

Reclaiming “*People Power*”: Prospects for Renewed Civil Society Engagement and Democratic Governance

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abstract

With mounting challenges to democratization and the threat of regression, one asks how do we best reclaim spaces for engagement and public participation. The paper turns to civil society and revisits the case of the Philippines. It takes a closer look at their contributions, experiences, and insights as to challenges faced by the country relative to democratic nation-building. Towards this end, the paper discusses prospects for renewed engagement towards inclusive and democratic governance.

Keywords: Civil Society, Democracy, Philippine Government, EDSA People Power, Political Engagement and Participation



Introduction

One of the important pillars of democratic nation-building is strong civil society and vibrant public participation. In the Philippines, the first EDSA People Power Revolution was a testament to the strength and stature of civil society in the country's politics as Filipinos from all walks of life joined together and deposed the dictator, Ferdinand Marcos. These people were either individuals or members of different organizations with specific causes and advocacies, several of them fuelled by competing ideologies. But these did not stop them from airing a unified voice to restore democracy and civil liberties that have long been eroded. Since then, civil society are at the fore of promoting democratic governance in light of the evolving socio-economic and political issues that challenge the Philippines today.

In the Philippines, civil society is often associated or equated with people power. Primarily because renewed calls for government accountability flourished after 1986. Non-government (NGOs) and peoples' organizations (POs) pitched efforts to rebuild democracy and ensure that the gains of nation-building were sustained. Streams of funding support from foreign governments and donor foundations expanded civil society work and allowed them to engage more groups and communities. Their work, influence, and important contributions to political development are often met with mixed reactions. Some people praise the audacity to criticize the government and hold that protests are effective mechanisms to keep public officials accountable to their constituents. Successful advocacy campaigns have led to better and

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more inclusive government policies such as anti-smoking in public spaces, removal of pork barrel, and full government subsidy for tertiary education. But for others, they find these public actions inconvenient, unnecessary, and increasingly becoming dangerous. Several civil society leaders and members have been the subject of government crackdown; veiled threats and absurd allegations for their continued work; while others were tortured or killed by unknown assailants. These concerns are further exacerbated by technology and social media, heightened historical revisionism, and authoritarian tendencies. Often, these would discourage people to participate and be more vocal about their stance on issues, thereby weakening the foundations of a democratic society.

Mounting threats to regression and descent to dangerous populist politics require a sincere study on one of the country’s democratic pillars: civil society. The paper examines its development, contributions to political development and nation-building, and how it remains a potent weapon towards reclaiming spaces for democracy to flourish. The paper is divided into three major sections: literature review, discussion and analysis of findings stemming from interviews with experts and a focus-group discussion with local government leagues officials, and conclusions and recommendations.

Conceptualizing democracy and political participation

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Aside from competitive elections and peaceful transitions of power¹, effective and functioning democracies also feature unbridled access to information, freedom of speech and expression, the active involvement of its citizenry and their capacity to equally discuss and arrive at a political consensus, and the assurance that all benefit from the nation's wealth. Without these², people grapple in the dark while powerful interests take the reins and benefit from information and power asymmetries. People suffer from unresponsive government policies, pay steep prices to access basic services, and eventually make bad, uninformed choices to their detriment, if information and other forms of freedoms are not accessed. It creates a vicious cycle of irresponsible service delivery, misinformation and deliberate ignorance, which eventually creates a disincentive for vibrant citizen's participation.

¹ Definitions of democracy can be classified as "thin" or "thick" according to Schumpeter. For Robert Dahl, the terms are "procedural" and "substantive." The aforementioned definition is on the thin or procedural category. A thick or substantive definition of democracy includes the following attributes, as expounded by Larry Diamond: individual freedom of belief, opinion, discussion, speech, publication, broadcast, assembly, demonstration, petition, and the internet; freedom of ethnic, religious, racial and other minority groups to practice their religion and culture, and to participate equally in political and social life; right of all adult citizens to vote and to run for office; genuine openness and competition in the electoral arena, form a party and contest for office; legal equality of all citizens under a rule of law; independent judiciary; due process of law; institutional checks on power and balances; real pluralism in sources of information and forms of organization independent of the state and thus a vibrant civil society; and, control over the military and state security apparatus by civilians who are ultimately accountable to the people through elections.

² Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright, "Thinking About Empowered Participatory Governance," (2003), add that the central ideals of democratic politics rest on facilitating the active involvement of the citizenry, forging political consensus or ensuring a platform for dialogues, crafting public policies that promote a productive economy and healthy society, and ensuring that all citizens benefit from the nation's wealth (3).

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Elections provide immediate platforms for public participation as it allows people to vote for their chosen representatives. It also creates avenues for feedback and regular exchange of insights between elected representatives and people directly affected by socio-political challenges that beset a certain community or the whole nation. When people extend their participation from elections towards participation in deliberation and decision-making, it creates a more credible air of legitimacy to actions undertaken and ensures accountability on the part of representatives. Essentially, these people entrusted with mandates are working to improve their lives and the overall welfare of the society. Participation is therefore a central driving force of a democratic society as it “relies on the commitment and capacities of ordinary people to make sensible decisions through reasonable deliberation.” The benefits of freedom, democracy, and participative decision-making are vast and enticing enough for societies to commit to its ideals and create spaces for these tenets to take root and flourish: mutual accommodation from among stakeholders; generates higher levels of trust; and, introduces broader platforms to rethink and evaluate policies and programs designed to help the people. But alas, these are difficult endeavors to work through.

