center's power. Central-local economic relations were reflected in and exacerbated by the highly centralized presidential system of government. But if economic growth in local areas not dependent on favors from the central government continues a whole chain of changes in the political realm will follow.

The reflection of these economic trends in politics is now being felt. Decentralization through the 1991 Local Government Code was not just the result of foreign-funded local government programs or the foresight of legislators such as Aquilino Pimentel, Jr. Political decentralization is occurring in the midst of economic decentralization. Local politicians naturally want more political control over resources generated by more rapid local economic growth.



The Local Government Code provides a legal framework for these claims. Although local governments were supposed to receive 20 percent of national internal revenue taxes, in practice they received much less. Between 1988 and 1991, for example, they received only 11 percent of taxes collected, or only a little over two percent of government appropriations. Now, under the Local Government Code, local government units, or LGUs, are to receive 40 percent of collections, and this is supposed to be automatically released. LGUs also have much broader power to tax their areas and to raise revenues by other means, including loans and development assistance.

But the process is apparently just beginning. Its impact has been limited by the long period of economic stagnation starting in the massive 1982 financial crisis. If the 5.5 percent GNP growth of 1994 can be sustained in the next few years, the process will move beyond the administrative decentralization mandated by the Local Government Code and spill over into deeper changes in the character of central-local political relations. The central government will become less dependent on foreign and local financial resources if it can undertake reforms that will enable it to capture a larger share of a growing economy. Local politicians, in turn, will be less dependent on central government resources. Not that the tug-of-war between central and local will end. Rather, it will be conducted in different ways.

At this point, we can only guess what the full range of changes will be. It is not just that the process is extremely complex and is only at its initial stages. The translation of economic change into political change follows a certain logic in the long term. But in the short and medium term, specific steps have to be taken by individual and collective political actors. These steps have to be taken within the context of existing structures and culturally embedded patterns of political action. If economic change pushes political change, existing structures inhibit change. To explore the possibilities for political reform in the present conjuncture, we have to look more carefully at these structures of local political action.

#### PATRONS AND BOSSES

Our "Mamla-centric" political discourse hides the fact that relations between citizens and central political institutions are mediated through local political structures. It has only been in the last few elections for national officials that what has been called the "market vote" — the vote that is not secured through local politicians — has become increasingly important. Even citizen-central government political exchanges in between elec-

tions — permits, licenses, patronage — are mediated through political fixers among local politicians. Studies of Philippine politics therefore have to begin with what might be called the basic unit of Philippine politics — the relationship between the citizen and the local politician.

The "patron-client" framework that was put forward in the 1960s has remained relevant much longer than it deserves because it goes directly to the heart of this essential analytical task. The quintessential patron-client relationship is that of landlord and tenant, though it also describes other kinds of political relationships. It has been defined as "an exchange relationship or instrumental friendship between two individuals of different status in which the patron uses his own influence and resources to provide for the protection and material welfare of his lower status client and his family, who, for his part, reciprocates by offering general support and assistance, including personal services, to the patron."<sup>5</sup>

This framework has been criticized many times because it does not give sufficient attention to the inequality in the relationship, because it emphasizes "valorized reciprocity, smooth interpersonal relations, and kinship and fictive kinship bonds." Other critics say that whatever the validity of the framework may have been in the past, the political situation has changed and "patron-client" ties have been replaced by more "modern" political relations. These are valid criticisms. But analysts continue to use this framework because it comes close to everyday political discourse among politicians and probably still the majority of the people.

By most standards, Makati is one of the most "modern" cities in the country, if not the most modern. Its politics should be furthest away from an analytical framework derived from landlord-tenant relationships. Yet Glenda Gloria's account of Makati politics makes the relationship between Mayor Jejomar "Jojo" Binay and his base in Makati's urban poor communities look suspiciously like a patron-client relationship. A pre-EDSA veteran of "modern" progressive activism, Binay begins "his day early, jogging along the streets of Makati's poor districts and stopping by *carinderias* to break bread with jeepney drivers and street workers." He ends his day "with a visit to every funeral site in town."

