

ONCE MORE WITH PASSION: FILIPINO WOMEN AND POLITICS

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The Pinay's Political Journey: Women's Many Paths to Politics

Historians of Pre-Spanish Philippine society documented the high status of Filipino women before western colonization. Salazar, writing for the book *Filipino Women's Role in History* (1998) presented a strong portrait of the Filipino woman as Babaylan in the community, where she served as healer and astrologer. While she did not have the political powers of the Datu, she had the respect of the people who depended on her for medicinal agricultural advice. In the ethnic communities in the mountains of Northern Luzon Prill-Bret (2004) pointed out the egalitarian roles played by male and female in the communities.

The woman's high status was conveyed in accounts of women ascending to high political office in the Sultanate or Datuship, such as Queen Sima of Cotabato and Princess Urduja of Pangasinan. Stories of brave women also abound, the most famous being that of Gabriela, the wife of Diego Silang in Ilocos who took over the leadership of her martyred husband and continued his rebellion against Spain. (Her bravery has inspired the current activism of the women's political party Gabriela.)

The Filipino woman's bravery was shown in other battlefields during the revolution against Spain and the resistance movement against the Americans and the Japanese. Outside the battleship of guns the women fought for their rights. The women of Malolos fought for more equal opportunities for education as the men, and the panuelo activists fought for women suffrage and won their cause.

In the direct political front there were intermittent cases of wives continuing their husband's crusades in the political realm. The first noted case is that of Magnolia Welborn Antonino who ran for the Senatorial position left by her husband when he died during the campaign and won. And of course, there will ever remain in recent memory the case of martyred Senator Ninoy Aquino's widow Cory, who ran against Dictator Ferdinand Marcos in the waning months of Martial Law and won as President, adding a newer dimension to political analysis—the wife political substitute.

However, whether in actual political seat or not, the Filipino women's political influence has been observed by other writers. Neher, writing on Cebu society in the 70', noted the wife's reluctance to run for political or any office that will make her higher in status as her husband, looking at politics as "dirty" and "a man's game". This was reiterated in one of my previous studies on women and politics (1992). And yet, outside of politics, she has been able to exercise her influence in getting preferences for projects and favors for people. Mina Roces studied the phenomenon of kinship politics in some of her writings, the most prominent being about the Lopez family (2001). Then we have the myriad write-ups on Imelda Marcos, who, at the height of her husband's rule, exercised not only power through influence but actually assumed political power, in positions where she was appointed by her husband—Governor of Metro Manila, Secretary of Human Settlements and thus member of the Batasang Pambansa, as well as special envoy for certain concerns abroad. (On this phenomenon, when asked abroad, I explained that Imelda was only the moon reflecting the light of her husband, the sun. I could have called it "reflective politics", but it does not describe the situation.)

Thus, we can say that the reluctant women, content with exerting influence when they could, could have found the importance of holding the power themselves, even if Imelda was not a good example of the use of power. The political path became an alternative choice for women since the International Conference of Women in Mexico in 1975, which showed their lack of power in the male-dominated world. The post-Martial Law period made the path for politics smoother for the Filipino women who saw the opportunity to participate more actively in decision-making.

And Then There Were Some

The first political party for women emerged after 1986 when democratic space became wider. Many civic society organizations arose, many established for women's causes and led by women. The first women's political party, called Kaiba, put up candidates in Congress. Counting on what was then perceived as possible women's vote because of the larger turn-out of women voters, Kaiba fielded very competent candidates. However, the large turn-out did not translate into women's vote and only Dominique Coseteng won as Congresswoman from the third district of Quezon City. (Tancangco in Tapales, Ed. 1992) However, through the Party List system, the women's political parties Gabriela and for a while, Abanse Pinay have been able to seat representatives. Although not a party list the women's group Ugnayan ng Kababaihan sa Politika (UKP) in the 90's served as motivator and pusher for more active women's political participation.

The women's organization WIN (Women in Nation Building) and the then National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women (now Philippine Commission on Women) conducted training to make women candidates win, especially at the local level. But then, shared comments by some who won in those days described the patronizing treatment of them by male colleagues in local Councils.

Nonetheless, two women senators in the Senate then and some colleagues in the House of Representatives both male and female, were able to push for the women's agenda. In the Local Government Code, for example, Muslim woman Senator Santanina Rasul worked for the inclusion of a woman sectoral representative in the local Councils. The late Senator Leticia Ramos-Shahani pushed for a 5% appropriation for women's programs in every government agency in Appropriations Acts. Senator Rasul and the late Congressman Raul Roco authored the historic law, Republic Act 7192 (Women in Development and Nation Building Act) which opened several doors to women—in the military and other exclusively men's enclaves. Its title set the tone—An Act Promoting the Integration of Women as Full and Equal Partners of Men in Development and Nation Building and for Other Purposes.

