

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

Elites and Power in a Philippine Town Under Martial Law, 1972-76

Mark M. Turner

Philippine Studies vol. 37, no. 3 (1989) 283–300

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>
Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

Elites and Power in a Philippine Town Under Martial Law, 1972-76

MARK M. TURNER

Following the declaration of martial law in 1972, President Marcos engineered various changes in the Philippine elite formation. Academics and journalists have tended to focus their discussions of these changes on the national level elite.¹ Far less attention has been directed to the effects of martial law on the lower level politico-administrative territories of province and municipality. This article aims to investigate such territories by focussing on events in one town, San Fernando, La Union province, from the imposition of martial law in 1972 until the end of 1976. Analysis is especially concerned with what Giddens terms the mediation of control . . . the actual (effective) power of policy formation and decisionmaking held by members of particular elite groups.² Also under scrutiny are the processes of recruitment and the "institutional mediation of power . . . the general form of state and economy within which elite groups are recruited and structured."³ Interwoven with these considerations is the need to examine the linkages, including those of conflict, which exist between different politico-administrative territories, what have been termed "levels of inte-

I wish to thank Brian Fegan for his extensive comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

1. See for example Perla Q. Makil, *Mobility by Decree: The Rise and Fall of Philippine Influentials Since Martial Law* (Quezon City: Institute of Philippine Culture, 1975); Jose V. Abueva, "Ideology and Practice in the New Society," in *Marcos and Martial Law in the Philippines*, ed. David A. Rosenberg (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), pp. 32-84; David Wurfel, "The Changing Relationship Between Political and Economic Elites in the Philippines," *Poverty and Social Change in Southeast Asia*, ed. Ozay Mehmet (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1979), pp. 140-58; and many articles in the weekly journal, *Far Eastern Economic Review*.

2. Anthony Giddens, *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies* (London: Hutchinson, 1973), p. 121.

3. *Ibid.*

gration."⁴ This line of enquiry leads to the vital questions of whether, under martial law, the state encroached on the power of lower level territories thus leading to higher levels of integration and whether this process resulted in various 'integration conflicts,' with lower levels resisting the state's challenge to their relative autonomy.

Before commencing analysis of San Fernando, it is necessary to establish the meaning of the term 'elite' as there is no consensus among writers on the subject. Academics have supplied a number of contrasting definitions for elite and have been guilty of terminological ambiguity in elite studies. Furthermore, in the Philippine literature, the term 'elite' has been used "rather loosely to refer to any persons of wealth, power or prestigious life style."⁵ In this article, the definition of elite starts from Giddens's assertion that an elite group is comprised of 'those individuals who occupy positions of formal authority at the head of a social organization or institution.'⁶ Elites are to be found in "strategic decisionmaking locations in organizations."⁷ The elite formations at provincial and municipal levels in the Philippines may be divided into distinct functional groups. Thus, in San Fernando there was a political elite of elected officeholders, an administrative elite of appointed officials, and an economic elite of influential businessmen at each level. There was some overlapping between and within levels. There may also be persons who influence policy and whose points of view are frequently taken into account in decisionmaking, yet who do not hold high positions in organizations. For example, some leading political figures who are 'out' of office might fall into this category and could be seen as being members of the elite. The functional groups which comprise the elite formation may be hierarchically ordered according to power differentials among groups while the range of issues over which a group can exercise power may also vary. Even within groups power can be unequally distributed, for example, between the mayor and the municipal councilors. The consciousness of the elite or of its component functional groups will depend on the level of solidarity. Ideological unity and frequent social interaction, including the promotion of intra-elite kinship ties, are characteristic of high levels of solidarity and hence of elite conscious-

4. Willem Wolters, *Politics, Patronage and Class Conflict in Central Luzon* (The Hague: Institute of Social Studies, 1983), pp. 5-7.

5. Brian Fegan, "The Social History of a Central Luzon Barrio," in *Philippine Social History: Global Trade and Local Transformation*, eds. Alfred McCoy and Ed. de Jesus (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1982), p. 125.