In Southeast Asia, societies believe that a democratic system is good, but they also favor at least one form of authoritarianism and/or other non-democratic alternatives³. Strong governments often see

³ Matthew Carlson and Mark Turner, “Public support for Southeast Asian democratic governance,” (2008). All modern Southeast Asian states have experienced rule by a powerful leader (dictator or autocrat) or military rule, the rule by experts, and bureaucratic authoritarianism. Their reaction and orientations about

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dissent as a direct affront to their leadership and authority. So whenever civil society voices out concerns, criticizes policies, and demands better solutions, governments resort to large-scale crackdowns or a show of force to sow fear, restore public order and secure the legitimacy of the regime⁴. Recent events in the region reflect this: democratic participation often led to state crackdown on protestors and dissenters as seen in the Red-Shirt-Yellow-Shirt demonstrations in Thailand, demands for minimum wage among garment factory workers in Cambodia, and movements against draconian policies in Indonesia, to name a few.

Surveying Philippine civil society⁵

democracy could partly be attributed to Southeast Asia's familiarity with authoritarian forms of government, hence their endorsement of at least one non-democratic regime type (227). Most of these countries were branded as "pseudo democracies," "semi-democracies," "unconsolidated democracies," and "low-quality democracies." In the same study, Southeast Asians become more critical of democratic practices as one moves from the abstract towards specific performances of the central government. There appears to be a sizeable gap between citizen perception of democratic ideals, and actual practices of democratic rule—a key challenge for the region's leaders and civil society if they are to ensure that their states would continue to be democratic (237).

⁴ John Kane, Haig Patapan, and Benjamin Wong, eds., *Dissident Democrats*, 2008. "Dissent is a natural feature of democracy; but dissent is just what authoritarians fear most. Authoritarians, relying on compulsion or co-optation, are unable to distinguish public consent from fearful acquiescence or selfish expediency, and this uncertainty makes any display of dissent alarming to them (13)." Dissent implies a direct challenge to the authority of a regime, prolonging it means instability, hence the immediate reference to state coercion or violence to curb such opposition (15).

⁵ The succeeding discussions are largely based on Ledevina Carino and the PNSP Project Staff, "Volunteering in Cross-National Perspective: Evidence From 24 Countries." *Working Papers of the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project*, no. 39. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies, 2001, along with the Asian Development Bank's (ADB) *Civil Society Briefs: Philippines*, February 2013.

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Amid all these challenges to participation, how does civil society remain vigilant and relevant? A survey of Philippine civil society history offers important insights. Based on the 2011 Civil Society Index, the country has a respectable civil society rating—people participate in various types of civil society groups, are well-represented in these platforms, and engage in several activities that embody their advocacies. Extant literature has also commended the entrenched role of civil society in empowering democratic governance in the country.

Philippine CSOs have often worked on the sidelines, content with helping and filling in certain social welfare needs present in their communities. Pre-colonial history highlights the concept of *bayanihan*, *kapwa* (shared inner self), *pakikipagkapwa* (holistic interaction with others), and *pagtutulungan* (mutual self-help) which embody a culture rooted in the tradition of reaching out, helping, and generosity. These concepts reflect the important notions of equality, mutualism, and interdependence; starkly different from Western notions that emphasize unequal relations between members of civil society and state authority. With the entry of colonial rulers, the dynamics would change in favor of those in power. During the Spanish occupation, community relationships were governed by Roman Catholic teachings and networks were confined in *cofradias*. Participation were embodied in town fiesta preparations and charitable activities such as feeding the poor and visiting the sick. These endured under the Americans with the overarching theme of benevolent assimilation. At the height of their occupation, state and church relations were delineated, offering a varied perspective with regard to community

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participation and social work. Philanthropic activities initiated by members of the upper echelons of Philippine society flourished, alongside private-led organizations such as rotary clubs and business associations.

Independence from colonial rulers opened doors for more sectoral-based CSO work. Farmers and laborers gradually organized themselves to form unions that would advance their legislative interests and political agenda. Some were tied with church-based groups, while others under cooperative schemes. Peasant dissatisfaction on rampant government corruption and inefficiencies compelled them to collaborate with early communist networks, much to the chagrin of the state. This eventually waned after a strong campaign against the *Hukbalahap* and its affiliate groups after the Second World War. Efforts focused on rehabilitation, but several social issues lingered—rural underdevelopment, government corruption, and increasing poverty. When Ferdinand Marcos came to power, he promised greater heights for the country only to succumb to martial rule after a stronger wave of communist ideology swept the countryside, student activism strengthened, and basic commodity prices increased⁶. Civil society groups attempted to work under the specter of martial law; but were eventually hindered by the government from organizing and welfare support. Some of these groups were also working with the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP), hence the massive government-

⁶ Primitivo Mijares, *The Conjugal Dictatorship of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos* (Quezon City: Bughaw, Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1976, 2017); Patricio N. Abinales and Donna J. Amoroso, “Marcos, 1965-1986,” *State and Society in the Philippines*, 2nd ed. (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2017) 193-229.

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sponsored crackdown against communists and dissidents. Most of these civil society groups went underground “to continue working for people’s welfare apart from or against the state⁷.”

