

Is There A Philippine Public Administration? —(1)

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Philippine public administration is shaped by three major institutions: education, politics and government. Being weak in history and science, the educational system fostered distorted sense of values that considers precision and quality as a nuisance and ignores the lessons of the past. Politics and government is best described as rule of the elite few and even with the introduction of American-styled governance, did not significantly evolve through the years to change the social order existent since the Spanish regime.

There has been a rightful discussion on the role of government because government occupies an important part of life. But there is another equally important aspect of life that distinguished human beings from citizens, that has to be preserved beyond public authority. One must think both of the role of government and the scope of that role, so that one will know the scope of one's life that remains his private dominion, inviolable from public invasion.

After the role of government has been defined, how does this impinge upon the private rights in society, upon the rights of its members as private persons? This is the moral question. It goes with a pragmatic question: How much can government effectively accomplish, having in mind its financial and manpower resources? These questions must be asked not only to establish the propriety of government action, but also to establish the efficacy of government activity. One cannot even begin to discuss the financing of government, except futilely, before the scope of proper government activity have been defined.

One is yet to hear of any seminar among Filipinos on the role of government that did not end with the conclusion that this is good, therefore the government must do it; and this is bad, therefore the government must do something about it; or this is being done in some foreign country, then the government must do it too; and so all these things must be put together, and make sure nothing is left out because the government should do everything that is good.

In times of economic hardship, it is tempting to assuage the people's anxieties through expanded government action. The Revolutionary Govern-

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ment has probably fueled escalating popular expectations. It is unfortunate that the Constitutional Commission includes persons who do not pay personal income taxes for the support of our Republic. These persons have not asked themselves: is it the government's role to attain for the people everything that it thinks is good for them? And, is it not right that the people define their good for themselves, and that the government governs for the purpose of enabling them to attain as much of that good for and by themselves? If the latter, then the government can focus its efforts on the poor and the unfortunate who cannot adequately attain the good by themselves.

There is an expressed apprehension for the government and for the people if the ConCom draft constitution were to be ratified; the people would have been asked to authorize what amounts to a blank check in the matter of the scope of what the government should do; the government's unbounded obligations would be faced with the people's own unbounded expectations, and both government and people will be deeply frustrated. In this situation the present government and its successor will surely and inevitably fail.

Is there a "Philippine Public Administration?" The public administration of a country is shaped by three other major institutions: education, politics, and government. These are so pervasive in society that they reflect many of the people's basic values as evolved through the years and centuries.

Philippine Institutions

Education

Philippine education is weakest in history and science. History would tell how the ancestors fared; it is the story of how the people became or failed to become what they wanted to be; it is the door to the past. Science provides the understanding of the nature and workings of the physical world; it tells what is physically possible; it is one of mankind's principal windows to the future.

But there is still no Filipino histories. As late as 1982, Marcos claimed that his *Tadhana* was the history of the Filipinos; it is in fact nothing of the kind; its protagonists are foreigners; ninety percent of the people it mentions by name are Spaniards, despite the fact that they were no more than two-tenths of one percent of the native population. The lack of a sense of history among Filipinos is fateful. The school system is occasionally expected to provide a brand new sense of values in the youth not later than the next fiscal year. In the civil service, there is only a fuzzy sense of nationhood; one may establish a US Statehood Movement chapter in most of government bureaus without being thought un-Filipino.

Great progress has been achieved in the craft of influencing mass audiences via the media nowadays, more in the field of illusion and image rather than of news and reality. The new Philippine Airlines (PAL) advertising pitch is that the Philippines is "a country of a million heroes." This is a current indication of inhospitality towards science and technology — the field of fact and reality. Many seem to believe that standards of precision and quality are a nuisance. The government pays no attention to the Bureau of Standards; it is the most neglected bureau in the Republic; local consumers are plagued by wishy-washy product norms, haphazard quality control is a major deterrent to the acceptance of export lines. Precision is blithely avoided, the result of which is having the most number of professor in the world because even elementary grade teachers, are called professors. It is the same reason for the admittance of having many intellectuals in the country; the title is not denied to people who do not understand philosophy.

Politics

The existing politics is that which is described in western modern terms. It is in fact essentially a direct evolution, little changes from centuries back, from Spanish colonial experience. The Spanish regime made Christians, not citizens, of the forefathers who were not then Muslims. The people were deprived of any meaningful experience in the politics of civil government. The members of the principals who were named *gobernadorcillos* of the pueblos were merely figureheads of the friar curates. A hundred proofs of this can be provided. From the seventeenth to the late nineteenth century it was noted that members of the principalia were spending money to avoid being named *gobernadorcillos* — service then was compulsory.

