Review: Oligarchic Patrimonialism, Bossism, Electoral Clientelism, and Contested Democracy in the Philippines
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Review Article

Oligarchic Patrimonialism, Bossism, Electoral Clientelism, and Contested Democracy in the Philippines

Nathan Gilbert Quimpo


Political and social scientists have interpreted Philippine politics in different ways. In the 1960s Carl Landé and Mary Hollnsteiner characterized it as being built on networks of patron-client ties or other personal relationships in which members extended mutual assistance and loyalty.1 At about the same time, Dante Simbulan argued that elite families dominated and ran the Philippine political system, using their connections, wealth, and force to control the country's resources.2 In the 1970s scholars like Renato Constantino and Alejandro Lichauco viewed the Filipino elite's power as limited and asserted that foreign interests actually dominated the country.3 A few years after Marcos's fall, a number of scholars echoed Simbulan's thesis. Gary Hawes, Walden Bello, John Gershman, and Robert Stauffer described postdictatorship Philippines as essentially a return to predictatorship "elite democracy," and Benedict Anderson as "cacique democracy."4 Reviewing the various characterizations and interpretations of Philippine politics, Benedict Kerkvliet declared in 1995 that they basically fell under three prominent theoretical frameworks: the patron-client factional, patrimonial or elite democracy, and neocolonial or dependency.5

This review examines the interpretations of Philippine politics as patrimonial oligarchic state, bossism, and clientelist electoral regime advanced by three recent books, as well as the challenge posed to oligarchic, boss, or clientelist rule by grass-roots
movements and by the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), discussed by two books. Contemporary interpretations of Philippine politics tend to be variations of the patrimonial/elite democracy theme and to suffer, like the patron-client and neocolonial frameworks and earlier versions of the patrimonial/elite democracy model, from a critical weakness: a one-sided, top-down view of Philippine politics. An alternative interpretation of Philippine politics is the contested democracy framework. Contested democracy is the combination of the elite democracy interpretation, now the dominant interpretation, with a popular empowerment or democracy from below element. In the Philippines the very meaning of democracy is contested. For the country’s ruling elite, democracy involves mainly elections, a formal democratic exercise they can easily manipulate for selfish ends. Major sections of the country’s subordinate classes and ethnic communities and even part of the upper classes, however, want democracy to mean greater popular participation in decision making and social and economic equality. In the past efforts toward democracy from below have been somewhat adulterated or deformed by influences of Stalinism and Maoism and also, to some extent, clientelism and populism. Elite democracy and democracy from below are currently the two major competing strands in Philippine politics. They are, in a sense, opposites, but the outcome of the contest need not mean a complete disempowerment of one side by the other or a regression to authoritarianism. Formal democracy, previously deficient due to its “elite” features, can be deepened into a more participatory and egalitarian democracy.

**Three New Interpretations of Philippine Politics**

In Paul Hutchcroft’s book, the concept of patrimonial oligarchic state appears in virtual tandem with the concept of booty capitalism, which is the book’s main subject. Both are derived from the writings of Max Weber, in which Hutchcroft is clearly well-grounded. Seeking an explanation for the Philippines’ laggard economic growth, Hutchcroft studies the relationship between the state and major elite families, focusing on a most crucial economic sector, the banking sector. He has come up with an outstanding piece of scholarship that provides insights not only into the development—or maldevelopment—of the Philippine banking system, but also into the country’s political economy and the nature of its political system.

Rampant favoritism and weak state regulation characterize the Philippine banking system and endure despite regime change. Taking advantage of them, oligarchic clans have looted the loan portfolios of their banks and engaged in cartel practices at the expense of developmental policy objectives. Through decades the financial system has performed poorly in mobilizing savings, allocating credit efficiently, attaining financial stability, checking oligopolistic trends, and maintaining a strong central monetary authority. For Hutchcroft, the ravage of the banking sector serves as a prism through which to peer into larger problems in the economy as a whole. He
characterizes the capitalist system prevailing in the Philippines as rent capitalism (as opposed to production-oriented capitalism), in particular, booty capitalism, in which "a powerful oligarchic business class extracts privilege from a largely incoherent bureaucracy" (p. 20). He distinguishes booty capitalism from bureaucratic capitalism, the type of rent capitalism found in such countries as Thailand, Indonesia, and Mobutu's Zaire, in which, conversely, a bureaucratic elite takes advantage of a weak business class.

Hutchcroft contends that the main obstacles to the Philippines' sustained economic development lie in weaknesses in its political development. While other scholars have characterized Marcos's dictatorship as "patrimonial" or "neopatrimonial authoritarianism," pursuing a "politics of plunder," Hutchcroft views patrimonialism as running much deeper and as being not limited to Marcos's regime. The Philippine state is itself patrimonial, specifically a patrimonial oligarchic state. It is a weak state preyed upon by a powerful oligarchy that has an economic base largely independent of the state but depends upon access to the state machinery as the major means to accumulate wealth. He differentiates this state from Thailand's, Indonesia's, and Zaire's patrimonial administrative state, in which the dominant social force is a bureaucratic elite and countervailing social forces are very weak. The patrimonial oligarchic state is more obdurate to change than a patrimonial administrative state because bureaucratic incoherence and the great clout of the oligarchic class hinder reforms. The Philippines' patrimonial oligarchic state and booty capitalism have put the country in a developmental bog.

