

Does Democracy Work In The Philippines?

By REX D. DRILON

Rafael Palma Lodge No. 147

To the question — Does democracy work in the Philippines? — the answer could well be yes and no, probably more no than yes.

Or a better answer might be, superficially yes. And very seriously, no.

If the question were phrased differently — “Can democracy work here?” — the answer would have to deal with the “ability” and “power” of the people to make it work. That ability and that power are shaped and limited by the framework of the prevailing institutions. Therefore, the answer in essence could well be the same, “Democracy doesn’t work here because it can’t.” It can’t, because of the character of the framework.

Our traditions, habits, and temperament are against the very spirit of democracy.

This judgment may seem to be too sweeping, for a good case can be made in support of democratic gains in the past 60 years. However, a counter-case can be made that the “gains” were superficial and were mostly concerned with “forms,” “motions,” or “words” rather than substance.

But first let us attempt to frame our own working definition of democracy. Although there are many definitions of democracy and none

is all-inclusive enough to be satisfactory, it seems to me that *democracy in its pure essence is the aspiration of the human spirit to attain the highest fulfillment in dignity, self-respect, and freedom through the use of legitimate techniques, methods, and tools consistent with this aspiration.* Note that the emphasis is on the quality of “fulfillment” and on the quality of “methods.” The term “highest fulfillment” could spell the difference between a people stirred by what the poet calls divine discontent on the one hand and a people self-satisfied, self-complacent, and self-righteous on the other. “Methods” could spell the difference between lights of civilization and darkness of uncivilization.

Democracy, therefore, is more than a “form” or “structure” of government with the familiar mechanics and appendages of a constitution, separation of powers, popular suffrage and representation, periodic elections, public debate, party system, and all the rest. We may have all these, and more, and yet miss the spirit of democracy. The spirit is deeper than any and all of these. The spirit is more than can be formulated in creeds, structural forms, or techniques.

At this writing, strictly speaking, in the Philippines democracy does not work and cannot work because we have the wrong kind of social institutions. Maybe it is more accurate to say that nothing is wrong with our social institutions, but something is wrong with the people who man these institutions, because they distort their functions and veer them away from the democratic orientation. The people who distort the functions of democracy cannot help doing so because they operate under a different value-system. And, too, while individuals powerful enough shape the institutions, in the long process as the institutions become established and rooted, they tend to grow more rigid and in the end they shape the individuals. This interaction goes on forever and it is not easy to locate the exclusive lines of demarcation and to determine where to detect and arrest the retrogression and where to encourage the desirable growth.

Our folkways and *mores* (the whole gamut of our habits of thinking and doing) are expressions of these institutions.

There are deterministic limits imposed by his culture, in which the Filipino moves without his being conscious that he is in a psychological prison-house, fashioned by his peculiar social structure, within which he develops a deceptive feeling of freedom of choice and dignity. Hence his naive faith that, because he was handed on a silver platter a democratic "form" of government by the United States, he has auto-

matically a democratic society. To change the figure, a simple fact is often forgotten that transplantation produces transmutation.

Democracy as a social and psychological acquirement is learned and appropriated only after a long lesson in first-hand experience. One can learn it by rote, it is true, but this kind of learning does not have much meaning and cannot last. In order for it to be meaningful and lasting, it must become part and parcel of the crystallized traditions extending back to the long past. We have had no such traditions. All we had was the experience revolving around the tribe, the barangay, the feudal land, colonialism, and of course the series of revolts, revolutions, and invasions.

For example, we make much of our democracy because we have a "democratic constitution," which shows how significantly we miss the point. Constitutions are not difficult to write, especially if there are models galore to copy from, and can be only so much paper if their spirit is not understood, respected, and implemented. Any people can have the most democratic constitution in the world and yet act and think most undemocratically. Thus, in this sense and for this reason, are the "democratic" constitutions of the SSviets and off many republics in the world mere "paper constitutions."

I have said that we have the wrong kind of social institutions here, so wrong or so wrongly manned and implemented that democracy doesn't work and can't. The most power-

ful and pervasive social institution we have is our exclusivistic and authoritarian religion. The merits of this great religion have been given a monolithic twist by its ruling elite at the top, and its unhappy historical record in this country is an open book for all social scientists to analyze. There is no one factor that has socially conditioned the Filipino people in such profound and seemingly irretrievable manner as this particular version of the Christian religion. This is at once its chief merit as well as its heavy responsibility.

