

PATRIMONIAL POWER STRUCTURES AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE



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Political violence pervades the whole political system of the Philippines. The ruling order uses violent means to secure and extend established power structures - against opponents and political rivals.

The following article looks at a phenomenon of social interaction which can especially be found in Southeast Asian countries: elitist and patrimonial power structures. Related to these structures, which are not to be confounded with the democratic system established in the Philippine constitution, different arrangements and characteristics developed all over the world. This article looks on Southeast Asia and especially the Philippines and puts the focus on an extreme part of suchlike power structures: politically motivated killings.

Until now these killings play an important role within the Philippine political system when it comes to the preservation and expansion of elitist power. Patrimonial structures have their origin and their most extreme implementations predominantly on the local level. Putting these power structures with a special focus on politically motivated killings at the centre of consideration means an intensified view on local, mostly rural and poor areas where most of the Southeast Asian population lives.

Vertical relationship patterns

Patrimonial and elitist social networks led to strong vertical relationships of dependence in some countries and especially rural areas. This is an expression of assertiveness of those in power. A small upper-class largely controls the population living in rural areas and poor urban districts. Surprisingly, the majority of the poor social class does not question this asymmetric relationship. These patron-client-relationships¹ rather involve the broad lower-class into the political process. In this context, deep-rooted moral concepts of arrangement and functionality of societies seem to affect the political thinking and behaviour (Loewen 2005: 17).

Huge parts of the Southeast Asian population are living in economic insecurity and looking for shelter by local patrons. In this way, the local strongmen² can pledge followers and create a power base. The patron-client-relationships give the patrons the possibility to reach monopolistic positions and demonstrate the advantages largely

on the side of the one in power (Sidel 2005: 15). Social relationships and collective moral concepts and their arrangement in patrimonial structures go through different levels of Southeast Asian societies. Social structures are often organised in a hierarchical way and controlled by local patrons. Important in this context is the addition of authority to this relation of loyalty. This fact undermines democratic processes and the participatory character of society systems.

Philippines

The elitist group of powerful families in the Philippines still benefits more of political, social and economic state comforts than the vast majority of the population. Often, families are parts of so-called clans³. Internal and external marriages created complex power networks. Based on their wealth and their local power bases, these family-clans managed to establish themselves in national and local politics. Further, there are those families who control the national economy. Altogether the political power and economic wealth is concentrated on about 200 families (Porchert 2008: 230).

Of all the countries of Southeast Asia, the Philippines offer the most obvious case of local strongmen (Sidel 2005: 3). These circumstances not only reflect the dominant patron-client-relationships or the wide range of power of the land-owning oligarchy, but also the unique structure of the Philippine state. "American colonialism, [...] had introduced the institutions and rhetoric of

1) Patron-client-relationships are based on social inequality and asymmetric power levels (cf. Eisenstadt et al. 1981: 271-296).

2) Term for local patrons or politicians which direct autonomous violence forces.

3) Below the elitist networks are termed as "family-clans". Especially on the local level these family-clans are concentrated on the "strongmen", the local patron with direct violence forces (cf. Sidel 2005).

formal democracy into the Philippines but left intact and reinforced social and economic inequality” (Silliman et al. 1998: 13). This inequality and a political system which is not sufficiently isolated against specific personal interests made it possible that local patrons have emerged and entrenched themselves in large part through violence and guile, thanks to favorable state structures and institutions, and as active promoters of capital accumulation and industrial growth (Sidel 2005: 5).

Consequences of this elitist dominance are prerogatives supported by a network of familial, political, social and economic relationships. Within these vertical networks, the principles of loyalty, faithfulness and commitment play an essential role. Projected on the everyday political life, these principles build a potent power – able to effectively constrain the national development. The family-clans which often seem to be above the rule of law or even dispense justice on the local level use their wide range of power to accumulate and maintain power and money.

