

Political Expectations and Democracy in the Philippines and Vietnam

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Abstract: Superficially, democracy in the Philippines is in better shape than in Vietnam. Yet in terms of being responsive to "the masses," Vietnam's government appears to do a better job than does the Philippines' national government. After exploring this paradox, this article points to issues regarding democracy that need considerably more research.

Keywords: liberal democracy, agrarian politics, land reform, corruption, poverty, contested democracy

Introduction

At its international conference in October 2004, the Philippine Political Science Association asked participants to assess the status and prospects of liberal democracy in the Philippines and elsewhere in Asia. This is a challenging question for people of all walks of life. Political scientists have a particular obligation to wrestle with answering it. The direction and quality of democracy pertains to central issues in our discipline: how societies are and should be governed. Also other people turn to political scientists for explanations and advice about such matters.

Democracy and liberal political preferences are still alive in the Philippines. I do agree, however, with those who say that the quality of democratic institutions in the country is low, particularly regarding the ability to serve the interests of relatively weak and poor sectors of society. As for the situation in other Asian countries, I shall restrict my assessment to Vietnam, where democratic institutions as usually defined in the academic literature are meager, even non-existent. Yet, oddly enough, Vietnam's system of government is more able to serve its people. In short, the political system in the Philippines has democratic institutions and processes yet does not serve

well the majority of people's interests, while the political system in Vietnam has meager democratic processes yet seems to serve the majority of people better than occurs in the Philippines.

I want to elaborate this paradox and then suggest that my assessment, while meritorious, is terribly incomplete. Significant aspects of politics in both countries indicate that democracy and liberal political thinking are doing better than analysts, myself included, often depict. For that reason, the last part of the article points to future research topics that scholars will hopefully pursue.

This article is a modest effort to convey some observations and thoughts I have had in recent years while doing research on agrarian politics in Vietnam. Before I began to do research in Vietnam about ten years ago, I had emphasized the agrarian unrest and village politics in the Philippines. Rural issues, therefore, are the main common threads in my studies of both countries. And although my purpose has not been to compare the two countries, I have been asking questions about Vietnam that are similar to what has interested me about the Philippines: what are the political dynamics in rural communities and how can they best be explained, what do rural people — especially ordinary farmers and workers — want or expect from fellow citizens and from authorities, how do people express and pursue their preferences, and how do local and national authorities deal with and respond to rural problems and needs? My discussion here is partly based on my own investigations but draws heavily on other researchers' work.

Expectations of government and other public institutions and leaders

What is it that people in the Philippines and Vietnam want from their governments and public leaders? We need a plausible answer to this question before trying to assess how well governments serve the interests and address the concerns of the majority of people. A comprehensive answer is impossible given the diversity in both countries. Moreover, data on this matter are sparse. The data are more plentiful and arguably more reliable for the Philippines, where also more research on such matters has been done than in Vietnam.

Also, statistically reliable public opinion survey data exist for the Philippines but not for Vietnam. Nevertheless, some plausible answers can be derived from the available material.

That material indicates several similar expectations of government among ordinary Filipinos and Vietnamese. They want a government that maintains peace and order (*katahimikan, katiwasayan* in Tagalog; *trạt tu an ninh* in Vietnamese). Second, they want authorities to show respect, inflict no physical harm on citizens without just cause, and be responsive to people's legitimate concerns and demands. Third, they want public office holders to exercise restraint when using public resources for private use. Only a modest degree of self-serving use of public revenues is acceptable. Fourth, they want public officials to have policies and programs that benefit the community. In particular, people expect government to take action to improve the lives of desperate people. Let me present some evidence pertaining to the last three of these.

In the Philippines, studies of particular communities as well as some survey data indicate that rural and urban Filipinos with modest and low incomes want government officials and politicians to treat them with respect and dignity and to listen attentively to their concerns and needs. Officials who do so are praised. Those who are insulting, dismissive, uncaring, and not attentive are criticized, privately if not openly.¹ For instance, an in-depth study in the 1980s of Tatalon, a poor neighborhood in Quezon City, found that "perhaps the most deeply felt grievance against the Marcos regime was the contempt for which the people felt they were being treated" by the President and Imelda Marcos.² Much worse are elected officials and other authorities, such as soldiers and police, who use their power and position with abandon to verbally and physically intimidate and abuse citizens. Such behavior, especially when it includes violent force, has been a primary reason why Filipinos, particularly from poor and low income sectors of society, have supported and joined rebellions. Among Muslims in Cotabato, for instance, "terror at the hands of the Philippine military" has been a "powerful impetus for joining or supporting" the Bangsamoro rebellion.³

In Vietnam, officials who bully and mistreat residents have been a source of discontent among villagers and townspeople since pre-colonial times.

Ridding communities of such abusive authorities was one of the programs of the revolutionary movement against French colonial rule and later against the Saigon-American government. The emergence of "new tyrants" (*cuong hao moi*) among local authorities during the 1980s contributed to intensified opposition to collective farming in northern Vietnam. More recently, urban and rural residents have frequently complained about police who throw their weight around, treating people cavalierly and sometimes violently with no legitimate cause. Police have even reportedly beaten to death people detained for minor offenses.⁴ In Hanoi, one of the largest public expressions of discontent in recent years was over a policeman who apparently robbed and killed a delivery man carrying a large amount of cash, a murder that other authorities then attempted to cover up. At one point during the case, which extended from 1993-1996, 10,000 people gathered outside the court house where the policeman was standing trial.⁵ Other demonstrations in various parts of the country have also been provoked at least in part by how authorities treated citizens. One of the largest, also involving thousands of people, occurred in Thai Binh province in May 1997. District and provincial officials there had not been violent but for three years they had been unresponsive and dismissive of villagers' many petitions against corrupt and abusive subdistrict officials. Giving up on the formal channels for remedies, angry people from hundreds of villages walked, bicycled, and motorcycled to converge on the provincial capital.⁶

Another expectation concerns authorities' use of public resources for personal gain. Neither Vietnamese nor Filipinos expect all officials to be squeaky clean. Taking small bribes and pilfering modest amounts of cash or other resources from public offices is tolerable, especially if the officials are poorly paid. Citizens also tolerate officials who bend the rules a bit for close relatives and friends or out of compassion to distraught people. The threshold between acceptable and unacceptable favoritism and personal use of public resources is hazy, and shifts over time and place. Clear in both countries, however, is that corruption and favoritism beyond a tolerable threshold disgust and anger people.

