



The Partisan Civil Society:
Analyzing Civil Society Engagement in Partisan Politics

**Session 2: Reflecting on the Past Civil Society Engagements in Partisan Politics:
Reasons and Outcomes of the Experience**
10 September 2008, Social Development Complex
Ateneo de Manila University

Summary and Synthesis

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Resource Persons:

1. Dr. Joel Rocamora, Akbayan!
2. Ms. Dinky Soliman, INCITEGov

Synthesis of the Session

A cursory look at the historical record shows many civil society individuals and organizations in the Philippines are already deeply involved in politics, including partisan politics. Some individual CSOs and NGIs (non-government individuals) have committed to partisan political action, if not as candidates, certainly as advisers, policy researchers, and electoral campaign supporters.

The bulk of civil society organizations appear to still disdain, or at least continue to debate, the ethics and risks of “crossing over” into partisan politics and elective and appointive government positions. While many of them feel frustrated with the level of influence they exercise on the direction of government policy and governance, they have so far been unwilling to directly capture and exercise elective and appointive offices in government. Which is why, Joel Rocamora mused half in jest during the session, “I am surprised you (the CSO representatives in attendance) have not yet joined Akbayan.”

The session’s conclusion seemed clear: civil society organizations must together build and field political parties together. The 2010 presidential elections are near, and organized or not, many civil society organizations will be involved in one way or another in electoral and partisan campaigns. Payoffs in isolated CSO forays into partisan coalition politics will certainly be modest compared to CSO collective political action.

The first step to working together to build political parties is for CSOs to be open to and actively strain towards agreement on principles. Bringing to the table the same unyielding commitment to historical ideological stances may not be productive. Involving the youth who are unimpaired by such memories may open up new space for collaboration.

The middle process is to learn to build "countable support". In the end, the capacity to promise and deliver votes and vote-getting resources is the only valid currency for traditional and new politicians alike.

A further step is to anticipate that capturing power is not the same as exercising it. Civil society-friendly individuals who get into government elective and appointive positions need to quickly adjust personal perspectives and build the required competencies to best harness these positions to produce expected results for stakeholders. Such a preparation need to be undertaken well before government positions are actually attained. How best to organize and sustain support of civil society for their erstwhile members who now are in government positions and need to fight for political survival and success is also a crucial task. These are among the lessons to be learned from the Fr Ed Panlilio and other CSO crossover experiences.

If CSOs must enhance their capacity to influence political outcomes in the 2010 elections and other contests, they need to act now. Building the countable support needed to play in the game is a long journey. The earlier it is started, the better.

Summary of the Session

The theme of this roundtable was "Reflecting on the Past Civil Society Engagements in Partisan Politics: Reasons and Outcomes of the Experience", sponsored by the Ateneo School of Government and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung. It is the second in the series; the first roundtable was on the theme "Civil Society and Partisanship: Strange Bed Fellows?" held on 11 August 2008 at the Social Development Complex, Ateneo de Manila University.

The guide questions announced for the session were:

1. What were the reasons behind the civil society engagement in partisan politics?
2. Had the engagements been successful in achieving its goals and objectives?
3. What was the impact of the engagement on the overall electoral exercise?

The resource persons for this roundtable were Ms Dinky Soliman of INCITEGov who made a presentation on "History of Electoral Participation by Development NGOs/POs" and Mr Joel Rocamora, Executive Director of the Institute of Politics and Governance on "Bridging Civil and Political Society -- State of Discourse". (Please see attached copies of the presentations.)

The presentation of Dinky Soliman highlighted the following key points:

- The early initiatives of development NGOs into politics include the "Partido Kabus" experience where Central Visayas-based sugar workers and unions contested the 1970-1971 local elections (just before the martial law regime). These organizations thought they had a sufficient mass base. The lesson learned from this experience was the difficulty in facing guns, goons, and gold fielded by the competition.