In depicting bossism as a common and variegated phenomenon in the Philippines, John Sidel paints an even grimmer picture of the country's politics. Sidel concurs with Hutchcroft's thesis that the Philippine state is an object of oligarchical plunder, but he goes much further. In his empirically rich and provocative book, he portrays the Philippine state as itself being predatory—"a complex set of predatory mechanisms for the private exploitation and accumulation of the archipelago's human, natural, and monetary resources" (p. 146). Moreover, he highlights the role of coercive forms of control over local populations, showing how coercion has persistently and systemically intruded upon elections and distorted economic and social relations. Sidel defines bosses as "predatory power brokers who achieve monopolistic control over both coercive and economic resources within given territorial jurisdictions or bailiwicks" (p. 19). Bossism reflects a common conjuncture in state formation and capitalist development: the superimposition of the trappings of formal electoral democracy upon a state apparatus at an early stage of capital accumulation. Sidel examines patterns of bossism at the municipal, district, provincial, and national levels, dissecting the corruption and coercion of the state-based warlords of Cavite and the capital-intensive dynasties of Cebu, comparing them with similar cases as well as other subcategories of bossism in other provinces, and ending up with a brief account of Marcos's martial law era—"a protracted period of national-level boss rule" (p. 144).
Sidel criticizes the strong society, weak state thesis (especially the strong oligarchy, weak state variant) that gained a good number of adherents among Philippine scholars in the 1990s. Hutchcroft’s characterizations of oligarchy-state relations in the Philippines put the patrimonial oligarchic state concept into Sidel’s line of fire. Sidel does not get it quite right in portraying strong society, weak state advocates as associating the oligarchy only with the established landed elite. Not all—even, possibly, not many—do. Hutchcroft, for instance, emphasizes that the Philippine oligarchy is “not a fixed aristocracy, but rather a social group that is based on wealth and that changes over time” (p. 22). Nonetheless, Sidel sounds more convincing than the weak state adherents in his dual depiction of the Philippine state as weak in its many faults as a developmental state but as strong in its capabilities as a predatory state.

Comparing the Philippines with other countries, particularly in Southeast Asia, Sidel appears to have found additional evidence to link the rise of bossism with electoral democracy and early capital accumulation. The emergence of local bosses in Thailand since the 1980s—“godfathers” operating illegal rackets who have accumulated proprietary wealth, gained control of local state apparatuses, and manipulated elections—bears watching. Apart from affirming or negating Sidel’s contention, it has implications for Hutchcroft’s argument. Can a patrimonial bureaucratic state, instead of reforming, turn into a patrimonial oligarchic state?

Jennifer Franco puts forward the concept of a clientelist electoral regime in her well-researched study of elections and democratization in the Philippines, from the Spanish colonial era to the late 1980s. Franco asserts that the Philippines, since gaining independence, has always had less-than-democratic regimes, neither fully authoritarian nor fully democratic. To help distinguish between regimes in the Philippines, she reviews the Latin American democratic transitions in the 1980s and comes up with four types of less-than-democratic regimes: electoral authoritarian (for example, El Salvador and Brazil before 1985); clientelist electoral (Brazil after 1985 and Mexico since 1988); militarized electoral (Colombia, Guatemala, and Peru); and demilitarizing electoral (Uruguay, Argentina, and Chile). Applying this categorization to the Philippines, she classifies Marcos’s dictatorship as electoral authoritarian and the pre- and post-dictatorship regimes as clientelist electoral. Franco describes a clientelist electoral regime as “an electorally competitive national regime which falls short of the minimum democratic threshold because of the persistence of local authoritarian enclaves” (p. 71). Like Sidel, Franco pays particular attention to the role of coercion at the local level of the political system. Instead of bossism, however, Franco calls it authoritarian clientelism, described by Jonathan Fox as a situation in which “imbalance bargaining relations require the enduring political subordination of clients and are reinforced by the threat of coercion” (p. 16).

In examining the relationship between elections under less-than-democratic
regimes and democratization, Franco devotes particular attention to the period before and immediately after the fall of Marcos. She shows how the opposition built up strength in the course of a series of unfree and unfair elections that Marcos called from 1978 to 1986 and how the less-than-democratic elections contributed to national regime change. On the basis of this experience, she argues that elections under authoritarian rule can still promote movement, however limited, toward full political democracy if they provide the political space needed for democratic opposition to emerge. In the immediate post-Marcos period, Franco shifts to district elections, studying the congressional bids of two politics candidates, one victorious, the other defeated. She asserts that less-than-democratic elections under a clientelist electoral regime can still contribute to the erosion of local authoritarian enclaves if local authoritarian elites are either divided or isolated from allies at the top, the democratic opposition is united electorally, and there is a preexisting alternative outreach network that supports the efforts of prodemocratization groups.

Hutchcroft, Sidel, and Franco trace the roots of the patrimonial oligarchic state, bossism, and the clientelist electoral regime, respectively, to the colonial period. However, the three authors—all Americans—are more sharply critical of the much shorter U.S. period. Their negative assessments stand in stark contrast with those of pre-1970 scholarship, which tended to paint the U.S. colonial interlude as some sort of special tutelage in civic democracy. According to Franco, U.S. colonialism set up a political system in which central state power served land-based regional elite interests. Sidel states that the peculiar institutional legacies of U.S.-imposed colonial democracy facilitated the emergence and entrenchment of local bosses and warlords by providing them with the means to control state resources and use them for self-aggrandizement. He uses bossism, instead of caciquism, in part to underscore the distinctive institutional structures inherited by the Philippine state from the American colonial era. "[T]he legacy of U.S. colonialism," puts Hutchcroft bluntly, "was considerable oligarchy building, but very little in the way of state building" (p. 26).

**Unchallenged Predominance of the Patron-Client Framework?**

Sidel also challenges the patron-client framework. "[T]he notion that patron-client relations ever provided the essential social cement in Philippine life ignores the persistence of coercive pressures and local power monopolies in electoral politics and social relations." Few scholars of Philippine politics today would probably disagree. More disputable is his contention that the patron-client framework "today remains largely unchallenged as a framework for understanding the dynamics of local politics in the archipelago." A careful historical review of the various characterizations of Philippine politics since the 1960s, however, would show not only that there have
been serious challenges to the patron-client framework, but also that it has long been displaced, first by the neocolonial/dependency and then by the patrimonial/elite democracy framework. Sidel gave short shrift to the works of scholars who in the early 1970s “variously linked national developments and processes of political change to the putative ‘transformation’ or ‘breakdown’ of patron-client relations” (pp. 7–9). There is not much appreciation for these scholars’ contributions to the eventual conceptualization of the neocolonial/dependency and patrimonial/elite democracy frameworks, and of ‘bossism’ as well.