Binay undergoes this bizarre daily ritual because he knows that the language of politics most Filipinos understand is the highly personalized language of coffee and *pan de sal* breakfasts and funerals. He knows that the political relationship most Filipinos are comfortable with is translated into a one-on-one, or at best a family-to-family, relationship. And why shouldn't most Filipinos feel this way when there aren't too many other structures that carry political weight in their day-to-day lives? But class-

struggle enthusiasts need not fret. People are perfectly aware that these "reciprocal" relationships carry a built-in inequality, that more and more politicians are, plain and simple, crooks and not benign patrons.

Young American political scientist John Sidel's framework comes closer to everyday political discourse, at least to that of the oppressed "client" if not the self-justificatory "patron." His focus on what he calls "bossism" — a "sophisticated system of brigandage" — is more emotionally satisfying (and, of course, more PC, or "politically correct") than the bland academic jargon of clientelism. Sidel points out that "an examination of the complex processes through which inequality, indebtedness, landlessness, and poverty are created has highlighted how so-called patrons have — through predatory and heavily coercive forms of primitive accumulation and monopoly rent-capitalism — expropriated the natural and human resources of the archipelago from the broad mass of the population, thereby generating and sustaining the scarcity, insecurity, and dependency which underpins their rule as bosses."<sup>6</sup>

It is no accident that Sidel's framework is especially appropriate for Sheila Coronel's study of contemporary Cavite politics. Cavite was one of the two provinces that Sidel based his study on, and Juanito Remulla is a particularly apt "boss" — a "modernizing goon," as some have called him. Cavite is also a good case study of how "modernization" affects political relationships. Despite Sidel's critique of the patron-client framework, Coronel's study shows that Remulla's use of violence and wheeling-and-dealing with foreign investors is made possible by a painstakingly built patron-client-based political machine.

"It would be a mistake," Coronel insists, "... to think that Remulla governs by sheer terror alone. The governor may be feared and, by the dispossessed peasantry, even loathed. But in Cavite, Remulla is also a magnificent patron. Two mornings a week in his office at the provincial capitol in Trece Martires and two evenings a week in his home in Imus, the governor receives a continuous stream of favor-seekers.... The callers bring with them every imaginable request. One morning at the provincial capitol in November 1994, two teachers from Dasmariñas were asking for the repair of school toilets; an old couple from the Senior Citizens Association of Bulhan, Silang, wanted Christmas packers for the elderly; a young college graduate needed a recommendation for a job in Monterey Farms; a barangay captain was asking for the delivery of construction materials for a village hall. Remulla sat behind a huge desk, smiling and making small talk with the visitors, all of whom left the office with the governor's assurance, written on the margins of their letters of request, that what they wanted would be granted."

If this machine worked perfectly, it would not be necessary to use violence. In Cavite's case, it becomes necessary to use violence because the reaction of Cavite's farmers to what are, in effect, expropriations of their land, cannot be contained in the personalized patron-client system's mechanisms for dealing with such intensification of exploitation. The reactions of Cavite peasants and workers are nothing else but class action. This interpretation fits within what Sidel calls a "neo-Marxist" approach which posits that "the penetration of capitalism into the Philippine countryside, the commercialization of agriculture, and the resultant trends of increasing landlessness and rising inequalities in income distribution narrowed the scope and effectiveness of clientelistic exchanges, undermined patron-client relations, and paved the way for intensifying factionalism, social unrest and class conflict."

Sidel is as critical of this approach as he is of the patron-client framework. "The myriad manifestations of bossism," Sidel asserts, "reflect neither the strength (or decline) of patron-client relations nor the resilience and rule of a landed oligarchy, but rather the peculiar institutional structures of the Philippine state, whose lineages may be traced over successive phases of state formation."<sup>7</sup> Sidel's own historical account does not discount the changes in the Philippine political economy pushing class formation; he takes issue instead with the extension of the analysis to the "weak state, strong society" framework currently in vogue in both academic and government circles.