Especially in rural areas this asymmetric relationship between strongmen and the mostly poor citizens is supplemented with the use of force. This leads to local “authoritarian clientelism” (Franco 2005: 17) which means that real access to democratic rights and freedoms is restricted through political repression and the threat and exercise of violence. Due to these practices and mechanisms, the inequalities within the Philippine political and social structures are perpetuated. A breach of this elitist dominance by the Filipin@s is a very difficult step. It seems that the long-time developed asymmetric structures are deeply rooted in the Philippine system.

Politically motivated violence

Political violence pervades the whole political system of the Philippines, most often on or below the municipal level

but also upwards to the provincial level, when governors or congressmen secure their power through violent means.

In the last years, 390 Filipin@s fell victim to political killings (Parreño 2010: 5). The fact that the politically motivated killings are not decreasing with more distance to the Marcos dictatorship leads to the assumption that this form of violence is rooted within Philippine politics (Kreuzer 2007: 3).

Generally there are two separated forms of political violence in the Philippines:

Philippines are mainly considered as free and fair but choice is limited.

The ruling order is challenged by a number of civil society groups, from the various armed revolutionary movements, left-leaning union activists, farmers’ rights movements that for more than two decades have been trying to push through land-reform, to anti-logging movements and local organisations campaigning against mining business, to journalists who try to investigate and publicise the illegal activities of



© IPON | Holding various political and administrative positions in San Narciso, the Uy clan controls the area as a local patron.

vertical and horizontal violence. Both present the elites’ efforts to stabilise and extend the established power structures. In the following, these two types of political violence are curty in the centre of consideration.

Vertical violence

Although there are elections in the Philippines which can effectively lead to change of positions, one can notice, that the change is only within a very limited elite. In fact, the Philippines, like other Southeast Asian countries, are practically ruled by influential clans. Elections in the

politicians and businessmen. For the family-clans, these groups and individuals are especially dangerous for the status quo because they are working on a fundamental change of political, social and economic structures (Kreuzer 2009: 17). Philipp Alston, Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions of the United Nations, concluded that “there have been many extrajudicial executions of leftist activists in the Philippines. These killings have eliminated civil society leaders, including human rights defenders, trade unionists and land reform advocates, intimidated a vast number of civil society actors,

and narrowed the country's political discourse" (Alston 2008: 2). Often local politicians do neither distance themselves from violent actions against the above-mentioned groups and individuals nor show sympathies for it; they are even broadly noticed as the client.

Horizontal violence

Beside this vertical form of political violence, there is a horizontal profile which also originates from the political establishment: the inter-elite violence. This violence is a means to stabilise and readjust the political power balance within the influential family-clans. This struggle for political positions and power bases often escalate on the local level, as the Maguindanao massacre in November 2009 has shown. Official police data have recorded 95 attacks on elective officials from June 2009 to early March 2010 with 102 victims of whom 65 were killed (Philippine Star 2010).

Furthermore local strongmen control private armies and the local police and utilise them to push for their personal interests. At any time in modern Philippine history, a large number of politicians employed the services of variously termed private armies, private or partisan armed groups, made private use of state security forces, hired contract killers or made use of prisoners. The size of private armed forces goes from the single gun-for-hire, or a lone local ruffian over a

small number of outright illegal or formally legal forces up to veritable armies encompassing several hundred heavily armed men, the latter clearly being the exception (Kreuzer 2009: 16).

Violence is a crucial ingredient of political rule in the Philippines. And even though the vertical violence against leftists, social activists and human rights defenders resembles the violent strategies of many authoritarian states, in the Philippines this latter vertical violence has to be seen in the context of the corresponding type of horizontal violence, which rages mostly between segments of the family-clans from the lowest to the highest levels. Violence against political opponents and competitors is a means to perpetuate the general structures of society, especially the central position of local patrons and family-clans. These structures shall be manifested in the general awareness of the people and also stabilised in a democratic surrounding – a surrounding that rather targets on the abolishment of these patrimonial structures.

A state with a stronger institutional effectiveness and a higher accordance to the rule of law would debilitate the local patrons and politicians and their range of power. When it comes to politically motivated killings, weak spots of the Philippine state like the lack of law enforcement is important or rather essential. Therefore the political elite of the country has no interest in a successfully implemented and non-privatised monopoly of violence. ■



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