

Public Opinion Polls, Governance and Democratization: The Philippines

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This paper seeks to describe, explain and analyze the 2000 Gallup Millennium Survey (hereinafter, GMS) data on democratic governance in the Philippines in comparison with other nine countries covered in the study. Organized along trust and governance issues, the GMS data allows for a useful — albeit tentative — comparative assessment of political values, norms and beliefs among Asian countries.

Political and governance research with public opinion polls as primary material bears a lot of promise in understanding public affairs and promoting democratic governance. Democratic impulse is enhanced every time public views and sentiments are factored in policies, programs and decisions. It checks and qualifies overstatements of forceful yet impressionistic prescriptions and coherent yet technocratic views. If developed to a level of regularity and methodology such as those which now operate in Western democracies, opinion polls stand to be a valuable guide in good governance and citizenship in Asia.¹⁾ For the region, the two major challenges that ought to be hurdled are the polls' usual enormous logistical requirements and politico — cultural constraints.

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1) See, Mahar Mangahas, *The Philippine Social Climate: From the SWS Survey* (Manila: Anvil Publishing, 1994) chaps. 1 and 2.

The study is divided in three parts. First is the discussion of the background, factors and trends in Philippine democratization. This section seeks to put the description and analysis of GMS data in a broader domestic political and socio-economic context.

Second is the discussion and analysis of GMS data. To allow for greater comparison, the discourse has adopted the six modules on trust and governance from the paper of Profs. Chung-Si Ahn and Won Taek Kang's which was presented last Nov. 17-18, 2000 at Seoul National University. They are as follows: 1) Social quality of life; 2) Government responsiveness/accountability and representation; 3) Government Efficiency; 4) Human Rights, Equality and Freedom; 5) Women's Rights; 6) Peace and Violence. Whenever necessary and possible, other Philippine survey data and other relevant studies are cited to explain the GMS findings.

Some of the questions to be answered in this section include the following: What is the level of satisfaction of Filipinos to their quality of life? How much hope or trust do they have in Philippine democracy? Do they consider government to be just or corrupt? What is the level of women's rights and empowerment? Does peace or absence of war matter most for Filipinos? How do the Filipinos' trust and government ratings differ from their Asian neighbors? What can be the underlying factors for their similar or different perceptions and levels of satisfaction ratings?

Third and last is the summary and a few concluding statements.

I. POLITICAL AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT

A middle -income country with a population of 78 million, the Philippines has the longest record of constitutional democracy and representative politics in Asia. It has been extensively exposed to liberalism: it was Asia's oldest republic (1898); it is the only Christian country in Asia; it was a working democracy

between 1946 and 1972; and, after a dictatorial interlude between 1972 and 1986, that dictatorship was ousted by a non-violent 'People Power' revolt in 1986. Its newly-restored democracy has already saw two orderly transfers of power through free and popular elections in 1992 and 1998.

In January 2001, a dysfunctional presidency was deposed through another peaceful 'People Power' revolution (People Power 2-PP2). Unlike the first popular movement which was fundamental and forceful — as it led to a regime change (i.e. new Constitution, new Congress and new local government officials) — PP2 was simply a corrective, remedial action. It was a mass movement where the larger society asserted its norm on an errant ruler. Indeed, it was a revolution with a small "r". It merely removed only the rotten part of the political system — the country's corrupt and inept president. It did not touch the Constitution, allowed the constitutional successor (the vice-president) to assume the presidency and restrained itself from making bold, structural political reforms.

Philippine democratization in turn has been conditioned by at least six major factors and conditions. They are: 1) The liberal and constitutional origins and foundations of Filipino nationhood. The French and American ideals of independence and republicanism were the underlying ideology of its successful revolution against colonial Spain and the establishment of Asia's first constitutional republic in 1898. It was also the organizing principle of its fierce national resistance against American invasion and aggression in 1898-1902;

2) Strong Catholicism which props up a powerful Catholic Church as an independent force outside the state; Moulded during the more than 300 years of theocratic colonial rule of Spain (1521-1898), the Catholic Church has been an activist in political affairs especially in the post-1986 period. It sustains the historical basis of the Filipino of spirituality and prayerfulness which provides a sense of optimism and hopefulness especially in times of crisis and uncertainties.²⁾ No less than 80 percent of the 78 million Filipinos are Catholics many of whom subscribe to traditional Christian values and beliefs such as universal

love, forgiveness, rejection of materialism and great importance of life- after-death.