Several historical junctures triggered thousands of Filipinos to decry the oppressive rule of Marcos and depose him by marching in the streets of Metro Manila, convening at the infamous Shrine of Mary, Queen of Peace along EDSA. This has since been known as the 1986 People Power Revolution which effected regime change and appropriated a “transformative role” for civil society in the country’s politics⁸. Several key accomplishments began at the creation and ratification of the 1987 Constitution, which enshrined strong people’s participation, local autonomy, respect for indigenous peoples, upheld the role of women and youth in nation-building, and social justice⁹. Leaders from various civil society groups were credited for these groundbreaking constitutional principles, which laid out the foundation for a more democratic Filipino society.

The succeeding administrations saw a civil society that remained a reliable and stalwart force demanding transparency, accountability, and good governance from public officials. CSOs were instrumental in popularizing

⁷ Resil Mojares, “Words that are not moving: civil society in the Philippines,” *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society*, 34: 1 Special Issue: Three By Mojares, (March 2006).

⁸ P.T. Martin, “The First Quarter Storm Library,” offers a collection of images, articles, and other information regarding student activism in the Philippines during the martial law era. A summary of all public demonstrations were also outlined in “A History of Philippine Political Protest” at the website of the Official Gazette of the Philippines.

⁹ Eleanor R. Dionisio (ed.), “What is good about the 1987 Constitution?” *Intersect Quick Facts* 5:1 (January 2018) 1

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Fidel Ramos' social reform agenda, majority of which broke monopolies and opened markets for competition. The more populist Joseph "Erap" Estrada appointed civil society leaders to key cabinet positions and instituted broader poverty alleviation programs. His dalliances with women, friendly ties with known shrewd businessmen, and allegations of unexplained wealth imperiled his presidency in 2001. New communications technology changed the dynamics of recent public assemblies and street protests, most notable of which was EDSA Dos¹⁰. Civil society members coordinated the four-day protest in the streets of EDSA through a series of text messages sent across their network of friends and colleagues. Within hours, a large mass of people from various sectors of the society gathered, decried his immoral leadership, and demanded Erap's resignation. The political opposition leveraged this opportunity to their political advantage with Erap finally ousted. Incumbent vice-president at that time, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo (GMA) fulfilled the remaining presidential term. Her rise to power however fuelled class-based protests—middle class and young professionals worked with student movements, church-based organizations and several other advocacy groups supporting the new regime and calls for virtuous leadership, while the other end featured a large

¹⁰ Raul Pertierra (2012). "The New Media, Society and Politics in the Philippines." *Fesmedia Asia Series*. Berlin, Germany: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung and fesmedia Asia. The discussion notes that new media / new communications technology altered the Philippine political sphere, but other factors remain equally strong in shaping the country's politics and governance. Text messages served as a tool to drive expression of dissent into political action in the streets, as in the case of Erap; but not in the case of GMA. Pertierra argues that "in the absence of a confluence of factors favouring change, new media activism is insufficient to achieve it. In other words, the new media in itself is unable to bring about fundamental political change (23)."

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mass of urban poor groups and Erap fans demanding his return to office¹¹.

Her nine years into office were marked with protests and a divided government. She also contended with mounting opposition to her economic policies aimed at liberalizing markets and cultivating a larger room for the forces of globalization, her firm support to the American-led war on terror, and her dismal human rights records. It also did not help that she ran for re-election despite initially promising to fulfill Erap’s remaining term, followed by controversies tied to electoral fraud and vote manipulation during the 2004 elections. Since then, she cracked down against dissent often against civil society leaders and social movements through a nefarious use of her constitutionally-granted extraordinary powers¹².

A disgruntled Filipino population banked on the promise of fresh politics offered by Aquino scion, Benigno III, also known as PNoy. His campaign and eventual election as president was backed by a motley

¹¹ Abinales and Amoroso, *State and Society in the Philippines*; Glenda M. Gloria, “Remembering the Iglesia-led EDSA 3,” *Rappler*, August 29 2015. Erap supporters disgruntled by the arrest of the former president gathered at EDSA for a protest. On May 1, a group of people broke away and proceeded to Mendiola, in front of the Malacanang Palace, “where they fought a bloody street battle with police and military forces.” GMA then imposed a state of rebellion wherein a number of protesters were arrested and a few of them were killed. EDSA 2 groups tried to dispel the memories of EDSA 3 by labeling it a “drug-crazed mob” and mobilized by leaders who were not even there; however, it remained a classic manifestation of lower class grievance against a government callous to their needs and an upper economic class comfortable with the status quo.

¹² Raul C. Pangalangan, “Political emergencies in the Philippines: changing labels and the unchanging need for legitimacy,” in *Emergency Powers in Asia: Exploring the Limits of Legitimacy*, eds. V.V. Ramraj and A.K. Thiruvengadam (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010). He describes GMA’s approach towards dissent as follows: “each time, she has deliberately avoided using the exact language of the Constitution in order not to trigger off the built-in safeguards, and she has not been fundamentally repudiated by either the Supreme Court, the Congress or the people (413).”