Nevertheless, the principalia or local upper class developed a politics of its own outside the politics of civil government. This was the politics of the pueblo religious fiesta. The leading pueblo families vied with each other for the post of *hermano mayor*, the sponsor and presiding officer of the celebrations. This post, entailed effort and personal expenditures for a few weeks, but it was capped by a few days of personal glory, without abuse from the Spanish curate.

The development of the politics of the principalia and the fiesta was crucial. However ill construed in its essence at times, and however complex in its manifestations most of the time, the politics of civil government is always elevated by a higher objective, the well being of the community. Moreover, the means employed in this process are normally subjected to community standards.

It was very different with the politics of the fiesta. The end or goal in this process was simply that one prevailed over his opponents; success meant the attainment of personal ambition and the advancement of family interests. This end was entirely private and had nothing to do with the common weal.

Under the circumstances there was no need to justify these ends to the community. Freed of this obligation, the upper class of pueblo society was free to devise and employ its chosen means to success, and there were no formal community processes for enforcing proper and improper conduct in this politics.

As for the people, they again were kept out of fiesta politics because the post of hermano mayor was not public. It was contested only by the principalia, the final choice was arranged, often in private, with the curate. This old politics of the fiesta seems to be the leitmotif even today, in the politics of our civil government.

The pueblo elites became the basis of Philippine politics into the American colonial period. The old political ethics did not die away over the brief period 1900-1946, because it had served the pueblo upper class from before 1700 until the end of the nineteenth century.

The old and the new political ethics have become one, a syncretism or a combination of often contradictory elements, since the beginning of the century. The victorious elites affirm the triumph of democracy, the victory of the people; and the latter listen to finely crafted speeches on nationalism, social justice, and the popular welfare. But the archetypal *lider* in Filipino politics is still he who gets the most jobs for his followers, increases his income when his faction is in power (while paying less in income taxes), and gives the most help in various forms to his followers' families. This is the relationship between a Mafia don and his "soldiers." What is Filipino in this is that, the rewards distributed by politicians are public resources; the politicians who are out of power regard their counterparts in power with envy and admiration, and no practitioner of this highly developed Filipino art has even been accused of anything but success.

Government

Modern government arrived just before the century. The Americans were efficient in their way. Each item of equipment from tables to tools to books was assigned an official service life. Every year, as this service life ended, the corresponding items of equipment were piled high by the schoolhouse; the property officer, the auditor, the town officials, and the public would gravely watch; the condemned equipment was burned, and official certifications to this effect were made. There was quality in the public administration in those days. There was little or no pilfering of office property.

But government under the Americans was the first and the last proconsular government. It was limited and was meant to govern the Philippines as a colony and to maintain the US presence in the Far East in the form of coaling stations and naval bases. The limited nature of government under the colonial regime is illustrated in the scheme of responsibilities for operating

its most important social program: vocational schools and higher education were funded and run by the national government; general high schools by the provincial governments; and elementary schools (there was a national subsidy for Grades 5-7) by the municipal governments.

Whatever it did not do for the masses, the colonial regime did not disturb the social fabric. Filipino society continued with the old principalia or ilustrado families on top, and the common people or *tao* made up the rest. The Americans thought in good faith that they had established a working democracy; after all they had instituted popular elections (this was originally restricted to males; there were also age, literacy, and property qualifications). In fact the new system became merely an overlay for the old system of local elites and their personal conceptions of ends and means that had taken over the new politics of government.

With the establishment of autonomy in 1935, the Filipino notions of politics and government asserted themselves. The process began with the school system. The national government assumed total control over elementary schooling, and for good measure, it shortened the grade school years from seven to six. The expansion of the national government has not stopped since then; today it operates the largest number of state colleges and universities in the whole world relative to the country's resources, cement factories, steel plants, commercial banks, a gambling casino, an oil refinery, as well as all kinds of wondrous and exotic undertakings.

With big government has come stifling and labyrinthine regulation of private business. In order to escape this, private businessmen have to develop "connections" with the regulators and the politicians. They pay the price through the nose. This is the clear origin of cronyism. There may never again be as big cronies as there were during the Marcos era, but unless public regulation of private enterprise is soon reduced, cronyism on a smaller scale could multiply a hundredfold.