3) Long experience in democratic politics and governance; This record saw a vibrant American-style of democratic politics during the post-war period; Institutions and processes of democracy like legislative bodies, elections, political parties, free press and civil society groups flourished from 1946-1972 and revitalized since the overthrow of dictatorship in 1986.

Philippine media, print and broadcast, is considered to be among the 'most free' in the region. They are numerous (at least 8 daily broad sheet newspapers; 10 tabloids and 10 major regional/provincial newspapers) and often critical to the government. Its great number and activism engender a strong press freedom in Philippine society.³⁾

The civil society, especially in women empowerment and environmental protection, is also among the most vibrant and articulate in the world. To date, two world NGO fora on women rights in Nairobi and Beijing have been chaired by Filipino women leaders. Also, the country prides itself for producing two women heads of state — a rarity in Asia's male-dominated world of politics;

4) Negative record of authoritarianism; The 14-year Marcos martial law regime in 1970s and early 1980s proved to be a worse cure against the disease of oligarchical politics and underdevelopment; A modest yet sustained economic growth, broadened political representation, inroads of information technology and 'civil society' politics are considered antidotes against a democratic reversal to authoritarianism;⁴⁾

2) Felipe Miranda, "Political Economy in a Democratizing Philippines" in Felipe Miranda, ed. *Democratization: Philippine Perspectives* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1997) pp. 177-179.

3) *Freedom in the World: Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties, 1988-1999* (New York: Freedom House, 1999) pp. 370-371; 555.

4) Renato Velasco, "The Philippines" in Ian Marsh, Jean Blondel and Takashi Inoguchi, eds.

5) Close relations with developed democracies especially the United States, Western Europe and Japan. As major sources of aid, trade, investments and military assistance, the developed democracies are not mere economic actors as they exert a strong influence in the Filipino politics and government policies. Leading members of Filipino elites were trained and educated in schools and universities of these developed countries. They are both recipients and purveyors of Western mainstream ways of life, policy views and viewpoints. As agents of modernization, they counter-check the retrogressive tendencies of cultural traditionalism and oligarchical politics;

6) The twin forces of globalization and information technology. The integration of Philippine economy in the global economy combined with information technology to transform the country's political economy. Despite its drawbacks which have been highlighted in rallies and street protests in Seattle, Bangkok, Sydney and elsewhere, globalization has in the main promoted economic growth and reduced poverty incidence in the Philippines and many other countries. One of its positive consequences is a larger, more affluent, more informed and educated Filipino middle classes. These middle forces are promoting not only growth prospects with their knowledge, skills, capital, self-confidence and motivation. Their increasing demand for better governance and greater voice in policymaking are also undermining the remnants of the traditional oligarchy, thus, enhancing the consolidation of Philippine democracy.

II. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS OF 2000 GMS DATA

Except in the level of crime, the high estimation of the quality of life by Filipino respondents in the 2000 GMS study is quite clear in Table 1. Fifty-two

Table 1. Social Quality of Life

ISSUE	PHILIPPINES	MEAN	LOWEST	HIGHEST
State of the Environment	52	44	17.3 (Pakistan)	92.1 (Singapore)
Level of Crime	91	88.9	69.4 (Singapore)	97.1 (Thailand)
Use of Torture	29	44.5	193 (Singapore)	80.4 (Korea)

per cent claimed to be satisfied with the state of their environment. This is higher than the mean score of 44 per cent for nine countries in Asia. The positive rating is also revealed in the use of torture wherein only 29 per cent said yes to the documentation of torture. The mean score is a high 44.5 per cent.

The picture is different in the issue of crime. Ninety-one per cent considered the level of crime as a serious concern. This rating is somehow complemented with the findings on crime victimization of the Social Weather Stations (SWS) in March 2000 or about the same period of GMS study. In this survey, 8.2 per cent of the respondents claimed that they and/or their relatives were victimized by some crime against property.⁵⁾ The Filipino rating on crime from GMS was notably above the mean score of 88.9 per cent. It is close to the highest score of 97.1 registered by Thai respondents which shows the same discontentment in crime situation between them.

Table 2 reveals a high level of satisfaction of Filipinos with government responsiveness, accountability and representation. Except in the two issues of fair and free elections (45 per cent) and response to the will of the people (19 per cent), wherein the scores are a bit lower than the mean scores (48.2 per cent and 21.1 per cent respectively), the Filipino estimations in three other categories are way above the mean scores.