The earliest studies on the patron-client interpretation of Philippine politics came out in the 1960s, at a time when social scientists of various disciplines and from various parts of the globe devoted considerable attention to patron-client structures, with case studies of clientelist forms and dynamics in different world regions but especially in Latin America, Southeast Asia, and southern Europe. Carl Landé observed that the Philippines’ two major political parties then were identical in policies, ideological position, and sources of support, that intraparty solidarity was weak, and that interparty switching was endemic. He found that the Philippine polity, unlike western democracies, was structured less by organized interest groups than by networks of personal ties, to a great extent dyadic ties involving exchanges of favors between prosperous patrons and their poor and dependent clients. In each province the country’s two main parties were structured by vertical chains of patron-client relationships, extending from wealthy, landed political leaders at the provincial level, down to lesser gentry politicians in the towns, down further to village leaders, and finally to ordinary peasants. The pyramids of patron-client relationships cut across classes, ethnolinguistic communities, and religious affiliations. Landé’s study drew from and belonged to a series of studies, largely employing the anthropological approach, that emphasized the element of personalism in Philippine politics. In the 1960s the patron-client framework was without question the predominant framework of Philippine politics.

By the late 1960s and early 1970s, however, scholarly studies already began to show that Landé’s model was inadequate or even becoming outdated. As early as 1969, James Scott wrote about the emergence in the Philippines not only of the political machine, but also of “bosses.” According to him, traditional patron-client relations were eroding, and the traditional faction based on patron-client bonds was being transformed into a political machine. Instead of relying on traditional patterns of deference, the machine resorted to widespread use of short-run, material inducements to secure cooperation. Occasionally, the machine “boss” also used charisma, coercion, or ideology. To generate broad support on a continuing basis, machine parties wielded patronage on a distinctive scale. In his study of Philippine elections from 1946 to 1969, Hirofumi Ando found that, while the electoral process basically conformed to the patron-client model, material resources and rewards had become
“too diffusely distributed” and many members of the elite could no longer meet the
voters’ demands through remunerative means alone. He noted a serious mutation in
the compliance system: the threat or use of physical violence, a feature supposed to
be alien to the patron-client model. With increasing intraelite competition, politi-
cians hired more and more “private security guards.” Political warlords emerged
with their private armies. Ando also observed the use of fraud, such as the falsifica-
tion of election returns.10 Arthur Alan Shantz produced a long list of cases of vio-
lene, coercion, and other irregularities committed during the 1969 elections.11 In a
study of politics, patronage, and class conflict in Central Luzon, Willem Wolters
found that by the late 1960s and early 1970s patron-client relations and other forms
of personal intermediation did not have a stable and permanent character and did not
provide structural linkages between the local community and the central state.
Landownership had become less important as a basis for power and prestige.
Moreover, landlord-tenant relations were no longer on a patron-client basis. They
“had become much less persistent, the scope of the exchange had narrowed, the tie
binding the parties had become weaker and less comprehensive, and was more
instrumental in character.” Meanwhile, the state apparatus had become increasingly
important as a provider of capital. Huge amounts of government money were being
distributed along particularistic lines, but such patronage could be dispensed without
recourse to patron-client ties.12

As the inadequacies of the original patron-client framework became more appar-
et, the concept of clientelism began to change. Thomas Nowak and Kay Snyder
declared clientelist politics as “a system of exchange which is particularistic, non-
programmatic, and non-ideological.” The political machine was merely a more spe-
cialized form of clientelist politics that had evolved in response to increased differ-
etiation and growth of urban areas.13

By the mid 1970s the patron-client model had outlived its usefulness as an inter-
pretative framework of Philippine politics. While patron-client bonds could still
account for a great deal of the political behavior in both rural and urban areas, they
could not explain “the role of violence, coercion, intimidation, monetary induce-
ments, and the considerable autonomy elites have to manipulate formal democratic
procedures to their liking” and “the influence, even control of foreign interests over
Philippine politics.”14 The exchange of favors in a patron-client relationship was apt
to lead to a bit of corruption, but the large-scale corruption and, most especially, the
coercion and violence went well beyond the placid clientelist order originally paint-
ed. In the decade prior to martial law elections had become so marred by corruption,
fraud, and the threat or use of force that “guns, goons, gold” had become a byword
in Philippine politics. After the 1969 elections the losing presidential candidate can-
didly protested that Marcos had “out-gunned, out-gooned and out-gold” him.15 The
1971 elections were marked by a record 534 violent incidents and 905 deaths. The
patron-client model also could not convincingly explain martial law. To state that the

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breakdown of clientelist machines brought about martial law was to admit that there were factors well outside of patron-client bonds that had to be considered.

A Period of Predominance of the Neocolonial/Dependency Framework

Philippine left-wing nationalists have long articulated the neocolonial/dependency interpretation of Philippine politics. According to Constantino, the U.S. exercised “indirect colonial rule” over the Philippines even after granting it independence in 1946 by continuing to dominate the Philippine economy, retaining it as a market for American goods, a source of raw materials, and an open field for American investments. To guarantee such economic control, the U.S. maintained military bases and tied the country to various military pacts. The Filipino economic and political elite was merely “a sub-elite within an essentially colonial framework.” Lichauco traced the country’s ills—massive and deepening poverty, rising unemployment, runaway inflation, the infantile state of military and productive capacities, the disoriented educational system, social anarchy—directly or indirectly to the country’s neocolonial status. Philippine Communists, who had propagated the neocolonial interpretation of Philippine politics since the late 1940s, were much more strident in their critiques of “U.S. imperialism.”16 During the stormy protest rallies of 1970–72 the writings of nationalist authors gained wide readership. The resurgence of the nationalist movement was no doubt influenced by the worldwide “rediscovery of imperialism” and the rise of the dependency school in Latin America, both in the late 1960s and early 1970s.17 With the advent of martial law, the neocolonial or dependency interpretation gradually replaced the patron-client model as the predominant interpretation of Philippine politics. The increased dependence of Marcos’s regime on U.S. economic and military assistance was an added factor for its rise.

