The Devolution of Disaster:
Popular Politics and Regional Governance in Metropolitan Manila

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Abstract: Urban governance in metropolitan Manila is marked by extreme localism, which has both supported a vibrant civil society and hampered regional coordination and planning. Scholars and activists are increasingly critical of Philippine localism, yet fear that it cannot be dislodged due to cultural or economic forces. This essay argues that in fact local governance as a political practice in Manila is the result of a specific set of forces in the recent historical past. Its roots are institutional and structural—the product of political choices made in the fairly recent past—rather than deeply cultural. Filipinos and international development experts have wrongly assumed that localism produces democracy, and therefore regional initiatives must entail the sacrifice of democracy. In fact, Philippine history shows that democracy is a prerequisite for both localism and regionalism, and Manila's residents must pursue both to assure the city's future.

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For better or worse—mostly worse—Manila is a city of neighborhoods. Whether in the overcrowded quarters of Balic-Balic, where rural migrants rent the rooms of tin shacks in eight-hour shifts, or in the gated confines of Forbes Park, where the city's wealthiest families gather behind security walls and razor wire, greater Manila's 12 million residents are a radically localistic bunch. To some, that is cause for celebration. At a time when both the left and the right value decentralization, devolution, and the replacement of centralized state planning with market forces and community solutions, the vibrant civil society that pulses through Manila's neighborhoods appears to model local solutions for the twenty-first century.

Everyday political power in Manila rests in the neighborhood, or *barangay,* a local governance unit in which 1,000 to 2,000 residents manage urban life. The *barangays* have substantial power and resources and give voice to popular demands for political participation; voter turnout in local elections regularly reaches 90 percent. But Manila's residents are increasingly aware that their localism is a problem, not a solution. *Barangay* captains and NGOs struggle to provide safe housing, clean water, reliable electricity, and efficient transport at the local level, but the challenges facing this rapidly growing city encompass far more than a single neighborhood. Manila quite simply can not survive the twenty-first century if its residents' collective identities go no further than the borders of the *barangay.*

Scholars and community leaders have known this for some time. Some say that localism cannot be dislodged and attribute it to fundamental aspects of Philippine culture: the power of kin networks in both politics and civil society; the importance of *utang na loob* ("debt of gratitude") in structuring social relations; and the greatest obstacle to social change, Filipinos' fatalistic sense of *bahala na,* "let the gods decide."[1]

But a fuller understanding of recent Philippine history shows that if localism pervades contemporary political culture, devolution as a political practice has a history that is short indeed. Its roots are institutional and structural—the product of political choices made in the fairly recent past—rather than deeply cultural. Filipinos codified their localism into law as part of their democratic 1986 revolution; it is a new phenomenon, not a product of a timeless culture. Nor is it by itself an engine of democracy: both Filipinos and international development experts have wrongly assumed that localism produces democracy, and therefore regional initiatives must entail the sacrifice of democracy. In fact, Philippine history shows that democracy is a prerequisite for both localism and regionalism, and Manila's residents must pursue both to assure the city's future.

Although the form of the *barangay* predated even Spanish colonialism of the sixteenth century, contemporary Manila's local governance is best understood as a reaction against decades of centralization during and after U.S. colonial rule. With American imperialism came regional planning. Daniel Burnham, a noted American city planner, drew up the first comprehensive plan for Manila in 1902, but his plan focused overwhelmingly on the urban needs of American colonists, and the city's population in any case rapidly outpaced measly efforts at implementation. Other regional plans announced in the 1920s and 1930s failed for lack of funds. World War II's devastation left Manila too impoverished to plan its reconstruction; Japanese and American bombs and fires turned vast areas of the metropolitan urban landscape into empty spaces, where rural migrants settled in the immediate aftermath of the war, establishing the massive squatter cities that sprawl across the region today. Cold War foreign aid brought technical assistance for agricultural improvement and rural

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[1] Aprodicio A. Laquian, "Metro Manila: People's Participation and Social Inclusion in a City of Villages," in *Urban Governance around the World,* ed. Blair A. Ruble et al. (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center, 2002), 84.

industrialization, but American and Japanese development experts paid little attention to Philippine cities. Only in 1972, with the consolidation of power in the state during the military dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos, did regional planning get underway.[2]

Manila was the showcase city of the Marcos regime. In November 1975, Presidential Decree no. 824 established a regional governance structure for the city in the Metro Manila Commission; soon thereafter, President Marcos installed his wife, Imelda Romualdez Marcos, as both the region's governor and the nation's Minister of Human Settlements. From her position in the Malacañang Palace, Imelda Marcos announced plans to build the "Los Angeles of the East," including grandiose plans for road construction, housing, schools, hospitals, and land reclamation. Her plans solved few problems. The regime consistently focused on high-profile undertakings that would win foreign aid or capture news photographers' attention; as U.S. dollars siphoned into the pockets of administration cronies, projects frequently went uncompleted. Low-status projects such as garbage and sewer construction were never even started. Nor did the Metro Manila government incorporate democratic policies in its decision-making. It not only failed to address the basic needs of the city's rapidly expanding poor; frequently it was hostile to the poor themselves. Residents of Manila's informal settlements remember Imelda Marcos's fondness not only for shoes but for bulldozers, which she frequently sent to flatten their neighborhoods. In 1974, to clean up the city before it played host to the Miss Universe pageant, Imelda Marcos forcibly moved almost 100,000 residents. Slum clearance—a signature project of the Metro Manila regional government—regularly displaced and criminalized the city's most vulnerable populations.[3]