Sidel constructs his own interpretation of how this framework might be used to analyze the Philippines, drawing on works that are not even directly about the Philippines. He might have done better criticizing the framework's use in a specific work on the Philippines such as Ternario Rivera's thesis.<sup>8</sup>

The proposition that the dominant class in the Philippines is the landlord class, one strong enough to keep the Philippine state weak through its exactions, is a theoretical straw man. A dominant ruling class strong enough, on its own, to keep a state weak is also strong enough to take the state over completely and bend it to its class will, use it against competing classes and in the process, turn it into a "strong state."

In Rivera's analysis, the Philippine landlord class does not fulfill its supposed historic role to dismantle itself and make way for the bourgeoisie. This happened not because the landlord class was strong enough to prevent its historic demise, but because it was too weak to transform itself into the bourgeoisie and usher in a new mode of production. Instead, part of the landlord class transformed itself into the import-substitution-in-

dustrialization bourgeoisie. When the ISI phase is exhausted, the same and/or additional segments of the landlord class shift into export-oriented industrialization. It is this chameleon-like capacity of the landlord class to transpose itself into another class without completely becoming that class that keeps it literally in business, but not strong enough to shape the state around its own interests.

#### DEMOCRACY AND THE PHILIPPINE STATE

In the end, these arcane academic debates justify themselves only insofar as they contribute to our understanding of the key political question of our time — the connection between democracy and development. The dominant frameworks for studying Philippine politics, the patron-client and what Sidel calls the “neo-Marxist” approaches, are embedded within at times only implicit but no less definite assumptions on these issues. They also contain prescriptions for political action, though mostly by extrapolation, because academics are reticent about going from the descriptive to the prescriptive in their work.

Carl Lande, who first developed the patron-client framework in the early 1960s, thought that patron-client relations were an adequate base for democracy. “This pattern of persistent bifactionalism — allegedly reflected in ‘the unrestrictedness, the closeness, and the intensity of competition for elective office at all levels of government’ — guaranteed that politicians were ‘highly responsive’ to their constituents and that ordinary voters exerted ‘substantial influence . . . upon decision-making.’ Examining the two-party system that predominated in the pre-marital law years, one scholar concluded that ‘each party has had a reasonable chance of winning a good number of elections — and neither party, having won control of a constituency anywhere in the country, has been able to take its continued hegemony for granted.’”<sup>9</sup>

Lande was not bothered by the obvious inequalities in the patron-client relationship because he operated within the “modernization theory” framework dominant at that time in American political science. In this framework, democracy is a matter of fine-tuning formal institutions of constitutional democracy so that they adequately fulfill their “functions.” For Lande, an essentially “democratic” patron-client system of political relations buttresses these institutions. Because the resulting political system is democratic, economic inequalities will be lessened in the long term through a process of bargaining and negotiation that is at work not only in the economy but also in the political system.

A later variation of “modernization theory” held that patron-client relations would give way to more “modern” political machines in the aftermath of increasing commercialization of agriculture and greater urbanization. Traditional politicians, landlords dabbling in politics, would be replaced by “professional” politicians; families and clans would be replaced by more “modern” institutions such as political parties. Paradoxically, the erosion of patron-client ties, the very element in Philippine political culture identified by Lande as the bedrock of Philippine democracy, is now seen as indicative of democratization.<sup>10</sup>

These theories about Philippine democracy did not survive Marcos’s inauguration of 14 years of dictatorship in 1972. It was not just that neither patron-client ties nor their supposed replacement, political machines, were unable to prevent the demise of democracy. The long years of the dictatorship also saw the rise of class-based peasant and workers’ movements centered in the work of the Communist Party of the Philippines and its armed wing, the New People’s Army. There were also multi-class, issue-based social movements that proliferated in the late 1970s and the first half of the 1980s. These developments, plus Marcos’s audacious attempt to reshape the Philippine upper classes, might be said to be the social phenomena that “neo-Marxist” theorists tried to capture.