Under martial law, Marcos clamped down on all dissent and threw thousands of dissenters, including many nationalist writers, into detention. For a while there was a lull in nationalist and anti-imperialist literature in Philippine academia. Non-Filipino academics and foreign-based Filipino scholars critical of martial law, however, could not be covered by Marcos’s clampdown. Characterizing Marcos’ imposition of martial law as a coup, Robert Stauffer asserted that foreign control over the Philippine economy had held back economic development to such an extent that conditions had made a resort to authoritarian rule extremely likely.18 According to Jonathan Fast, the Philippines had long served as a politically tranquil base for U.S. imperialism, but martial law—an attack by Marcos on his bourgeois rivals—plunged the Philippines into an unprecedented political crisis.19 Bello and Severina Rivera argued that Marcos’s dictatorship remained in power primarily because of the vast quantities of military and economic assistance—the “logistics of repression”—it

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received from the U.S. Later, Stauffer showed how authoritarian supports, ideologi-
cal and material, from a metropolitan nation (the U.S.) had been used by antination-
alist groups in the Philippines to overthrow the existing political system and to insti-
tute a “dependent-authoritarian regime.”

By the late 1970s the nationalist movement resurfaced in the Philippines. Old and
new writings of nationalist scholars again circulated widely. A lively, multisided
debate over the “mode of production” took place. Leftists aligned with the CPP
defended the thesis that the Philippines was a “semicolonial and semifeudal” coun-
try in which emerging bourgeois leaders had been coopted by imperialism and
turned into “big comprador-bourgeois.” Those identified with the pro-Moscow
Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (PKP) argued that it was a backward neocolony
being groomed under the “new international division of labor” to become an indus-
trial one, albeit only engaged in the production of labor-intensive commodities for
export. A good number of the dependency or world-systems scholars used the his-
torical approach in explaining how the Philippines became a dependent-capitalist
state or was integrated into the capitalist world system. Due to continuing restric-
tions on free expression, the mode of production debate tended to avoid deep open
discussion of Philippine politics. However, Rigoberto Tiglao argued that the
Philippines’ “backward capitalism” had generated an unstable state machinery and
prevented the smooth operation of elections. Moreover, limited capital sources and
the existence of large power groupings arising from landownership and the bureau-
cracy resulted in “explosive intra-elite struggles to capture a prime source of capital
accumulation—the state.” Complete centralization of political authority was needed
to manage these contradictions.

Kathleen Weekley briefly assesses the mode of production controversy in her
book. In her view, the debate in the Philippines, as in other countries, did not really
go anywhere, as it was highly theoretical and empirically weak. Moreover, it was
based on questionable assumptions, restricted by narrow terms of reference, and
“dogged by a tendency to pit detailed textual exegeses of Marx against each other”
(p. 51).

Meanwhile, foreign-based scholars further expounded on the neocolonial/depend-
cy theme. Presenting a conventional neocolonial picture, Stephen Shalom traced
how the U.S. restored the Philippines’ prewar elite to power, defined the terms of
Philippine independence to preserve U.S. economic and strategic interests, inter-
vened in the political crisis of the early 1950s, maintained military and economic aid
to further its own interests and those of local allies, and backed the imposition of
martial law. Walden Bello, David Kinley, and Elaine Elinson exposed the “devel-
opment debacle” of the World Bank’s policies in the Philippines. In a study of the
political economy of transnational corporate investment in Philippine agriculture,
Hawes conceptualized the Philippine state, “not as a sovereign actor representing in
a democratic manner the interest of pluralist groups, but rather as a penetrated and
class-dominated state.” Like other Third World countries, the Philippines had been integrated into the world economy in a dependent role.28

The neocolonial or dependency theories dominated scholarly studies and debates on Philippine politics during the Marcos authoritarian period. Little was heard from the adherents of the patron-client model. The picture of neat dyads of benign patron-client ties simply could not gibe with the stark reality of flagrant Marcosian plunder and repression. Not long after the fall of Marcos, however, the influence of the neocolonial view, in turn, waned. Many scholars had never believed or no longer believed that Marcos had merely been a U.S. puppet. “[I]t is perhaps part of the colonial legacy,” commented Landé, “that there remains an exaggerated view of what the American government can accomplish in the Philippines.”29

The Current Predominance of the Patrimonial/Elite Democracy Framework

Dante Simbulan’s 1965 study of the socioeconomic elite in Philippine politics appears to be the pioneering study on the patrimonial/elite democracy framework. Simbulan had the same observations as Landé on the indistinguishability of the country’s two main parties, loose party identification, and frequent defections, but, utilizing Laswell’s theory of the elite, he came up with a different explanation. The parties were similar because they were essentially alliances of leaders from the same socioeconomic stratum, the elite. Simbulan showed that the Philippine elite had a long history marked by a remarkable continuity. He traced how Spanish colonizers turned the precolonial chiefs and nobles, together with mestizos, into the privileged local class, the principalia, how this privileged class accumulated land, wealth, and power under Spanish and American colonial rule, and how the principalia evolved into the modern day elite. The Philippines’ two major parties had formal rules on party organization, but the power relations in the social structure impinged on the formal organization. In the provinces, factions composed of elite families served as the nuclei of party organization, and provincial politics revolved around the interests of these elite family groupings. To win an election, elite politicians made effective use of money (including public funds), violence, and fraud, as well as of cultural norms. While in office, they utilized political power to enrich themselves and their backers. Philippine political parties were elite, not multiclass, parties. Far from satisfying the needs of various social strata, they served only the interests of the modern principalia.