Corruption was the overriding issue that galvanized those villagers in Thai Binh to openly protest, initially in various district centers and eventually

in the province's capital. Beginning in 1994 and increasing during 1995-1996, villagers complained that local authorities were selling land that did not belong to them, misallocating land in ways that made money for themselves, using local tax revenues for their own private purposes, claiming public expenditures were higher than they actually were then keeping the difference for themselves and their families, and in other ways misusing their authority. Before and since the Thai Binh protests, people in many other parts of the country have publicly demonstrated against crooked bureaucrats, party leaders, police, and government officials. Indeed, an article in a prominent Vietnam Communist Party publication in 1998 concluded that corruption is one of the major causes of unrest in the countryside.⁷ On numerous occasions people in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, Hai Phong, and many other urban areas have also demonstrated against embezzlement, bribery, and other forms of corruption. In some localities, people have used elections, however constrained those procedures are, to oust corrupt government officials from office.⁸ People also send letters and petitions to complain about authorities. For example, nearly annually since the mid 1990s, corruption has been among the chief complaints in citizens' correspondence to Vietnam's National Assembly.

Filipinos, too, have long objected to corrupt local and national officials. Surveys from as early as 1974 have shown this.⁹ In 2004, focus group discussions across the country by the Institute of Philippine Culture found that poor people virtually unanimously cited corruption (*kurakot*) as the leading characteristic of a bad leader. Honesty or truthfulness (*matapat*) was one of the primary qualities of a good leader.¹⁰ With their feet and votes, Filipinos have also expressed disgust with public officials who cross the boundary of acceptable personal use of public resources. Corruption was one of the major factors motivating people in many parts of the country to vote against Ferdinand Marcos in 1986 and force him to flee to Hawaii. Fifteen years later it also figured prominently in the uprising against Joseph Estrada. He had been the most popular president since Ramon Magsaysay. But as corruption allegations mounted in 2000, support for Estrada dwindled even before the impeachment process had begun. Revelations during the impeachment and the Senate trial about the extent of corruption propelled bitterly disgusted lower income people to join the protests of People Power 2.

in January 2001 against Estrada. For the protesters, wrote one analyst of information about those who demonstrated in Metro Manila and elsewhere in the country, "Estrada had lost the moral ascendancy to govern." Protesters were united in wanting to "change a corrupt government...."¹¹

The final common expectation to discuss is that Filipinos and Vietnamese want government and public officials to assist people in need and particularly to alleviate poverty. In the Institute of Philippine Culture study done this year, being helpful (*matulungin*) was high on the list of qualities poor people want in leaders.¹² Community studies have found similar sentiments.¹³ So have surveys. For instance, 66 percent of Filipinos surveyed in 1998 said that government has the responsibility to reduce the income gap between rich and poor.¹⁴ A recent doctoral dissertation reports that Filipinos from diverse backgrounds agree nearly unanimously that elimination of poverty is a social objective that should receive priority, including apparently in government policies and programs.¹⁵ Surveys also indicate that by promising to serve the poor, candidate Joseph Estrada attracted a large percentage of low income people's votes and won the 1998 presidential election.¹⁶

For Vietnam, we do not have survey data on this topic. But people's expectations of government to help the needy are suggested in other kinds of evidence. The central government's practice of reducing taxes at times of bad harvests and natural disasters and periodically redistributing agricultural land to reduce inequalities and assure subsistence dates back to pre colonial era.¹⁷ Deepening poverty and misery during French and then Japanese rule contributed to widespread rural support for the Viet Minh, which led the revolution against colonial rule (1945-1954). For similar reasons many poor and landless villagers opposed the Saigon government and favored the revolutionary movement in southern Vietnam (early 1960s-1975). More recently, in the late 1980s-early 1990s in northern Vietnam as collective farms were being dissolved, villagers wanted authorities to redistribute land equally among farming households. Many villages also designated some land to be used in such a way as to fund community services and charity programs.

Performance

How well do the government and public officials fulfill people's expectations? As a gross generalization, my answer is that government and public officials in Vietnam do a better job than they do in the Philippines.

Consider peace and order. Since 1975, Vietnam has had nothing even approaching the persistent armed clashes between government forces and the Cordillera People's Liberation Army, the New People's Army, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, Abu Sayyaf, and other rebellions that the Philippines has had. Nor does Vietnam have the private armies that many Philippine companies, plantations, and politicians employ. In the Philippines, private security agencies are reportedly among most profitable businesses today. The total number of private security guards in the country is said to be twice the size of the nation's standing army and police.¹⁸ In Vietnam, private security guards are few and rarely are they armed. The police and national public safety force, run by the Ministry of Public Safety (Bo Cong An), maintain public security. And they do it reasonably effectively. I do not have statistics but my sense is that the level of crime, especially violent crime, in Vietnam is much lower than in the Philippines and culprits there are much more likely to be caught than they are in the Philippines.

Vietnam's government has also been better able to serve disadvantaged sectors of society. One telling measure of this is what the national government in each country has done regarding land tenure conditions and land redistribution, matters that for decades have intensely concerned poor and nearly poor Vietnamese and Filipino villagers.

Between the 1950s and the early 1990s, Vietnam had three major agrarian reforms. One involved eliminating tenant farming and redistributing land fairly equitably among households that actually farmed. This occurred in northern Vietnam in the first half of the 1950s under the Viet Minh and Communist Party government. In the southern half of the country, it started in places controlled by the Viet Minh but then stopped and was even reversed after 1954 when the country was temporarily divided and the Saigon

government was established. It resumed during the 1960s and early 1970s in areas controlled by the revolutionary movement and to a much lesser extent in areas under Saigon government rule. After the war, the Communist government completed the job of eliminating tenant farming and redistributing land among farming households.

