Power in the Philippines: How Democratic is Asia’s "First Democracy"?

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To what extent does the power elite in the Philippines represent a relatively closed and self-perpetuating social class? On the surface, the Philippine polity presents us with an intriguing paradox. On the one hand, we are confronted with the almost unanimous opinion of social scientists, both native and foreign, that the country’s political leadership is reactionary, greedy, and corrupt on a scale seldom equalled. On the other hand, we hear of the intelligence, urbanity and humanity of the individual Filipino political leader, and we are told of the extremely high occupational prestige enjoyed by politicians in Philippine society (Tiryakian, 1956: 123).

Could the answer to these apparent contradictions lie in the inherently stratified or “class” nature of that Philippine society and of its power elite as well — a situation, if not created, at least strengthened and perpetuated by past and present colonial relationships? And if this is indeed the case, what are the implications for future social change in the Philippines?

The problem with which this study concerns itself is hardly novel nor unique; rather, it is as old as is the interest of sociologists in politics. Raymond Aron reduces it to the following question, “What is the relation between social differentiation and political hierarchy?” (Aron, 1966: 51) and recommends a method of analysis for dealing with the question which combines insights from the Marxist theory of class struggle and the “elitism” of the Pareto school. Aron maintains that crucial to the understanding of any society is the structure of its elite. By this he means “the relationship between the groups exercising power, the degree of unity or division between these groups, the system of recruiting the elite, and the ease or difficulty of entering it” (Aron, 1966:99).

A unified elite, says Aron, means the end of freedom. Although Aron sees the unified elite as developing only in the communist type of situation, it could conceivably tend to occur in any society where social power has been monopolized by one ruling class (whether that class be the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, the proletariat, or the “scientific technostructure”) (Galbraith, 1967:82). To that class belong the holders of the positions of authority in the upper hierarchy of all of the society’s organizational complexes, and from that class the ruling group emerges — a cohesive, interdependent and interrelated entity, subject to little or no competition from countervailing centers of power. It is
this type of group that C. Wright Mills labeled “the power elite” (Mills, 1956:147). Because they represent the most powerful economic interests, one of the major sources of social power – control over the community’s resources – is theirs to command. Formal organization, another primary source of social power, becomes almost their sole prerogative in a non-industrial society. All that remains of the three sources of social power discussed by Robert Bierstedt in his thoughtful analysis (Bierstedt, 1950:734) is the mere potential for power (through ultimate resort to violence) that resides in majorities, or sheer numbers of unorganized people (Arendt, 1968).

The situation just described, that of the unified elite, is only one of a number of possible relationships between the political leadership, or elite, and the larger society. Tom Bottomore recommends the use of a three-fold system of “ideal type” societies to assess and analyze these same aspects of the relationship of rulers to ruled with which Aron is concerned. Bottomore lists these as: societies in which there is a ruling class, and elites which represent no more than particular aspects of its interests; societies in which there is no ruling class, but an elite which founds its power upon control of the bureaucracy or upon military force; and societies in which there exists a multiplicity of elites among which no cohesive and enduring group of powerful individuals or families seems to be discoverable (Bottomore, 1964:38).

This study has attempted to move in the direction suggested by Bottomore, in seeking to ascertain the class nature of the governing group in the Philippines and its relation to the larger society. For this purpose it was decided to focus on the Senate – the senior legislative body. Admittedly, this choice may have introduced a measure of bias into the analysis, as two recent studies of Filipino legislators located some slight differences in background characteristics between members of the two houses of Congress (Abueva, 1965:10-29 and Stauffer, 1966). However, in every political system one of the governing bodies in the formal structure serves as the arena for the really decisive struggles for power. Indications are that in the Philippines it is the Senate which functions in this way, and is consequently the base of the most powerful of the elite. It is into the Senate that the most successful of the congressmen eventually move; it is from the Senate that the president and his running mate are customarily drawn.

Data were gathered on the membership of the 1931 and 1967 senates, and a comparison of the two was attempted. Six categories of information were sought: education and profession; family connections; business connections; income level; political background; and previous experience in high level administration. It was thought that only by close attention to all of these would it be possible to determine both the class component of the group and the degree to which monopolization of the powerful sectors of society has occurred. A considerable number of biographical sources were utilized, as well as back issues of the Manila Times and the Philippine Free Press from 1926 to 1969.¹