The term elite democracy seems to have caught on fast in the post-Marcos era, drawing many former adherents of the neocolonial/dependency framework. Hawes, Bello and Gershman, Stauffer, and others use the term, characterizing the coming to power of Corazon Aquino as the restoration of elite democracy. They draw an image of Philippine politics similar to Simbulan’s elite politics. Bello and Gershman point
out that elite politicians won the vast majority of the posts in the 1987 and 1988 elections, thanks to “the combination of money, high media visibility, leftist ambivalence, and the continuing strong influence of patron-client relationships.” Elite democracy is more complicated than authoritarian rule. Borrowing from Gramsci, they characterize elite democracy as being “based on the creation of cultural or ideological hegemony, obtaining the consent of the ruled through the use of institutions, symbols, and processes that enjoy a strong degree of legitimacy among the ruled.” Elections serve as the means for the relatively peaceful alternation in power among rival elite factions. Through mass socialization and the enormous advantage conferred by wealth and resources on elite politicians, elite democracy screens out fundamental challenges to the social status quo.30

Most of the other postauthoritarian interpretations of Philippine politics—cacique democracy, strong society/weak state, oligarchic democracy—are variations on the theme of elite rule. Like Simbulan, Anderson seeks to underscore the continuity of the lineage of the Philippines’ present-day elite from the caciques of the Spanish colonial era. Thus, Anderson coins the term cacique democracy, the marriage of American electoralism with Spanish caciquism. He sees the beginnings of Philippine political dynasties in the “palmy days” of the American colonial period, when provincial and local elective offices proliferated and caciques stacked them with their relatives and friends. Private armies and warlords emerged in the early post-colonial years when the landed elite sought to subdue restive peasants and restore uncontested cacique rule. The oligarchy faced no serious domestic challenges from 1954 to 1972, “the full heyday of cacique democracy in the Philippines.” Cacique democracy returned after Marcos, and members of the traditional political families again dominated electoral politics.

Expounding on the strong society, weak state thesis, Alfred McCoy pinpoints two key elements that contributed to the emergence of powerful political families: “the rise of ‘rents’ as a significant share of the nation’s economy and a simultaneous attenuation of central government control over the provinces.” To maintain themselves in power, the political families resorted to various tactics and methods, but most especially to political violence and “rent-seeking.” The privatization of public resources, while strengthening the elite families, weakened the state’s resources and its bureaucratic apparatus.31

Patrimonial oligarchic state, bossism, and in part clientelist electoral regime are variants, too, of the patrimonial/elite democracy model. They all conjure up a political system dominated by the elite who uses its access to state resources to maintain and expand its economic and political power. Hutchcroft, Sidel, and Franco expand on particular features or facets of elite rule in the Philippines that have not been duly recognized or studied in-depth in the past: oligarchic plunder (Hutchcroft), local strongman rule (Sidel and Franco), and the state as prey and predator (Hutchcroft and Sidel, respectively). Moreover, for students of comparative politics, the three
provide thought-stimulating and useful analyses of different types of patrimonialism (Hutchcroft), bossism (Sidel), and clientelism and electoralism (Franco).

In one aspect—his tendency to dispense with clientelism as a useful analytic tool altogether, as Franco puts it (p. 16)—Sidel diverges from other patrimonial/elite democracy theorists. In general, not only patrimonial/elite democracy but also neocolonial/dependency theorists acknowledge that members of the elite in the Philippines still resort to traditional patron-client ties as one of the means—not necessarily the principal means—of maintaining and expanding economic and political power. Politicians in the Philippines have become so good at combining personalistic and nonpersonalistic, noncoercive and coercive forms of control that often it is difficult to determine exactly when deferential patron-client ties have been replaced by a more coercive arrangement. The politician-godfather of KBL fame may give the kiss of the traditional kumpadre (ritual kin) today and that of the Mafiosi tomorrow, or of both at the same time.32 Moreover, the concept of clientelism itself has evolved. Nowak, Snyder, Scott, and Fox, whom Sidel cites as patron-client model adherents, all departed from Landé’s model and integrated machine politics or coercion into their concepts of clientelism.

A Critique of the Prominent Interpretations of Philippine Politics

The three prominent frameworks of politics in the Philippines—the patron-client, neocolonial/dependency, and patrimonial/elite democracy (including such variants of the last as the patrimonial oligarchic state and bossism)—suffer from a major weakness: their one-sided, top-down view.

For the patron-client framework, its inability to account for intraelite violence was bad enough. Perhaps most egregious, it was blind to the serious class and ethnic tensions that threatened to tear Philippine society apart. Once before, in the early 1950s, landlord-peasant tensions had resulted in a mighty explosion: the Huk rebellion, in which the PKP figured prominently. The rebellion was crushed by the mid 1950s, perhaps explaining why the patron-client model saw only tranquil patron-client relationships. As high levels of landlessness and social inequality persisted, however, class tensions built up again. A new Communist insurgency, the CPP, began in the late 1960s. In 1970–72 tens of thousands of students, workers, urban poor, and peasants marched onto the streets of Manila and other urban centers. Strongly influenced by the revolutionary left, they railed against imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucrat capitalism. A number of rallies turned into pitched battles between policemen using truncheons and high-powered rifles and demonstrators hurling stones, molotov cocktails, and pillboxes. By the time Marcos imposed martial law, the revolutionary movement had spread nationwide and established guerrilla zones in many areas.
Meanwhile, in Mindanao disputes over land between Christian settlers and increasingly displaced Muslims heated up. Paramilitary groups terrorized Muslim and Christian communities. After Marcos declared martial law, all hell broke loose in Mindanao. Muslim rebels called for independence from Philippine colonialism. The Communist insurgency, the Muslim secessionist movement, and the stormy protest rallies shattered the patron-client model’s tranquil landscape of an integrative multi-class, multiethnic society.

The neocolonial/dependency model also depicted power, domination, and control as flowing from top to bottom, from the U.S. to its puppet Marcos and his cabal, to their local cohorts, and finally down to the masses. The revolutionary forces basically saw themselves as working outside of this political system, and they sought to overthrow the reactionary state. Before the February 1986 uprising, it seemed to many who adhered to the neocolonial perspective that the U.S. would decide Marcos’s political fate. In the case of the CPP, such thinking proved disastrous. The revolutionary left boycotted the fateful 1986 presidential elections and was left out of the revolution it claimed to lead.

