

## **A Case for Serious Political Party Building**

Reflections on the *Partisan Civil Society Discussion Series*

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The understanding and practice of civil society in the Philippines has evolved over the years, with many meanings and permutations ascribed to the term *civil society*. These multi-faceted views and characteristics of civil society reflect how vast and diverse societal actions are in our country.

In the Philippines, we see in practice all the major arguments and views on civil society. We see (1) the *associational civil society* based on Touqueville and Putnam's argument about social capital or strong civil society as a critical element of democratization; (2) the *counterweight civil society* that presents a dichotomy between society and state and civil society serving as a force that guards against a tyrannical or predatory state; and (3) the *hegemonic civil society* based on Gramsci which looks at civil society as a space for political contestations where civil society serve as trenches that protect the state. Civil society in the Philippines could refer to actors, a space, a phenomenon or processes and form of communication at the same time.

The seeming "democratic rollback" in the country under the current administration poses serious threats to civil liberties and political rights that constrict the space for non-partisan and "harmonious" civil society work; hence more than ever, the fundamental significance of partisan political work by civil society actors requires serious consideration. Institutions of democracy are weakened, as repeatedly pointed by advocates and scholars; and the serious implication of this on citizens' participation is that without the restoration of these institutions to their supposed form, citizens' engagement with these institutions could be distracting to the real reform work and thus could be destructive to democratization.

The imperative of partisan electoral work is further underscored given the seemingly insignificant democratic change in the country's power structure. Significant political power remains in the hands of the same privileged few, despite the active and vibrant works of different groups and forces in civil society. This proves the limit of *associational* and *counterweight* civil society work that in general do not presuppose contesting state posts and gives much relevance and urgency on the need for societal forces to compete for formal seats of power. Why guard power if you'll just end up guarding the same abusive power holders? It only becomes a self-perpetuating cycle if citizens' participation in governance is not linked to citizens becoming the government.

Given the limitation of resources, the narrow ranks of reformers and reform-oriented groups and with formidable forces whose interests lie on keeping the status quo, there is a need to prioritize and to concentrate efforts. Both the conjuncture and the capacity of reform and progressive movements make it imperative to identify a focus and locus of efforts.

*Partisan Civil Society*, a discussion series on the engagement of societal forces on partisan politics organized and hosted by the Ateneo School of Government through its Political Democracy & Reform (PODER) with support from the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung in the Philippines, was about what lessons from the past, particularly the 1992, 1998 and 2004 presidential elections, can guide future partisan political work by groups and forces from civil society. It was not a political project, but it delved on praxis. The discussion did not aim to make binding decisions, but instead attempted to start laying a framework for citizens' meaningful engagement in partisan politics,

cognizant of the diversity of its advocacies and forms of engagement, through an examination of past experience and analyses of the current conditions.

*Partisan Civil Society* provided a rare space for key leaders in civil society from various backgrounds and with diverse perspectives to step back and reflect on their involvement in politics. This space served as an opportunity to link the practice to theories and concepts, which is critical to elucidate understanding and appreciation as well as to frame and structure future interventions.

Because of the complexities of practice and the richness of academic discourse on civil society, short discussions are bound to get confusing and overwhelming, hence there is a need to do deskwork that will process and put to writing the discourse guided by the result of the discussions. The most important academic learning from this exercise is that there seems to be a growing dissonance and disconnect between what is said in theory and what is actually happening; that theories are no longer enough to entirely capture what is on the ground.

The discussion series also proved to be useful in recollecting historical facts and painting a version of Philippine electoral history—chronicles that could be most compelling to those who want to know stories in Philippine politics that are not mainstreamed but nonetheless give an important color and dimension in the exercise of power and the continuing growth of a nation.

What is probably the most important lesson generated from the discussion is **the need to extend the logic of electoral engagement of civil society actors to political party formation—organization, political strategy formulation, platform development and preparing to govern.** “Partisan civil society” phenomenon should be appreciated as just a temporary solution to the underperforming political parties and barely existing party system in the Philippines and hence just a beginning of serious electoral engagements.

The historical account of the experience pinned down the limits of partisan electoral engagements of civil society such as the lack of effective machinery in converting mass base to votes and the absence of a permanent collective that could support those who “crossover” to government particularly in dealing with the balance of power within and outside the government. These learnings point to the need to consider serious political party building efforts. There has been enough explaining of why there has been little progress on this, but the most important challenge from this point on is how to finally make it work.

“The language of reform is the language of power,” said one of the discussants; hence to be effective in pushing for agenda, citizens’ reform groups must speak the language of power. As one of the resource persons said: “Whoever wins the presidency in 2010 will determine the kind of reform agenda. It is crucial therefore to find and elect a candidate who can challenge the status quo and push reforms for the country.” Reform constituencies must be translated to vote base. But where and what constitute the reform constituencies?

The final session pointed to three (3) segments of the population that have the greatest potential of becoming part of the reform constituencies that must be organized and mobilized for a successful engagement of reform-oriented groups in the 2010 elections. These are: overseas Filipino workers (OFWs), the youth & students sector and the existing reform-oriented advocacy groups. Based on the discussion, these are the potential political actors that are not yet entirely immersed and

integrated in the patronage-based political system of the country. They also have the numbers, the capacity and most likely the desire for changes in politics and governance of the country.

In order to further hone the potential of the youth and students, which constitutes majority of the country's population, they must be mobilized and educated using the language and methods that they are accustomed to. The OFWs have experienced a different politics abroad that could give them new and fresh perspectives. The reform-minded, though few and scattered, would provide the experience in engaging the traditional political landscape.

It was inspiring to see in the discussion series the not so young along with the young to come together and draw lessons collectively, admitting in the process mistakes and shortcomings, conceding limitations and weaknesses and realizing what's left to fight for, so as to give a better chance for the future attempts to make a difference in electoral contestation.