

Book Review

Local Politics in the Philippines

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A Review of Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism and Institute for Popular Democracy, *Boss: Five Case Studies of Local Politics in the Philippines* (Pasig City: Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, 1995), 167 pages.

Local politics and administration in the Philippines remains a very rich and interesting area of study. Recent developments have attracted more scholars to focus their studies on this area. The passage of the Local Government Code in 1991 has caused the shift of the locus of power from Metro Manila to the provinces. The Code's provisions on local autonomy and devolution have made local government positions more lucrative than ever.

The book *Boss: Five Case Studies of Local Politics in the Philippines* explores the nature and dynamics of local politics and administration in five areas, namely, Cavite, Surigao del Norte, Makati, Pangasinan and Sulu. Its six essays include an introduction to the case studies written by investigative journalists as part of a larger project on local politics undertaken by the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) and the Institute for Popular Democracy (IPD).

The book attempts to characterize local politics in the Philippines as dominated by "bosses" or "macho leaders" and warring political clans. The authors, however, fail to discuss their criteria for choosing the areas covered by the case studies. It appears that the choices were based on whether the politics in the areas fitted appropriately into the framework of "bossism" which was adapted from the study of John Sidel (1995) on the politics of Cavite. Furthermore, the essays fall short in their discussion of the methodology for the case studies. None of them discusses the criteria for the selection of the key informants who were the main source of the data used for each case study.

The essays describe the areas' social, political, economic and cultural milieu. The writers attempt to explain the continued dominance of political clans and warlords in local areas despite economic growth and urbanization.

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An effort to characterize the nature and dynamics of local and national politics in the Philippines is also made.

In his introductory essay, Joel Rocamora writes that studies of Philippine politics have to begin with the basic unit which is the relationship between the citizen and local politician. He traces the evolution of Philippine political culture to explain certain characteristics of national and local politics and administration. He cites, for instance, the great impact of Spanish and American colonization on the process of shaping our political culture. The concept of centralization was introduced by the Spaniards to strengthen their hold on their colony. This was also the same strategy used by the Americans to control the country politically and economically. Hence, Manila became the seat of national power.

Using the findings in the five case studies, Rocamora asserts that local politics in the Philippines has been dominated by classes, bosses, goons and clans. Hence, anyone who wants change "must engage the people in concrete struggles based on concrete conditions by entering the people's consciousness, bridging the gap between the national and local government, and translating the modern languages of academic theories, of reform and of revolution to the everyday language of politics" (p. xxix).

The case studies attempt to characterize the different types of "bosses" in the five areas of study. Mayor Jejomar Binay's relationship with his urban poor base in Makati City is identified as fitting into the mold of a "patron-client" relationship. The study on politics revealed its "greatest irony: despite its urbanization, it has refused to modernize its politics" (p.96). The writer argues that although Binay is identified as a street parliamentarian, human rights lawyer and an anti-Marcos activist, he employs the same brand of patronage politics popularized by his predecessor, Nemesio Yabut, in Makati's poor districts. Binay has developed his own brand of politics characterized by his personal touch. He makes it a point to become close to his constituents by engaging in one-on-one or family-to-family relationships, attending funerals, and having breakfast with them. The writer concludes that Binay's political survival depends on his effective use of Yabut's machinery: masses, money, and *municipio*. The study of Binay as a politician and decisionmaker largely revolves around the study of his personality. Both allies and enemies of Mayor Binay served as key informants for this particular case study. It is quite evident in this study of Makati's politics that the writer had already concluded from the very start that Binay is a "boss" like the previous chief executives of the city. The next thing the writer did was to find the empirical evidence to support such claim.

A similar type of "boss" was found in Cavite's Juanito Remulla. The study of the province's political history reveals that the combination of its

politics and economy "lends itself easily to strongmen who use elective office to enrich themselves and perpetuate their hold on power"(p. 6). This particular case study adopted John Sidel's findings in his own study of the politics of Cavite. Sidel characterized Cavite as governed by local bosses whose strength is based on their "political machinery, the profitability of their rackets, and their willingness to use force" (p. 6).