The patrimonial/elite democracy model, a pyramidal model, too, follows a logical continuum of hierarchical politics dating back to the colonial era. Colonialism nurtured the domestic elite; “colonial democracy” reared it in the ways of patronage, manipulation, and coercion. Hence it can be said that colonial rule and postcolonial elite rule form one continuous thread. At times, democratic structures and processes or their trappings partly or wholly masked their hierarchical nature. Both colonial rule and postcolonial elite rule, in fact, had authoritarian and democratic phases in them. The long colonial era included a long authoritarian Spanish rule, a brief experience with Spanish colonial democracy, a short but extremely bloody American authoritarian period, a golden era of American colonial democracy, and an authoritarian Japanese occupation. The postcolonial era has had two democratic periods with an authoritarian one sandwiched in between.

The elite democracy interpretation of Philippine politics appears to be superior to the two other prominent interpretations, however. Unlike the patron-client model, it takes corruption, fraud, coercion, and violence into account. And while the elite democracy model may regard foreign interests as at times or often infringing on Philippine sovereignty, it does not have an exaggerated view, as the neocolonial model tends to have, of the power of these external forces to determine the course of political events in the country.

Although the elite democracy framework has now gained ascendancy, it nonetheless has critical weaknesses. As another static, top-down model, the elite democracy model tends to see what happens in the Philippines as mainly resulting from the actions and machinations of the elite—the corrupt caciques, predatory oligarchs, and bosses—or factions of the elite. But elite action and intraelite competition have not always been the decisive factor in shaping events. While actions of the opposition
elite and the "Cory magic" certainly contributed to the downfall of Marcos in 1986, people power, not elite power or persona, was the decisive factor in toppling the corrupt dictator. In 2001, again, people power proved to be the most crucial element in ousting Estrada, another corrupt president.

Hutchcroft and Sidel devote only passing mention to the efforts of those fighting against patrimonial oligarchic and boss rule. "Nonoligarchic social forces," writes Hutchcroft somewhat dismissively (p. 54), "never seem to achieve the 'critical mass' necessary to force major overhaul of the system." Only in the very last paragraph of his book does Sidel acknowledge the hard work of nongovernmental organization activists, investigative journalists, and labor, peasant, and urban poor organizers in resisting the predations of local bosses, adding that "[s]uch efforts are amply deserving of both attention and support" (p. 154). In contrast, Franco provides a more balanced picture and an integrated analysis of both elite rule and the popular opposition to it. To make sure that clientelist electoral regime does not appear as capturing the essence of political dynamics in pre- and postauthoritarian Philippines, she also presents social movement-based efforts at democratization. Franco's account departs from the overly elite-centered depictions of Philippine politics in the general run of the elite democracy model.

Contested Democracy: An Alternative Interpretation of Philippine Politics

An alternative paradigm of contested democracy is more appropriate in explaining Philippine politics today. It takes into account not just the workings of elite politics, but also the actions of forces from below, thus building on previous work by scholars like Kerkvliet, Franco, and David Wurfel, who have tried to encompass a fuller range of ideas, organizational bases, and cleavages beyond the patron-client, neocolonial, and elite democracy approaches. A contested democracy approach acknowledges that colonial and postcolonial elite rule constitutes a single continuous seam in Philippine politics yet contends that they are not the only important thread. The fight against hierarchical structures—the struggle for independence and for popular empowerment or democracy from below—is the other major running thread. Filipinos' yearning for independence was manifested in the many wars and battles fought by the native inhabitants against Spanish colonization, the numerous revolts against Spain, the revolution of 1896, the Filipino-American War and the Moro-American War, the campaign for Philippine independence, and the resistance against Japanese occupation. With the granting of independence in 1946, the efforts to assert Philippine sovereignty against foreign intervention or domination continued, but the focal point of the fight against hierarchy swung to social justice and popular empowerment against elite rule.

The two main strands in present-day Philippine politics—elite democracy and
democracy from below—represent two competing concepts of democracy. The oligarchs and bosses basically ride on the minimalist concept of democracy that equates democracy with elections. Such a concept is most useful and convenient for the elite, for it allows them the greatest leeway to manipulate political structures and processes in their favor. Elections could well be regular and relatively free and fair; in general, candidates would be able to speak, organize, and assemble freely. To win an election, the elite politician could bank on his economic and political clout and take advantage of deferential patron-client ties or, when he tires of the kumpadre bit, simply resort to less personalistic forms of patronage. When this approach does not suffice, then perhaps vote buying or a bit of pressure would do the trick. In extreme situations, the boss-politician could resort to the full regalia of guns, goons, and gold. Once in power, the “trapo” (traditional politician) makes the most of his position to further enrich himself and the oligarchs behind him through rents and plunder and to entrench himself.34

The long history of struggle of subordinate classes and marginalized communities for popular empowerment and social justice indicates that for many Filipinos the minimalist concept of democracy does not suffice. Before and during Marcos’s authoritarian rule, however, democracy from below remained nascent and somewhat adulterated, as popular movements were influenced by Stalinist or Maoist parties that espoused “people’s democracy” or “national democracy,” a fig leaf for one party dictatorship. Since the fall of Marcos the influence of doctrinaire Marxism has declined, and democracy from below has taken a less adulterated form. Democracy from below stresses greater popular participation in decision making, as well as social and economic equality. It has found organized expression in many people’s organizations and nongovernmental organizations and in the social movements, as well as in new political parties and groups that oppose elite and trapo politics and espouse new politics. The advocates of democracy from below aim to bring Philippine democracy much closer to the classical meaning of democracy, rule by the people. Democracy, in other words, is people power.

In the sense that the very meaning of democracy is contested, contested democracy would be a more accurate interpretative framework of Philippine politics. The contested democracy framework remedies the static, one-sided, and top-down view of the elite democracy framework by integrating the elements of democracy from below. The oligarchs, caciques, bosses, and trapos are still very dominant in Philippine politics, but their predatory rule has been challenged and continues to be challenged by the poor and marginalized.