Community-based organizations tenaciously protected everyday life in Manila's neighborhoods during the years of martial law. Groups such as ZOTO, the Zone One Tondo Organization, established in the 1960s, organized residents of Tondo, the city's poorest *barangay*, to fight squatter clearance; soon after Governor Imelda Marcos attempted in 1982 to clear all the city's slums in a massive military action, squatters organized the Alliance of the Poor against Demolition. Local attachment and democratic participation made possible the "People Power" movement that overthrew the Marcos regime in 1986. Democracy survived regionalism's active efforts to destroy it.[4]

Regional urban governance was a creation—and a weapon—of the dictatorship, and regionalism as an idea was therefore discredited by it. Little surprise, then, that when Filipinos gathered in 1987 to ratify a new constitution, they deliberately chose to make the Manila region a relatively powerless government institution. Article 10, Section 3 of the new constitution demanded "a more responsive and accountable local government structure," while Section 11 of the same article insisted that "the component cities and municipalities

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[2] Alex B. Brillantes, Jr., "Decentralization, Devolution and Development in the Philippines," in *Enhancing Urban Management in East Asia*, ed. Mila Freire and Belinda Yuen (London: Ashgate, 2004), 116-117; Jose P. Laurel, *Local Government in the Philippine Islands* (Manila: La Pilarica Press, 1926); Otto van den Muijzenberg and Ton van Naerssen, "Metro Manila: Designers or Directors of Urban Development?" in *Directors of Urban Change in Asia*, ed. Peter J.M. Nas (New York: Routledge, 2005), 148, 154; L. Shelton Woods, "Expatriate Global Investment and Squatter Displacement in Manila," in *City, Space, and Globalization: An International Perspective*, ed. Hemalata C. Dandekar (Ann Arbor, Mich.: College of Architecture and Urban Planning, 1998), 172.

[3] Gerard Lico, *Edifice Complex: Power, Myth, and Marcos State Architecture* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2003). See also Romeo B. Ocampo, "The Metro Manila Mega-Region," in *The Mega-Urban Regions of Southeast Asia* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1995), 292; Alan B. Simmons, "Slowing Metropolitan City Growth in Asia: Policies, Programs, and Results," *Population and Development Review* 5 (March 1979): 87-104.

[4] Laquian, "Metro Manila," 75; Woods, "Expatriate Global Investment," 172. On urban Manila's civil society in the 1986 revolution, see Victor Sumsky, "The City as Political Actor: Manila, February 1986," *Alternatives* 17 (1992): 479-492.

shall retain their basic autonomy…. The jurisdiction of the metropolitan authority that will be created shall be limited to basic services requiring coordination."[5]

Legislation passed after the 1986 revolution dismantled the institutions and financing that supported regional governance. The 1991 Local Government Code devolved substantial authority to cities and municipalities in areas such as housing, health, education, and public safety; it handed some taxation authority and a substantial portion of federal tax revenue over to localities. To weave civil society into everyday governance, the law includes provisions for the participation of NGOs and people's organizations in local decision-making processes. It is this law that has empowered the *barangay* system that effectively governs contemporary Manila. The Local Government Code also actively weakened the Metro Manila government. Although the Metro Manila Development Authority still technically governs the region, current laws grant the regional body so little money that it is essentially powerless. Moreover, the code requires that the regional government act "without diminution of the autonomy of local government units concerning purely local matters."[6]

In the sixteen years since the adoption of the Local Government Code, radical localism has proved disastrous. The city's growth rate outpaces the possibilities for reasonable housing; at least a quarter of Manila's residents live in substandard informal settlements clustered on flood plains, railroad tracks, and garbage dumps. In a city with a fragmentary public transit system, and where car ownership symbolizes modernity and success, traffic is particularly bad. The city's main ring highway, the EDSA, features an average speed of just 12 km per hour; air pollution levels are three times the threshold set by the World Health Organization. ("Los Angeles of the East," indeed.) Garbage creation exceeds garbage collection; much of it towers in open sites such as Smokey Mountain, where thousands of impoverished Manilans make their livings scavenging through trash. Rainy-season flooding regularly destroys informal settlement areas and sends sewer water and storm water flooding together through the city's streets, posing devastating threats of epidemic disease.[7]

Devolution and the anti-regionalism of the 1990s coincided with the turn toward market solutions and privatization throughout the world in the same years. Manila experimented with a massive privatization of its water system in 1995. The city also depends on private corporations for railways, toll roads, telephone service, and telecommunications. For the nation's elite, privatization has been a success; wealthy residents of Makati, for example, have consistently opposed incorporation as a city to avoid paying higher taxes for municipal services. In fact, they don't need them, since they already depend on private services they pay for themselves. But outside the confines of air-conditioned shopping malls

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[5] Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines (1987), Article 10, Sec. 3, 11.

