

- The development of the legal status and political position of the Filipino woman shows a marked contrast to that of many other countries in Asia.

WOMAN SUFFRAGE IN THE PHILIPPINES

The women of the United States have been enfranchised as early as 1920. Portugal, on the other hand, extended limited voting rights to its women in 1945; Belgium granted this right to its women in 1950.

China and Japan gave their women the right of suffrage in 1946; India and Burma followed suit in 1947; and Korea in 1948, but the Filipino women hold the distinction of being the first in the Far East to be enfranchised and this was in 1937.

The political emancipation of the Filipino women may be attributed primarily and particularly to the educational policy introduced by the Americans in the Philippines. If at all, however, our keen historians have not allowed to go unrecorded such other events that constituted the preliminary attempts of our countrymen toward the early emancipa-

tion of the Filipino women. Even prior to the arrival of the Americans the Filipino leaders, particularly Rizal, took steps that would in effect lift the status of Filipino womanhood to its rightful position.

Apolinario Mabini, the Sublime Paralytic, among others, distinguished himself for being the first to espouse the cause of feminism in the Philippines. He was way ahead in proposing the enfranchisement of our women. The First Philippine Republic explicitly provides:

"Female taxpayers who have attained the age of twenty-one years, who are not subject to parental or marital authority, shall have the right to vote for public office, unless they have been disqualified for leading a licentious life or by having been convicted of some misdemeanor."

In June 1905, Miss Con-

ception Felix who later became Mrs. Felipe Calderon formed and organized the *Feminista Filipina*, the first women's club in the Philippines. This organization did not agitate particularly for woman suffrage, but engaged in the promotion of social welfare work.

In 1912 the Manila women closed ranks and formed the Society for the Advancement of Women with Mrs. Charles Lobingier as its first President. The initial principal aim was to work for the enfranchisement of women but gradually relaxed its stand by concentrating more on the social welfare phase of activity. It later became the Manila Women's Club, the mother club of all women's clubs throughout the archipelago, and today more popularly known as the Federation of Women's Clubs.

On October 16, 1918 Governor General Francis Burton Harrison recommended to the Philippine Legislature the extension of suffrage to the Filipino women. In response to the recommendation, Representative Ricardo Lloret of Bulacan, Feliciano Gomez of Laguna, and Tomas Luna of Albay intro-

duced a woman suffrage bill. The move failed to find its marks when the Legislature failed to pass the bill.

In 1919 Senator Pedro Masison introduced a similar bill in the Senate. Although the bill was approved in the Senate, it was disregarded in the lower chamber of the Philippine Legislature. On October 15, 1921, Governor General Leonard Wood who like his predecessor was a believer in the feminist cause, advocated the extension of suffrage to the Filipino women in his inaugural address to the sixth Philippine Legislature. The National Federation of Women's Clubs to this point also stressed their pro-suffrage activity throughout the country but it consistently met defeat in the hands of the anti-suffragists in the Legislative body.

In 1928 at the initiative of Dr. Paz Mendoza the Women Citizens League was duly organized at the Philippine Columbian Club. It was their primary aim to work for the enfranchisement of the Filipino women. They presented a petition to the Philippine Legislature, which though formally acknowledged, was nonetheless uncer-

moniously ignored.

In 1931 the Philippine Association of University Women, which had earlier been organized by the college-graduate-members of the Women Citizens League, in an effort to get attention and support invited to a conference members of the Committee on the Revision of Laws. To this Committee was referred the various woman suffrage bills authored by Francisco Varona, Eugenio Perez, and Arsenio Bonifacio.

Sensing the impossibility and futility of meeting the women's enthusiasm with inattention and disinterestedness, Representative Marcelo T. Boncan, the committee chairman, conducted in September of the same year a public hearing to determine once and for all the merits of what seemed to be a most interesting and intriguing issue of the times. Among the prominent leaders who figured in the feminist cause and religiously attended the hearings were Drs. Encarnacion Alzona, Paz Mendoza Guazon, the former Miss Maria Kalaw, now Senator Maria K. Katigbak, Mrs. Pilar Hidalgo Lim, Mrs. Concepcion F. Rodriguez, Mrs. Pura V.

Kalaw, Atty. Pacita de los Reyes, and Atty. Rosario Ocampo of the Catholic Women's League. Their concerted efforts in the fight for equal rights visibly swayed the committee to favorably endorse the bill to the House.

The House of Representatives then headed by Speaker Manuel Roxas overwhelmingly gave its assent when the bill was formally presented by the suffragists' new champion, Miguel Cuenco. For greater national problems, however, which the Senate alleged as demanding more the attention of its members, the bill suffered another discouraging fate.

In November 1933, however the Senate finally approved the suffrage bill as approved by the Lower House in 1931. Governor Frank Murphy signed the Woman Suffrage Bill on December 7, 1933, thus making it a law, but which was to take effect only on January 1, 1935, to give new women voters ample time to register.

Subsequent political events in Philippine history in the year 1934 however, proved to be the bane that rendered the victory of the women suffragists a shortlived one.

By the Philippine Legislature's acceptance of the Tydings-McDuffie law as passed by the United States Congress in May 1934, a chain of related events inevitably followed. The law in effect provided for the establishment of a Philippine Commonwealth whose Constitution was to be framed by an elective Constitutional Assembly.

The Constitutional Convention presented another obstacle for the women suffragists. The Convention agreed that the National Assembly should extend the right of suffrage to women, but predicated its exercise on the outcome of a plebiscite which would be held for that purpose within two years after the adoption of the Constitution, and only if not less than three hundred thousand women possessing the necessary qualifications should affirmatively vote on the question.

This turn of events offered no alternative for the women suffragists. Casting aside their prejudices; they proved equal to the demands of their political aspirations aware as they were that the rejection of the Constitution

could only mean one thing — the indefinite postponement of Philippine Independence. The General Council for Women firmly resolved to work and campaign for the acceptance of the Constitution.

Soon after the inauguration of the Philippine Commonwealth, President Quezon signed the Plebiscite Bill on September 30, 1936. On Plebiscite Day, April 30, 1937, the women electorate of the Philippines registered 447,725 "yes" votes against 44,307 "no" votes. In a special session held from August to September 1937, the National Assembly ratified the plebiscite's returns.

Marking a milestone in the stride taken by the Filipino women towards their political emancipation, and anxious to exercise a right so nobly won, the Filipino suffragettes gleefully marched to the polls for the first time on December 14, 1937. The succeeding events proved heartening to the whole Filipino womanhood as several hundred Filipinas aspired for positions which have hitherto remained exclusively for the exploitation of their male counterparts.