To a people so conditioned by high authority to think alike, uniformity in thought is no surprise as a hallmark of their "unity" as a nation. A phenomenon so common as censorship in all its forms — direct and indirect, subtle and frontal — is accepted without question. Censorship, for example, as to what "right" movies to see, what "safe" books to read, what "correct" ideas to write, what "acceptable" schools to attend on pain of "ex-communication," the sterile indoctrination and meaningless memorization in the teaching and learning process, etc., etc. — all this is accepted and taken for granted because of the long years of social conditioning. To think, to question, to follow wherever truth leads — why, this is unpardonable heresy.

True democracy which took long and painful centuries for the Anglo-Saxon peoples to learn is not compatible with our kind of social conditioning. Totalitarianism and au-

thoritarianism over the whole gamut of life, encompassed in the words, "faith and morals," which a religious-political church says by implication are no less than the words of God as interpreted by an infallible monolithic source, do not encourage the nurturing, much less the maturing of democracy here. It is worthy of note that this same version of religion, developing as a minority in truly democratic lands where the social climate is benign, such as in the United States, is a far cry from the kind we have spawned. The Spanish aims and the Filipino responses, as discussed by Phelan (*The Hispanization of the Philippines*), are in instructive study to an extent.

The success or failure of any hope for democracy here will depend much upon the behavioristic record of our majority religion. I think the easing of the pressures is possible only if the ruling religious elite will revise its strangle-hold upon the masses and allow the energies of thought to reach and permeate all possible levels. There is no guarantee, however, that if the Iglesia Ni Kristo or Protestant or Moslem religion should take the place of the present majority religion, there would be a marked change in our social outlook favorable to democracy. For, as developed by the Filipinos in the very ecology of their habitat, these different versions of religion could be as authoritarian as any we have known.

Another institution responsible for the inhospitable reception of the democratic idea is our authoritarian home. Except for a very few emancipated families, our people in gen-

eral, especially in the far-flung barrios where 75 per cent of them live, do not question the authority of the parents and elders, on the one hand, and the almost sacrosanct customs and traditions that have shaped our lives, on the other. In such overdictated homes, it is considered bad manners to differ with one's elders, and it is good breeding always to accord neighborhood (public) opinion due respect, no matter how tyrannical or backward. Disobedience, deviation, or variety exacts a high price. This is an unconscious extension of too much church authority.

Industrialization may change the authoritarian character of our home. With industrialization will come increased economic independence for individual persons and the concomitant loosening of too much family dependence and control. There will be a re-examination of old values and a consequent change of attitudes. If this should happen, then democracy may have a chance. But that industrialization — the real one -- is far off, very far off in the future.

Our schools are in the main still authoritarian in spite of the community-type education, which is of very recent experimental vintage. From the primary grades to the university, there is still plenty of indoctrination and preaching going on and there are still many tyrants and many bigots. It has been rightly observed that teachers tend to be set in their ways, and in their thinking they are inclined to be more bigoted than the bigots they criticize.

Free discussion and sharing of views, disagreements with authority, questioning of dogmas — these are still very much an expensive luxury.

Our curricula are still generally strait-jacketed and are constructed by legislative fiat. On the administrative levels and at faculty meetings and forums — all over the country — ideas are still the monopoly of school superiors, and as for the rank and file of teachers or professors, their safety lies in the discreet use of silence and conformism as the better part of valor.

Our economic institutions, rigidly "structuralized" for centuries, find the country without a middle class, which is the base of any meaningful democracy. If there are 28 million Filipinos today (estimate) and if 75 per cent of them live in rural areas, that means more than 21 million live in the most backward portions of the country, economically speaking. But this enormous figure of 21 million can still be swelled to, say, 24 million, out of our population of 28 million, because most of our towns not officially classed as "barrios" are in fact barrios (rural areas) due to their isolated geography, backward culture, and neglected economy.

