

People Power as a Form of Citizen Participation

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People power is an alternative to the regular institutional channels that have failed. It involves the people's expression of their stand and calling for a resolution of pressing national issues. People power is a form of citizen's participation that is central to the theory of participatory democracy in political science and public administration. A major problem confronting the government is its failure to effectively employ participatory strategy in the formulation and implementation of its programs and projects. People power was the recourse when formal legal channels for participation broke down. It is within this context that people power is considered a boon primarily because of its meaningful capability to contribute to the achievement of the popular will. People power as a form of meaningful citizen participation should extend itself to the implementation of development programs and projects.

Introduction

This paper attempts to clarify the conceptual definition and the nature of people power as it has emerged in the February snap political revolution. It tries to relate people power to citizen participation. An attempt is made to evaluate some representative policies of the past government towards enhancing citizen participation. Finally, the paper tries to respond to the question of whether people power is boon or bane. Some concluding statements will be made about the potential role of people power in the transition government.

What is People Power?

People power is a term that gained popularity and became a household word during the snap political revolution of February 1986. People power connotes the involvement of the civilian populace in expressing a stand and pressuring for a resolution about some national issues. In the February series of events, people power was expressed as an alternative to the regular

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institutional channels that have proven to be ineffective from the public view.

First of all, people power was relied upon as a strategy to respond to an administrative issue of maintaining clean, honest and fair elections. Because of the lack of faith of the citizens in the administration of elections, the people manifested direct concern by overseeing the electoral process. Various individuals and groups, e.g., religious orders of nuns and priests, civic clubs like Jaycees and Kiwanis, cause-oriented groups like ATOM (August Twenty-One Movement) and BANDILA (Bansang Nagkakaisa sa Diwa at Layunin), served as vigilantes in monitoring the precincts to prevent flying voters from participating in the elections. Some served as "watchdogs" during the tallying of the electoral returns at the precinct level. The people assisted in transporting ballot boxes to assure that they were not switched or snatched by hired goons. People also milled around municipal/city halls and the Batasang Pambansa to be reassured that tally sheets were canvassed properly. These examples of people power activities were expressed in addition to and in support of the participation of the duly recognized citizen arm of the NAMFREL (National Citizens Movement for Free Elections) to oversee the electoral process.

Second, people power was also mobilized in response to the political problem of dismantling the stubborn dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos. In spite of persistent reports of fraud and terrorism at the polls, Marcos refused to step down and insisted that he be declared by the Batasang Pambansa¹ as the official winner. The whole nation was gripped with tension and anxiety over the highly conflicting reports of the government election agency, the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) and the volunteer citizen organization, the NAMFREL. But the sentiments of the people were clear. When Corazon Aquino called for a *Tagumpay ng Bayan*² rally at the Luneta, millions of Filipinos responded to her call and signified their consent when she waged for a civil disobedience campaign. This started with the boycott of some crony banks, newspapers and products. People power was then dramatized during the political revolution that was spontaneously staged in front of the two military camps along EDSA (Epifanio de los Santos Avenue) from February 22-25, 1986. People power was expressed by forming barricades in front of the gates of the two camps to prevent Marcos' supporters from attacking the military officials and soldiers belonging to the reformist movement who defected from the Marcos government. Massive numbers of people kept round-the-clock vigil in front of these camps and extended various forms of support to the defectors. People power was likewise manifested when the people took over the Marcos-controlled television station, Channel 4.

These people power activities constitute one of the important factors in the eventual downfall of the Marcos regime.

The Nature of People Power

People power may be expressed in various ways. It may be waged peacefully or violently. It may be pursued in an organized manner or non-organized manner, and, it may be legitimate or non-legitimate..

The people power activities along EDSA and at Channel 4 during the snap revolution were held peacefully inspite of threats poised by tanks and soldiers deployed by the Marcos followers. The manner in which this protest were staged by awesome millions received acclamation from international circles. This was in sharp contrast to the people power activities of some Marcos adherents who paraded in front of the Asian Institute of Tourism in support of the "rump" Batasan held by the Kilusang Bagong Lipunan assemblymen and those who kept vigil at the Plaza Ferguson demanding the return of the deposed Marcos. On these different occasions, the loyalists reportedly threw stones at supporters of Corazon Aquino and banged some vehicles with yellow stickers and ribbons.

