

# The failure of the Philippine presidential system\*

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## Abstract

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This article explains why the Philippines continues to be a weak state and that the prospects for building a stronger, sustainable state are dim under the current political system. Philippine elections are won through a mix of popularity, populism and money politics. This seriously undermines the strength of the state since the oligarchy expects returns for their investment in a candidate's campaign. The extraordinary power of the president and the ministers makes it possible to repay and buy the loyalty of the financial and political oligarchy by giving away jobs within the bureaucracy. A predatory political elite, whose prime goal it has been to win the coming elections and to assure that their family interests are protected and promoted further undermines the independence and meritocracy of the Philippine bureaucracy. I argue that as long as the current presidential system continues to exist in the Philippines the chances for building a strong state are slight.

## Introduction

*“In the Philippines it is a known fact that patrons are needed in everything, from the time one is baptized until one dies, to obtain justice, secure a passport or exploit whatever industry.”*<sup>1</sup>

This is what national hero José Rizal wrote in 1889 about his beloved home country, the Philippines. The widespread corruption and nepotism he described still applies in 21<sup>st</sup> century Philippines and has given the country an unsavory

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<sup>1</sup> J. Rizal, *El Filibusterismo: Subversion*. Translated by M. S. Lacson-Locsin (Makati City: Bookmark Inc., 1996) p. 251.

reputation as a patrimonial oligarchic predatory state. In a patrimonial state: “Practically everything depends explicitly upon personal considerations: upon purely personal connections, favors, promises, and privileges.”<sup>2</sup> The adjectives oligarchic and predatory underscore that in the Philippines the controlling forces are not the administration or bureaucracy, but the economic oligarchy. The oligarchies “seem to plunder without any more regard for the welfare of the citizenry than a predator has for the welfare of its prey.”<sup>3</sup>

The relationship between politicians and power brokers, a broader term for the oligarchy that also includes members of the elite whose core activity is not business, is established by providing the politicians the necessary financial, political and moral support during election campaigns. Politicians are well aware of the expectations of power brokers who supported them in their quest for office. By assuring that their allies within the political and economic elite are receiving the rents, they can rely on their support in the upcoming elections. The politician should repay his debt to the power brokers in the future in a form acceptable to the donor, partly also because of the social characteristic of *‘utang na loob’* (literally, a debt inside oneself, but generally translated as debt of gratitude) that is an imbedded value in Philippine society. Failing to pay or expressing one’s gratitude in an unsatisfactory way is the biggest form of losing face (*hiya*), which Filipinos try to avoid under all circumstances.

Politicians should not be regarded as simply agents of the wealthy elite in the Philippines. A political career is often initiated to protect and expand the business interests of the family the politician belongs to. To protect the family welfare powerful families have transformed “their electoral offices into lasting family assets, building what Filipinos call a “political dynasty.”<sup>4</sup> Whether the politicians are members of the elite or not, throughout their political career politicians need to build, maintain and expand their network with elite families in their city, province and other parts of the archipelago. Beside the elite families there are dozens of wealthy businessmen who through rent seeking activities try to protect their business interests against foreign and national competitors. These rent-seekers are fully aware that for politicians holding office is ephemeral.<sup>5</sup> In the zero-sum game that Philippine elections are, politicians rely heavily on the support of the political and financial elite. As will be described in this article, this heavy reliance on the backing of power brokers during elections prevents the fulfillment of the main task of a politician: representing his constituents.

<sup>2</sup> M. Weber, *Economy and Society*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), II, p. 104.

<sup>3</sup> Quote of P.B. Evans, Predatory, Developmental, and Other Apparatuses: A comparative Political Economic Perspective in the Third World State. In: *Sociological Forum* 4, no. 4. December 1989. p. 562. Found in: J.T. Sidel, *Capital, Coercion and Crime, Bossism in the Philippines*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999) p. 146.

<sup>4</sup> A. W. McCoy, “An Anarchy of Families”: The Historiography of State and Family in the Philippines. In: A. W. McCoy (ed.), *An Anarchy of Families*. (Madison: Center for Southeast Asian Studies University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1993) p. 24.