As in the transition to democracy, the consolidation and deepening of democracy involve contestation, especially among different classes and class coalitions. Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyne Huber Stephens, and John Stephens assert the centrality of class power to the process of democratization, that democratization in Europe and
Latin America was both pushed forward and opposed by class interest, that on the whole subordinate classes fought for democracy and classes benefiting from the status quo resisted democracy, and that this centrality holds both for achieving formal democracy and advancing towards greater social and economic equality. The Philippines would easily fall under the category they describe as a “truncated” or “deficient” formal democracy. It exhibits deficiencies that hinder the deepening of democracy, similar to those in Latin American democracies: political and economic power concentrated in a few, weak state autonomy from dominant class interests, and international pressure for market-oriented but socially inequitable policies. In the democratic deepening process, the contestation between the entrenched economic-political elite and the subordinate classes and marginalized communities is becoming a drawn-out struggle centering on the missing features or attributes of democracy. As an alternative interpretation of Philippine politics, contested democracy graphically captures the dynamics and tensions within a deficient formal democracy that is seemingly unable to move forward.

A Deformation of Democracy from Below

As can be gleaned from the historical presentations of Franco and Weekley, Philippine postcolonial history has been marked by powerful movements with nascent elements of democracy from below. Peasant struggles for land reform have been at the core of the Huk rebellion and the Maoist insurgency, and the struggles of Muslims against oppression and discrimination have been at the core of the Muslim secessionist movement. The CPP’s armed struggle is now one of the world’s longest-running insurgencies. Fighting between the government and the insurgents has claimed over 43,000 lives. While many may abhor the CPP’s ends and means, the intensity and longevity of its armed struggle show the depth of popular opposition not just to Marcos’s authoritarian rule, but also to elite rule in general. The struggle of the Muslims for self-determination has been even more intense than the Communist insurgency. About 120,000 people have been killed in the armed conflict between the government and Muslim rebels, and over 200,000 forced to flee to Sabah.

In the toppling of Marcos, too much credit has often been given to intraelite conflict and too little to popular movements. Commendably, Franco shows the prominent role played by the grass-roots movements in the broad resistance to Marcos’s dictatorship. In the mid 1970s, long before the assassination of Benigno Aquino, mass movements of workers, urban poor, and students had already reawakened in Metro Manila. In 1980–81 tens of thousands of both rural and urban masses took to the streets all over the country, especially at the time of the March 1981 plebiscite
and the May 1981 presidential election. Aquino’s assassination in August 1983 sparked off what Franco calls a civic uprising involving not just the popular forces, but also large sections of the middle class and the opposition elite. The people power revolt of 1986 was primarily the culmination of the long struggle of popular forces against dictatorship, certainly not just the product of intraelite competition.

Since the late 1960s the CPP, which advocated “national democracy” and established its mass base among the peasants and workers, has portrayed itself as the forerunner of “genuine” or “people’s” democracy. The CPP and the CPP-aligned national democrats were very much in the thick of the anti-Marcos struggle. Weekley describes the CPP as having “played the lead role in building the opposition to Marcos’ anti-democratic, self-serving government” and as having been “the most consistently daring, the most vocal and the most visible of the regime’s opposition” (pp. 1, 5). Through their active participation in the anti-Marcos dictatorship struggle, the CPP and the national democrats managed to convince many of their democratic credentials. Franco herself includes the national democrats as part of the democratic opposition.

In her book, Weekley tells the story of the establishment, rise and decline of the CPP, with the stress on the role of theory. “It is one of the world’s tales of extraordinary determination and self-sacrifice of a group of people inspired by Marxist ideas to assert economic justice for the wealth-producers of the country against the powerful interests of wealth-appropriators.” The CPP was established in 1968 upon the theoretical foundations of Marxism-Leninism-Mao Tsetung Thought and adopted Mao’s strategy of protracted people’s war. The CPP and the national democratic movement grew rapidly under Marcos, becoming a powerful antidictatorship force and the hegemonic force in the left. Party leaders attributed such growth in large part to the correctness of the party’s ideological and political line. In the late 1970s and early 1980s certain party organs, notably those in charge of the mass movement and united front work and of the Mindanao region, raised questions and proposed certain innovations in strategy, such as giving more emphasis to the political struggle and to urban work. The CPP leadership, however, did not give them much latitude. Weekley argues that the party’s theoretical principles “remained unchallenged in any fundamental way until 1986, thus hobbling efforts to redefine the Party’s place and role in post-dictatorship politics” (pp. 1–7). It was wracked by dissension and debate after the boycott fiasco of 1986 and then again after the collapse of the Communist regimes in eastern Europe. Instead of responding to calls for change, the main core of the CPP leadership, stuck in the past, launched a campaign to reaffirm the party’s basic Maoist principles. Amid intense, acrimonious polemics and public mudslinging, the hardline leadership expelled dissidents in 1992–93. The party split. In twenty-five years, quips Weekley, the CPP “moved from the vanguard to the rearguard of radical politics” (p. 259).

Weekley’s book is a very good, clear, and straightforward account of the CPP’s
theory and practice. She explores the issues and questions that confronted the CPP in the course of its revolutionary practice, incisively showing how the initial inquiries and "adjustments" in strategy made before 1986 slowly led to bigger questions, ripening into a full-blown attack on Maoist dogma in 1992–93. Her focus is mainly on strategy, as major theoretical debates within the CPP indeed centered on the means of seizing power. It is a pity, however, that Weekley does not delve much into the debates related to the CPP's vision of an alternative society in the early 1990s, which included discussion of a vanguard party versus a pluralistic state. Her account, nevertheless, amply exposes the CPP's Stalinist nature and its instrumental view of democracy from below.