- Another initiative was the Federation of Free Farmers (FFF) initiative of Memong Patayan and Ben Granada in Davao.¹ Their confidence came from winning, as FFF, 3 seats in the ConCon – Father Buen, Atty Satur, and Camilo Sabio (who was their lawyer at the time). These NGO leaders who entered politics already were thinking that working for interests of stakeholders means you should be in position of power.
- The PARTIDO NG BAYAN PROJECT 2000 initiative was “...concerned with realizable goals. Beyond opportunities for raising popular consciousness, for reaching the unorganized, for strengthening the organized and for testing capacities for mobilization, we aim to achieve key electoral victories – 1992, 1995, 1998, 2001...” Butch Abad Feb. 8, 1991 Project 2000 consultation. There was a consciousness to get involved in elections, as President Cory Aquino’s term was about to end. The aim was to reach the organized and achieve key electoral victories. The sentiment among many NGOs was clear: “Kailangang pumasok ka sa pulitika.” (It is necessary to enter into politics). This was after 1986, the hopes were high for reforms, but the politicians quickly dashed these hopes. Cory herself said she was a transition president, agrarian reform was difficult to support. NGOs realized that to attain their objectives, state power was needed. They needed to be part of the election process.
- In the 1992 elections, the NGO community sought active electoral engagement. The situation was very fluid, as there were six presidential candidates. An NGO community electoral initiative was to form an urban rural electoral coalition consisting of one million members of ngo coalitions working in urban areas. This coalition put its support behind Jovito Salonga for president and, among others, Butch Abad for Senator. There were different formations of electoral initiatives – URSEC, and others. The claimed mass base of the PO/NGO community did not convert to a significant number of votes. Imelda Marcos had more votes than Salonga or Cojuangco. The result was an agreement in the coalition to engage with the incoming administration of President Ramos, in view of NGO-friendly individuals having joined his administration, particularly Ernie Garilao as Agrarian Reform Secretary and Tony La Viña as Environment Undersecretary. This was by no means a unanimous position; CPAR folded up because one faction wanted to do collaborative work with Ernie Garilao as Agrarian Reform Secretary. Other POs/ NGO leaders joined the Cabinet in the agrarian reform and anti poverty portfolios.
- In the 1998 elections, electoral engagement continued. Boy Morales and Ed de la Torre helped Joseph Estrada put up the “JEEP ni ERAP” pro-poor campaign platform and organization. Erap won eleven million votes. In retrospect, it seems clear the poor people who got him there, not the organized groups. The Erap administration experienced significant PO/NGO “crossover” in the agrarian reform, anti-poverty, social welfare, and labor portfolios.
- In the 2004 elections, NGOs and POs continued to be engaged. Dinky reflected that she campaigned vigorously, as the fear of another actor president was very strong, and while there were doubts, she believed GMA seemed to be the better candidate. The NGOs put themselves behind a good governance platform. There was sectoral NGO support for GMA through Pulong Bayan – SAPAKAT, Ugnayan, and other venues. Still, NGO divisions surfaced on the issues of candidates and support for GMA.

¹ Patayan and Granada established the Kamayan Party in Davao to contest the governorship in 1969 elections. See the article of singer Gary Granada, son of Ben Granada, in <http://www.garygranada.com/Short%20Essays/Martial%20Law.htm>

- There were, at the LGU level, what can be called “Energy Zones”: The Naga City People’s Council, the budget monitoring initiatives in Isabela, the strengthening of pillars of support, and working with barangay captains and villages. There were fresh and refreshing local government initiatives -- to preserve the Banaue rice terraces (Teddy Baguilan), Iloilo public covenant mechanism (Boyet Areno).
- What are the challenges to NGOs in partisan politics? The challenge is clear – how to crack the patronage system. There is a need to develop the alternative paradigm of “citizenship in a democracy”. There is poetry and prose in governance. Poetry is winning and prose is attending to the correct rules and regulations and delivering concrete things. Very few CSOs have delivered.

Joel Rocamora’s presentation on the state of the bridging of Civil and Political Society raised several key points.

What was most memorable is his statement that he is a “politician”, by way of explaining that civil and political societies have always been linked. Rocamora started to introduce himself as a “politician” in the 2003 summit of political parties Speaker de Venecia convened in Clark. This gave comfort to NGOs trying to get out of civil society into politics, but shocked other NGOs.

Introduction to make these points:

When you choose to go into politics, you have to be partisan. Many CSOs insist on being non-partisan. But even when they support candidates in elections, like Grace Padaca and they Jessie Robredo, they act as if they are non-partisan. NGOs must come to terms with power. Advocacy and lobby work is exercise of power. Bearing witness to the truth is exercise of power. Advocacy is dealing with balance of power. The more significant the change you desire, the more important the prior rearrangement in the balance of power.

What do we learn from EDSA? First, that civil society has political capabilities. Second, that CSOs are better in destabilizing governments than building ones; third, that military support is essential. There are peculiar complexities to the different EDSAs – “EDSA 4” for example showed that Arroyo had the support of ci and phil Chinese chamber of commerce support the arroyo regime, while EDSA 3 had to do with populism.