Some people power activities along EDSA were organized and some were not. The advantage of groups which kept vigil in an organized manner was noticeable among some groups like ATOM, BANDILA and Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (BAYAN). They assured round-the-clock pool of vigilantes and provided food and other amenities for its members. On the other hand, others came singly or as a group without any prior plans for provisions or a definite schedule of keeping vigil. On the whole, however, the snap revolution emerged quite spontaneously and lacked the logistics and systematic coordination of various interest groups.

Further, a distinction can be made between people power that is legitimate or not. People power is legitimate if the popular will is expressed by the activity. The February revolution is legitimate because it is based on the "ultimate and the highest power of a sovereign people."³ On the other hand, people power manifested during the "rump" Batasan was severely criticized for lack of popular support and for the absence of genuine concern among participants, some of whom were reportedly paid by some party leaders of the KBL.

People Power and Citizen Participation

People power may be viewed as a form of realizing citizen participation or popular participation in the political-administrative system. Citizen participation is a term that is considered central in the literature on participatory democracy in political science. In the field of public administration, this ethic is given emphasis by those who espouse the perspectives of "new public administration" and development administration.

Exponents of participatory democracy argue that the selection of leaders through the electoral process does not sufficiently provide citizens an opportunity to participate politically. Full participation entails taking part in the formulation, passage or implementation of public policies.⁴ The chief argument in favor of citizen participation is that it is a factor that prevents "tyranny" and "centralization" because the citizens ensure that "their interests are defended and promoted."⁵ Hence, participation enables the individual to be free as he controls the structure of his environment and obeys laws he prescribes to himself.⁶ Furthermore, participation is considered a form of political education because it is only by "practical experience in decision-making that the individual and the society at large can manage their own affairs."⁷

Among the proponents of "new public administration," citizen participation is considered an important component in assuring that the services provided by the governmental systems are responsive to the demands of the clientele. "New public administration" as a perspective departs from the traditional concern of public administration experts who give primary emphasis on how the internal organization can be managed efficiently. "New public administration" gives equal emphasis to the effect of the operations of the organization on the target clientele and how the problem of social equity is addressed. Hence, one important process in achieving an effective and efficient government is "boundary exchange," to describe the general relationship "between publicly administered organization and its reference groups and clients."⁸ In particular, this should be characterized by "higher client involvement on the part of the minorities who have not heretofore been involved."⁹

A similar emphasis has been given by exponents of development administration. Development administration as a movement emerged as a result of the interest among experts on "the study of administrative patterns and behavior in societies caught in the midst of transition along the path from rural, agricultural, peasant life toward urban, industrial, and more advanced forms; and to devise a set of guidelines potentially helpful in facilitating the process of transition."¹⁰ Like the proponents of "new public administration," those who support development administration also adhere to the participatory ethic both at the organizational and societal levels. Some of its adherents believe that "development planning" is incompatible with "extensive bureaucratization." They argue that development may be fully realized only through decentralization of powers and responsibilities within government and the encouragement of people participation.¹¹

On the whole, therefore, citizen participation may be expressed in a number of spheres outside the traditional process of voting leaders. These include: (1) deliberating on the policies or legislations that may govern the

nation; (2) formulating strategies to fulfill some stated policies; (3) actual implementation of activities or strategies to fulfill some stated policies; and, (4) making an assessment of the manner in which these goals are pursued. Hence, citizens' contributions may be tapped in the political decision-making process and in the various phases of governmental management such as planning, implementation and evaluation of programs and projects that fulfill some stated policies.

Policies for Citizen Participation

Popular participation has been given impetus during the Marcos regime and this has been instituted through some formal channels. However, what has been legislated largely differs from how it has been implemented.