5) Mahar Mangahas, "The SWS Crime Victimization Statistics" *Manila Standard*, July 2, 2001.

Table 2. Government Responsiveness / Accountability and Representation

ISSUE	PHILIPPINES	MEAN	LOWEST	HIGHEST
Governed by the will of the People	53	40.5	18.7 (Korea)	77.3 (Malaysia)
Fair and Free Elections	45	48.2	23.8 (Pakistan)	75.3 (Singapore)
Response to the will of the people	19	21.1	5.3 (Japan)	41.1 (Malaysia)
Handling the issues of crime	67	49.1	26.6 (Japan)	93.7 (Japan)
Government policies about environment	60	31.1	6.4 (Japan)	74.7 (Singapore)

On the issue of governing by the will of the people, 53 per cent claimed it is observed as against the low mean score of 40.5 per cent. On the subject of handling crime, 67 per cent expressed satisfaction as against the mean score of 49.1 per cent. With regard to policies about the environment, 60 per cent claimed contentment — a score way above the low mean rating of 31.1 per cent.

It is surprising that the Filipino scores are higher than those of the Japanese and Koreans despite the latter's obvious material affluence that suggests a more efficient and modern governance. There are many reasons which account for this interesting disparity. One, perhaps, is the timing of the survey wherein certain political and economic events tend to mould the public mood into a more pronounced stance of either supportive or critical to government. Political scandals or economic crisis, for instance, have often induced adverse public opinion towards government or, at the very least some officials. The other factor seems to be the country's political culture which conditions public views and attitudes to government.

These twin factors appear to be at work in the positive estimation of Filipinos

on government responsiveness and accountability. At the time of the 2000 GMS survey, the country was still charmed or even captivated by the popular and charismatic president — President Joseph Estrada. A former movie actor, Pres. Estrada was adept in using the language and symbols of the masses (i.e. simple Filipino language rather than English; good sound bites; eating with bare hands with urban poor families) to project himself as a champion of the common people.⁶⁾

The personality-oriented political culture combined with this ‘charismatic’ president to produce a largely positive view of government responsiveness and accountability.⁷⁾ Quite ably, Estrada, stroke a pose as a tough leader against trouble makers and criminals. Wearing military uniform in his visit to military camps, he ordered the bombings of Muslim rebel camps in Southern Philippines. In his press conferences, captured criminals and kidnappers were shown in hand cuffs.

These media-savvy activities seemed to have created a positive ‘common touch’ image for Estrada and his administration. Estrada, in the eyes of many Filipinos, was not only regular, folksy and approachable. Regardless of actual performance, image engineering has projected him to be serious in crime fighting and responsive to the concerns of ordinary people.

It was not until the expose’ of Governor Luis Singson (Estrada’s supporter and gambling/drinking buddy) in October 2000 that the extravagant lifestyle and corrupt ways of Estrada became public knowledge. He was then impeached by the House of Representatives and ousted from power via people power revolt on January 20, 2001.

6) For a discussion of interrelationships between media and public perception/opinion, see Dennis Arroyo and Gerardo Sandoval, “Do the Mass Media Really Affect Public Opinion” *Social Weather Bulletin*, May 1993, pp. 3-5. See also, Randy David, “Media Education Challenges in the 1990s” in *Media Expo’ 91, Manila Metro Times*, 1991, p. 13-14.

7) Renato Velasco, “Personalized Politics in Japanese and Filipino Elections” in *Kasarinlan* Vol. 3 No. 4 2nd Quarter 1988, pp. 13-20.

Table 3. Government Efficiency

ISSUES	PHILIPPINES	MEAN	LOWEST	HIGHEST
Efficient	23	19.1	2.5 (Japan)	52.6 (Singapore)
Bureaucratic	25	41	12.3 (Singapore)	66.5 (Taiwan)
Corrupt	48	43.1	1.4 (Singapore)	72.5 (Korea)
Just	19	15	1.9 (Japan)	44.3 (Malaysia)

Table 3 shows again the high level of satisfaction of Filipinos with regard to government efficiency except in the area of corruption. This is in stark contrast with the low scores of given by their East Asian neighbors to their respective governments. In terms of efficiency, the Filipinos' score is 23 percent or higher than the mean score of 19.1 per cent. The Japanese is surprisingly the lowest (2.5 per cent) in efficiency rating. The Filipinos also considered their government as just (19 per cent) which is a higher rating than the mean score of only 15 percent. Again, the Japanese gave their government the lowest grade of 1.9 per cent.

