

Noynoy Takes the Helm in Manila

Paul D. Hutchcroft, 6 July 2010

When Benigno S. “Noynoy” Aquino III assumed the presidency of the Philippines on 30 June, he promised big changes ahead. Rather than trying to dampen the high expectations raised by his decisive victory in the May election, Noynoy proclaimed a new era in Philippine politics: “No more turning back on pledges made during the campaign....No more influence-peddling, no more patronage politics, no more stealing....no more bribes. It is time for us to work together once more.” While this represents a major and very welcome shift in leadership goals, the actual achievement of these goals will require far more than a change in leadership or a shift in leadership styles. An essential element of longer-term success will be concerted attention to reforming the Philippines’ increasingly beleaguered political institutions.

The crowd that gathered at his inauguration had no doubt to whom the new president was alluding when he talked about dirty politics. His predecessor, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, has left office as the most unpopular president since the fall of Ferdinand Marcos in 1986. Arroyo became president in a 2001 “people-power” uprising motivated by anger over the corruption of her predecessor, but stepped down in 2010 under a cloud of disrepute: corruption allegations against her and her husband, close ties with notorious warlords, widespread human rights abuses, and more. The greatest political damage came after evidence that President Arroyo had been personally involved in efforts to pad her vote margin in the 2004 election. No one can question Arroyo’s skill at maintaining herself in power amid controversy; sadly, however, this effort led to the further politicization of the country’s already politicized bureaucracy, military, and judiciary.

Arroyo’s nine years in the presidential palace, longer than any other chief executive in Philippine history aside from Marcos, brought forth a widespread clamour for clean

leadership. When former President Corazon C. “Cory” Aquino succumbed to cancer in August 2009, the country was overcome by a wave of nostalgia for the “yellow revolution” that she had led against the Marcos regime after her husband’s assassination in 1983. In the wake of a huge “people-power” uprising on the streets of Manila in early 1986, Cory was propelled to the presidency. Many years later, it is the memory of this struggle that propelled her only son, Noynoy, to become the Liberal Party’s 2010 presidential candidate (despite his lacklustre record across 12 years in the House and Senate). With a campaign slogan embodying the goal of good government—“*Kung walang corrupt, walang mahirap*” (If no one is corrupt, no one is poor)—Noynoy emerged in the 10 May elections with the largest plurality of any post-Marcos president.

In some ways, the ascension of another Aquino to the presidency in 2010 feels a bit like 1986 all over again. Just as Corazon Aquino saw herself as the antithesis of Marcos, so is Noynoy seeking to differentiate himself as explicitly as possible from his predecessor. As in 1986, the inaugural speech had a post-authoritarian tone. Cory’s cry was “Never Again!” while Noynoy proclaimed that “Today marks the end of a regime indifferent to the appeals of the people.” As in the movement that toppled Marcos, the colour yellow is once again in vogue—both in Noynoy’s victorious campaign and in the yellow confetti that helicopters dropped on the inauguration after he took the oath of office.

Not unlike 1986, as well, there are enormous problems to be tackled. During his exile overseas, Marcos opposition leader Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino, Sr. once remarked that he did not envy whoever would have to rule the Philippines in the wake of the political and economic devastation left behind by the dictator. Little did he know it would be his wife, Cory, after his own assassination at the hands of the Marcos regime. Nearly a quarter-century later, Noynoy is assuming the presidency at age 50—exactly the same age as was his father Ninoy when he was assassinated. Like his mother, Noynoy is not to be envied for what lies

ahead.

The new president has assembled a generally seasoned cabinet comprised in large part of old faces from his mother's administration, former Arroyo associates who resigned when the electoral scandal came to light in 2005, and Liberal Party allies. Together, they confront a range of extremely challenging problems in desperate need of attention: a mounting budget deficit and infrastructural deficiencies (requiring more effective generation of revenue by a state that has long had a low tax effort); high rates of poverty (with 44% of the population subsisting on less than US\$2 per day); lack of employment opportunities (encouraging some 10 million Filipinos to head overseas for work); a secessionist conflict in Mindanao now four decades old; an equally old communist insurgency fuelled by longstanding socio-economic disparities; loopholes in the land reform program (with renewed attention on Noynoy's family's sprawling sugar estate north of Manila); a public education system that has declined steeply in recent decades; massive environmental degradation, heightening the country's longstanding vulnerability to natural disasters; and growing security challenges amid an increasingly volatile regional environment.