The second agrarian reform was collective farming. It occurred in northern Vietnam, starting in the late 1950s and continuing into the 1980s. Only some parts of southern Vietnam were collectivized, beginning in the late 1970s. Few villagers wanted to farm collectively, but most in the north went along with it partly because the Communist Party promised that it would improve their living standards. And initially it did. But by the mid 1960s, conditions were deteriorating partly because the country was again in the midst of war but also because productivity in the collective farms was dropping.

Growing rural discontent and opposition to collective farming resulted in the third agrarian reform, which scrapped collective farming and returned land, draft animals, and other means of production to individual households. It started slowly in the late 1970s-early 1980s, then sped up. By the end of the 1980s households, not collective organizations, were farming nearly all agricultural land in the country. Through a process involving ordinary villagers and local authorities, land was allocated equally among qualified recipients in central and northern Vietnam. In the Mekong delta and some other areas, the distribution was less equitable.¹⁹ Land holders have long-term use rights, not ownership, to the land they till. In the future, when the period of those use-rights end, some adjustment in the distribution may occur in order to maximize an equitable distribution.

In the Philippines, during roughly the same period, 1950s to 1980s, agrarian reform was much slower and benefited far fewer peasants. The main objectives have been to eliminate share tenancy, improve the conditions of leasehold tenancy, and significantly reduce inequality in the ownership of agricultural land. Share tenancy did drop significantly, in parts of the country, especially Central Luzon, where it fell from 80 percent of farms in the late 1960s to about 4 percent in 1990-1991.²⁰ Share tenants became leasehold

tenants and holders of "land transfer certificates" (CLTs), which entitled them to purchase their fields. Nationwide, however, share tenancy was still about 25 percent in 1991, slightly higher than in 1971.²¹ And that was only for rice and corn land whose owners had more than seven hectares, which until 1987 were the only lands included in agrarian reform.

Land redistribution has been barely perceptible. Prior to 1972 the government purchased only a few thousand hectares of land for redistribution to tenants.²² The area increased between 1972 and 1992 when about two million hectares were redistributed, but the pace remained slow — about one percent annually of targeted land. (See table 1.) The pace increased to nearly six percent per year in 1993-1997 when the government acquired 2.3 million hectares from large owners and resold the fields to farming households. Between 1998 and 2001, the rate slackened to three percent annually. Overall, during three decades, 5.2 million hectares were redistributed at the rate of just 2 percent per year of the total scope.²³

Table 1: Land redistribution in the Philippines, 1972-2001

Scope (ha.)	Land redistribution accomplished (%)						
	1972-1992		1972-1997		1972-2001		
	entire period	annually	entire period	1993-97 annually	entire period	1998-2001 annually	
DAR	4,331,109	21	1.0	56	7.0	64	2.0
DENR	3,771,141	28	1.3	50	4.4	66	4.0
Total	8,102,502	24 ^a	1.1	53 ^b	5.8	65 ^c	3.0

^a DAR 900,018 ha.
DENR 1,067,489 ha.
1,967,507

^b DAR 2,408,333 ha.
DENR 1,896,750 ha.
4,305,083

^c DAR 2,779,047 ha.
DENR 2,477,535 ha.
5,256,582

DAR: Department of Agrarian Reform

DENR: Department of Environment and Natural Resources

Note: Not included in the area redistributed are the amounts that owners voluntarily transferred, a method by which landowners often evade having their land go to tenants and workers.

Sources: Saturnino M. Borras, Jr., "Can Redistributive Reform Be Achieved via Market-based Voluntary Land Transfer Schemes? Evidence and Lessons from the Philippines," *Journal of Development Studies*, forthcoming, table 2 and section 3; and Ernesto D. Garilao, "Agrarian Reform," 543-84, in *The Ramos Presidency and Administration: Record and Legacy 1992-1998*, vol. 1 (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1998), table 4.

Poverty reduction is another indicator of how well governments are addressing expectations of people, especially among lower income families. Although government alone can not reduce poverty and improve quality of life for the majority, it is a key actor. Economic growth may be the best remedy, but social science research shows that government policies affect the extent of growth. Studies also indicate that economic growth in combination with favorable government policies and institutions greatly influences the impact on living conditions.

Governments in both the Philippines and Vietnam have long claimed that poverty reduction and improved living conditions are high priorities.²⁴ To compare results, I focus on the last two decades. During that period Vietnam moved from a centrally planned economy to what is officially called a "market economy with socialist characteristics" and the Philippines got out from under the economically and politically burdensome Marcos regime. In the early 1980s, despite Marcos rule having left the country in bad shape, living conditions in the Philippines were better than in Vietnam. After all, Vietnam was still recovering from thirty years of war that had killed over 2.5 million citizens; wounded, maimed, and made homeless several million more people; and damaged and defoliated millions of hectares of cultivated land and forests. Much of this death and destruction was due to the United States military, which dropped two and half times more bombs on the country than had been dropped in all of World War II.²⁵

According to the best available data, the extent of poverty has been decreasing in both the Philippines and Vietnam. The proportion of Filipino households living in poverty dropped from 41 percent in 1985 to 28 percent in 2000, a 13 percent decrease over 15 years or 0.9 percent per year. The data for Vietnam, which are fewer, show a decline from 58 percent of households in 1993 to 37 percent in 1998, a 21 percent decrease over 5 years, or an average decrease of more than 4 percent annually (table 2). The two countries' poverty measures are not necessarily the same, hence the levels may not be comparable. The point is that the rate of reduction is significantly greater in Vietnam.

Table 2: Incidence of poverty (% of households)

Vietnam		1993	1998	av. annual reduction			
		58	37	4.2			
Philippines		1985	1988	1994	1997	2000	av. annual reduction
		41	34	32	25	28	0.9

Note: Measures of poverty incidence in Vietnam and the Philippines are not necessarily the same.