After 1986, political practice again began to outpace theory. Philippine democracy — such as it is — had been restored, but without any significant increase in the political power of either class-based mass organizations or multi-class social movements that were supposed to be the harbingers of true democracy. President Aquino’s deliberate diffusion of central government powers to local politicians returned politics to their preferred arenas and instruments of political action. It should then not be hard to understand why, by the 1990s, studies of clans and families again became intellectually fashionable. Philippine politics in the 1990s does look very much like an “anarchy of families.”

What are we left with then? What framework do we use to understand Philippine politics at this time, barely five years into the turn of the century? I have to admit that I have learned more about Philippine politics from Sidel’s studies of “bossism” in Cebu and Cavite, and from *Anarchy of Families*, a collection of essays edited by Al McCoy, than from most of the other books about Philippine politics that I have read. The data on the continuing relevance of clans, presented in books published by the Institute of Popular Democracy, is persuasive. Still, I take issue with these works because, while they are closer to what I see and hear of politics in the Philippines present, they do not say anything to me about where the future of Philippine politics might lie.

The Sidel, McCoy, and IPD "school" of studies of Philippine politics does not deny that there was an increase in class-based and multi-class political action by social movements during the Marcos period. These movements were weakened after 1986, but they continue today with new orientations and different organizational forms. The fact that these movements have not managed to accumulate much political power does not prove that political action outside of clans and families is impossible. Sociological possibilities do not translate automatically into political action, much less effective political action.

#### THE LANGUAGES OF REFORM AND REVOLUTION

Many popular organizations outside of those in the national democratic movement would not be happy to be labeled "Marxist," even if one qualifies that term with the prefix "neo." But if we narrow the meaning of "neo-Marxist" to a preference for political action against traditional politicians, and against the economic and political structures they dominate, by organizing along class and social-movement lines, a major portion of the political spectrum of popular organizations would be included. In this sense, they also suffer from a major blind spot of the neo-Marxist approach, its failure to appreciate the everyday language of politics.

It is this hole in the discourse of the Left in the Philippines, both revolutionary and reform-oriented, that is one of the major reasons for its failure to acquire significant political power. This is not to say that these popular organizations have not succeeded in organizing large numbers of people; they have. But they have failed to translate these large organizational bases into significant power within the Philippine state, whether they are trying to work within or to subvert it. To acquire such power, you have to reach outside of your own ranks. You have to be able to translate your organizational base into votes, or to reach levels of popular approval which will enable you to paralyze the state and mobilize support for a combination of military and mass actions for toppling the government. In Gramsci's terms, you have to acquire ideological hegemony.

The armed underground has different problems from aboveground groups. The success of the underground is measured by its ability to develop members with high levels of commitment and capacity for sacrifice. To do this, it has to get them to break with competing orientations and loyalties to families, clans, and other non-progressive or, worse, "counter-revolutionary" social institutions. Its attack on ruling class ideology is, of course, *sine qua non*. Despite Maoist exhortations to "learn from the people," the underground's approach to ordinary people is hedged by its con-

ception of "false consciousness" — that the "masses" are alienated from its own class interests by the ideological hegemony of the ruling classes.