Contested Democracy in the Post-Marcos Era

The question of democracy from below—the efforts of forces identified with subordinate classes, communities, and groups in Philippine society to bring about popular empowerment and social justice—has grown in urgency. Corruption and plunder by the oligarchic elite have sapped the government's coffers and the country's resources. Neoliberal economic policies adopted over the last two decades by this very same elite (paradoxically, it may seem to some) under pressure from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank have worsened the situation. Structural adjustment programs featuring export-oriented industrialization, liberalization, deregulation, and privatization have produced low and volatile growth and widened poverty and inequalities. Thanks to booty capitalism and neoliberalism, the Philippines has degenerated from being Asia's second most developed postwar economy to being the region's sick man.

The Philippines is now perhaps one of the world's worst class-divided societies. A small percentage of the population controls the country's economic resources, while the great majority remains mired in poverty. Despite land reform, landholding became more concentrated between 1960 and 1990. The gap between the rich and the poor has turned into a more gaping chasm. In 1957 the country's richest 20 percent received 7.5 times the share of the poorest 20 percent; in 2000 this figure grew to 12.4 times. Worse, the beautiful people flaunt their wealth and power, even as some of the urban poor scavenged and live in garbage dumpsites amid filth, stench, and fumes. The Filipino worker's minimum wage, P280, contrasts with the whopping P6.1 million a day that Estrada raked in from illegal gambling from May 1999 to November 2000. (Estrada's loot of $78–80 million pales in comparison, of course, to the $6.78 to $13.56 billion that Marcos amassed over twenty years in power, as estimated by Transparency International.) The Muslims of Mindanao and other minority ethnic communities, many of whom have already been displaced from their ancestral lands, continue to be treated like second-class citizens. To feed their families, hundreds of thousands of Filipinos have had to seek jobs abroad.
For those whose attention became glued since the 1986 people power uprising to the actions and manipulations of the oligarchs and trapos, the ouster of Estrada through People Power II (or EDSA II) served as a reminder that democracy from below is still very much the other running thread in Philippine politics. Some western observers waxed critical of people power, one even commenting that “ousting presidents by revolution has become a bad national habit” and that “people power” was nothing more than “mob rule.”

What these observers did not seem to fathom is that a lot of democratic processes and structures, from the political party system to mechanisms for horizontal accountability and even the rule of law, have not yet been institutionalized because trapos want to leave them that way for easy manipulation and that sometimes the only recourse the people have to check the abuses of the predatory elite is direct action.

Even EDSA III was to a significant extent a protest against elite politics. Most of the great unwashed who gathered at EDSA in support of the deposed Estrada and later attacked Malacanang Palace came from the poorest of the poor. They harbored deep resentment against the rich and felt alienated from all the dirt and hypocrisy of trapo politics. While people power did oust two corrupt presidents, one should avoid taking a romanticized view of the Filipino masses. Given the long-standing role of patron-client ties in Philippine politics, large numbers of them remain vulnerable to clientelism and populism. Throughout his long screen and political life, Estrada had shrewdly cultivated the image of a man for the downtrodden. Estrada victimized the poor he was supposed to be championing not just through patronage and corruption, but also through the socially inequitable neoliberal agenda he pursued as president. Sadly, clientelist-populist appeals still worked at EDSA III.

Since People Power I, the term popular empowerment has become very common, and it has been associated with people’s and nongovernmental organizations and with social movements. Social organizations have mushroomed all over the country and ventured into a wide array of concerns. The Philippines is now reputed to have the third largest nongovernmental organization community in the developing world behind Brazil and India and probably the world’s highest density. Many of these organizations are at the core of various social movements that have waged campaigns on land reform, labor relations, women’s rights, peace, U.S. military presence, globalization, and overseas Filipinos. Some have employed “programmatic demand-making” to influence the crafting of national policies. A growing number has ventured into development work and promoted people’s participation in governance, challenging traditional, top-down approaches.

Of late, the adherents of democracy from below have ventured into the main playing field of the elite, elections, whose ins and outs, modus, and tricks the oligarchs have so mastered in over a century of experience. Doing battle with the trapos in the electoral arena follows a simple logic. Explosions of people power and a strong and vibrant civil society are not enough, if oligarchs and trapos still call the shots and
make a mess of people's lives. Since the approval of the party list system in 1995, forces based in people's and nongovernmental organizations have built new political parties representing marginalized sectors. Fledgling new politics parties like Akbayan, ABA-AKO, and Sanlakas have won congressional seats and/or local government posts.

Given the current unfavorable power relations, the Philippines may continue to be bogged down by widespread poverty, social inequality, corruption, and trapo-dominated electoralism for some time. Under such unstable conditions, a comeback of authoritarian rule can not be ruled out. Possibilities for the deepening of democracy nonetheless remain. Contested democracy, as an alternative paradigm of Philippine politics, highlights the element of agency, apart from contestation. Formal democracy, despite deficiencies, provides the opportunity for subordinate classes and communities to push for popular empowerment and, further, for a more equitable distribution of the country's wealth and ultimately to bring about a stable, more participatory, and egalitarian democracy. Towards that end, one can expect in the years to come more expressions and explosions of that bad national habit—people power.

NOTES

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7. For instance, Landé, p. 54, wrote: "Filipinos have under American tutelage been imbued with the belief that nepotism and corruption are bad for the country and not to be tolerated."


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24. For a more detailed account of the mode of production debate, see Virgilio Rojas, “The Mode of Production Controversy in the Philippines: Anatomy of a Lingering Theoretical Stalemate,” Debate, 4 (1992), 3–43. Rojas identified Fast, Jim Richardson, Brian Fegan, Peter Limqueco, Alfred McCoy, and Marshall McLennan with the historical approach of dependency theory; Tiglao with the political economy approach; and Magno with the relative autonomy of the state approach.
32. KBL stands for kasal, binyag at libing (weddings, baptisms, and funerals).
34. Ordinary Filipinos derogatorily refer to politicians who resort to patronage or to guns, goons, and gold, especially those linked to powerful clans, as trapos. Short for traditional politician, trapo ordinarily means an old rag used to wipe off dust and dirt, which often becomes grimy and greasy.