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crew: civil society groups, prominent academic institutions, several student movements, Aquino loyalists and the Liberal Party, politicians abandoning the ruling party to shed off the “GMA curse”, and thousands of Filipinos hungry for change¹³. He started off strong with policies aimed at removing corruption and promoting good government. He also scored good relations with civil society given his progressive policies on engagement and inclusive governance as exhibited in the full disclosure policy (FDP), bottom-up budgeting (BUB), and campaigns towards freedom of information (FoI)¹⁴. Halfway through his leadership, he was saddled by similar concerns on red tape, political favoritism and partisanship, and elitism. The public were dissatisfied with his administration’s approach to traffic congestion, poor public transportation, and non-appearance in critical situations (i.e. Typhoon Yolanda visits and other disaster-related concerns), to name a few¹⁵. These became decisive issues in the next presidential elections, which easily

¹³ Chay F. Hofilena and Miriam Grace A. Go, *Ambition, Destiny, Victory: Stories From A Presidential Election*, (Anvil Publishing: Mandaluyong City, 2011). The rise of social media platforms and video-sharing sites opened new opportunities for public participation and engagement during the elections season. It yielded modest results for public officials who took advantage of technology; but the strength of PNoy’s “fresh” brand of politics and the symbolism of Cory Aquino’s death proved to be a potent weapon to ultimately clinch the presidency (Pertierra, “The New Media,” 2012: 23).

¹⁴ “Inaugural Address of President Benigno S. Aquino III,” *Official Gazette of the Philippines*, June 30 2010, accessed: <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2010/06/30/inaugural-address-of-his-excellency-benigno-s-aquino-iii/>

¹⁵ Nile Villa, “10 of Aquino’s biggest hits and misses, as seen through social media,” *Rappler*, June 18 2016, accessed: <https://www.rappler.com/technology/social-media/136480-president-aquino-term-social-media-reactions>

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handed the victory to popular and candid local chief executive of Davao City, Rodrigo Roa Duterte.

Compared to 2010, social media platforms and the internet played a more crucial role during the recent presidential elections. Numerous fan pages and social media groups were created to popularize candidates, mobilize a broader base of support, and spread their political messages across a larger section of the population¹⁶. These mechanisms helped secure an overwhelming victory for Duterte, commanding 16 million votes and becoming the country’s most popularly elected president. When he assumed office, he introduced several initiatives that proved to be both reform-oriented and polarizing; which in turn, increasingly highlighted the evolving discourse on how the country’s development should be shaped in the years to come¹⁷.

Today, the government seems intent on following an alternative path on foreign policy and economic development: lesser interventions from traditional allies in the West, and more friendly ties with the emerging

¹⁶ Aim Sinpeng, “How Duterte won the election on Facebook,” *New Mandala*, May 12 2016, accessed: <https://www.newmandala.org/how-duterte-won-the-election-on-facebook/>; Maria Isabel T. Buenaobra, “Social Media: A Game Changer in Philippine Elections,” *The Asia Foundation*, April 27 2016, accessed: <https://asiafoundation.org/2016/04/27/social-media-a-game-changer-in-philippine-elections/>.

¹⁷ The Philippines comes from a short period of impressive economic growth, second to China in terms of gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate; and an aggressive stance on the South China Sea dispute compared to its Southeast Asian neighbors with competing claims. During the younger Aquino’s administration, the Philippines secured several ratings upgrades from top credit rating agencies (Clarissa Batino and Cecilia Yap, “Philippines Wins S&P Upgrade as Aquino’s Changes Seen Enduring,” *Bloomberg*, May 9 2014). It was also during PNoy’s period where the Philippines formalized its claim on numerous islands located at the South China Sea, with The Hague eventually ruling in favor of the Philippines (Paterno Esmaguél II, “Aquino: The president who brought China to court,” *Rappler*, June 29 2017).

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powers of China and Russia; coupled with a strong-handed approach against narcotics and on ensuring peace and order within the archipelago. More populist stances on social welfare, health, and education were also introduced¹⁸. The environment sector had also seen its fair share of limelight on the administration's focus with the six-month rehabilitation for popular tourist destination Boracay hitting the front-page. It is important to highlight that these positively sounding developments come with a bloody price tag. While not causative, one also has to take into account the government's implied disregard for human rights abuses—an estimated 12,000 lives were slain in the President's flagship drug war; unemployment rates continue to soar, and would see more with looming inflation due to the poor implementation of the new tax reform law¹⁹. Indigenous

¹⁸ Examples include: larger taxes for higher earning individuals and removal of taxes for minimum wage earners; continued support for the conditional cash transfer program (4Ps); increasing benefits through rice subsidies (i.e. from TRAIN Law package); a reiteration of the No Balance Billing Policy for the poor; and, the recent free tuition for college students in state universities.

¹⁹ According to Human Rights Watch, at least 12,000 lives were taken due to the President's relentless drug war. Majority of them are suspected drug users and dealers from poor families living in urban slums. Perpetrators are said to be police officers and for several other cases, by unidentified gunmen (HRW, "Philippines: Duterte's 'Drug War' Claims 12,000+ Lives," January 18 2018). With regards to unemployment rates, the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) pegged it at 5.4% on July 2018; but in IBON's estimates it is at 9.2%.