<sup>5</sup> A. W. McCoy, “An Anarchy of Families”: The Historiography of State and Family in the Philippines. In: A. W. McCoy (ed.), *An Anarchy of Families*. (Madison: Center for Southeast Asian Studies University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1993) p. 24.

## ***The strength of the Philippine state***

In 1988, Joel S. Migdal wrote a very influential book about the capabilities of states to achieve changes in society. On the basis of this, a distinction was made between strong and weak states. Being a strong state implies that the state has a certain level of autonomy from particular groups, whose interests do not correspond with the interests of the government. Reading a Philippine newspaper on any day of the week, shows that the Philippine government struggles to control the affairs that take place within its borders.<sup>6</sup> The weakness of the Philippine state is evident in almost any function the government fulfills. Examples of this can be found in the evident failure of the Philippine state to monopolize the use of force, control and regulate the extraction of natural resources,<sup>7</sup> reduce the painfully visible socio-economic disparities that exist between the small elite and the large group of impoverished Filipinos,<sup>8</sup> collect taxes from its citizens,<sup>9</sup> and combat corruption.<sup>10</sup>

According to leading Philippine scholar Joel Rocamora, the Philippine state has largely been kept so weak due to the absence of one particular unified group, that it has been able to bend the state to its will.<sup>11</sup> With this, Rocamora refers to the fragmentation that exists among members of the upper class who form loose and unstable alliances during election time. These short-term alliances are created for the sole purpose of assuring an electoral victory of one of their political allies. The

<sup>6</sup> For example the leading newspaper of the Philippines, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, on October 4, 2002 mentioned the following internal issues: Muslim terrorist organization Abu Sayyaf responsible for bombing, Luzon police on full alert versus communist New People's Army, corruption scandal regarding public works, bomb blasts prevented in Mindanao and a kidnapping case. In: *Philippine Daily Inquirer* October 4, 2002.

<sup>7</sup> The Philippines has one of the lowest percentages in government revenues as percentage of the total GDP in Southeast Asia. In 1997 this was 14%, compared to Indonesia 21.3%, Malaysia 26.3% and Thailand 18.6%. In: Far Eastern Economic Review, *Asia 2001 Yearbook*. For figures and consequences of the lack of control on natural resources see: J. Boyce, *The Philippines: The Political economy of Growth and Impoverishment in the Marcos Era*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 1993) pp. 225-241. Robin Broad and John Cavanagh, *Plundering Paradise: The Struggle for the Environment in the Philippines*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

<sup>8</sup> The government has been inept at finding a solution for the communist and Muslim insurrections. Kidnap-for-ransom gangs, violent robberies, drugs, smuggling and corruption within the police and armed forces, also plague the country.

<sup>9</sup> The Bureau of Internal Revenue collects about 80% of all government revenue. To date, it has not been able to match the collection efficiency (measured as the ratio of taxes collected to Gross Domestic Product) of its counterparts in the region. The highest its efficiency ration has reached has been slightly less than 13% (in 1997). Corruption is partly responsible for this. The Department of Finance estimated that the total annual leakage is around 240 billion pesos. The World Bank on its turn estimated that 50 centavos out of every peso that can be lost to corruption (which includes evasion made possible by bribes). J. Edgardo Campos, Commentary. Holding the Country Hostage. In: *Newsbreak*, 16 September 2002. [http://www.inql.net/nwsbrk/2002/Sep/05/nbk\\_2-1.htm](http://www.inql.net/nwsbrk/2002/Sep/05/nbk_2-1.htm) (October 29, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> J. Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998) pp. 4-5

<sup>11</sup> J. Rocamora, The Constitutional Amendment Debate. In: S. M. Santos, Jr. (et al.), *Shift*. (Quezon City: Ateneo Center for Social Policy and Public Affairs, 1997) p. 105.