It can then be appreciated now why, even in the best of times, public administration cannot perform well in all its varied roles. If it did well in one project, the isolated success is hailed as a triumph. Cases in court drag on for years, recently paved highways are cracking, the Gross National Product (GNP) is negative and the people's incomes are ravaged, public hospitals and schools are run down. But then a new bridge or building project happens to be completed at long last; all else is forgotten, and the government is flushed with success.

Administrators deliberately focus the people's attention to these new projects, they are state-of-the-art; they are visible and politically "sexy." The government pours resources (mostly foreign loans) on these projects, and scant local funds are provided for epic inaugurations. There is a series of such

projects on the drawing boards; the rounds of inaugural speeches hail the advent of Filipino self-reliance and modernization; but now, last year's projects have been forgotten, and they have begun to deteriorate. As for the humdrum government offices that service the masses of citizens, they languish under conditions of malicious and perverse neglect. Only well organized associations of urban squatters, because they promise rich votes, receive some attention during election years or in times of disaster.

The tremendous media resources that the national government has built over the last two decades keep the situation under a steaming lid. Citizen frustration with government services is swamped by news of the administration's latest plans and foreign loan negotiations.

The list goes on, but it must be clear by now that the Philippine case is not the usual one. The institutions of education, civil politics, and government do not have a continuity with the past. They are young institutions dating back to no more than the beginning of the century. The government had been run independently for just the last four decades, managing most of public affairs in a language that is not native to the citizens. The period of nationhood is much shorter than the history of colonial experience. The more thoughtful are uneasy about the lack of definition in self-image. The crisis had to be coped in this state fitting together the pieces of new and evolving life as best as possible. A good job have not been done of it, but what is on hand can only reflect reality, and therefore, the not so surprising conclusion to make is that the existing public administration is faithfully Filipino.

In government offices, the comfort rooms stink. Tissue in the favored executive toilets is pilfered. Office personnel and their spouses bring free enterprises into the offices, selling jewelry or clothes or food to the staff. More important, supervisors never rate any of their subordinates inefficient or unsatisfactory — *kaawaawa naman*. As a result, misfits are weeded out not through the rating system, but via the disciplinary process — after some mischief has been perpetrated. The old system of cabinet secretaries and bureau directors rewarding individual good performers with salary increases disappeared during the previous administration, so that ministries are no longer assigned funds for staff promotions in their budgets. Good civil servants can only desperately resort to novenas or to political padrinos for recognition. All this is very Filipino.

No political party has ever stood for serious civil service reform. Aside from this not being a politically exciting issue, the fact of the matter is that there are no political parties. What is there are groupings and factions built around a leader. In more politically mature countries, the majority parties in times of crisis change their government leaders, even their prime ministers, and in this way often ride out the crisis. This is because the parties as organizations are normally stronger than the individual leaders. This is not possible

in the Philippine political scene, because the faction's existence depends not on the group but on the one-man leadership. And so, the political structure does not offer means for regarding the public administration system technically. The electorate have been conditioned to looking at the civil service only in terms of graft and corruption charges against the party in power, and not in terms of good recruitment, career development, technical expertise, and the other standards of modern public administration.

The civil service commission is now hardly anything but a national personnel records office. Civil service tests have become useless as instruments for civil service development and improvement. Cheating and collusion are notorious. One cannot cure the defects of public administration by just repeating the naive formula that the civil service commission shall be a constitutional commission. All this is the fruit of political culture, which affords little room for regarding the civil service as the foundation of government.

The civil service is like the Pasig River which, in the bygone era, used to be a pulsing and living artery of commerce and life. It will always be there, whichever group of political leaders capture the government. Today, the Pasig is silted, dirty, and dead with the detritus of households and industry.

The government grandly declares that they will plan and program and bring about development, provide justice, prosperity, happiness, and safety for the people. It seems that if a government cannot keep its toilets clean or cleanse one dying river and bring it to life, then it can neither govern well nor attain development for the people, except through accident. What is more certain is failure for a government that do not improve public administration.

It is all very well, Filipino. There is consolation in that the government, contrary to the notions of the totalitarians who wish to capture its power, does not yet encompass the entirety of the people's lives, and those who are minded to can still pursue their illusions and interests honorably and worthily in their private worlds, doors closed to ill conceived laws and mischievous regulations. But how about those people who do not have the sanctuary of a tolerable private life? Presumably, it will take the space of at least two generations to discipline and wisen people, in order to have a public administration that will not be an unforgiving mirror of frailties, but an image of higher ideals and virtues.