The Tax Reform for Acceleration and Inclusion (TRAIN) Package 1 of the Comprehensive Tax Reform Program (CTRP) was signed into law by the end of 2017. It was then implemented immediately by 2018. The tax reform cut workers' tax rates and increased their take-home pay, but also increased excise taxes on oil and petroleum products, and introduced new taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages and vehicles (Joann Villanueva, "TRAIN on its 1st year of implementation," *Philippine News Agency*, December 28 2017). Leading think tank IBON Foundation note that TRAIN is behind the continued spike in inflation rates, and its continued implementation would add to inflationary pressure (IBON Foundation, "TRAIN still behind high inflation, IBON Infopost, January 14 2019).

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peoples (IPs), farmers, fisherfolk, and families affected by abusive mining practices, are at the whipping end of the government’s pursuit for change and socio-economic development²⁰. Civil society leaders particularly those who lead labor, urban poor, and IP movements, as well as vociferous critics of the government are either jailed or accused of vague charges. And while corruption and bad practices of government officials are relentlessly shown in media, most of them do not receive commensurate sanctions²¹. The public have yet to see fruition of the administration’s election promises and civil society is divided more than ever.

Examining the challenges that beset Philippine civil society

Three (3) broad issues faced by civil society are discussed in this section. The first two issues require reflection and introspection on the part of civil society members; while the last one is an external issue civil society has to actively work on, and to which government has to also think about and act upon. These issues are discussed briefly based on literature, and then extensively in the analysis shortly:

²⁰ Human rights organization, Karapatan, reports that at least 134 individuals were slain under the Duterte administration. Majority of those targeted were farmers. On January 30 2019, National Democratic Front (NDF) consultant Randy Malayao was fatally attacked in broad daylight in Nueva Vizcaya. Other human rights defenders who have tragically fallen include Lumad farmer associations in Davao, Compostela Valley, and South Cotabato (Janella Paris, “Human rights defenders also killed under Duterte administration,” Rappler, February 7 2019).

²¹ Alan Robles, “If Duterte’s so proud of firing corrupt officials, why hire them?” South China Morning Post, November 19 2018); Michael Bueza, “Notable Duterte admin exits and reappointments,” Rappler, June 29 2018).

- Sustainable funding and accountability. CSOs rely on two major sources of funds: self-imposed fees or charges, and donations from other institutions. Smaller organizations such as those comprising farmers, fisher folk, and grassroots-based groups rely on self-imposed fees or charges; while the larger coalitions gain access to external sources of funding, as discussed in CS Index 2011. Both are unsustainable: smaller organizations with members coming from lower-income groups need larger bases of support so as not to strain their pockets; while groups with access to external sources see dwindling assistance with donors moving out of the country or are limiting areas for possible funding. These create further concerns at the domestic level: organizations are already working with fewer staff, who in turn are not receiving full benefits of work or are working as volunteers, and interventions are either limited or cut short to meet funding requirements. There are also perceptions of corruption among CSOs.
- Clear focus, objectives, and audience engagement. CSOs began as relief and welfare groups, then transitioned towards community enhancement and promoting sustainable systems for development, and more recently to introducing alternative forms of development. As observed in the case of the Philippines, CSOs have successfully accomplished these things through progressive policies, championing the voices of

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the poor and the marginalized, and organizing communities for expanded participation²². Over time, long-term goals have been obscured in favor of short-term gains. They are criticized for cooptation, compromise and other actions that may have demanded government accountability but through extra-constitutional means²³. Funding institutions have also gradually shaped some of the advocacy’s participation through various measures, indicators, and identified targets. At some point these are helpful metrics, but to a certain extent, these have been the focus of organizations instead of the actual people they need to work with and support. In a way there is a need to “go back to the basics”, reflecting on the greater need to secure development that is not segregated from the people and the overall social movements through which these initiatives are grounded²⁴.

- Strong frameworks, values promoted, and enabling environment. Civil society participation is vibrant, active, and fully entrenched in the Philippines if seen through the lens of its policies and legal frameworks. After all, the country has provided both constitutional and statutory safeguards for public participation. Decentralization also multiplied avenues for

²² Isagani Serrano, *Civil Society in the Philippines* (Undated).

²³ Resil Mojares, “Words that are not moving,” (2006).

²⁴ Dorothea Hilhorst, “The power of discourse,” 29

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participation at the local level. But when juxtaposed with operations and implementation, literature shows that the laws on enhanced public participation have yet to be fully implemented, and decentralization in turn have registered mixed results relative to its impact on democratization. In particular, studies emphasized the need to maximize the use of local special bodies such as local development councils (LDCs) that mandate the presence of civil society groups²⁵. One of the issues point to the lack of registered / accredited CSOs at the local level, but also the lack of groups with adequate capacity and expertise for engagement with government.

Historically, one can already glean the love-hate relationship between the government and civil society. One always must give in to compromises—and often, this happens to civil society. Governments are more powerful and authoritative, hence actions that may stifle dissent or inclusive participation may be done if civil society is often antagonistic. This is understandable, but not valid and healthy for a democratic society. Democracy thrives on dialogues, dissent, and engagement. Government must realize that in order to retain their legitimacy and integrity, a tight grip on power is not the answer; rather, on a deeper trust on the capacity of its people to help and improve the society.

