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Formal Democracy and Its Alternatives in the Philippines: Parties, Elections and Social Movements

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Introduction

The Philippines has the most persistently undemocratic democracy in Asia. Except for the period of dictatorship under Ferdinand Marcos between 1972 and 1986, the Philippines has had a functioning democracy since independence from the United States in 1946. At the same time, a small group of powerful families has dominated politics and kept the economic benefits of power to themselves. Many analysts use the modifier ‘elite’ when referring to Philippine democracy. Effective participation by citizens outside of elections is limited. Unlike Malaysia and Singapore (much more obviously unlike the military dictatorship in Burma) with their Internal Security Acts, the Philippine state does not impose too many formal limits to the self-organization of disadvantaged groups. But a combination of bureaucratic rules and informal means including violence continues to make organizing difficult; without effective popular pressure, government is generally not accountable.

While labour and peasant organizations remain weak, other civil society organizations, NGOs and new social movement groups including women and environmental groups are strong and continue to build significant political capability. Initiatives to build new kinds of political parties come from this section of Philippine society. They also constitute a strong base of support for initiatives to reform Philippine politics; to transform a weak, incompetent government dominated by rent-seeking elites.

Democratization and international capital

We need to locate the process of democratization in the Philippines in the context of contemporary democratization discourse. The main...
source of ‘democratization’ discourse in the 1990s are multilateral institutions such as the World Bank, the OECD and Western governments led by the United States. Of the multilateral banks, the Asian Development Bank is a latecomer. Given these sources, the ‘good governance’ (GD) discourse cannot be understood outside of the interests and international agendas of international capitalism and the national and multi-national public institutions that support them.

Although ‘democracy’ has always been part of the ideological arsenal of international capital, ‘democratization’ discourse in the 1990s has been strongly influenced by post-Cold War conditions. The removal of socialism as an alternative has led to all manner of Western triumphalism, the grossest being Fukuyama’s ‘end of history’ conceit. Western style liberal democracy, Fukuyama asserts, is the final goal of political evolution (Fukuyama 1989). Therefore, history has ended.

Another source of Western pressure on governments of the South to democratize is the acceleration of Western penetration of the economies of the South usually labelled globalization. To facilitate this thrust, specific elements in the Western conception of liberal democracy have been pushed, most importantly, its anti-state bias and the equation of democracy with market. Trade and other forms of liberalization have been packaged as ‘democratization’. Since governments are corrupt and inefficient, the argument goes that democracy can be advanced only if many of the economic functions of government are privatized – turned over to the market.

The most important reason for problematizing governance and democratization discourse is that it is being pushed by international capitalism, by multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and the governments of advanced capitalist countries led by the United States. After supporting authoritarian regimes throughout the world from Somoza to Marcos to Mobutu for decades, why has international capitalism shifted to support for democracy? Why is democratization in countries of the South in the interest of international capitalism?

The attempt to equate democracy with capitalism by neo-liberal ideologues is only one part of the problem. Surely, history will ‘end’ much later than Francis Fukuyama. Arguing against the proposition that markets lead to democracy should not be too difficult given the many examples of markets prospering under various forms of authoritarianism in the past and today. The opposite direction of the argument, that democracy requires markets, demands more attention because it leads to the issue of state building under conditions of accelerating globalization under the aegis of capitalism.