The problems that such an approach has created is illustrated in a study of local politics in Baraan. "The NPA's organizing strategy was problematic because it tried to fit the entire political universe into a world which has its own logic and its own process of rationalizing events and situations. . . . Images such as the feudal system, the comprador-bourgeoisie and the imperialists, which the NPA organizers repeatedly claimed as the roots of all societal evils, remain incoherent images. They do not represent anything or cohere in the recurrent patterns of thinking or habits of the community. The problem does not lie in the failure of the underground to identify the appropriate connection between their grand narrative — the national democratic analysis and program — and the daily problems confronting the people, but in its attempt to introduce its own narrative and its own language to a community that has its own narrative."<sup>11</sup>

The CPP/NPA succeeded in building a strong base in what might be called the country's sociological periphery — alienated youth, peasants in isolated, hilly areas, and segments of the urban working class. It has the most difficulty working among what it calls "middle forces." During the highly polarized last years of the Marcos dictatorship, the CPP did succeed in organizing large numbers of these "middle forces" around what it used to derisively call "petty bourgeois" issues. But on the brink of Marcos's defeat, the CPP pulled back into its ideological redoubt and isolated itself because it refused to work within the confines of the broad anti-dictatorship movement.

Aboveground groups have had similar problems. Though progressive coalitions have won a few victories through mass actions, their issues tend to focus on opposition to specific government policies such as the oil price hike in early 1994. Politicians such as Miriam Santiago have had more success in tapping more universally popular issues such as anti-corruption and anti-trapo issues. This difficulty with connecting with popular consciousness has resulted in the abject failure of progressive forays into the electoral arena. Once again, the problem is not the issues carried by progressive candidates, but their failure to understand that the personal approach, the continuous handshaking and baby-kissing, is as much a part of the everyday language of politics as their issues.

As corrupt and mean and self-serving as *trapos* are, they understand, and are adept at, manipulating the ideological-cultural and quasi-religious matrix of local politics. Marites Dañugilan Virug's study of the Ecleo family in Surigao del Norte provides an interesting case study of the religio-

cultural dimensions of local politics. The Eccleos started out without the usual economic and political instruments of local politicians, though they built up these resources once they were in power. Their main source of power is their control of the Philippine Benevolent Missionaries Association (PBMA), a religious sect with many members in Surigao. What is interesting about the PBMA is not its theology, which is eclectic and unsystematic, but the way the Eccleos have shaped the religious community around political and economic activities, most of it to the Eccleo family's benefit.

The deficiencies of progressive discourse are also evident in its approaches to central-local politics. The contributions of the Left in central and national political discourse are not often appreciated. At a time when upper and middle class groups were busy collaborating with the Marcos dictatorship, Left groups devised and popularized a whole range of issues which gradually weakened the dictatorship and prepared the ground for its downfall. This was achieved through painstaking work in local areas. But the strategies and political predispositions of the Left also contributed to the depreciation of local politics.

The impact of theory on political practice is most evident in the CPP/NPA. CPP strategy is anchored on the "seizure of state power," for which read: the central state. This is to be accomplished through careful organizing in local areas in support of armed struggle. The result in approaches to local structures of power, however, was one part avoidance and another part opportunism. As long as local politicians and holders of economic power did not get in the way of building up the NPA's armed capability, the CPP generally avoided engaging them. Only local holders of power who participated in the military's counter-insurgency operations were attacked. Otherwise, arrangements were made for their financial contributions through "revolutionary taxation," in return for delivering the vote of organized villages.

Partly in reaction to the CPP/NPA's "seize the state" approach, development NGOs, those connected to other political blocs and independents, began to develop small-scale, barrio-based livelihood projects and the people's organizations to implement them. After some time, these NGOs discovered that this work was limited by local structures of economic and political power. Building more people's organizations and devising more socioeconomic projects was "simple accumulation" of power. More "complex" accumulation required fighting against these local structures. The problem is that these local structures of power are constructed in larger geographical units than the barrios where NGO projects are. Thus, the trend towards "area development" among development NGOs.

The "area development" approach has been accompanied by efforts to "scale up" the economic capability of NGO-PO projects, to move from village credit associations to rural banks, from barrio-based marketing cooperatives to rural-urban trading structures. These groups have also begun to take elections seriously. Because it is clear that progressive groups do not have sufficient electoral clout nationally, much of the electoral work is pitched at building up strength locally. There is a sea change in orientation here. Moving from treating elections as arenas for propaganda, as extensions of national advocacy, to actually trying to win is most importantly moving towards taking the local seriously.