Just like the study made on Binay, this study on Remulla's political leadership focuses on the subject's personality and brand of politics. Once again, another political figure fits into the mold of a "boss" who employs patronage politics for political survival. The writer provides the empirical bases for characterizing Remulla as a boss, citing particular issues and concrete incidents to prove such claim. In this light, the writer may have been successful in proving her assumption that Remulla epitomizes a local boss. However, the results of the recent local elections in Cavite show that Remulla's vast political machinery failed him. In May 1995, he lost the gubernatorial seat to a political neophyte, Epimaco Velasco, who was supported by President Ramos despite the compromise made with the Laban Party that Remulla be made the official Lakas-Laban Coalition candidate. Hence, it may be appropriate to assert that politics in Cavite has taken a different direction considering the recent political developments in the province.

The third case study focuses on the politics of Surigao del Norte. It is interesting in providing the religious and cultural dimensions of local politics. It likewise provides the empirical base for Rocamora's assertion that the accumulation of local power requires "engaging the culture of the local." This study describes the way the Edeo family has shaped a religious community around political and economic activities. The family's political influence is attributed to its charismatic patriarch, Ruben Ecleo, Sr., who founded a religious brotherhood called the Philippine Benevolent Missionaries Association (PBMA). This religious association has proven to be a potent force in the politics of the province as the victories of the Edeos during elections are attributed to it. This case study likewise gives evidence to the assertion that public office need not be based on skill or competence when religious affiliations and family ties suffice.

A province where rivalries among political clans persist is Pangasinan, the home province of President Fidel Ramos. Its prominent clans include the Colets, Agbayanis, Bengzons, Estrellas, Sisons, and Sorianos. The province had always witnessed power struggles among them until 1992 when Fidel Ramos became president. President Ramos has chosen to play the role of "arbiter" in the bitter disputes among Pangasinan's political clans in an attempt to consolidate the support of the province's one million voters. It is in this case study where the influence of the national government on local politics

is described. Hence, the pattern of "bossism" appears to be weak in this area. Instead, the writer shows that politics in Pangasinan is characterized more by the struggles among political clans rather than being dominated by local bosses. The essay does not provide sufficient evidence of the dominance of a single family in the province, nor does it deal with the process by which a clan achieves and maintains political influence.

The last case study deals with the politics of poverty and war-stricken Sulu. Politics in this province has remained influenced by the national leadership. This study shows that the national government acts as the "chief dispenser of patronage" since the local governments are dependent on it for their operation. Development has been elusive to the province since it is considered an "arena in which to square off with rivals rather than as a political unit to govern" (p. 132). The province's politics is also characterized by the presence of competing political families.

The last two case studies actually give more attention to the nature of national-local relations instead of analyzing how political clans continue to dominate the politics in the two provinces. What could have been done by the writers was to describe the nature of the clans' political influence and their relationship with the local citizens. Furthermore, the writers could have devoted their analysis to the relationship of these clans with the national leadership. Meanwhile, none of these studies provide strong evidence that the national leader possesses the characteristics of a "macho" leader or "boss" or that he uses a similar machinery utilized by a local boss.

This book may be commended for its efforts to study the nature of local politics in the Philippines. However, these efforts have been outweighed by the basic weakness of this book which is its inability to utilize a common methodology for studying the nature and dynamics of local politics in various places of the country. It appears at the start of the book that the framework of "bossism" is applied in the five case studies. But in the studies on Pangasinan and Sulu, the pattern of the existence of local bosses is not very evident. The analyses are also weak in terms of describing how political clans have dominated local politics. Thus, it can be said that the essays simply provide a description of the present political climate in the five areas of study.

This attempt to study local politics in the Philippines suggests that there is a need for further research in this area. Further studies should endeavor to develop a methodology which could contribute to the evolution of an appropriate framework in studying Philippine politics.

Reference

Sidel, John Thayer

1995 *Coercion, Capital and the Post-Colonial State: Bossism in the Post-War Philippines.*
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