The same trend is evident in negative views about their government. Asked if it was bureaucratic, only 25 percent Filipinos considered government as such, as against the high mean score of 41 per cent. Even in the castigation of government as corrupt, only 48 per cent claimed it is so. Notably, this score is only a few points higher than the average of 43 per cent.

Three things that are worthy of further study can be drawn out from these data: First, the political cultures of East Asians are demanding or strict towards leaders, and that of the Filipinos is more forgiving and accommodating. Second, compared to the Filipinos', the communication methods, networks and skills of East Asian state elites seem to be less effective in creating a more positive image to the public. Third, government performance no matter how good and

Table 4. Protection of Human Rights, Equality and Freedom

ISSUES	PHILIPPINES	MEAN	LOWEST	HIGHEST
Protection of Human Rights	29	17.1	3 (Japan)	45.3 (Singapore)
Discrimination in Political Opinion	25	23.1	5.8 (Japan)	37.8 (Taiwan)
Freedom of Speech	72	42.8	14.2 (Japan)	71.6 (Philippines)
Equality before the Law	27	31.6	11.1 (Japan)	71.7 (Singapore)
Equal pay for equal work	50	33.3	3.2 (Japan)	55.6 (Malaysia)

solid is not sufficient to secure public acceptance.

Table 4 reveals the Filipinos' wide margin of satisfaction with issues related to democratic governance. In human rights protection (29 percent versus 17.1 per cent mean score), freedom of speech (72 per cent versus 42.8 percent mean score), and in equal pay for equal work (50 percent versus 33.3 mean score) Filipinos expressed higher approval rating than their Asian neighbors. The only below- the- mean scores are in the two issues of discrimination (25 per cent versus 23.1 per cent mean score) and equality before the law (27 per cent versus 31.6 per cent mean score) which are only few percentage points from median score.

Notably, the approval rating in freedom of speech is the highest among all respondents. This lends credence to the oft-cited observation that in Asia, civil liberties — especially press freedom and right to assembly — are most vibrant and upheld in the Philippines.

Any person or group in the country can stage a street rally or demonstration against the government or private entity on any issue. Not a few media outlets churn out very critical reports against government officials and policies without

any fear of harassment or suppression. To the point of being hyper-critical, libelous and licentious in some cases, press freedom in the Philippines is almost absolute. It equals if not exceeds the independence — not necessarily the quality — of Western press.

Table 4 as well as tables 2 and 3 indicate the Filipinos' high level of satisfaction to Philippine democracy. This is in stark contrast to their more seemingly more demanding and stringent East Asian neighbors. More surprising is the fact that the satisfaction level of Filipinos with democracy is higher than those from developed democracies of Western Europe.

Table 5 below shows satisfaction rating of Filipinos vis-a vis their democratic political system high — higher, indeed, than those of the citizens of such developed democracies as Belgium, Italy, France and the United Kingdom. (Note that the this 58 percent 1993 satisfaction level with democracy has dropped to 51 percent in March 2000 and 42 per cent in September 2000)⁸⁾

Table 5. Satisfaction with Democracy: The Philippines compared with European countries, 1993

Countries	Very satisfied/Fairly satisfied	Not Very/ Not at all satisfied
Belgium	48	46
Denmark	81	18
France	41	56
Greece	34	65
Italy	12	88
Luxembourg	72	24
Netherlands	68	30
Philippines	58	42
Portugal	54	43
Spain	41	55
UK	49	

Source: Social Weather Stations, 1993: Eurobarometer, 1993, pp. 1-4.

8) *SWS Survey Snapshots*, Vol. 2, No. 5, July 2001, p. 8.

Table 6. Women's Rights

ISSUES	PHILIPPINES	MEAN	LOWEST	HIGHEST
Equal rights between men and women	72	50.6	26 (Korea)	74.5 (Malaysia)
Discrimination in gender	13	21.5	9.1 (Singapore)	39.4 (Korea)
Men make better political leaders	51	48.4	25.5 (Japan)	65.8 (Pakistan)
Women's contribution to household income	95	77.8	45.9 (Japan)	97.1 (Thailand)
Men should have more rights to a job	63	53	35.1 (Thailand)	79.4 (Pakistan)
Marriage with free and full consent of partners	77	56.1	20.3 (Pakistan)	84.1 (Hong Kong)
Education is more important for boys than for girls	27	21.2	12.9 (Thailand)	51.3 (Pakistan)