Sources: Arsenio M. Balisacan, "Poverty and Inequality," in idem. and Hal Hill, eds, *The Philippine Economy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 319; Hy V. Luong, "Postwar Vietnamese Society: An Overview of Transformation Dynamics", in *Postwar Vietnam: Dynamics of a Transformation Society*, edited by Hy V. Luong (Boulder and Singapore: Rowman & Littlefield and Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003).

Also indicating that Vietnam – the country as a whole and its government – may be doing better than the Philippines with regard to living conditions are changes in each nation's Human Development Index. The index is a composite measure of life expectancy, literacy, and income. The index improved in each country between 1990-2002, the period for which figures are available for both. The rate of improvement in the Philippines was 0.39 percent per annum; the rate in Vietnam, however, was nearly three times that (table 3). Indeed, Vietnam's improvement rate is greater than the Philippines has ever achieved since 1975 (the earliest year for this index).

Table 3: Human development index trends

Year	Philippines	Vietnam
1975	0.653	
1980	0.686	
1985	0.692	
1990	0.719	0.610
1995	0.735	0.649
2000		0.686
2002	0.753	0.691
% change/year		
1975-2002	0.57	
1975-1990	0.67	
1990-2002	0.39	1.11

Note: The index range is 0.0 (lowest) to 1.0 (highest). Blank cells mean no index is available.

Source: UNDP, *Human Development Report, 2003*, pages for the Philippines and Vietnam (<http://hdr.undp.org/statistics/data/city>), accessed 25 August 2004).

I turn now to corruption, which upsets both Filipino and Vietnamese people. Neither country's government appears to be combating the rot well. In Transparency International's index of perceived corruption, a flawed indicator but the only comparative one available, both countries' rankings have been about the same between 1995 (the first year of the index) and 2003 (table 4). Both countries are perceived to be among the most corrupt in Southeast Asia (significantly worse than Thailand and Malaysia but not as bad as Indonesia and Myanmar). Government efforts in neither country seem to be terribly effective. My impression is that campaigns against corruption have been more vigorous in Vietnam than in the Philippines. Besides regularly chastising corruption and imploring everyone to struggle against it, national government and Communist Party leaders have charged and convicted numerous officials. Following the 1997 rural protests in Thai Binh, for instance, about 2,000 corrupt officials in the province were punished. Among them were the province's two highest authorities, the head of the Thai Binh branch of the Communist Party and the chair of the provincial council. During the 1990s, several high ranking national authorities were thrown out of office and/or imprisoned for embezzlement and other corruption. They included a minister for energy and the deputy prime minister. Recently a high official in the ministry for agriculture convicted of embezzling millions of dollars was given the death penalty.²⁶ In the Philippines, mass uprisings have driven two corrupt national presidents from office. In recent years, courts and other agencies in the Philippines have convicted or removed from office some politicians and public servants but no high ranking ones so far as I am aware.

Table 4: Corruption perceptions index

Year	Philippines	Vietnam
1995	2.8	n.a.
1998	3.3	2.5
2000	2.8	2.5
2003	2.5	2.4

Note: The perception index ranges from 0.0 (most corrupt) to 10.0 (no corruption).

Source: Press release, 15 July 1995; Corruption Perceptions Index 1998; The 2000 Corruption Perceptions Index; and Corruption Perceptions Index 2003 – all from Transparency International. (<http://www.transparency.org>, accessed 7 September 2004)

Why this difference in meeting people's expectations?

If my comparisons are sensible, the Philippine government appears to be less able to meet citizens' expectations than Vietnam's government is. We might well have expected the opposite given that the Philippines has a much more representative democracy and liberal democratic institutions than Vietnam has. Why then isn't the Philippine political system more capable of maintaining peace and order, respond to people's needs, and deal with poverty than Vietnam's system? And does this apparent paradox make democratic institutions and liberal democracy irrelevant?

First, a few remarks about the two countries' political systems. Both countries have executive, legislative, and judiciary branches of government at national, provincial, and sub provincial levels. Both claim to have democratic institutions; for example, both have regular elections and constitutional provisions for freedom of speech, assembly, religion, etc. Apart from these outward similarities, however, the political systems in the two countries are strikingly different. Whereas the Philippines has several political parties, Vietnam has only the Communist Party. Elections in Vietnam are competitive in the limited sense that two or three candidates might run for one position. The competitors are usually fellow Communist Party members. Candidates who are not party members are screened by a national organization dominated by the party. Debate and disagreements about policy matters occur primarily within the party's organization and among party members who dominate the legislative branch and hold key positions in the executive branch. Unlike the president of the Philippines, the prime minister of Vietnam has little trouble getting the national legislature to approve (usually with few modifications) proposed laws and policy directions. Also unlike the Philippines, Vietnam has no private publishing houses, television stations, or radio stations. Internet service providers are government owned or monitored. With few exceptions, organizations of peasants, workers, women, youth, etc., are connected to, if not organized by, the government or Communist Party. Even religious organizations are supposed to have official approval and are subject to government restrictions. For instance, the government controls the number of Catholic priests the country may have. These and other features of Vietnam's political system are far more restrictive

than the Philippines has experienced except possibly during the Japanese occupation (1941-45) and martial law (1972-1981).

Despite being less democratic, Vietnam's political system seems to be more capable of meeting people's expectations. There are three primary reasons. The first is the significant difference in orientation of government leaders. On the whole, the government in Vietnam is more concerned about peasants and workers' conditions and needs than the Philippine government is. A major reason is the origin of each country's political system. The system in Vietnam results largely from a political and social-economic revolution based heavily on the peasantry. The revolution sought both national independence and a redistribution of wealth and power. Organizations composed mostly of poor people and the Communist Party defeated the French and American armies, reunited the country, and carried out programs that favored peasants and workers and suppressed colonialists, large landowners, and upper class Vietnamese. Until today Vietnamese authorities know that their rule depends heavily on support from villagers and workers. In the Philippines, by contrast, the evolution of political rule has been primarily an elite affair. Peasants and workers were not particularly important. They started out to be, at the end of the 19th century, in the revolution against Spain in which lower class people pressed for both independence and a redistribution of wealth. But American colonialism interrupted. Eventually Philippine independence came in a peaceful and planned manner that left largely undisturbed the political prominence of economic elites who had little to do with the lower classes. That condition remains much the same today.