impact on the Philippine political system of the reliance on the support of oligarchic groups, of which the political elite is an integral part, is expressed by former President Ramos: “for the last 47 years, we have had a political system, that has been too responsive to groups possessing wealth and power enough to bend the state to do their will.”<sup>12</sup> The elite’s undisputed economic, political and cultural dominance has given them the opportunity to protect and expand their economic and political interests at the expense of the strength and independence of the Philippine State. In his book ‘State in Society’ Migdal pointed out that in “societies in which social control is vested in numerous local level social organizations”... “the rules of behavior have been dictated by critically placed strongmen- landlords, caciques, bosses, moneylender, and others.”<sup>13</sup> “A society fragmented in social control affects the character of the state”... “the prospects for building cohesive states, which can apply their rules and policies effectively, are not bright in societies with fragmented social control.”<sup>14</sup> Through corruption, nepotism and patronage the traditional Philippine elite has maintained their power and influence thankfully using an underdeveloped state apparatus that has close ties with the oligarchy. This has caused Sidel to observe that “the Philippines offers a classic example of a post-colonial weak state confronting a strong society dominated by traditional elites.”<sup>15</sup>

This thesis will demonstrate that the prospects for building a strong(er) Philippine state continues to be dim as long as Philippine elected leaders fail to take a more independent position from the oligarchy that continues to hold considerable social control over the Philippine state. By analyzing the election and presidency of Joseph Ejercito Estrada it will become evident that within the current political system, and predominate political culture, politicians are fully dependent on the financial, political and moral support of members of the oligarchy in their attempt to make a successful bid for public office. The Estrada Presidency demonstrated a sequence of events in which the elected president not only abused the presidential prerogative to express his gratitude to the oligarchy that supported him during his electoral campaign but which also slowed down the process of building a stronger state that was initiated by his predecessor Fidel V. Ramos. Before we look at Estrada’s failure to contribute to the creation of a stronger state in the Philippines, it is important to pay more attention to the weak-strong state dichotomy.

Dunham observed that too often the success or failure of the economic growth of a country is attributed to “state strength”. Dunham proposes to not only look at the state capacity to take what he calls ‘firm decisions’, but also to look at the sustainability of the reforms that go hand in hand with ‘firm decisions’.

<sup>12</sup> F. V. Ramos. *State of the Nation*, 26 July 1993. Office of Press Secretary, p. 4.

<sup>13</sup> J.S. Migdal, *State in Society*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) p. 92.

<sup>14</sup> J.S. Migdal, *State in Society*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) p. 93.

<sup>15</sup> The original quote of Sidel was: “the Philippines offers a classic example of a post-colonial weak state confronting a strong society dominated by traditional elites and local strongmen.” Strongmen has been omitted since Sidel pays much attention to local politics and warlordism. This thesis however focuses primarily on national politics. J.T. Sidel, *Capital, Coercion and Crime, Bossism in the Philippines*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999) p. 10.

**Table 1.** Dunham's categorization of states on the basis of state capacities<sup>16</sup>

Capacity for firm decisions	Sustainability of reform	
	High	Low
Strong	<i>Strong states</i>	Strong states but unsustainable
Weak	<i>Weak states but sustainable</i>	Weak states

We can look at what Migdal referred to as skillful leadership and an independent bureaucracy to see whether the Philippines has had the capacity for firm decisions to provide sustainability of reforms.<sup>17</sup>

### ***Failure of skillful political leadership***

A short overview of political leadership in the Philippines after 1986 shows that step one, skillful leadership has hardly been displayed by the elected presidents. In 1986, after the fall of President Ferdinand Marcos, Cory Aquino protected the re-establishment of democracy in 1986. Despite Aquino's outspoken commitment to break with the history of corruption and nepotism under the Marcos regime, Aquino did have difficulties in being impartial when it came to decisions affecting her relatives, supporters and political allies.<sup>18</sup> When Fidel V. Ramos succeeded Aquino in 1992, for the first time an elected Philippine President did demonstrate a level of independent, skillful leadership that country had not witnessed since it gained independence in 1946.<sup>19</sup> During his term, Ramos tried to create a stronger state by breaking the power of certain oligarchic groups<sup>20</sup> and by enforcing more peace and order.<sup>21</sup> The Ramos presidency was successful in making a start in reforming the economy and improving the internal security situation. However, the capacity of the Ramos administration to take firm decisions that would further weaken the

