

A Review

Shift

by *Soliman M. Santos, Jr. et al.*

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This book is not only an attempt by the collective progressive writers to craft the debate on charter change, but to inform the public as well on the imperative for constitutional change for better governance. Although the charter change issue was in the forefront of all the media, the level of political discourse had not risen above the puerile arguments given by either side of the anti or pro charter change advocates.

Shift, on the other hand, goes through a historical analysis of debate from presidential to parliamentary forms of governance by Soliman Santos Jr. Florencio Abad analyzes this debate through forms of governance in a multi-cultural setting against the crucial backdrop of democratic consolidation and institutional reform. Joel Rocamora, meanwhile, examines the unique Philippine political and cultural milieu and the need to reform political institutions for a more responsive governance and relates these reforms toward a more open participatory government in all levels of governance. Chay Florentino-Hofileña provides an analysis of the debate on presidentialism vs. parliamentarism from the period 1995 to mid-March 1997.

In all of these constitutional debates from the Revolutionary Period (1896-1899) to the Post-EDSA Period (1986-1997), the overwhelming presence of the political ambitions of the dominant or leading personalities of the times shaped the nature of the political discourse. None of the constitutional debates occurred in an atmosphere of calm so that as Santos asserts, "a task as delicate as framing the constitution should be done in a peaceful and quiet mood to give the framers sufficient time to deliberate on its proposed provisions."

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The essay by Santos is a historical account of Philippine constitutional development which is further divided into six sections: (1) the Revolutionary Period (1896-1899); (2) the American and Commonwealth Period (1899-1946); (3) the Japanese Period (1942-1945); (4) the Republican Period (1946-1972); (5) the Marcos Dictatorship (1972-1986); and (6) the Post-EDSA Period (1986-1996).

Santos gives us a glimpse of the state of the debate on forms of governance. For instance, the parliamentary vs. presidential debate was the main issue during the 1971 Constitutional Convention and the 1898 Malolos Congress, where the debate was between a strong legislature vs. a strong executive. This issue was peripheral in the 1934 Constitutional Convention and the 1896 Constitutional Commission.

According to Santos, the form of government was decided by external factors or considerations that were not central to the particular issue of governance. For example, in the 1898 Malolos Congress the major issue was the fear of military dominance by Gen. Emilio Aguinaldo over the civilians in Congress. In the 1934 Constitutional Convention the dominance of Manuel Quezon, United States (US) governmental influence and the desire for independence commanded center stage. In the 1971 Constitutional Convention it was Marcos's political ambitions and the threat of martial law that set the tone of the debates. In the 1986 Constitutional Commission it was the speedy restoration of democracy. Santos's article is essentially a chronicle of the history of constitutional debate. It does not argue for one form of government over another. There is, however, an underlying subtext in this chronicle, and that is a plea for "minimizing extraneous factors from the merits of the issue of form of government."

The Santos essay is important from a historical perspective. It gives a comprehensive review and summary of the debates on Philippine political constitutional thought and praxis that have gone on for the past century.

Abad's article is written against the backdrop of democratic consolidation amidst the tedious process of designing an ideal political institution for effective governance. He marshals his arguments for a parliamentary form of government or the "Westminster model" by citing resiliency, enduring democracy, stability, and continuity in governance. He cites the works of Juan Linz, Alfred Stepan, and Cindy Skach on parliamentary vs. presidentialism to buttress his arguments in favor of parliamentarism. Abad also states that parliamentarism effectively promotes a multi-party system and here he cites again the work of Stepan and

Skach on the relationship of party system and consolidated democracies. Abad's main thesis is that a "parliamentary form of government is a more supportive evolutionary framework for developing effectiveness in governance and for consolidating democracy." In developing this thesis Abad uses a three-tiered analytical tool. The first tier is the effect of institutions and their impact on governance. The second tier are the many variations in the presidential and parliamentary models of governance. The third tier are the institutional and noninstitutional factors. The institutional factors refer to the judiciary, federalism, unicameralism and others, while the noninstitutional factors refer to political goals of policy makers, socioeconomic and demographic status and policy choices made in the past.