The second reason concerns differences in the two countries' political parties. Vietnam's Communist Party is a mass-based political organization. Its 2.5 million members are organized into units in most villages, urban neighborhoods, schools, universities, factories, and other places of work and residence. From these units, the party's organization extends up to the national level with a voluminous flow of communication up and down the structure: Discussion and debate occurs at all levels within the party. Once decisions are made, the party's organizational structure can implement them reasonably effectively. In the Philippines, political parties since

independence have been, with rare exceptions, much less rooted in communities and work places, not well organized, and rather undisciplined. Leadership is usually dispersed. Membership is amorphous and fluid. Most people affiliated with the parties are only active during election campaigns. Even people elected to office often have meager connections to their parties. These conditions make it difficult for Philippine political parties to develop or be committed to coherent positions on controversial issues. The big exception to this description of political parties is the Communist Party of the Philippines, which had clear positions on many major policy issues and developed a nationwide organization from the late 1960s to mid 1980s. But, it did not, or could not, pursue political objectives through the electoral system.

Third, the administrative infrastructure in the Philippines is less developed and weaker than in Vietnam. Even in the early 19th century, prior to French colonial rule, Vietnam was "the paramount bureaucratic society in Southeast Asia."²⁷ Building on that tradition, national ministries of the Vietnam state today have branches and offices down to the provincial, district, and even subdistrict levels. While often short of resources and vulnerable to corruption, the system is reasonably able to implement policies and programs. In the Philippines, neither Spanish nor American colonial rule created an extensive bureaucracy. While the state's administrative system has become stronger and more efficient since independence, it is prone to extensive influence from powerful individuals, families, and corporations. This frequently hampers government agencies' efforts to implement regulations, programs, and policies that conflict with or threaten the interests of those influential actors.

For these three reasons and others, the conditions of workers, peasants, and poor sectors of society are more prominent in the public discourse within Vietnam than within the Philippines, and Vietnamese authorities over the years have been more inclined to listen to what lower class people say and do. A striking example of the public discourse is that television newscasts in Vietnam frequently cover village economic activities, rural health clinics, factory workers' employment and living conditions, and the like. While some reports are upbeat and flattering to the government, others describe hardships people face and the shortcomings of government programs and

officials. Comparable news coverage in the Philippines is rare, at least in my experience. Even the government controlled television stations during martial law paid scant attention to workers and villagers except when publicizing visits that President Marcos, Imelda Marcos, or another high officials made to rural areas and factories. Through Vietnam's formal structures – the Communist Party, government offices, official mass organizations – authorities monitor what people are doing and saying. This can intimidate and stifle open dissent. But the structures are also ways for authorities to learn about problems and seek solutions. Even subtle expressions of discontent outside those channels can get authorities' attention. The pressure from villagers against collective farming, for example, involved very little public protest; nor was it channeled primarily through formal structures. Mostly villagers communicated their growing disgust with collective work through unorganized, everyday politics and resistance, which eventually influenced policy makers to redistribute farmland to households.²⁸

In the Philippines, workers, peasants, and low income people have far greater freedom than their Vietnamese counterparts to organize and protest against particular officials, government policies, and even the government itself. Yet Filipinos have much more difficulty being taken seriously by government officials. Philippine authorities rarely listen. Since at least the 1930s, large organizations have marched the streets of provincial capitals and demonstrated in front of Malacanang and national government offices to demand agrarian reform. More often than not, authorities have responded with indifference or ordered soldiers and police to disperse the protesters. Frequently they have turned blind eyes to landlords' counter-organizations that intimidate and kill agrarian reform advocates. Such indifference and repression, combined with poverty and misery, have been major causes of the country's many rebellions during the last sixty years.

Wither democratic and liberal institutions?

The discussion thus far could give the impression that democratic and liberal institutions are largely irrelevant for Filipinos and the Vietnamese and for how well governments meet ordinary people's expectations. But that is not my conclusion. There is more to political life in both countries than has

been included in the synthesis thus far. Much of the scholarly literature on the two countries, however, does essentially stop here. So the point of this final section is to suggest that democracy and liberalism are doing better than analysts, myself included, often depict and to indicate needed research on this.

In the Philippines, democratic institutions and freedoms have long been important to a large proportion of the population. Only during martial law did many Filipinos seem willing to give them up in exchange for the better living conditions, including land reform, that Marcos vowed the authoritarian government would deliver. But it did not deliver, and in time Filipinos from all classes were up in arms. Some literally took up arms against the regime. The right to freedom of press, assembly, and speech were among the prominent demands of opponents to the Marcos regime. Another frequent demand was genuine elections. In the 1985-1986 election campaign, which Marcos was forced to allow, millions of Filipinos were determined to bring the voting process in line with even the regime's rhetoric that elections should be free from coercion, intimidation, cheating, and fraud. And when Marcos and his supporters used those exact methods in order to "win," tens of thousands of Filipinos, practically in unison, took to the streets. "EDSA" was, among other things, a resounding affirmation of the electoral process as the legitimate way to decide who shall hold public office.

Elections, various studies tell us, get mixed evaluations among voters. Many Filipinos are cynical. They know from experience that election results are often distorted and that politicians are unlikely to keep their campaign promises. People also detest intimidation and violence that frequently occurs during elections. Nevertheless, people repeatedly affirm the value of elections. Three-fourths of Filipinos surveyed in 1992, for instance, disagreed with the statements that "elections are a game of the wealthy" and "all that the citizens can hope for [in elections] is the price of a vote." The same proportion also disagreed with the statement that "democracy cannot work in the Philippines." The results were virtually the same across all income groups and geographical areas.²⁹ In 2004, research in poor neighborhoods across the country found that, despite criticisms of elections, most people voted, associated voting with good citizenship, and regarded elections as legitimate.