<sup>16</sup> D. Dunham, *State, Reforms and Institutional Change: On the Dynamics of Failure*. p. 7 [[http://wbno018.worldbank.org/eurvp/web.nsf/Pages/Paper+by+David+Dunham/\\$File/DUNHAM+FINAL+VERSION.pdf](http://wbno018.worldbank.org/eurvp/web.nsf/Pages/Paper+by+David+Dunham/$File/DUNHAM+FINAL+VERSION.pdf)]

<sup>17</sup> J. Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998) pp. 271-277.

<sup>18</sup> The Aquino-era corruption is named *Kamag-anak* (relatives) Incorporated because of corrupt deals and favouritism of Aquino and Cojuangco relatives.

J. Rocamora, *Introduction Corruption in The Philippines, A Beginners Guide*. In: S.S. Coronel (ed.), *Pork and Other Perks: Corruption & Governance in the Philippines*. (Manila: Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, 1998) p. 23.

<sup>19</sup> E.S. de Dios and P.D. Hutchcroft. *Political Economy*. In: A. Balisacan and H. Hill (eds.) *The Philippine Economy. Development, Policies and Challenges*. (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 2003) p. 58. With reference to J. Rocamora. *The Political Requirements of Economic Reform*. In: *Issues & Letters* 4(October) 1-4.

<sup>20</sup> S.S. Coronel, *Monopoly*. In: S.S. Coronel (ed.), *Pork and Other Perks, Corruption & Governance in the Philippines*. (Quezon City: Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, 1998) pp. 112-150.

<sup>21</sup> Under his term peace agreements were reached with MNLF and the NPA/CPP.

position of the economic and political oligarchy was undermined by “*old-style pork barrel politics*” and “*scandals involving persons appointed by Ramos to satisfy political debts*”.<sup>22</sup> The accusations of corruption and nepotism seriously debased the progress the country had made under his leadership.

To understand the current weakness of the Philippine State, Sidel emphasized that one needs to pay attention to the institutional legacies of American colonial rule.<sup>23</sup> A major institutional legacy of American colonial rule has been the adaptation of a presidential type of governing system. The Philippine president has considerable powers available to build an effective administration that can be put into service for the attainment of the president’s program of government up to the present time. However, Philippine leaders (except Ramos) have not been able or willing to spearhead necessary institutional and economic reforms. These reforms are necessary to bring a stop to widespread and rampant corruption and nepotism, find a peaceful solution for the Communist and Muslim rebellions, reduce extreme socio-economic disparities and invest in the country’s poor infrastructure. Due to the lack of reforms and peaceful solutions of the insurgences the country is dealing with, the Philippines has been called ‘the sick country’ in the Southeast Asian region for a long time. Another major problem is that under the current constitution the re-election for an elected president is not permitted. Due to these constitutional restrictions, the prospects of the sustainability of the reforms brought about under the Ramos presidency were very low. Using Dunham’s categorization of states on the basis of state capacities it is obvious that the Philippines falls under the cluster of weak states that is characterized by non-sustainability of the few reforms that are actually initiated.

The most important factor for the weakness of the Philippine State and consequently the failure of the Philippine government to provide the environment that would foster sustainable and egalitarian economic development is, in my view, the absence of, what I regard, as effective, enlightened, independent and skillful leadership on all levels of government, but most importantly, on the national level. This leadership is necessary to break with the already accepted level of corruption, patronage and nepotism. The costs of reforms will however be borne by the “*rich and powerful families and social groups who have historically benefited from their influence over the political and economic system*”.<sup>24</sup> During their political career the reliance of politicians on the support of members of the oligarchy has formed the foundation of close reciprocal relationships that