Overall the Abad article is a prescription for what ails the current presidential system in the Philippines. According to this view, parliamentarism will engender cohesive and disciplined parties as opposed to the current turncoatism, promote a multi-party system, strengthen accountability in governance, provide stability and continuity in governance, prevent political gridlock and promote consensus. The latter benefits of parliamentarism, namely stability and continuity of governance were the main arguments used by the pro-charter change partisans. The Abad article is a scholarly presentation of the arguments in favor of a parliamentary form of governance, both from the standpoint of effectivity and democratic consolidation.

Rocamora's article is a tour de force in the prescriptions for reform of political institutions as well as a politico-cultural overview of Philippine situation — past, present, and a wager on the future. He catalogs the arguments of the proponents for charter change as well as their motivations for advocating such changes and he does the same analytical work on the anti-charter change partisans. He then takes the reader on a quick historical travel into the past to look at the basis of Philippine presidentialism, elite dominance and their adaptability and resiliency, the role of the Americans and the Spaniards. Rocamora also examines the peculiar aspects of our political culture. He analyzes the changing political landscape brought about by the implementation of the Local Government Code of 1992. Rocamora then concludes by taking the reader on a leap of faith or as he calls it a wager for change. In this last section of his essay he argues for a shift to a parliamentary system which should go hand in hand with electoral reforms to bring us to his vision of the promised land of a strong state but with an open and enlarged political participation. Into this "Brave New World" of Rocamora, he says "taking a pro-parliamentary position has other risks. There

is no guarantee that it will provide effective shock therapy for changing Philippine political culture. Indeed, there are many other things that could go wrong. But in the end, it is better to wager on change than to play safe with an unsatisfactory present.”

Hofileña writes about the charter amendment debates from 1995 to mid-March 1997, a period where the arguments for and anti-charter change took center stage in the media as well as Philippine political discourse. Hofileña takes the reader through an analysis of the current situation of the debate. She then cites the summary of the Stepan and Skach paper as presented by Emile Bolongaita, in his doctoral dissertation, quoting works by Horowitz, Shugart and Carey in support of the presidential form of government. Hofileña also provides a summary of sectoral points of view viz-à-viz the debate on parliamentary form vs. the status quo. The sectors range from the progressive block such as Siglaya and *Kilusang Mayo Uno* (KMU) to the conservative Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP). Hofileña concludes that the timing and proponents of charter change were not right. The proponents for charter change should have come from the business sector, nongovernment organizations (NGOs), and the church. When it came from politicians or perceived pawns of politicians then the issue of parliamentarism vs. presidentialism could not be debated on its own merits. Personal ambitions and personal political agenda have come to dominate the political discourse which brings us back to what Soliman said earlier that extraneous issues intrude into the debate on constitutional change.

A common thread which connects all the essays together is a pining for a parliamentary form of government combined with electoral reforms, which will produce a strong state with an open, enlarged, participatory polity, as opposed to the National Security Council vision of a strong state along an authoritarian model. What I find lacking in all the essays, especially in the Rocamora essay which asks the reader to wager on change, or as it were to take a leap of faith along the parliamentary model is the direct correlation between the model and increased political participation by the masses. Abad, Rocamora, and Hofileña all present arguments that parliamentarism strengthens party discipline, enhances political participation, etc., all the good arguments for an open, democratic state. But there is little argument presented which connects those desired ends to be hoped for results, to the actual practical result given the Philippine political culture. The Abad essay which looks comprehensively at parliamentary and presidential systems and factoring our cultural bias does not come up with this missing link between increased political participation, political cohesiveness, etc. The Rocamora

essay which is heavy on analysis of political culture and looks into elite politics does not provide such a link. The political elites in this country are flexible, adaptable and by and large enduring. This poses a problem because the elites could in fact capture and co-opt these small regional parties or local parties on which the Rocamora argument lays its claim or wager for change. Since the contests are local, this would make it easier for the local elites to capture or influence the electoral process, whether in multiple member districts with a party list system or single member districts. All the writers assume that if their model is adopted, somehow elite influence will disappear. What I find disconcerting is that there was no argument advanced for achieving this laudable goal.

Shift, with this one shortcoming mentioned above, is a valuable book for raising the political awareness of the public. The arguments presented by the writers should be read by political writers, television and radio commentators in order to raise the level of political discourse.