²⁵ Czarina Medina-Guce, “Substance over Form: Improving Assessments of Local Development Councils (LDCs) and Local Development Investment Programs (LDIPs), *Policy Note for DILG (Support for Local Governance Program)*, (2018)

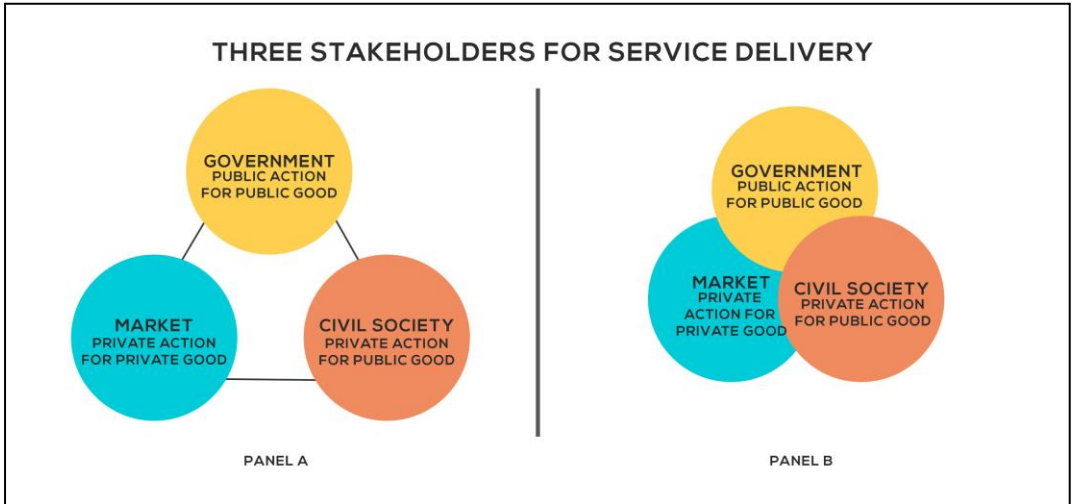
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Discussion and Analysis of Findings

This section is divided into three (3) sub-sections. The first part outlines how the different experts interviewed defined civil society, how they understand the role of civil society in governance, and the accomplishments clinched relative to enhancing participation and introducing good governance. The second part delves into the issues and challenges that affect civil society today, how these can be compared and contrasted with the challenges they faced before, and how these contentions open opportunities for further reflection on the role and value of civil society. The last part collates the recommendations and final insights from the experts relative to the continuing significant role of civil society in democratic societies.

Evolving definition of civil society. In general, definitions for civil society remained consistent with those observed in literature. It is a “broad aggrupation of citizens and people” distinct from the government and market that provide direct services and welfare assistance to the public. Civil society definition gains nuance when compared with the two other key stakeholders in Philippine society—government and market. In the figure below, they are illustrated as separate spheres connected by lines to connote their modes of engagement (Panel A). The idea is that they are distinct but interact, work together, or even counteract each other relative to delivery of goods and services. The respondents affirmed this idea, but also added that increasingly over time, the spheres are moving closer to each other as characterized by overlapping circles in Panel B.

Figure 1. Three Main Stakeholders



The overlapping circles offer two insightful scenarios according to the respondents. First, it could mean that they are really working closer together relative to ensuring accountability and meeting public needs. This should be seen in a positive light as this offers broader platforms for service delivery and engages more people in the process. Private sector social responsibility could be a way to move towards a more humane and inclusive perspective on economic development and globalization. Government NGOs (GRINGOs), to a certain extent, could be a way to bring government closer to the people. Areas with only a small number or without CSOs would see GRINGOs as a seed for a more vibrant civil society.

On the other hand, and of equal importance, these may literally mean overlapping work and engagement to the

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detriment of civil society. Compared with the two other sectors, civil society relies on volunteerism and civic participation—government sources its authority from public mandate making it a powerful force, and market on private capital and hold over economic forces. The respondents note that overlapping work connote skewed power relations, with civil society at the mercy of government and market forces. For instance, some local governments set up their own NGOs which then serve as representatives in local councils or as primary supporters of administration policies and programs. One can say that this is public participation; but with local government at its back, these NGOs are given token power. Other NGOs critical of the sitting public officials or those diametrically opposed to their platforms or policies are crowded out of the discourse. The effects of such nefarious mechanism may not be immediately felt, but over time, this crumbles democratic institutions and eats away public enthusiasm for discourse. In the end, democratic societies cannot expect a vibrant and legitimate public opinion when participants are filtered.

Business- initiated NGOs also create a dilemma on democratic and participatory governance²⁶. They offer an alternative perspective, one that humanizes capitalism and globalization forces even as these take advantage of the poor and those who work on the informal sector. Further, they also serve as masks for unjust labor and economic practices done by companies. As long as they champion a global cause or advocate for a certain policy, they gain the good graces of the public. A good example

²⁶ Shingo Mikamo offers an extensive discussion in “Business associations and politics in the post-EDSA Philippines: neither oligarchy nor civil society,” *Philippine Political Science Journal*.

would be companies with advocacy arms championing Filipino identity and nationalism but are actually shortchanging their workers by hiring them on a contractual basis. There are also companies which participate in coastal cleanup activities or tree-planting ceremonies, only to find out that they are prime violators of the country's environmental laws. These actions cheapen volunteerism and public participation into tokenistic, one-time campaigns; and blindside people as to their motives. While these may not be true for all business-initiated NGOs, there is a need to fully account these kinds of actions to prevent further abuse and negative impact on participation in the long-run.