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<sup>22</sup> Examples are the Amari-Manila Bay Scandal and the Centennial Scandal. E. Tordesillas and S.S. Coronel, The Grandmother of all Scams. In: S.S. Coronel (eds.), *Betrayals of the Public Trust*. (Manila: Philippine Center of Investigative Journalism, 2000) pp. 145–162. C. Florentino-Hofileña and Ian Sayson, Centennial Scandal. In: S.S. Coronel (eds.), *Betrayals of the Public Trust*. (Manila: Philippine Center of Investigative Journalism, 2000) pp. 163–181. E. Tordesillas and S.S. Coronel, Scam. In: S.S. Coronel (ed.), *Pork and Other Perks, Corruption & Governance in the Philippines*. (Quezon City: Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, 1998) pp. 82–112.

<sup>23</sup> J.T. Sidel, *Capital, Coercion and Crime, Bossism in the Philippines*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999) p. 143.

<sup>24</sup> F. V. Ramos, Good Governance Against Corruption. In: *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*. Vol. 25:2 Summer 2001. p. 14.

exists between the political, economic and religious oligarchy. This relationship prevents the necessary reforms, which will damage the short-term interest of the oligarchy, will be implemented. The dependence of politicians on the financial, moral and political support from certain factions of the elite seriously undermines the ability of elected politicians to provide independent and skillful leadership.

### ***The political survival techniques of the predatory political elite in the Philippines***

Once elected into office, politicians want to use government resources to already start campaigning for the next election. To ensure that Congressmen will win the next election, they have to express their gratitude to their backers and provide their inner circle and constituents with jobs, gifts and other favors. With over 8,500 new top government officials to be appointed by the president, a president has considerable powers available to court politicians. As important is the presidential prerogative to release government funds, which a president can use to dragoon the legislative power into docility and reemphasis that he is the grand political patron. For congressmen the government funds released by the president to them are the air they breathe. Without these public funds Congressmen would be reduced to sheer legislators, which would mean the end of being the motor behind big government investments in, for example, the infrastructure of the region they represent. Thus, congressmen will insist that a president releases funds to congressmen. If this money is not released a hostile legislative power will be reluctant to accept appointments for the president's cabinet, utter fierce critique through the media and charge the president and cabinet members with malfunctioning, corruption and nepotism. Hence, a president not only has to appease his backers through measures that conflict with good governance, but a president also has to accede to the demands of the selfish Congressmen.

This starts with the appointment of cabinet members who in their turn are forced to appoint recommendees of congressmen within their department. Cabinet members are forced to do so because they are highly dependent on Congress. Firstly, Congress has to approve their appointment by the president and secondly Congress has to approve their budgets. Often a gentlemen's agreement is reached in which the Secretary gets his budget approved and Congressmen get what they want: funds, the appointment of their allies and kickbacks from business deals which come about through lobbying of the congressmen. As a result, it is no surprise that "*the Philippine bureaucracy...*"<sup>25</sup> has long been penetrated by particularistic oligarchic interests.

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<sup>25</sup> P.D. Hutchcroft, *The Political Foundations of Booty Capitalism in the Philippines* (paper delivered at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, September 1992) pp. 1-4. In: A. W. McCoy, "An Anarchy of Families": The Historiography of State and Family in the Philippines. In: A. W. McCoy (ed.), *An Anarchy of Families*. (Madison: Center for Southeast Asian Studies University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1993).

oligarchic interests prevent the presence of an autonomous and efficient bureaucracy. This hinders the development and implementation of policies when they are not in accordance with the interests of the president and his allies i.e. that is the oligarchy.

