5 Transition to Political Democracy in the Philippines: 1978–88

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The redemocratization of the Philippine polity contains some unique elements. Many participants, in fact, even including Mrs Aquino, have regarded it as a miracle, the consequence of divine intervention (Elwood, 1986). Fortunately for the social scientist, however, the unique and miraculous characteristics are embedded in patterns that are found to be quite similar to Latin American, other Asian, and even Southern European examples.

Comparison can thrive if terms are clear. Out of the welter of terms which have become common in the discussion of transitions to democracy there are two in special need of clarification: liberalization and democratization. Though some would equate the two terms (Schmitter, 1986, 4) others, quite appropriately, I would think, have tried to make a sharp distinction (O’Donnell and Schmitter, 1986, 7; Przeworski, 1986, 56), even though there is not consensus on what the distinctions should be. Liberalization, I would argue, is a process of change which takes place within an authoritarian regime and under the control of its leaders. It may include renewed protection of at least some human rights, new offices made elective, new opportunities for opposition parties to participate in elections or policy-making, or some improvement in the degree of honesty or openness in the electoral process. The purpose is to enhance the legitimacy of the authoritarian regime, perhaps even through some sharing of power, as long as it does not jeopardize effective control by the ruling elite.

Democratization on the other hand, while including, at least, all of the elements of liberalization, has been aptly described as ‘institutionalizing uncertainty’ (Przeworski, 1986, 58). Though institutional arrangements may be biased to favour the protection of particular interests, the rules of the game are certain. Reforms are ‘modifications of the organization of conflict that alter the prior probabilities of realizing group interest’. But in a democracy no group is able to intervene to change the rules just because their interests seem
threatened, unless they abide by the institutionalized procedures for rule change. Unlike ‘liberalization’ the ruling elite cannot always control the process of rule change. Far-sighted elites, however, if threatened with overthrow, may bargain for continued influence.

While liberalization and democratization are by definition discontinuous, historically and empirically the first may blend into the second so that it is difficult to fix the precise moment when the character of the process changes. It is nevertheless fruitful for purposes of analysis to keep the two distinct. Liberalization may or may not precede democratization (Share, 1987, 528), but usually does. Liberalization may also be halted by ruling elites if it seems to be getting out of control, as in Haiti, or El Salvador, thus preventing democratization.

Transition is an oft-used word which also needs special definition. It refers to the period which begins as liberalization ends and concludes when the new democratic rules of the game have been formally accepted, that is, the ratification of the constitution. Democratic consolidation is a longer process which, while it is working, is never finally complete. It signifies the gradual acquisition of legitimacy for the new rules. Clear evidence of progress would be electoral defeat of an incumbent chief executive and his/her smooth, legal replacement. The only well-defined conclusion of this process is its failure in a coup or revolution.

Transitions to democracy have occurred most often when authoritarian elites (or segments thereof) have felt the need to augment their legitimacy through liberalization while retaining as much power as possible (Przeworski, 1986, 50). Loss of legitimacy is an almost inevitable component of regime ageing. In other cases opposition forces have played the major role in terminating the authoritarian regime (Stepan, 1986, 65). The former initiative is, of course, more likely to be nonviolent than the latter, which may take the form of a coup or even revolutionary war. Transitions have thus been categorized in terms of the sources of initiative (Stepan, 1986, 65; Share, 1987, 529) and the means used (violent or non-violent).

Considerable attention has also been paid to the contexts which affect the character or hasten the initiation of transition: socio-economic, cultural, institutional, elite cohesion/conflict, and international. What the literature has not done so far, however, is to look beyond an explanation of the initial transition to the impact of these various factors on the prospects of democratic consolidation. As Share notes (1987, 532), ‘Legitimacy of authoritarian rule is most