Most saw elections as the only proper mechanisms for determining who should govern.³⁰

Not only when responding to questionnaires do Filipinos affirm the value of elections. They do it through their actions. The 1986 "EDSA" uprising is a significant example, but is far from the only one. On numerous occasions, Filipinos from many walks of life have struggled, sometimes at the expense of their lives, to insist on elections being held, make elections fair and convey voters' views about candidates and issues.³¹ These persistent efforts are part of ongoing struggles about democracy itself.

These efforts are part of a central political dynamic that Nathan Quimpo has synthesized well. Quimpo argues that the Philippines is a "contested democracy" in which many individuals and organizations, especially from upper classes of society, strive to maintain the limited forms of procedural democracy that they dominate and manipulate while other Filipinos, especially from marginalized sectors of society but also from middle and upper classes, "struggle for a more participatory and egalitarian democracy."³² We need, I submit, to devote more scholarly attention to understand the contested nature of democracy in the Philippines. I say this for two reasons.

One is that thus far we have a lopsided view and understanding of Philippine politics. We know quite a bit about the limited forms of procedural democracy. This knowledge comes from numerous studies of neo-colonialism, clientelism, patrimonialism, political machines and bosses, and political dynasties. We know a great deal less, however, about struggles in the country against such politics and for a more participatory and egalitarian democracy. We particularly need more research about struggles within the institutions and processes of procedural democracy.

An example are efforts to make the government bureaucracy implement existing laws that would lessen inequalities and raise poor people's living standards. Land redistribution noticeably increased in the mid 1990s because key officials within the Department of Agrarian Reform responded positively to bottom-up pressures for land redistribution by applying their own top-down pressure on landowners to comply with the law. This "bibingka

strategy," as Saturnino Borras ingeniously summarized the two sets of political pressures, merits more study.³³ It worked in DAR during the mid 1990s partly because of who the department's leaders were. Is it working now? Why do some bureaucrats or bureaucracies try hard to do the right thing while others are not? Have other bureaucracies been involved in such *bibingka* strategies or in other ways struggled to implement laws that run counter to powerful elite interests?³⁴

Another example would be to look carefully at politicians who do not readily fit the "*trapo*" stereotype and at politicians who have *trapo* characteristics yet at times seem honestly trying to improve the lives of ordinary Filipinos. Lorraine Salazar's recent doctoral dissertation takes a valuable step in that direction when analyzing the positive role of Fidel Ramos's presidency in telecommunications reform.³⁵ National politicians who are often said to have tried hard to be good public servants include Senators Jose Diokno, Raul Manglapus, Jovito R. Salonga, and Lorenzo M. Tañada. Today and in the past, there have been other decent senators, congressmen, congresswomen, governors, mayors, councilors. But political scientists have paid them little attention. Nor have we paid much attention to others advocating a more participatory and egalitarian democracy who sought elected office but lost.³⁶ We need to do research on these politicians: find out who they are, how they deal with challenges to their integrity, how they campaign for office, what are their successes and failures as public servants, and what trade-offs they make as they try to strengthen and deepen democratic and liberal institutions and practices.

A second reason for studying the contested meanings of democracy in the Philippines is to correct the all-too-common negative image of Philippine politics. Studies that emphasize corruption, political bosses, gangsters, and similar features of Philippine politics are not wrong but they are incomplete. They perpetuate the impression that the crippled form of procedural democracy is the only important aspect of politics in the country. But that is false. Hence, we need to look seriously at other dimensions, particularly the struggles for democratic institutions and practices that better meet ordinary Filipinos' expectations and needs.

"Contested democracy" is also a useful way to think about political dynamics in Vietnam. Vietnamese officials claim that their Communist Party government is a democracy, and a socialist democracy at that. They bristle when outsiders such as international human rights organizations and the U.S. State Department say Vietnam's government is undemocratic, violates human rights, etc. Officials insist that Vietnam not only has democratic institutions, such as elected law makers, but also protects such liberal values as freedom of press and religion and is improving the quality of life throughout the country.

That authorities in Vietnam defend their government in these terms is itself evidence that at least the idea of having democratic institutions and liberal values remains influential. This defense also makes authorities vulnerable to criticism for not practicing what they preach. Vietnam has many such critics. Their presence is further evidence that people in the country are struggling to engage and promote democratic ideas and liberal values.

Political scientists have not paid much attention to this struggle within Vietnam, perhaps partly because meeting and learning from the critics is extremely difficult. Authorities stand in the way. Numerous critics are in prison, under house detention, and under intense police surveillance, making them almost inaccessible to researchers.

In my initial steps to learn about these people and what they are saying, I notice two broad groups. One includes those who criticize primarily through writings that make explicit arguments for democratic procedures, institutions, citizen participation. Until very recently, their written works circulated only episodically, such as in the mid 1950s when restrictions on such expression was not yet severe and in the late 1980s when restrictions were briefly relaxed. Since photocopy machines became numerous in the early 1990s and especially since the internet became accessible in the late 1990s, the flow of critics' writings has been continuous and the circulation much wider. A theme in many of these commentaries is inconsistency between the facade of democracy and the reality of how the political system works. For instance, they write, the supreme law making body in the country is supposed to be

the National Assembly but in practice it is the elite leadership of the Communist Party. The country has elections that are meaningless because only one political party is allowed. The nation's constitution assures freedom of expression, assembly, and press, but authorities intimidate people from actually exercising those freedoms and frequently imprisons those who insist on trying. Those freedoms, critics often argue in their writings, go hand in hand with real democracy; without them, these writers say, democracy is phony.³⁷