The result is a continuous bargaining process in which the president has to use all his available resources, especially the right to appoint and release funds, to befriend congressmen to accept his suggested policies, appointees and way of running the government.<sup>26</sup> Although the president is chief administrator and has the right to fire, hire and transfer government officials he is forced to allow fellow politicians to nominate a large share of the bureaucracy. Migdal observed that in weak states: “allocations of posts reflect the loyalty of particular groups, the threat of other groups and the importance of specific state agencies.”<sup>27</sup>

### ***The prevalence of a traditional bureaucracy***

Migdal has pointed out that an important condition for creating a strong state is the “existence of a social grouping with people sufficiently independent of existing bases of social control and skillful enough to execute grand designs of state leaders. Bureaucrats of the state, both those at the tops of agencies and the implementers in the field, must identify their own ultimate interests with those of the state as an autonomous organization.”<sup>28</sup> The benefits of an independent bureaucracy are largely public in the sense that almost everyone in society would benefit from a more honest and competent bureaucracy.<sup>29</sup> Among development economists it is generally accepted that without a capable independent bureaucracy, the execution of a long-term policy towards sustainable growth is impossible.<sup>30</sup> The lack of enlightened political leadership has enormous effects on the performance of the Philippine bureaucracy.<sup>31</sup> A result of the dysfunction of the Philippine leadership has been bureaucratic corruption, which has become endemic in the Philippines.<sup>32</sup> Through the years the Philippines has suffered greatly under the prevalence of corruption. “The World Bank, in a study in 2000, said the government lost about 48 billion dollars because of corruption over a 20-year period” and “Morgan Stanley Research estimated that losses from corruption

<sup>26</sup> The right to appoint government officials makes the committee on appointments in Congress one of the most wanted committees. Once elected into this committee, Congressmen are able to improve their bargaining position vis à vis the president.

<sup>27</sup> J.S. Migdal, *State in Society*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) pp. 77–78.

<sup>28</sup> J. Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998) p. 274.

<sup>29</sup> B. Geddes, *Politician's Dilemma: Building State Capacity in Latin America*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) p. 27.

<sup>30</sup> See for example: John Brohman, *Popular Development. Rethinking the Theory & Practice of Development* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).

<sup>31</sup> G. Sosmeña, *Concept of Bureaucratic Sediton*. NDCP occasional papers: Quezon City, June 1999. [http://apan.info.net/ndcp/occasional\\_papers/pdf/bursediton.pdf](http://apan.info.net/ndcp/occasional_papers/pdf/bursediton.pdf) p. 36.

<sup>32</sup> G. Sosmeña, *Concept of Bureaucratic Sediton*. NDCP occasional papers: Quezon City, June 1999. [http://apan.info.net/ndcp/occasional\\_papers/pdf/bursediton.pdf](http://apan.info.net/ndcp/occasional_papers/pdf/bursediton.pdf) p. 36.

totalled 204 billion dollars from 1965 to 2001.”<sup>33</sup> A large factor in the prevalence of corruption in the Philippines has been the usage of the bureaucracy by politicians.

In ‘State in Society’, Migdal emphasized that pivotal in the politics of survival of state leaders in weak states is the usage of the bureaucracy.<sup>34</sup> In states where the state’s leadership has only a limited reservoir of structured support, the bureaucracy is used as a tool to repay debts of gratitude, buy the loyalty of former enemies and share the spoils of victory with backers, family, friends, former classmates and people from the same region. A major barrier to the creation of a meritocratic bureaucracy is the president’s power to appoint top agency officials.

The election of a new president will lead to a new round of giving away jobs to supporters and providing rents to campaign contributors. This decelerates reforms implemented by the predecessor of the new leader and contributes to the deinstitutionalization of the bureaucracy. When a new leader takes over reforms will be brought to a basic standstill. The observation made by Grindle about the shadow of the ‘*sexenio*’ corresponds to the practice in the Philippines.<sup>35</sup> During the first two years the new officials will be pre-occupied with familiarizing themselves with their new job, start appointing their clients, friends and family members appointed to government positions and assuring loyalty from government employees. Only in the second third of the agency heads will show the willingness to implement reforms and create new policies. This phase is followed by the last third of the ‘*sexenio*’ in which top governmental officials will fear not only to identify themselves too much with the political leaders, but also to implement policies that might create controversy and protest within the bureaucracy.

