

Achieving Reforms in Oligarchical Democracies: The Role of Leadership and Coalitions in the Philippines

John T. Sidel, London School of Economics and Political Science

This paper examines the role of developmental leadership in two major reforms introduced in the Philippines in 2012: the passage into law in December of excise tax reform which significantly raised taxes on cigarettes and alcohol – generally referred to as the Sin Tax Reform – and, in July, the re-registration of voters in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). These reforms have a) strengthened government finances and healthcare; and b) improved the quality of elections and promoted good governance and conflict resolution in the southern Philippines.

These reforms were not achieved exclusively through the executive leadership of Philippine President Benigno Aquino III, this paper argues. A broader form of developmental leadership was critical to their passage into legislation and their subsequent implementation, comprising reform coalitions that incorporated elements of government, the legislature, and civil society. While these coalitions were diverse and flexible in their form and composition, their core strength came from established advocacy groups and experienced activists. These groups and activists used highly labour-intensive, specialized and complex forms of mobilization.

The success of these reform coalitions, it is argued, has implications for economic and governance reform in the developing world, particularly in systems characterised by oligarchical democracy, where competition for elected office is closely linked to the entrenched interests of business and industry.

Methodology

This paper is based on iterative participatory 'action research' in connection with the Coalitions for Change Program in the

The author would like to thank Jaime Faustino, Steve Hogg, Heather Marquette, and Steve Rood for their insightful comments, questions, and suggestions for revision on successive drafts of this paper. The remaining errors, limitations, and shortcomings of this paper remain the responsibility of the author alone.

Philippines, a joint program of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the Asia Foundation since April 2012 and continuing to the present.

It is based on more than 20 interviews conducted in April 2013. Interviewees ranged from reform coalition activists to senior officials of the presidential administration, members of Congress and of the Senate, and officials of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, the Commission on Elections, and the Philippine National Police. It also draws on a review of documentation including policy and research papers, copies of draft legislation, extensive transcripts of congressional hearings and election records. Press reports, internet text and video postings were also monitored and analyzed.

Help with interviews and access to documents was given by the Asia Foundation and, in the Philippines, DFAT and the two key advocacy groups involved in the reforms – Action for Economic Reforms, and the Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting.

Key findings

The success of the two reforms can in part be explained by leadership in its narrowest sense, the presidential leadership of Benigno Aquino III who has a reputation as a 'reformist'.

However, even in a national context where presidential powers and prerogatives are especially strong, this paper shows that narrowly construed forms of executive leadership do not explain the Philippines' 2012 reform achievements. The efforts of reform coalitions were crucial in helping President Aquino overcome considerable resistance to the changes.

These coalitions drew together disparate elements within the Aquino Administration, Congress and civil society. They mobilized various forms of support: behind-the-scenes lobbying, number-crunching, Powerpoint presentations,

intelligence-gathering in the halls of Congress, monitoring electoral wards in rural areas and far-flung islands, and multi-media productions on radio, television, websites and in the blogosphere. This all helped to:

- set the stage for reform initiatives;
- stimulate coordination among disparate actors and interests;
- communicate with audiences likely to support the reforms;
- use highly labour-intensive forms of mobilization to overcome resistance to change and ensure reforms were implemented.

These reforms were in large measure the product of strong executive leadership: A crucial determinant of change, and the driving force behind these reforms, was the Aquino Administration.

However, even with strong government leadership, reform coalitions were key to the successful drafting of legislation and implementation of the new laws: The Aquino Administration relied on encouragement and assistance from coalitions to enact and implement the reforms, demonstrating that developmental leadership in the Philippines is made up of various branches of government and elements of civil society.

Reform coalitions were not necessarily made up entirely of reformers, and political compromises and alliances of convenience were necessary: The success of the 2012 reforms was achieved through a highly complex political process that required collaboration with a wide variety of actors.

The reform process was highly labour-intensive and required committed activists from experienced advocacy groups to bring the process to fruition.

Success required careful and continued attention not only to legislation, but also to implementation: Activists were vigilant and worked hard after the reforms were drafted and after they were given legal status to make sure they were not watered down.

The emergence of reform activists and advocacy groups in the Philippines had been a long-term process: The success of the Philippine reform coalitions depended not only on the activists' commitment to these issues, but also on their accumulated experience from earlier reform campaigns in the country.

Policy implications

What are the implications for international development agencies and other proponents of reform?

Monitoring changing signals from a government makes it possible to exploit openings to exert influence and encourage action: Proponents of reform who are closely attentive – and adaptive – to shifts in government reform agendas and approaches are likely to have the most success, especially if they consistently work to expand access to policy-makers.

A government's own reform agenda may be more effective if assisted by reform coalitions: Reform coalitions can supplement an incumbent government's political resources to help advance reform.

Reform initiatives do not have to be confined to 'backstopping' the reform agendas of incumbent governments and ruling parties: Playing this kind of supportive role can of course produce concrete results, but the Philippine reforms of 2012 demonstrate that it is possible for reform coalitions to be proactive instead of confining themselves to the agenda of an incumbent government.

Reform achievements are difficult to plan or predict, and reform movements are complicated, often throwing up uncertainty and ambiguity: As demonstrated by this case study, pragmatic alliances may have to be made with unlikely partners – another reason why flexibility is a valuable asset for reformers.

A few experienced, well-connected partners can mobilize large-scale support: Successful advocacy coalitions require a small cadre of committed activists with expertise, access, and a common vision.

Local activists are likely to have valuable experience and expertise: The best activists know what they are doing and may need very little costly guidance or 'incentivizing' from international development agencies.

Activists are created through the political process of campaigns for reform: Beyond the concrete, measurable achievements of each reform, there is a longer-term legacy that provides the foundations for future reform campaigns.

Reform coalitions and the process of reform can benefit from consistent long-term support, rather than episodic support for each individual campaign: Campaigns come and go but reform coalitions that have long-term support can strengthen the implementation of any reform victory, and sustain the broader infrastructure for further reforms in the future.

Download the full paper at: www.dlprog.org/ftp/

The Developmental Leadership Program (DLP) is an international research initiative that aims to increase understanding of the political processes that drive or constrain development. DLP's work focuses on the crucial role of home-grown leaderships and coalitions in forging legitimate institutions that promote developmental outcomes. DLP's independent program of research is supported by the Australian Government.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of the Australian Government or any of DLP's other partner organisations.

The Developmental Leadership Program

E: info@dlprog.org

www.dlprog.org