1. *Political Decision-Making Process.* At least at the level of rhetoric, an innovation introduced under the Marcos regime was the creation of the barangay as the lowest political subdivision in the arena of political decision-making in the country. The objective for the establishment of the barangay is "to provide greater opportunities for the citizens to express their views on fundamental national issues."¹² Upon the establishment of the barangay, political participation has been enlarged to include residents who are 15 and above. The barangay member has the power to recommend to the legislative council (or sangguniang barangay) measures for the welfare of the barangay; holding of plebiscite for decisions on fundamental issues or questions; and, hear and pass semestral report of the sangguniang barangay.¹³ A barangay assembly is expected to be held at least two times a year to discuss the activities and finances of the sangguniang barangay or upon the request of a tenth of its members.

In terms of implementation, however, barangays have failed to assume its role for effective popular participation in political decision-making. De Guzman and Catilo¹⁴ report that the barangay has only become a vehicle for delivering goods and services to the people at the community level like distributing rice, gasoline coupons and cooking oil. It has also assisted the national and other local government units in the maintenance of peace and order; engaging in cleanliness and beautification campaigns; facilitating the reporting system for census and intelligence reports; and, implementing some aspects of the barangay roads program. More importantly, de Guzman and Catilo argue that barangays "have been developed as a support for the 'regime' by getting the assemblies' approval for referendum issues."¹⁵

2. *Development Planning Process.* Another important innovation to widen popular participation is in the area of planning development programs and projects. Since 1972, planning efforts had been regionalized with the creation of the regional development councils (RDC's) and later, their counterparts at the local levels. The development councils were created

with the purpose of bringing the planning process closer to the people. The development councils are to be composed of representatives of operating agencies undertaking sectoral functions (e.g., health, agriculture, etc.) and elective officials of the local government units. As coordinative bodies, these councils are expected to consolidate plans that are reflective of the needs and resources available in the local areas.

However, despite these organizational improvements, the effectiveness of the institutional machinery for regional planning is contingent upon the willingness of the central government to decentralize its planning functions. Unfortunately, while administrative powers (e.g., appointments and promotion of personnel) had been decentralized, substantive powers are still very limited at the regional level.¹⁶ Regional offices still have to be given flexibility in project identification and selection so that identified programs are truly directed towards a set of strictly regional aims.¹⁷ Being financially dependent on the national government, regional decisions on program priorities and budgetary requirements are subordinate to central office decision.¹⁸ Despite the meticulous development-oriented activities for the identification of programs and projects to meet development needs and objectives of the regions, it is regrettable that majority if not all, of the projects that get funded are centrally initiated and/or identified.¹⁹ Hence, coordinating councils only become "talking fora" and are only left to perform "collation" of sectoral and local government proposals according to guidelines supplied by the central planning body, the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA).²⁰ Hardly has there been any effort to tap private sector participation in the planning process.

3. *Implementation.* An example of a program which involves people participation in implementation is in the area of nutrition. This thrust was formally launched with the promulgation of Presidential Decree No. 1569 on June 1978. This decree meant tapping voluntary workers called the Barangay Nutrition Scholars (BNS) to facilitate the delivery of basic nutrition and health services of the National Nutrition Council. The package of activities to realize this participatory ethic include training and deployment of indigenous workers to assist in the nutritional diagnosis of the community and the organization of mothers for learning activities on basic nutrition information, homeyard food production and environmental sanitation.²¹

The bone of contention about the program, however, lies in the lack of motivation of the people to get involved "despite efforts and formal mechanisms to win their interest and participation."²² This problem had been attributed to (1) the failure to involve the people in the planning/decision-making processes; (2) the tendency of program planners to ignore the need to first generate as well as sustain a solid and active climate of interest at the grassroots level prior to the delivery of nutrition interventions which are

more directed to symptoms and rarely at the basic causes of the problem which could be traced from the socio-economic structure of our society.²³

4. *Comprehensive Participation.* Experiments had also been initiated by the past regime for comprehensive citizen participation at the various levels of planning, implementation and evaluation of a development program. The pioneer example is the IAD (Integrated Area Development) approach.

The IAD approach is characterized by the involvement of various agencies crossing multi-sectoral lines and is carried out within a geographical boundary that is "able to synchronize politico-economic administration."²⁴ Aimed at addressing the issue of equity, the IAD approach encourages grassroots participation in the various levels of decision-making.