6. Giddens, *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies*, p. 120.

7. John Higley, Desley Deacon and Don Smart, *Elites in Australia* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), p. 3.

ness. An elite formation may, however, possess low levels of solidarity which may be manifested in frequent and intense conflicts.

POWER AND POLITICS BEFORE MARTIAL LAW

San Fernando is the capital and largest of the twenty municipalities that make up La Union province. The town is also headquarters for Region 1, the administrative area that encompasses the provinces of northwest Luzon.⁸ Due to its location on one of the few indentations on the northwest coast, astride the major north-south communication artery at the 'gateway to Ilocandia,' and close to a principal route into the mountain provinces, San Fernando has been able to develop a considerable number of nonagricultural functions. Urbanization has involved the development of commerce, government, transport, port industries, educational institutions, medical establishments, religious administration, entertainment and other service industries. Manufacturing is characteristically of the cottage type with only three medium-sized manufacturing plants operating within the municipality. Virginia tobacco is the most important cash crop in both province and municipality. San Fernando has centralized urban development for much of the province and growth has been especially rapid in the postwar era with the population expanding from 28,742 in 1948 to 60,884 in 1975 when approximately 20,000 could be regarded as urban residents. This latter group can be divided into 'five qualitatively distinct clusters of class positions'—landlords, and property-owners, urban capitalists or businessmen, marginal businessmen, white-collar workers, and manual workers.⁹

In order to appreciate the changes following the declaration of martial law on 21 September 1972, it is necessary to examine the most important features and trends of pre-1972 politics in San Fernando. During this time, the political elite dominated the elite hierarchy although many leading members of the political elite could also be classified as belonging to the economic elite.

In San Fernando and La Union, the divisions of class and status were never transformed into bases for political mobilization and struggle. This was due to the development and maintenance of the faction as the significant organizational form competing at all political

8. Region 1 was comprised of the provinces of Ilocos Norte, Ilocos Sur, La Union, Pangasinan, Benguet, Mountain Province and Abra, and the cities of Laoag and Baguio.

9. Mark M. Turner, "Urbanization and Class in the Ilocos Region," *Philippine Studies* 30 (1982): 206.

levels in the province. Factions predated the party politics in which they became involved and were a clear expression of the vertically-oriented linkages which cut across class boundaries. They were also manifestations of the dominant ideology which sought to explain and legitimate relations between unequals with reference to social classes and the opposition of capital and labor.¹⁰ Each faction was primarily concerned to obtain support through networks of personal ties which stretched across all social classes. The possibilities for the underprivileged to engage in collective action based on class and status were thus undermined by the omnipresent multiclass faction. Distinctive political ideologies or contrasting models of development were absent from this form of political organization. Factions served as vehicles for leaders at different levels to secure election into the municipal, provincial or even national political elites.¹¹

In the province of La Union and its municipalities, political aspirants at all levels and their followers split into major factions, each adopting one of the leading party labels, either Liberal or Nacionalista. Such was the competition for municipal political office during the postwar years in San Fernando, that a third group, Independent Nacionalista, emerged to contest the council elections. Nevertheless, parties were largely irrelevant in the local struggles for power as both leaders and followers freely switched sides according to where they perceived their best interests or personal loyalties to lie.

During the American colonial period, positions in the political elite were dominated by the province's agricultural landlords. However, their grasp of power was never firmly established as landholdings in La Union were typically small. Landlords were thus denied the power-base of their counterparts in central Luzon where individual families owned extensive areas and so controlled large numbers of tenant farmers. The landlords' tenuous grip of political power in La Union was further loosened by postwar economic diversification and urbanization. New or expanded economic activities gave opportunities for the acquisition of wealth and permitted social mobility. Ambitious or successful individuals involved in the urban economy saw politics as a way in which their privilege could be increased, legitimated or

10. For a discussion of patron-client relations as ideology in Indonesia see Joel Kahn, "Ideology and Social Structure in Indonesia," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 20 (1978): 103-122.