In general terms, Filipinos perceive women rights and empowerment to be strong in Philippine society. The fact that the country holds the record of having the most number of women who served as heads of state in Asia indicates the more advanced status of women. Table 6 shows that in five major issues, gender fairness in the Philippines is pretty strong and widespread. In equal rights between men and women the Filipinos' rating of 72 per cent is way above the 50.6 per cent average. This is only 2.5 percentage points lower than the 74.5 per cent highest score of Malaysians. In gender discrimination, only 13 per cent claimed it is existent. This score is again only less than 4 percentage points away from the highest score of 9.1 per cent by the Singaporeans. In the issue of men make better political leaders, 51 per cent expressed approval which is only a few points percentage points higher than the 48.8 per cent

Table 7. Peace and Non-Violence

ISSUES	PHILIPPINES	MEAN	LOWEST	HIGHEST
In favor of the death penalty	69	64.8	51.3 (Korea)	83.3 (Taiwan)
To live in a country without violence and corruption	8	12.9	6.2 (Japan)	33.3 (Taiwan)
To live in a country where there is no war	8	15.9	6.7 (Korea)	29.9 (Hong Kong)

mean score. A high 95 per cent said yes to the women's contribution to household income — a score only 2 percentage points lower than the highest rating of 97.1 by the Thais. This same pattern is seen in the issue of marriage with free and full consent of partners with a high 77 per cent expressing approval.

The only two issues that somehow point to remnants of gender discrimination are in job opportunities and education. Asked if men should have more rights to a job in times of scarcity, a big majority of 63 per cent expressed approval. In terms of education being more important for boys than for girls, 27 per cent expressed agreement which is several points higher than the mean score of 21.2 per cent.

Table 7 shows a big majority of 69 percent are in favor of death penalty. This above-the-median score complements the serious concern on the level of crime cited in Table 1. It is seen both as a weapon or deterrent against criminals and as a form of equal justice to victims of heinous crimes. Death penalty in the Philippines, it should be noted, only applies for heinous and horrible crimes.

Previous SWS survey data shows a higher agreement level of Filipinos in favor of death penalty than the GMS score. In July 1991, 59 per cent said yes to death penalty. This figure increased to 64 per cent in December 1992, jumped to 70 per cent in 1993, and soared to 81 per cent in November 1998.⁹⁾

9) Mahar Mangahas, "Opinion Polls on Death Penalty" *Manila Standard*, January 8, 1999.

In terms of “what matters most in life”, a miniscule 8 per cent claim that living in a country without violence and corruption is very important. This score is below the average of 12.9 percent. The same pattern is evident in the issue of living in a country wherein only 8 per cent say it is so for them. It appears, from these data, that while corruption and criminality are indeed serious concerns (Tables 1 and 3), there are other more precious and valuable things in life for the Filipinos.

III. SUMMARY AND A FEW CONCLUDING REMARKS

As a way to sum up the findings of this study, a few observations that answer the issues and questions raised in the first part of this paper are hereby presented.

First, the GMS data show that Filipinos are generally satisfied with their quality of life notwithstanding their concern on the level of crime.

Second, the Filipinos consider their government just and efficient while at the same time admitting it is also corrupt.

Third, the Filipinos have a strong faith and trust in democratic governance. They consider human rights, freedom of speech and equality to be widely upheld and practiced.

Fourth, the Filipinos are concerned about violence and criminality. However, they are not the alpha and omega of life for them. They believe there are other things more precious and valuable in life.

Fifth, the hopeful and trustful satisfaction level of Filipino with governance seems to be a function of many factors which include spiritual values, prayerfulness, personality-oriented culture and media and image engineering of politicians.

Sixth, the aforementioned high trust and governance satisfaction scores of Filipinos bear a good degree of commonality with their Southeast Asian neigh-

bors like the Thais and Malaysians. However, they tend to be in stark contrast with the East Asian neighbors such as the Japanese and Koreans.

These observations clearly present new issues and questions worthy of further study if only to promote understanding of the public pulse and develop opinion polls as guide for good governance. Some of these new interesting questions are as follows: What are the explanatory variables on the similarities and differences in trust and governance satisfaction ratings of various Asian countries? Which of these variables is the most critical or determining factor? How do Asians rate these variables as shapers of their trust and governance views? Which one factor do they consider to be the most critical and most important? the least critical and least important?

It is hoped these questions shall not remain unanswered for long.