In addition, as part of campaign promises to promote good government, there will be much attention given to the new administration's treatment of Arroyo. A former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court has been tasked with setting up a "Truth Commission," the goal of which is to investigate the misdeeds of the previous administration. But prosecution of the former president and her husband will be inhibited by the dominance of Arroyo appointees not only in the Office of the Ombudsman but also the Supreme Court.

As he begins his term, Noynoy is putting major focus on projecting a new style of leadership. "The first step," Noynoy said in his inaugural speech, "is to have leaders who are ethical, honest, and true public servants." He pledged not only to "set the example" himself but also to hold similarly high standards for those who join the government. In making the

latter pledge, Noynoy may have been responding to those who emphasize the negative example of his mother's presidency. While Cory herself was perceived to be a president of great personal integrity, she surrounded herself with a host of sometimes dodgy relatives and advisors. One can hope that Noynoy plans to do better.

The new president has set out ambitious goals as part of what he perceives to be a clear mandate for change, "to transform our government from one that is self-serving to one that works for the welfare of the nation." But this is certainly not the first time an incoming Philippine president has attacked the corruption of his or her predecessor and promised a new and cleaner style of leadership. Strong presidential leadership can indeed bring important change—as demonstrated by the economic reforms pushed through under the administration of President Fidel Ramos between 1992 and 1998 (lubricated by the pork barrel, the *sine qua non* of legislative achievement in the Philippines). Over the longer term, however, the prospects for Philippine prosperity and the viability of Philippine democracy depend on the emergence of stronger political institutions. . If Noynoy's "transformation" is to be sustained into future administrations and future generations, institutional reform is essential. While the president spoke with passion in his inaugural address about the need for a new type of leader, he did not articulate any vision of institutional change.

Political analysts have long noted the weakness of Philippine political institutions, notably political parties and the bureaucracy, and the highly personalistic character of the polity. The emergence of patronage-infested political parties can be traced to the American colonial regime of one century ago, when the modern Philippine state first took shape. While the rhetoric of "political tutelage" was oriented to New England-style deliberative democracy, the end result is better thought of as a Philippine version of Tammany Hall (the highly corrupt political machine of late 19th-century New York City). The emerging Philippine bureaucracy was a rich source of spoils for patronage-hungry politicians, and the

stature of the civil service never approached that of most neighbouring colonial regimes. In the postcolonial era, patronage and pork have continued to crowd out programs and policies, and most mainstream parties are merely personal vehicles for political advancement. Efforts to promote bureaucratic reform have rarely been sustained, and the Philippine state often has difficulties implementing the laws that are promulgated by democratic institutions in Manila. The question that Noynoy posed in his inaugural speech is one that many Filipinos have long pondered: “Is our government beyond redemption?”

Despite the patronage and personalism that infuse the polity, the Philippines has generally been able to muddle through. While its record of economic development in recent decades does not match that of its fast-paced neighbours, there have been periods of respectable growth. The quality of democracy has declined in recent years, but democratic institutions remain in place. Looking forward, however, we can anticipate mounting challenges of governance. There are many reasons for this, but a focus upon population growth is sufficient to make the point. Thirty years ago, when Noynoy and his family were in exile in Boston, the population of the Philippines was 48 million. It is now an estimated 95 million, and thirty years hence (in 2040) it is projected to reach 140 million. As the country grows, and its problems become more complex, stronger institutions will be critical to achieving the goal of good government.

Noynoy begins his six-year term in office with what seems to be a strong sense of destiny. “I will not be able to face my parents and you who have brought me here if I do not fulfill the promises I made,” he said in the conclusion of his inaugural address. “My parents sought nothing less, died for nothing less, than democracy and peace. I am blessed by this legacy. I shall carry the torch forward.” Expectations are high, and many are very keen for the new president to succeed. But a focus upon leadership alone will not bring forth the ambitious changes he has promised. If success is to come, and if the torch is to be carried

forward beyond the current administration, a new and cleaner style of leadership needs to be accompanied with concerted attention as well to the imperatives of institutional reform.

Paul D. Hutchcroft is Director of the School of International, Political, and Strategic Studies in the ANU College of Asia and the Pacific.