[6] Local Government Code, Republic Act no. 7160 (1991). See also Miriam Defensor Santiago, *Local Government Code Annotated* (Quezon City: Central Professional Books, 2000); Ledivina V. Cariño, "Devolution toward Democracy: Lessons for Theory and Practice from the Philippines," in *Decentralizing Governance: Emerging Concepts and Practices*, ed. G. Shabbir Cheema and Dennis A. Rondinelli (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2007), 92; Emma Porio, "Urban Governance in Southeast Asia: Implications for Sustainable Human Settlements," in *Cities and Governance: New Directions in Latin America, Asia and Africa*, ed. Patricia L. McCarney (Toronto: Centre for Urban and Community Studies, 1996), 76.

[7] Benigno P. Beltran, *Smokey Mountain: Ravaged Earth and Wasted Lives* (Manila: Divine Word Publications, 1994); Michael Carley and Josefa Rizalina Bautista, "Urban Management and Community Development in Metro Manila," in *Urban Development and Civil Society: The Role of Communities in Sustainable Cities*, ed. Michael Carley et al. (Sterling, Va.: Earthscan, 2001), 103; Laquian, "Metro Manila," 87; Ocampo, "Metro Manila," 287.

or condominiums guarded by private security forces, Manila tells another story. In the wake of privatization, at least a third of the city's population has no access to clean water.[8]

Some scholars suggest that the historical combination of devolution and privatization in the 1990s has not only weakened infrastructure and social service provision, but has fundamentally undermined Philippine civil society, making it increasingly impossible to craft a political solution to the city's social problems. Yet the lessons of history teach more than pessimism. The briefness of the Philippines' history of radical devolution—and the extent to which that system of urban governance depends on legal structures—suggest that what has been made can be remade.[9]

New political choices have the potential to undo the obstacles Manila faces. Answers will not come from outside, in the technical assistance plans or architectural drawings of the World Bank, USAID, or the Japan International Cooperation Agency. Nor will they come from Malacañang Palace; the nation's long history linking regional governance with dictatorship and urban struggle preclude such interventions politically, and suggest that top-down plans will not succeed. Rather, the motivations for regionalism must grow out of the neighborhoods themselves, as *barangays* come to realize that struggles for clean water and safe housing in one corner of Manila require the cooperation of fellow citizens across town, and as the residents of Makati's closed communities learn that gates and walls will not protect them in an increasingly fragile and interdependent world.

Such collaboration will not simply emerge from the city's existing political culture, but neither is political culture too powerful to preclude action. New regionalism must ultimately be structured into law. It is time to revisit the Local Government Code, and to imagine new structures that will assign both legal authority and economic resources to regional-level planning initiatives. These institutions must include incentives for cooperation and systems of accountability that ensure trust and minimize corruption. And, twenty years after People Power, proponents of urban coordination should make clear that regionalism does not inherently pose a threat to democracy. The notion that Manila's residents must sacrifice democracy for regionalism is a false choice. The need is to bring democratic practices to the regional level.

In Balic-Balic, residents find shelter in temporary houses located just a few feet—sometimes even just a few inches—from the city's dilapidated railroad lines. They struggle for water and housing and shelter; they note that the natural landscape around them is increasingly polluted; they cannot move to the city's outskirts where houses are cheaper because the city's clogged traffic system would make for a two-hour daily commute. This is their *barangay*, and despite the efforts of landlords to call them "squatters," this is their home. "Most people," said Balic-Balic resident Joanne Seares, "they would come back again to Manila."[10]

Their problems encapsulate the challenge of collective identity and governance in a megacity such as Manila. To accept the culture of *bahala na* is to admit defeat. To forego the rich tradition of democracy that has sustained Filipinos' civil society and carried them through previous crises is a waste. The problems of population, sustainability, and human security cannot be solved by *barangay* captains, but they cannot be solved without them either.

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[8] Dörte Bernhardt, "Manila: A Success Story Turned Sour," in *Limits to Privatization: How to Avoid Too Much of a Good Thing*, ed. Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker et al. (Sterling, Va.: Earthscan, 2005), 25.

[9] Gavin Shatkin, "Colonial Capital, Modernist Capital, Global Capital: The Changing Political Symbolism of Urban Space in Metro Manila, the Philippines," *Pacific Affairs* 78 (Winter 2005-2006): 577-600.

[10] Mark Kramer, *Dispossessed: Life in Our World's Urban Slums* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2006), 25.