A second group is the people who join public demonstrations and protests.³⁸ Usually the protests are small — a few dozen people at a time, typically in front of government and Communist Party offices — though they can go on for days, even weeks at a stretch. Occasionally, such as the Thai Binh unrest referred to earlier, numerous small ones can accumulate into a big burst of anger. Apart from their placards and petitions, demonstrators voice their concerns primarily through their physical presence and the private meetings that they might have with officials. Understanding their concerns, therefore, is very difficult for outsiders. At one level, the protesters are speaking against abusive officials, corruption, particular policies, and improper implementation of laws. They are not talking about democracy per se. But underneath those objections are criticisms that bear on participatory and egalitarian democracy. Demonstrators are angry that authorities have excluded them from processes for deciding how to use land, money, and other resources in their neighborhoods and villages. They say that authorities do not consult them, ignore their preferences, or grossly distort their views. Indirectly, and sometimes even directly, they demand transparency and accountability in government. Often they are also objecting to widening inequality at their own expense. Officials, they say, become far more wealthy than the citizens they are supposed to be serving by embezzling public funds and engaging in other corruption. Adding insult to injury, these officials flaunt their illicit gains; they build large houses filled with nice furniture and appliances, buy expensive vehicles, and wear fine clothing. Demonstrators seem to be condemning corruption not only because it is illegal but also because it violates egalitarian ideals.

Conclusion

Democratic and liberal political aspirations abound in both the Philippines and Vietnam. The governments in both countries claim to be democratic, though they fall well short of being full democracies. Meanwhile, both countries have people pushing for better procedural democracy and more participatory and egalitarian democracy. Research, however, on the struggles in the Philippines and Vietnam for fuller democracy is sparse. Political scientists should get more serious about studying them.

My sense is that the struggle has further to go in the Philippines than in Vietnam. This is counter-intuitive given that on the surface the Philippines is more democratic than Vietnam. It has multiple political parties, voters regularly replace incumbent officials with newly elected ones, organizations independent of the government are numerous, and the people are much freer to publish and express what they want and believe. Yet entrenched powerful elite interests stubbornly, often violently use the political system to their own advantage, paying slight attention to the needs and demands of the majority of people. The political elite in Vietnam has a track record of being inclined to listen for and be responsive to ordinary people's aspirations. That ability, if it is not washed away by greed and corruption, will go a long way to help the government to accommodate pressures for making the political system more democratic in procedural and other terms. ♦

Notes

¹ See, for instance, Myrna J. Alejo, Maria Elena P. Rivera, and Noel Inocencio P. Valencia, *[De]scribing Elections: A Study of Elections in the Lifeworld of San Isidro* (Quezon City: Institute for Popular Democracy, 1996), 46, 89; Frederic Charles Schaffer, "Disciplinary Reactions: Alienation and the Reform of Vote Buying in the Philippines," manuscript, 22 August 2002, 17-19; and Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, *Everyday Politics in the Philippines* (Berkeley and Quezon City: University of California Press and New Day Press, 1990), 1-2, 12-13.

² Michael Pinches, *From Marcos to Aquino: Local Perspectives on Political Transition in the Philippines*, 176, edited by Benedict J. Kerkvliet and Resil B. Mojares (Honolulu and Quezon City: University of Hawaii Press and Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1991).

³ Thomas M. McKenna, *Muslim Rulers and Rebels: Everyday Politics and Armed Separatism in the Southern Philippines* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 195-96.

⁴ See, for example, news accounts in *Dai Doan Ket*, 3 December 1993, 6; *Nong Dan Viet Nam*, 7 January 1994, 6; and *Nong Thon Ngay Nay*, 24 March 1999, 9; 20 September 1999, 5; 19 May 2000, 5, 11; 8 December 2000, 5; 29 December 2000, 5.

⁵ Mark Sidel, "Law, the Press and Police Murder in Vietnam: The Vietnamese Press and the Trial of Nguyen Tung Duong," 98-119, in *The Mass Media in Vietnam*, edited by David G. Marr (Canberra: Department of Political and Social Change, Australian National University, 1998).

⁶ Material about the Thai Binh protests comes from a report commissioned by the Prime Minister and written by Tuong Lai, head of the Sociology Institute of the National Center for Social Sciences and Humanities, entitled "Bao Cao So Bo ve Cuoc Khao Sat Xa Hoi tai Thai Binh cuoi Thang Sau, dau Thang Bay Nam 1997" [Preliminary report of a sociological investigation in Thai Binh in late June and early July 1997], 8 August 1997; a serialized story published in the newspaper *Tien Phong* 2, 4, 7, and 9 October 1997; and an article in the newspaper *Dai Doan Ket*, 23 February 1998, p.6.

⁷ Nguyen Duc Minh, "May Van De ve An Ninh Nong Thon Hien Nay" [Current security problems in the rural areas] *Tap Chi Cong San* (February 1998): 45-48.

⁸ For one account and other insights into what villagers expect of leaders, see Shaun Kingsley Malarney, "Culture, Virtue, and Political transformation in Contemporary Northern Vietnam," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 56 (November 1997): 899-920.

⁹ Elsa P. Jurado, "Indicators of Political Opportunity and Political Welfare," 377-78, in *Measuring Philippine Development*, edited by Mahar Mangahas (n.p.: Development Academy of the Philippines, 1976). Also see results of surveys done in the 1980s and 1990s by the Social Weather Stations and Pulse Asia.

¹⁰ Institute of Philippine Culture, "The Vote of the Poor: The Values and Pragmatics of Elections," (manuscript, 2004), 7-8, 25.

¹¹ Maria Cynthia Rose Banzon Bautista, "People Power 2," 8-10, 12-14, 16-18, in *Between Fires: Fifteen Perspectives on the Estrada Crisis*, edited by Amando Doronila (Metro Manila: Anvil Publishing and Philippine Daily Inquirer, 2001). Amando Doronila, *The Fall of Joseph Estrada: The Inside Story* (Metro Manila: Anvil and Philippine Daily Inquirer, 2001).

¹² Institute of Philippine Culture, "Vote of the Poor," 7.

¹³ Alejo et al., *[De]scribing Elections*, 47, 89, 92.

¹⁴ Mahar Mangahas, "What the word 'Mayaman' Means," *Social Climate*, 23 November 2001. (Social Weather Stations website, <http://www.sws.org.ph/nov01.htm>, accessed 3 August 2004).