Sosmeña typifies the Philippine bureaucracy as a traditional bureaucracy, which has five key characteristics: inward looking, parochial, powerless, reactive and visionless.<sup>36</sup> On top of that Philippine public agencies are exemplified by a culture of legalism, conformance, mediocrity, patronage and corruption.<sup>37</sup> Up until this day the chance to receive a position within the government and rise within the bureaucracy increases significantly when one utilizes personal ties with influential government officials, Congressmen and members of the business oligarchy. The recruitment process is only partly based on competence, corruption is rampant (and widely accepted) and suggested reforms by department heads are quelled by the civil servants who

<sup>33</sup> Philippine Daily Inquirer, Corruption, [http://www.inq7.net/opi/2003/oct/14/text/opi\\_editorial-1-p.htm](http://www.inq7.net/opi/2003/oct/14/text/opi_editorial-1-p.htm).

<sup>34</sup> J.S. Migdal, *State in Society*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) pp. 71–84.

<sup>35</sup> M. Grindle, *Bureaucrats, Politicians, and Peasants in Mexico. A Case Study in Public Policy*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977). In: J.S. Migdal, *State in Society*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) pp. 86–87.

<sup>36</sup> G. Sosmeña, *Concept of Bureaucratic Sediton*. NDCP occasional papers: Quezon City, June 1999. [http://apan-info.net/ndcp/occasional\\_papers/PDF/bursediton.pdf](http://apan-info.net/ndcp/occasional_papers/PDF/bursediton.pdf) p. 43.

<sup>37</sup> G. Sosmeña, *Concept of Bureaucratic Sediton*. NDCP occasional papers: Quezon City, June 1999. [http://apan-info.net/ndcp/occasional\\_papers/PDF/bursediton.pdf](http://apan-info.net/ndcp/occasional_papers/PDF/bursediton.pdf) pp. 32–36.

will not hesitate to accuse reformers with corruption, malpractice and nepotism.<sup>38</sup> It can therefore be no surprise that competent, honest and motivated state employees do not dominate the Philippine bureaucracy, which undermines the chances for sustainable reforms.<sup>39</sup> Against the backdrop of the outline of the weakness of the Philippine state, the lack of skillful political leadership and the absence of an independent meritocratic bureaucracy the following chapters will provide a case study of how the dynamics of Philippine electoral politics form the major obstacles in becoming a stronger state.

### ***The election and presidency of Joseph Ejercito Estrada (1998–2001)***

In 1969 Scott published an article with the title ‘*Corruption, Machine Politics and Political Change*’ in which the Philippines was mentioned several times as an example of a country where the political machinery dominated the political arena.<sup>40</sup> This is “*best characterized by the nature of the cement binding leaders and followers.*”<sup>41</sup> The use by politicians of their elective position to repay their backers and sow the conditions for remaining in power, is in congruence with Scott’s observation that “*politicians...have increasingly made use of the available patronage (not to mention licenses, contracts, franchises) to maintain their electoral strength.*”<sup>42</sup> To maintain their electoral strength politicians need to align themselves with those numbers of the oligarchy who cannot only provide them with financial means, but also with those members of the oligarchy who have command over the necessary connections to bring into action a network of people willing to support the candidate. By looking at the election and the presidency Joseph Ejercito Estrada it will become obvious that his observations remain relevant for contemporary Philippine politics since they will show in detail that “*the machine politician (Estrada) could be viewed as broker who, in return for financial assistance from wealthy elites, promoted their policy interests when in office.*”<sup>43</sup>

The 1998 presidential election campaign had hardly anything to do with a contest between political ideologies and political programs. Estrada’s campaign

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<sup>38</sup> See for example: Defensor-Santiago’s experience with the bureaucracy in the Bureau of Immigration and Deportation and the Department of Agrarian Reform. M. Defensor Santiago, *Cutting Edge. The Politics of Reform in the Philippines*. (Mandaluyong City: Woman Today Publications, 1995).

<sup>39</sup> This is also a common complaint heard in the business sector connections reign over qualities.