Rocamora then discussed the Party List situation. More CSO energy has been put in the partylist effort than in any other activity. While in theory the party-list representatives account for 20 percent of the seats in the legislature, in actuality this is just 10 percent. While the party list mechanism is intended for marginalized groups, only 2 percent of the marginalized groups are now represented in the legislature. (“It is as if the idea is, join the party list to be marginalized.”)

The party list effort is characterized by “an epidemic of illusionitis”, schemes to divide civil society, and continuing explorations to unite forces.

Rocamora on individual vs organizational crossovers: Boy Morales invited Joel to join the Erap government, but Joel said I do not want to join as an individual, as I will only have low negotiating power. On the other hand, no matter how small your part is in the government, you will be responsible for the whole thrust of the government. So, I will just help build a political

party. I will come in only as part of a political party, not as an individual. This calls to mind some "cross over" issues: (1) If you join government, who will politicize civil society? How rabidly partisan should you be? (Reflecting on the "Walang iwanan" strategy of Boy Morales and Ed de la Torre with regard to the Erap Administration).

Major step in bridging civil society and political society – lessons of Hyatt 10: Rocamora said it was not the block of individuals that was significant, but the power block of institutions and individuals they represented. The power assembled, however, simply did not suffice to accomplish its aim. Friends in Hyatt 10 were more organized in forming coalitions in government in key issues, e.g., preventing Malacanang from giving the coco levy to Danding Cojuangco. The lessons are: (1) you have to organize powerblocks; it is not enough to be right; and (2) organize for power within and outside government.

The 2010 elections. The administration has turned to disaster management to deal with the disaster that is the Arroyo administration. She wont get away with martial law. Military will not put up with it.

CSOs have proved their capability in EDSA 1 and EDSA 2. They have led anti-chacha forces to stop both the people's initiative and con-ass. They need to continue introducing issues of political reform to increase the chances of the reforms to happen in any administration. They need to build constituencies around projects.

Who will be the reform candidate in 2010? The 2010 elections are an opportunity for civil society to play a major role, possible only if we come to terms that it is not enough to be right, but to back it up with countable support.

In the open forum, several issues and insights were raised:

Among Ed in Pampanga: Governance is different from elections. CSOs lack the discipline of political parties. There are no sufficient guidelines for participation and accountability -- actions in political office are personal actions and often not organizations. There is a changing stance of supporters into opposition, critics, withdrawal. There is disagreement on soundness of key appointments and appropriations.

There is a need to separate the elected official from appointed position; a political leader once elected is no longer "CSO". He must, however, have the same values. The guiding mechanism should be the covenant among the stakeholders -- what is the covenant? What is the role of each one? There must be room for constructive criticism and mechanisms for complaints and grievances.

Some larger CSO perspectives: From Sanlakas, which twice lost bid its for inclusion in the party list system: Election is just a tactic –2010, internal discussions, people's organizations, are all part of the dynamics. The ultimate goal should be to change the system totally. Civil society terminology must be adjusted to conform to its vision. It must resolve whether it is a space; a watchdog; etc. CSOs must realize and accept that they need to capture government.

1. CSOs have a continuing confusion about the meaning of partisan politics. Hesitance of CSOs to go political gets in the way of building the competencies for acquiring political power.

2. CSOs need to strain towards agreement on principles. They need to build a political party together. They need to accept that it is a long journey.
 3. CSOs must build their understanding of the essence and dynamics of Philippine electoral realpolitik. Who holds the balance of power? How can it be modified?
 4. CSOs need to learn cross-over mechanics and lessons from pitfalls at national and local levels.
 5. Learn to work in accordance with exacting accountabilities from multiple players and stakeholders.
 6. CSOs are good in bringing down governments, not forming them. Winning requires electoral proficiencies need to be developed. Governance requires a different set of competencies.
 7. There is great interest in 2010, but plans not yet sufficiently concretizing. Capacitate CSOs to be in the negotiating game with presidential hopefuls.
 8. Refocus on structural reforms in the Philippines – aim not only to cut down the power of the president, but the structure of politics and society.
 9. Need for institutional capacity-building for CSOs as political and partisan actors. Need honest brokers to facilitate “discourse of discourses” among CSOs as they explore and strain towards collective action as partisan actors in politics
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