Some serious limitations are, however, experienced by those implementing the IAD approach. First, while the IAD adheres to the philosophy of participatory decision-making, the major components of an IAD are designed by the government technocrats and the economists/consultants of the foreign funding agencies.²⁵ One instance is the Bicol River Basin Development Program. In a survey conducted by Wilfredo Olano in 1981,²⁶ only 41 per cent of the respondents acknowledged having participated in deciding the main components included in the IAD project. Further, it was noted in the same report that most physical infrastructure projects chosen for inclusion in the feasibility analysis were taken from inventories of capital projects submitted by the local government for national funding. It was also noted that farmer beneficiaries hardly remember any occasion when the people themselves volunteered their services. The initiative to involve them in the planning process always originates from the project management group or from the local government leadership. Furthermore, while the IAD approach aims to address the issue of equity, active participation tends to be associated with some socio-economic factors such as higher education, higher income and owner amortizing tenure status.

Summary. After having viewed the ineffectiveness or lack of comprehensiveness of regular participatory channels for decision-making process and governance, it is not a wonder why people power had been resorted to enable the citizens to express their sentiments concerning national issues. In particular, the February revolution had been directed towards the dismantling of Marcos for his bankruptcy of political will in forging the realization of the people's mandate and the failure to fully effect regular channels for popular participation. Marked discrepancies were manifested between stated policies and their implementation. The policies were only appreciable in rhetoric.

People Power: Boon or Bane?

Whether people power is boon or bane depends upon its capability to effectively fulfill popular will. People power can only be a boon if it supports the motives and sentiments of the greater majority. In the case of the snap revolution, the people asserted their will in removing Marcos out of office after ruling the country for 20 years, 12 as a virtual dictator. Because Marcos thwarted their desire for change by cheating during the elections, people power had been the alternative recourse.

The case of people power in support of the "rump" Batasan was a bane because it was not an expression of popular will. In fact, loyalists were questioned as some participants were mobilized only because of grease money. Further, the KBL supporters took a hostile and aggressive stance. They had no due concern to the rights and privileges of others, resorting to vandalism and destruction of property (i.e., some cars were stoned and hit with pieces of wood).

During the Labor Day rally at the Luneta, the police alleged that the loyalists started the violent riot in some Ermita side streets resulting in the injury of several people.

What is now important to consider is how people power can be effectively pursued if in case this is being considered as an alternative strategy in responding to political-administrative issues.

First of all, meaningful participation can only be made if participants are aware of the issues for which mobilization is directed. People power is irresponsible when pressure is expressed without knowing for what reason it is manifested. Some conditions are important to facilitate awareness. These include, among others, the openness of the mass media and other channels for communication in discussing objectively the issues of national concern. During the snap revolution, *Radio Veritas*²⁷ served as the rallying point among the participants in people power activities as it held 24-hour broadcast of the events during the revolution. This critical role may have threatened the Marcos followers such that its transmission was gunned down to put a halt to its operation. However, the Cory followers took over TV 4 and henceforth, it became the communication network of the so-called rebels.

A second requirement to put people power into full use is the need for organizing participants and purposive planning of activities in achieving its goals. Organization and planning enable careful programming for the maximum use of people and other resources. Organized work may also contribute towards better communication.

And third, if people power is to be an expression of popular will, it should necessarily be held by a cross-section of the citizenry and not dominated by a single class.

Conclusion

Let me now conclude by saying that the role of people power last February is indubitably a significant one in changing the course of our political-administrative history. But let us hope that the effort will not stop there. There are still a number of areas where people power can make a contribution in rebuilding our nation. Several problems still confront our government in transition. In particular, people power should be expressed to fully effectuate regular channels for people participation in political decision-making and governmental management. People power should forge the establishment of people's councils in the legislation process at the local and national levels. It should pressure for upholding the policy of conducting public hearings before legislations are passed.