No wonder, therefore, that a country like ours, with a few rich people at the top owning too much, and with so many poor people at the bottom owning too little or nothing, cannot understand democracy. The middle or in-between position is a vacuum and will take long years to

fill, if at all. The land tenure system is hardly scratched for all the legislative attempts at relief. Strong resistance by the "haves" is to be expected, and social change on the land-tenure front is going to be deathly slow. And yet a paradox stares us in the face and mocks us, for there is right now plenty of land to be had — jungles and non-jungles rich and waiting to be husbanded. But no capital, no know-how, no venturesomeness, no incentive.

Our tragedy, as I have repeatedly pointed out on many occasions, is that the Philippines, resources-wise, is one of the richest countries in the world for its size and yet is actually, also for its size, one of the hungriest countries in the world.

There is going to be no political democracy in this country unless and until there is economic democracy first, which, for us Filipinos, is still in the womb of the unforeseeable future. The dignity and self-respect, therefore, of the Filipino in terms of his present economic condition are so low as to mock the democratic requirements.

The economic development of this country cannot be entrusted wholly to the responsibility of the government, but our people, again through a wrong social conditioning for centuries, lean upon the government for many, many things, including those that they themselves can do and ought to do.

In the political realm, we do many things against every rule in democ-

racy's book. We make so much of our popular elections. We can have as many elections as we like, but that does not mean a thing until we can make those elections clean and representative and enlightened — and so peaceful that we do not have to call out the army and the constabulary to prevent bloodshed. Imagine having a population of 28 million and the registered voters are no more than seven million at the most and the actual votes cast are a little over five million only. (These are round figures, and the difference in estimates above or below these figures is not significant enough to alter the point.)

Even if we assume, generally, that we have seven million votes actually cast in our elections (which is only one-fourth of our total population), has anyone asked where those votes come from? From the provinces, of course. When we say "provinces," we mean our towns and barrios. How enlightened, therefore, are those votes? Let us stop kidding ourselves.

And so we are called the "show window of democracy in Asia" and we like it very much, but a window indeed whose contents are really "showing." For, haven't we in the past, in many places, finished our elections before election day, as typified by the classic performance of 1949? Don't we consistently alert the armed forces and the police during elections, and shortly before? Don't we move with ease from one party to another on mere personal pique and become "guest candi-

dates"? Don't we discourage opposition parties and forge "allied majorities"? Don't we place party interest above national interest ("what are we in power for?"), and feather our personal nests in such a way as to provide amply for our future, thereby giving us a license to raid a public office with all the resourcefulness of our private lust? Don't we carry political hatreds to the grave? Don't we brandish religion as a shield to hide our scanty virtues and make it a subtle test for employment and use it without conscience to bolster our electioneering stock? Etc., etc. In short, aren't we behaving politically in a manner to prove that democracy simply does not and cannot work in the Philippines?

We reveal our immaturity in many unconscious ways, and we revealed it last November in a most classic manner when we kept repeating from the housetop a shallow self-serving pronouncement that in the presidential elections of 1961 the Filipino people had attained maturity. As if maturity, instead of being a process of centuries, were merely a matter of periodic political elections in which almost no holds were barred. Is not the very lack of insight in the pronouncement eloquent of our immaturity?

We have yet to find another country which can compete with us in the serious preoccupation of making politics a veritable industry. Our image in this regard is reflected

faithfully in Latin America, where the social conditioning is strikingly similar, but even that part of the world, which is reportedly full of "banana republics," has nothing on us when it comes to the intensity and crassness of our politics.

The habits and attitudes mentioned in this brief article resist the growth of democracy. When and how they can be changed to create a different value-system is hard to say. Our only guide is history. Other societies, historically, have changed their social institutions, through revolutions, peaceful and armed. Armed revolutions, aside from being expensive in lives and treasure, create more problems than they solve, but they have happened in every clime and age with a relentlessness of a destiny, as if to impress a hard-learned lesson that in any developing society conditions have to become worse before they can get better.

If ways can be found to use the evolutionary method as an engine of change, provided people and institutions know how to be resilient enough to reshape themselves and reorient their spirit, democracy in this country may have a chance of growing. Otherwise, we have indeed a very long way to go, or if we are going and moving at all, it may be in authoritarian directions which seem most natural, because after all we really only had sixty years of America here, which is not even a drop in the ocean of Spain's 400.