Those led to other laws like The Anti-Sexual Harassment Law (RA 7877) The Anti-Rape Law (RA 8353), Day Care in Every Barangay (RA 6972), the Special Protection of Children Act (RA7610) the Solo Parents Welfare Act (RA 8972) and other laws providing protection and welfare to women and family. More recent laws were passed by female and male legislators, like the Violence against Women and Children Act (RA 9262) the Anti Trafficking in Persons Act (RA 9208), and the Magna Carta for Women (RA 9710).What could probably not be done by Congress was done by Executive Order of the President. In the early years of her term President Corazon Aquino issued the Family Code of the Philippines (Executive Order 209) upon the prodding of activist women. The Code corrected many provisions of the Civil Code detrimental to women. One very significant provision is the nod for annulment of marriage on certain grounds, skirting the divorce issue which had not, till now, been able to pass Congress.

The road to getting these and other laws enacted had been thorny, like the passage of the anti-rape law, but the women in Congress counted on the support of some men who understood the women's concerns. Women in civic society organizations pushed and assisted in reiterating the feminist discourse. Most recent bone of contention which took 15 years to pass and still has full implementation blocked by conservatives outside of Congress is the Reproductive Health Law (RA 10354) which, despite the current President's endorsement, has to hurdle barnacles to stop its implementation, moving it further away from its intention.

And Then There Are Many

More inroads to women's concerns were paved by other international initiatives for women. Significantly, on the political front, the expansion of women's participation in office was stated in the Beijing Conference' Declaration and Plan for Action in 1995. Boldly, the Beijing document called for 50% representation of women in political positions, to tilt the skewed lever into fair proportion. Although the compromise level later accepted 30% representation, that document became the inspiration for countries to aspire for more numerical proportion for women in decision making.

Representatives in 189 countries pledged to support the effort. Some countries provided affirmative action measures to meet the 30% proportion, through quotas for women in party candidacies, reserved seats for women in legislatures, and special laws providing for such support for women candidates. (Dahlberg, 2006) Sixteen of those countries have established quotas for women. Through such efforts, Rwanda in Africa has succeeded in raising the proportion of women policy maker to 48.8%. The South Asian countries of India, Bangladesh and Pakistan have been succeeding in putting more women in village government. A city in India, Alhabad, makes every third election specifically making sure that only women run for Mayor. In South East Asia, some countries now have as many as 20% women in their legislatures. (World Economic Forum, 2014; United Nations, 2010).

Prodding the countries further, the UNDP called another conference in Phitsanulok, Thailand in 2001, gathering together women local chief executives and legislators. National conventions followed. In the Philippines; a summit in Manila was held in 2003. It produced the Manila Declaration, calling for the government to move forward in terms of women's representation in politics.

Although not due to the Manila summit nor through quotas and other forms of affirmative action, the Philippines now ranks 9th in the world in terms of female political representation. From reluctance to acceptance of the role of women behind the scenes in politics, we now have actual ideal representation in Congress, with 33% women in the Senate and 27% women in the House of Representatives. (See charts)

We have what seems to be the ideal proportion of females in the legislature. Can we say this is real representation of the Filipino women?

The Pinay in Politics Today: Community Seer to Dynasty Link?

Before today's recorded good numerical participation in politics, there were mere anecdotal data on the extent of women's participation in actual electoral politics. Studies on local government politics were excellent in the discussions on patron-client relationships in local government politics and how they have served to perpetuate the power of families. One older research is that of Remigio Agpalo who wrote in

1969 and 1972 about the politics of Occidental Mindoro. He said that whoever won in elections the Abeleda family always won, through members of the extended family identifying with both parties. Studies of the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism showcase how power is attained by the family dynasties; however, not much has been written on how women in politics get into power in national and local governments, except in very recent political studies.) I focused on this in “Gender and Local Government” (2016) and Ronald Mendoza et al. presented gender statistics in a study titled “Political Dynasties in the Philippine Congress” written in the same year (Mendoza, et al. Eds., 2016).

To backtrack a bit, we can look at the electoral provisions in the 1987 Constitution and the Election Code which provide term limits for elected positions except the barangay—three year terms for local officials and members of the House of Representatives and six years for members of the Senate; maximum limits are three terms for local officials and congressmen and two terms for Senators. When there were no term limits dynasties were usually limited to two or three family members in elected positions. What occurred was the practice of “breakers”, first described by the women themselves who sat for the patriarch or family member while he had to sit out one term. With the inclusion of the Party List system more positions were opened to family members. The provision intended to discourage dynasticism actually led to broaden its scope.