Planning of developmental projects should not only be made among administrative and elective officials but should open participation to representatives from various citizen groups. Care should be made, however, in assuring that the poor and the underprivileged are represented. Some indications for participatory decision-making had already been initiated by the Minister of Trade and Industry and the Minister of Labor and Employment.

People power should pressure for the formal recognition of opportunities to participate in implementing development programs and projects similar to the thrust in nutrition. This does not only cut down governmental resources but also enhances self-reliance.

People power should advocate that people participation in monitoring and evaluation be made a regular process to generate immediate feedback on the government's performance. People's bureaus may be established in the different ministries to assure that complaints of the citizens about erring government officials are heard and noted down. These bureaus will ensure accountability and help prevent graft and corruption.

Finally, if people power is able to pressure for formal channels for popular participation in political decision-making and governmental management, then people power can claim that its mission has been successfully accomplished.

Endnotes

¹The Batasang Pambansa was the legislative body under the regime of Ferdinand E. Marcos. For an extensive discussion of the evolution of the Philippine legislature and the Batasang Pambansa, see Olivia Caoili, "The Batasang Pambansa: Continuity in the Philippine Legislative System" in January 1986 *PJPA*.

²Tagumpay ng Bayan is a behemoth rally called by Mrs. Corazon Aquino at the Luneta Park on February 16, 1986 in celebration of her victory in the presidential snap polls and simultaneously the launching of a nationwide civil disobedience campaign to boycott establishments and institutions supporting the Marcos administration.

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⁴Parry, Geraint (ed.), "The Idea of Political Participation," *Participation in Politics* (England, Manchester University Press, Rowman and Littlefield, 1972).

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⁸H. George Frederickson, "Toward a New Public Administration," in Frank Mereni (ed.), *Toward a New Public Administration* (Syracuse: Chandler Publishing Co.), 1971, p. 323.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 324.

¹⁰George K. Najjar, "Development Administration and 'New' Public Administration: Convergence of Perspectives," *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 34, No. 6, Nov./Dec. 1974, p. 587.

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 585.

¹²F. G. Ayson and J. B. Abletez, *Barangay: Its Operations and Organization* (Manila: National Book Store, 1985), pp. 8-9.

¹³*Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

¹⁴Raul P. de Guzman and Ma. Aurora C. Catilo, "Towards Meaningful Partnership in Government: Citizen Participative Mechanisms at the Local Levels," *Local Government Bulletin*, Vol. XIII, Nos. 1 & 2 (Special Issue 1978), p. 5.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶Ramon Bacani, "Framework of Regional Development Policies in the Philippines," *Budget Management*, Vol. II, No. 1 (March 1983), p. 45.

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸Narcisa Santos, "Towards a Reduction of Regional Imbalances," *Philippine Budget Management*, Vol. VII, No. 1 (March 1983), p. 28.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰Raul P. de Guzman and Alex B. Brillantes, Jr., "Issues and Problems in Development Administration in the Philippines: Focus on Regionalization," paper presented at the Fifth Annual National Conference of the Philippine Political Science Association, U.P. School of Economics Auditorium, Quezon City (October 21-22, 1978).

²¹Maria Lourdes Vega and Myra Bondad, "Desk Review of the Barangay Nutrition Scholar Projects, 1977-1984," (Manila: National Nutrition Council, Ministry of Agriculture and Food, 1985), p. 1.

²²Gabriel U. Iglesias, et al., *A Policy Review: Severe Malnutrition of Filipino Pre-school Children, Vol. 2: Policy Framework and Recommendations* (Manila: Policy Studies Program, U.P. College of Public Administration, 1985), p. 27.

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴Helen R. Garcia and Candido A. Cabrido, Jr., "Integrated Area Development: An Innovative Approach to Rural Development in the Philippines," *The Countryside* (November-December 1982), p. 8.

²⁵Rene Ofreneo, "Monitoring the Agricultural Sector," in Vivencio Jose (ed.), *Mortgaging the Future* (Quezon City: Foundation for Nationalist Studies, 1982), pp. 119-120.

²⁶See Gelia T. Castillo, *How Participatory is Participatory Development: A Review of the Philippine Experience* (NEDA: Philippine Institute for Development Studies, 1983), p. 555.