Accumulating local power will require engaging the culture of the local. It is in the attempts of progressive groups to participate in elections that the distance between the languages of reform and everyday politics is most stark. How to look at vote-buying is a perfect example of this gulf. More often than not, losing reform candidates blame their opponent's vote-buying and come away bitter at "voters who should know better" than to sell their votes. But to most voters in rural areas and urban poor communities, getting a little bit of money during elections is not something to be embarrassed about. It is an expression of a personalized relationship with politicians that is perceived as being no different from asking a politician for money for funeral expenses or hospital bills.

There are also simple economic explanations. People are poor and they do not feel the impact of government on their daily lives. They experience the results of elections in terms of whether they have personal access to winning politicians. This does not mean that reform groups have to accept vote-buying. Through their organizing work, they should intensify popular claims on government: feeder roads, irrigation, less abusive police, punctual and conscientious teachers. It is only through these struggles that people will gradually get used to the idea that government does make a difference. It is only at this point that voters will vote less because of the personal access that voting for certain politicians gives, and more because of what those politicians can do to make government more responsive to all constituents.

What has to be done by anyone who wants change, reformers and revolutionaries alike, is to engage the people in concrete struggles based on concrete conditions. But this cannot be done without entering the people's consciousness, without, as a postmodernist might say, engaging their narratives. It will also require bridging gaps: between central and local, between Manila and the provinces, between all of the "modern" languages — of academic theories, of reform, of revolution — and the everyday language of politics.

This is not just the task of "national" shapers of discourse — of journalists, academics, conscious reformers and revolutionaries. Politicians such as Masbate Representative Tiro Espinosa, who might be characterized as "reform *trappo*," will probably be more effective in undertaking these tasks. Espinosa supported the anti-dynasty component of the Comelec's electoral reform proposals. Its passage would have limited clan politics and in turn defused the intense personalization of electoral contests which is the main source of political violence. With a dose of political "poetic license," one might then accuse those of his colleagues who prevented the anti-dynasty bill's passage of being partly responsible for his death.

Manila, January 28, 1995

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Liha sa Bayan*, January 4, 1995, photocopy of original, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Jose Almonte, "The Politics of Development," *Manila Times*, July 26, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Fidel V. Ramos, "State of the Nation, 26 July 1993," Office of the Secretary, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> For a more extensive discussion of the political framework of Philipinos 2000, see "The Ramos Administration: Challenge of Philipinos 2000," Chapter 6 of my book, *Breaking Through: The Struggle within the Communist Party Philippines* (Manila: Anvil Publishing, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> James C. Scott and Benedict J. Kerkvliet, "How Traditional Rurals Lose Legitimacy: A Theory with Special Reference to Southeast Asia," *Culturas et Development*, V.3 (1973), p. 502. This and other quotes and many pages take off from John Thayer Sidel, "Coercion, Capital, and the Post-Colonial State: Bossism in the Postwar Philippines," Ph.D. dissertation, Cornell University, January 1995.

<sup>6</sup> Sidel, p. 509.

<sup>7</sup> Sidel, p. 21.

<sup>8</sup> Temario Rivera, "Class, the State and Foreign Capital: The Philippine Industrialization, 1950-1986," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1991.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Sidel, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> Kit G. Machado, "Changing Patterns of Leadership Recruitment and the Emergence of the Professional Politician in Philippine Local Politics," in Benedict Kerkvliet, ed., *Political Change in the Philippines: Studies of Local Politics Preceding Martial Law* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1974), pp. 129.

<sup>11</sup> From the unfortunately still unfinished study of the ideological directions of Philippine elections, by IPD research staff Myrna Alejo, Annelle Rivera and Noel Valencia.