Temario Rivera made a study of dynastic politics in 77 provinces (out of now 81) using the posts of Governor and Congressmen and local officials, and counted 178 political families lording it over the provincial and Congressional seats. He computed the provincial mean as 2.31 families per province (2016). Ronald Mendoza et al looked at Congress members in the 16th Congress and related them to local officials elected in the 2013 mid-term elections. For their definition of Dynasty 1, where members of the 16th Congress had “kinship links with at least one legislator in the 13th, 14th and 15th Congress”, they found that “34.33% of representatives can be categorized under the Dynasty 1 definition”. In terms of their distribution by gender, they found that while 28.77% of males belonged to the category, “almost half of the female representatives meet the Dynasty 1 definition”. What can be surmised from these statistics is that “when the scion gets to his three-term limit he can field a female relative ...to occupy he post that he is vacating”(Ibid.:17)

For instance, Former President Macapagal-Arroyo fielded her two sons as Pampanga and Bicol representatives, and when she ran for Congresswoman later, one son gave way to her to her and ran as party list representative; or the Binays of Makati until 2016 where the whole family occupied national and local positions—Vice-President, Senator, Mayor, and Congresswoman, and before that, Binay’s wife sat to break his expired term as mayor. Another case is seen in the City of San Juan, another post –Martial Law dynasty formed by movie star President Joseph Estrada. ERAP used to be Mayor, the only Ejercito as government official until he ran and won as Senator, Vice-President, and President. Along the way his wife Luisa became Senator, and his sons (legitimate and illegitimate) as San Juan Mayors, then Senators. Now his first mistress Guia is Mayor and a granddaughter (son of the legitimate son) as Vice-Mayor, all in attempts to keep the extended family in power.(See diagrams)

Can the dynastic cycle be stopped? In Isabela, a disabled young woman won two terms as Governor over the well-entrenched Dy family through the help of media and NGOs. Nevertheless, she could not win a third term over the dynasty who returned to power. Moreover, while sometimes political families change, as in Occidental Mindoro which is now under the newer Villarosa family, the succeeding dynasties remain in power for long periods as well.

In the words of one of the Binays, “there is no dynasty unless people vote for them”. Clarissa David and Rosel San Pascual analyzed who vote for dynasties. They quoted investigative reporter Sheila Coronel who said that in her study done in 2004 “more than 60% of legislators elected since 1986 are members of political clans”. For indeed the last Senate “saw two sets of siblings, three sons of former Presidents, the daughter of the Vice-President, eight children of former Senators, and the wife of a former Senator”. (In Ibid:102). The two researchers categorically say that “since 1986 new political dynasties emerged...as wives, daughters, sons and grandchildren as former Presidents and Senators pursued senatorial offices. (p.106) They attribute this largely to name recall and low levels of political knowledge, and concluded that it is “symptomatic of political and socio-economic inequality”. (p.115)

Catching the Dynasty by the Toe

While most studies do not precisely look at gender, the newer, closer look at provincial and national election winners show that more entrenched dynastic situation can be considered a major reason for the increased participation of women in Philippine politics, where at the moment the gender component is easier documented in the national legislature. In local government a tedious but possible means of tracing gender is through the leagues of women local officials, like the 4Ls (League of Lady Local Legislators) as the DILG has yet to come up with the complete list; in any case women’s use of their husband’s name may not accurately connect their dynastic ties, except through deeper case studies.

Yet, we must concede that dynasties are not necessarily dysfunctional, though their heavy reliance and loyalty to family may cause them to be so. Rivera further tried to correlate dynastic local governments with higher HDIs (human development index) and found that HDI is usually higher in areas closer to Metro Manila, thus geography and availability of resources is a major factor in achieving higher HDI. While island provinces show relatively lower HDIs, Cebu, a highly urbanized island and Batanes, which has been able to move on its own, are examples of islands with high HDIs. On another factor, he said that “a wider network of incumbents belonging to the same family as the incumbent Governor is in a better position to improve socio-economic conditions”(p.61). As one lady Mayor boasted in a conference, she is able to perform well because her husband is the Governor and her brother-in-law is the Congressman. Perhaps, there is more to name recall than meets the eye. Perhaps, beyond the feudal, familistic system, name recall may stand for trust in the dynastic leadership, trust by the electorate that the political family can give them the little that they want.

On the issue of why more women in dynasties have been able to get into positions of political power after 1986, we may, if we look deeper anecdotally, discover that strong family ties have made it easier for women to run for office. Starting as breakers is non-threatening to the husband for whom the favor of keeping the post for him is done, and daughters joining the family keeps the dynasty as some sort of bonding to make the family ties stronger. As we can observe in areas around here, children in political dynasties start as Barangay youth officials and go on to higher offices. And then, of course there are the other perks of political power which cements the family bond, as in the case of San Juan City where the extended family bond is stronger than issues of legitimacy.

More questions can be asked about Philippine political dynasties. For now, the idealists talk about passing an anti-dynasty law, to supersede the failed attempt of the drafters of the 1987 Constitution to discourage it through term limits. In the dynasties now prevailing in Congress and the local governments, that seems

to be an impossible dream. But by then we may have had a real 50/50 proportion of male and female leaders in politics, unfortunately dominated by few elite families.

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