<sup>40</sup> J. C. Scott, “Corruption, Machine Politics and Political Change,” In: *The American Political Science Review*. Vol. 63, No. 4 December, 1969, p. 1148.

<sup>41</sup> J. C. Scott, “Corruption, Machine Politics and Political Change,” In: *The American Political Science Review*. Vol. 63, No. 4 December, 1969, p. 1144.

<sup>42</sup> J. C. Scott, “Corruption, Machine Politics and Political Change,” In: *The American Political Science Review*. Vol. 63, No. 4 December, 1969, p. 1152.

<sup>43</sup> Non-Italics, Estrada, added by the author. J. C. Scott, “Corruption, Machine Politics and Political Change,” In: *The American Political Science Review*. Vol. 63, No. 4 December, 1969, p. 1144.

in particular was focused on wooing the support of the masses or as Scott called it the “*little man*.”<sup>44</sup> Estrada’s political strategists and backers were aware that a large share of the Philippine electorate had become so dissatisfied and estranged from the ruling political elite, that the *masa* (the poor and undereducated also called masses) were looking for a change in leadership. Estrada’s handlers designed a campaign strategy that reflected Estrada’s pro-poor image that he had built up throughout his movie career. Central in the campaign was Estrada’s campaign slogan ‘*Erap for the poor*’ that succeeded in inspiring the masses with the hope that Estrada would be the president of and for the masses. However, from day one the Estrada administration become identified with corruption, nepotism, political infighting, weak leadership and lack of vision. Despite repeating the message that Estrada was for the poor, there were hardly any real efforts to implement the ambitious program of government that was aimed to uplift the living conditions of the poor. Instead of going into history as the president who truly represented the poor, Estrada went into history as the first Philippine president against whom an impeachment trial was initiated. On November 13 2000, after two years in office, the House of Representatives initiated an impeachment trial against President Estrada on charges of Bribery, Graft and Corrupt Practices, Betrayal of Public Trust and Culpable violation of the Constitution.<sup>45</sup> After days of street protests mostly by college students, members of the middle and upper class, civil society, religious groups and opposition politicians (groups that did not cast a vote for Estrada in 1998), the military and police withdrew their support for President Estrada. On January 20, 2001, vice-president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo was sworn in as president and a few months later Estrada was detained and charged with crimes that are punishable by death.

## Conclusion

In his book, ‘*Filipino Politics Development and Decay*’ Wurfel concluded that “*In sum, an executive-dominated constitutional system facilitated intra-elite competition, and ... almost never implemented policies contrary to the interest of men of great wealth.*”<sup>46</sup> Now, as this thesis has shown, 16 years later his conclusion is unfortunately still valid for the Philippines. The 1998 presidential election was a pendulum for Philippine politics. A large share of the masses placed their hope on someone outside the political establishment who directly appealed to their grievances.

The prevalence of machine politics in which populism starts playing a more important role should be regarded as a dangerous development. This

<sup>44</sup> J. C. Scott, *Corruption, Machine Politics and Political Change*. In: The American Political Science Review, Vol. 63, No. 4 (Dec., 1969) p. 1144.

<sup>45</sup> The impeachment trial in the Senate was broadcasted live on TV and the whole nation witnessed revelations of alleged fake bank accounts, bags of illegal gamble revenues entering the presidential palace and dummy corporations owned by the president. The highly politicized Senate never came to the point of passing a verdict on the accusations made against the president.

<sup>46</sup> D. Wurfel, *Filipino Politics. Development and Decay*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988) p. 328.

development will cause an even bigger division between the ABC classes on one and the D and E classes on the other side. I am convinced that Filipino electorate will continue to look for alternatives for the inept politicians who continue to ignore the wants and needs of the country. This will mean the arrival of more new political players who, just as Estrada has done, not only heavily rely on their popularity and financial support from segments of the elite, but who also as Estrada did, will lack the knowledge and skills to provide strong, enlightened and independent leadership. And so Philippine presidential elections will become, more than ever a popularity contest in which the average Filipino will continue to be the biggest losers.

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