Expanding civil society roles. The respondents note how civil society dons numerous hats. Their answers could be summarized into three general roles, as discussed extensively in the succeeding parts. **The primary and most prominent role of civil society is welfare provision and assisting communities.** Most of them provide interventions in conflict-ridden zones, far-flung barangays, or poor communities. Civil society is central to fulfilling gaps in service delivery. As often, government could be overwhelmed by the sheer number of tasks expected of them, while markets only provide for consumers willing to pay for the good or service, or when there are subsidies that enable them to extend provision to areas where they're not usually expected. Civil society groups provide resources and work with the community by organizing them into people's organizations or empowering them through livelihood programs with the end goal of making them more sufficient and less dependent to external interventions.

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When state authority or the might of economic resources tend to be too much for the public to handle, **civil society takes on the cudgels of representing the people.** A more organized front offered by a civil society group or a coalition of NGOs could be an effective counterbalance against powerful forces that prey on the poor, vulnerable, and marginalized peoples. Representation could also be sectoral, as in the case of women, children, and persons-with-disabilities (PWDs); or could be for a specific advocacy, such as gun control, gender discrimination, or traffic congestion. Often, NGOs tend to speak for, work for, and fight for the people through campaigns, lobbying of policies, and coalition-building. They rely on their network and expertise to accomplish whatever goals they undertook for the sector or cause they represent. But there are also circumstances when the people themselves are organized to speak for themselves, work and fight with their colleagues, to achieve their common goals. This is observed in labor and trade unions, cooperatives, and even people’s organizations.

Finally, **civil society also serve as watchdogs.** Their perspective operates differently from government and market, and often they may see indiscretions or forms of abuses that may undermine public welfare. Their membership in boards and public councils accord them the power to check and balance the two other sectors. In cases where they are not included in the circle, civil society groups still step forward by creating independent committees and watchdogs to monitor government policies and programs, or even market practices. These formal undertakings may prove to be inadequate, and so

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other platforms may be done such as street protests, mobilizations, boycotts, strikes, and other campaigns. The idea behind these is to elicit public attention, invite further debate on a side-stepped issue, or demand immediate response from concerned stakeholders.

Evolving challenges. This section revisits and validates the three (3) issues raised in the literature review. In essence, the same challenges confront civil society today. **Funding and accountability remain a major concern for groups engaged in civil society work.** According to the respondents, being elevated into middle-income country status prevented the Philippines from securing more funding options. States with lesser incomes or are facing equally alarming geopolitical issues attract more assistance from donor groups. The respondents noted how these challenges push their colleagues to venture into social enterprising and partnership agreements with business groups willing to support their causes. These actions pose both positive and negative impacts, PhilDHRRA and INCITEGov affirmed. On one hand, it creates a steady source of income for CSOs, pushes them to be self-supporting, and opens opportunities to promote their products. On the flip side, some organizations compromise their principles in exchange for funding. The respondents did not elaborate much on compromise, except on the fact that they become less critical of their funders especially those from the business and/or government sector. The respondents also cited cases of competition among POs and NGOs for projects and funding support. Often, POs become direct implementers of projects because of their proximity to the desired beneficiaries. NGOs receive

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smaller grants to pursue research, advocacy campaigns, or lobbying at the national level. No specific cases were provided by the respondents. Corruption within the civil society is a veiled issue. The Napoles-Revilla plunder case in 2015 did not fully erode public trust on civil society but was quite detrimental for those organizations which are not accredited, PCNC explained. DSWD-NCR added that this affirmed the need to strengthen current accreditation processes among government agencies to make them effective partners for good governance. Over time, the concern relative to funding and accountability is anchored on the need to ensure sustainable civil society work in the long-run. Their value as an important stakeholder wanes, and the provision of extended public service is imperiled when resources necessary for their continued existence would not be secured.

For the second concern, the respondents noted the **lack of focus, off-tangent objectives, and failure to engage their audience as a major challenge for civil society today**. These are more apparent as people are more socially conscious and information is more accessible. Ultimately, it has to be effectively balanced between the people represented by these organizations and the agencies that support and fund them. However, the question is more difficult to answer and may yield contentious responses. Funding and accountability are directly tied to this second set of issues. First, CSOs find it imperative to meet the indicators set forth by their donors. While these are important metrics to ensure social transformation, there are times when figures become more significant than the lives and communities given the intervention. No specific cases were cited by the

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respondents, but they recognize that within their coalitions and groups, there are certain circumstances when their decisions tend to be abrasive and less sensitive to the actual needs of the people they serve. Second, members of civil society often succumb to “analysis paralysis.” There is a tendency to debate about better solutions to the country’s numerous social ills, without arriving at any concrete action point or mechanisms to move forward. If not fully addressed, the respondents noted that these challenges would continue to breed more problems later on: lesser funding and public support in the long-run; proposition of technically sound policies but politically unfeasible when implemented; and a public disillusioned and frustrated from countless arguments while the poor remain hungry, angry, and repressed. All of these do not bode well for a vision of a democratic and participatory governance.