¹⁵ Rena Ocampo dela Cruz-Dona, "Poverty in the Philippines," Ph.D. dissertation, Australian National University, 1999, 9, 58, 63-66.

¹⁶ Banzon Bautista, "People Power 2," 3-4

¹⁷ Van Nguyen-Marshall, "The Role of the State in Poverty Relief in 19th Century Vietnam," 179-91, in *Localized Poverty Reduction in Vietnam*, edited by Geoffrey B. Hainsworth (Vancouver, British Columbia: Centre for Southeast Asia Research, University of British Columbia, 1999).

¹⁸ Randy David, "Dealing with State Failure," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 5 September 2004 (<http://news.inq7.net/opinion>, accessed 9 September 2004).

¹⁹ Hy V. Luong, "Wealth, Power, and Inequality: Global Market, the State, and Local Sociocultural Dynamics," 99-101, in *Postwar Vietnam: Dynamics of a Transforming Society*, edited by Hy V. Luong (Boulder and Singapore: Rowman & Littlefield and the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003).

²⁰ Jonna P. Estudillo, "Income Inequality in the Philippines, 1961-91," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Hawaii, 1995, 172. Also see Kerkvliet, *Everyday Politics*, 29-34, 39-43, 282-83

²¹ *Ibid.*, 144. I have yet to find tenancy figures more recent than 1991.

²² Jeffrey Riedinger, "Philippine Land Reform in the 1980s," 23-26, in *Agrarian Reform and Grassroots Development*, edited by Roy L. Prosterman, Mary N. Temple, and Timothy M. Hanstad (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1990).

²³ If one included land that had once been included but later removed from the total area subject to land redistribution, the accomplishments would be even more pathetic. See the insightful analysis by Saturnino M. Borras, Jr., "Inclusion-Exclusion in Public Policies and Policy Analyses: The Case of Philippine Land Reform, 1972-2002," *Journal of International Development* 15 (2003): 1049-65. Also see James Putzel, "The Politics of Partial Reform in the Philippines," 214-19, in *Agrarian Studies: Essays on Agrarian Relations in Less-Developed Countries*, edited by V.K. Ramachandran and Madhura Swaminathan (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2002).

²⁴ Arsenio M. Balisacan, "Poverty and Inequality," 312-16, in *The Philippine Economy: Development, Policies, and Challenges*, edited by Arsenio M. Balisacan and Hal Hill (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Hy V. Luong, "Wealth, Power, and Inequality," 91-97.

²⁵ Ngo Vinh Long, "Vietnam," 9-10, in *Coming to Terms: Indochina, the United States, and the War*, edited by Douglas Allen and Ngo Vinh Long (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991); Indochina Resource Center, *Air War: The Third Indochina War* (Washington, D.C.: 1972) and "Supplement" to *Air War* (19 May 1972); J. B. Neilands et al., *Harvest of Death: Chemical Warfare in Vietnam and Cambodia* (New York: The Free Press, 1972); and John Lewallen, *Ecology of Devastation: Indochina* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1971).

- ²⁶ Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, "An Approach for Analyzing State-Society Relations in Vietnam," *Sojourn Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 16 (October 2001): 264, 267; *The Vietnam Investment Review*, 29 September 2004 (circulated through vnnews-1, 2 October 2004, list owner <sdenney@ocf.berkeley.edu>).
- ²⁷ Alexander B. Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976), 14, also see 15-17.
- ²⁸ Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, *The Power of Everyday Politics: How Vietnamese Peasants Transformed Government Policy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, forthcoming 2005).
- ²⁹ Ateneo de Manila University, "Public Opinion Survey, July 1992" (Quezon City, 1992), 43.
- ³⁰ Institute of Philippine Culture, "Vote of the Poor," 11-12.
- ³¹ Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, "Contested Meanings of Elections in the Philippines," 147-63, in *The Politics of Elections in Southeast Asia*, edited by R. H. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press and the Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1996),
- ³² Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, "Contested Democracy and the left in the Philippines after Marcos," Ph.D. dissertation (under examination), Australian National University, October 2004, p. 1 of conclusion.
- ³³ Saturnino M. Borras, Jr., *The Bibingka Strategy in Land Reform Implementation: Autonomous Peasant Movements and State Reformists in the Philippines* (Quezon City: Institute for Popular Democracy, 1998).
- ³⁴ Maybe one is the Department of Energy and Natural Resources, which increased its pace of redistributing land since 1993 (see table 1).
- ³⁵ Lorraine Carlos Salazar, "States, Market Reforms, and Rents: The Political Economy of Telecommunications Reform in Malaysia and the Philippines," Ph.D. dissertation, Australian National University, 2004.
- ³⁶ Among the few political scientists currently studying politicians who try to avoid being "trapo" are Jennifer Conroy Franco, *Elections and Democratization in the Philippines* (New York: Routledge, 2001), ch. 6; and Quimpo, "Contested Democracy," chs. 5-7.
- ³⁷ See, for instance, Tran Khue, "Thu Ngo Gui d/c Tong Bi Thu Nong Duc Manh" [Open letter to the party's Secretary General Nong Duc Manh], 7 May 2001 (<http://www.ykien.net/dthundm.html>, accessed 4 December 2003); Tran Dung Tien, "Gop Y voi du thao sua doi Hien Phap" [Suggestions regarding a draft for a revised constitution], 25 August 2001 (<http://www.ykien.net/bntdthienphap.html>, accessed 4 February 2004); Pham Hong Son, "Thu gui ban" [letter to a friend], 7 March 2002 (<http://www.ykien.net/bnphsthu01.html>, accessed 10 October 2003).

³⁸ This paragraph is based on accounts of various demonstrations published in the newspapers *Dai Doan Ket*, *Nguoi Lao Dong*, and *Thanh Nien* in the late 1990s and 2001-2002; sources about the Thai Binh unrest cited in footnote 6 above; and Nguyen Van Suu, "Contending Views and Conflicts over Land in Red River Delta Villages since Decollectivization," Ph.D. dissertation, Australian National University, submitted for examination in August 2004.