Finally, the respondents argue that **even with a constitution that supports public participation and several more legislations ensuring safe and free spaces for political discourse, the overall political climate in the Philippines continues to stifle dissent and resent opposition.** Civil society is once again at the crossroads. The continued oppression from the government and the diminishing support for human rights make the environment less supportive of civil society participation. The respondents admitted that within their ranks, they are divided as to their level of support for an administration that has a skewed perspective on civilian liberties. Several groups, they shared, have remained silent about certain controversial issues either because of weak values formation, fear in

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these dangerous times, or their deliberate decision to remain neutral. The respondents shared that an open government is a vital element for democratic governance. The existence of local special bodies is a progressive step towards this envisioned goal of participatory governance; however, the reality shows that these have not been maximized. As shared by the respondents, several LGUs create their own NGOs to sit in special bodies partly because of the lack of active CSOs in their communities, while on some other cases, these are deliberate attempts. There are no specific policies as to oppression, but government statements and actions paint a bleak future for participation. Technological advances create more opportunities to spread fake news and misinformation; and coupled with poor voter education, public opinion would be imperiled. While civil society should not be monolithic, it should also not be too fragmented to introduce cognitive dissonances and polarizing political decisions.

As noted in the literature portion, these issues were already present and have been consistently contended with until today. The fact that they continue to exist and evolve into larger concerns, as affirmed by the discussions with the respondents, partly reflect the lack of effective intervention to really address these challenges.

Upholding the value of civil society in democratic governance. Civil society has come a long way since it has started to assert its influence and part in Philippine politics and governance. The previous discussions showed aspects of civil society participation that have to be assessed honestly and worked on, to ensure the significant contribution of public participation to better

governance in the Philippines. The respondents provided several recommendations for an improved civil society, and they are summarized into three (3) themes as follows:

1. **Honestly reflect and assess where civil society is now, in relation to political participation and democracy.** They suggested discussing among their colleagues the possibility of mapping our major coalitions, networks, and associations of organizations; and also taking stock of current engagements and ideological biases. These would help them better understand the terrain of civil society work today. Further, this would also assist them in establishing common grounds and agreements as to human rights, free expression, and human development—issues that were quite contentious and divisive today.
2. **Diligently work towards community organizing, reframe methods to meet current demands if necessary, and attract younger people to CSO work.** The respondents emphasized the need to go back to community organizing. They believe that interacting with ordinary people and sharing in their struggle would help ground their ideals and motivations; areas which have since been diluted by being out of touch from the people they represent. It is also imperative to revisit their methods for organizing and advocacy building as these have been significantly changed by the current political landscape and the advent of technology. Labor

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unions for instance, must rethink organizing workers, especially with the rise of contractual work and freelance types of jobs. The same is true for NGOs and POs, where one can observe how themes have been split into more specific areas of interest and concern. The value of political correctness and sensitivity would also have to be ascertained and given room in civil society work today. Finally, all the respondents need a fresh generation of passionate civil society workers to continue blazing the path. Several factors may contribute to the lack of young people in CSO, and they would have to really work this out lest they see long-standing organizations fade out.

3. **Actively demand for inclusion and spaces to participate in local politics.** This would require more than just discussions and meetings; but continued presence in local activities, and protests if necessary, to make government accountable for its actions. The need to organize new groups and individuals at the local level would be a necessary step towards demanding more participatory space. Since there would be a greater number of participants later, then a platform to listen to their pleas and ideas would be an important result.

Conclusion: Reclaiming “people power”

Over the course of the discussion, three (3) important insights are underscored. These serve as foundation for future studies relative to understanding their current role

in politics and governance, and subsequently, the value of civil society in enhancing democratic governance in the Philippines.

- **One, democratization should be examined critically as to its quality and depth.** Democratization was fulfilled procedurally as explained in the previous statements; but it is equally important to examine it based on substantive fulfillment through notions of citizenship and participation, and state – civil society relations. The decentralization experience illustrates the government’s commitment to broader public participation by delegating powers at local units, along with other policies on participation. But these should transcend those written on paper to concrete action and full implementation of the law.
- **Two, civil society proved to be a formidable and reliable public institution but is unstable and has unequal power relations with the state.** Throughout history, civil society assumed broader roles relative to social welfare, and politics and governance. It has also gained the recognition of the state given their involvement in formal bodies and policy-making forums. But the field remains unequal as the state defines their terms of engagement and incentives for participation. The state can tune out civil society especially if it becomes critical to its policies. While this is difficult to do in the national level,

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this is fairly easy to undertake at the local level where chief executives are patrons and act as benevolent masters to their constituents. These then lend to its instability as they become mere pawns in public discourse. Decentralization therefore is a linchpin for creating a more enabling environment for quality and enhanced public participation.

- **Three, the issues and challenges confronting civil society are similar but evolving.** It is akin to hydra as the problems and concerns that impact civil society were not fully addressed and have even reared more dangerous heads difficult to resolve. These then require the civil society to reflect more seriously as to its role as a public institution and its commitment to ensuring participatory governance in the Philippines. In particular, issues close to their turf: the need for better funding resources and increased transparency and accountability measures; as well as the value of anchoring their work to public service delivery and improved human development. This should work hand-in-hand with government expanding areas for civil society engagement. One cannot work without the other; hence, a more collaborative environment should be cultivated, if one is committed to a more inclusive democracy.

The study provided an updated sketch of the country’s civil society landscape. The current undertaking illustrates

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where civil society is today, the challenges they continue to contend with, and areas where the community can start working on to ensure their sustainability and more effective contribution to political discourse and social development. Much has to be done, but more importantly the community has shown its willingness to assess and work towards a better civil society, one that is indeed geared towards genuine participatory and democratic governance. □

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