11. Factional structure and operation were broadly similar to those reported in other areas of the Philippines. See Carl H. Lande, *Leaders, Factions and Parties: The Structure of Philippine Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964); and Mary R. Hollnsteiner, *The Dynamics of Power in a Philippine Municipality* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines, 1963).

defended. High status or even popularity were no guarantee of electoral victory in San Fernando or La Union. Skills in obtaining and administering patronage through a system of brokers were infinitely more valuable political attributes, as was the capacity to threaten or exert physical force. The relative size of personal wealth was not a sure indicator of political success, and some of the richest families never engaged in direct competition for elected office. However, without wealth it was impossible to gain or maintain political power, although elective office certainly gave opportunities for reaping financial rewards beyond those offered by official salaries. Conversely, the progressively higher costs of electoral campaigning meant that some people expended considerable sums of money for which they were never 'reimbursed.'

The lack of wealth among marginal businessmen, manual workers and the majority of white-collar employees helps to explain the absence of members of these classes among elected officeholders at national, provincial and even municipal levels. While they could and did exercise power at a lower level, by occupying elected *barrio* positions or by acting as vote-brokers on behalf of higher levels, they did not have access to the resources available at higher levels which were prerequisites for success in national, provincial and municipal elections. When persons born into modest backgrounds did gain such political office, they had already demonstrated a capacity for social mobility and often utilized the patronage resources of a higher level faction leader to give weight to their own manipulative skills in the creation of a following. The lack of class-based politics meant that no person was able to gather a large following recruited exclusively from peers among the less privileged.

In the postwar years, the Ilocano voter had secured a relative independence of action.¹² The increasingly monetarized, diversified and urban-dominated economy, the spread of smallholder cash cropping of Virginia tobacco, and the change from 'diffuse landlord-tenant modes of control to less encompassing modes of exchange' accounted for this transformation.¹³ The relative voter freedom meant that persons in disadvantaged class positions were more able to capitalize on the value that their votes held for politicians. Widespread 'political awareness' was manifested in the capacity of individuals to extract

12. See Henry T. Lewis, *Ilocano Rice Farmers* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1971), p. 141

13. T.C. Nowak and K.A. Snyder, "Economic Concentration and Political Change in the Philippines," in *Political Change in the Philippines: Studies of Local Politics Preceding Martial Law*, ed. Benedict J. Kerkvliet (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1974), pp. 153-241.

short-term economic benefits, especially financial, from competitors in the political arena. Vote-buying, either directly or through brokers, increased with each election. This development and the numerical growth of the electorate led to an escalation in campaign costs for candidates and a greater instability in interpersonal alliances.

These events correlate with Machado's observation on changing patterns of factionalism in the years leading up to martial law.¹⁴ He noted the reduced importance of kinship in factions and the rise of instrumentally-oriented participation in factions, especially where there were high social mobilization and low concentration of land ownership. Such conditions prevailed in San Fernando and over much of La Union. Some evidence supports Machado's further assertion that higher levels of integration were occurring as the relative importance of nation and province grew at the expense of lower levels in the hierarchy of politico-administrative territories. However, the reliance of politicians at higher levels on the vote-gathering capacities of leaders at lower levels in San Fernando and La Union did much to counteract this trend towards political centralization.¹⁵ Finally, as faction leaders sought to exert control over the electorate and to protect their own economic interests, so their use of actual or threatened violence grew. This utilization of armed force in San Fernando and La Union did not reach the extremely high levels experienced in neighboring Ilocos Sur province where the Crisologo family struggled to attain province-wide political dominance and control over the province's major cash crop, Virginia tobacco. No such province-wide control was gained by any one family or 'strongman' in pre-martial law La Union.

On the eve of the declaration of martial law, factional politics had become more competitive, expensive and violent. The political elite was the most powerful functional elite group in the elite hierarchy, with mayor and governor exercising considerable power in their own domains, and far more power than the municipal councilors and provincial board members who constituted the rest of the political elite. The electorate had become more independent and the urban-based politicians now relied heavily on instrumental incentives for both faction-building and vote-gathering. Attempts by higher level territories to wield greater power over lower level territories, especially municipalities, were being met with resistance from the lower levels in La Union.¹⁶

14. Kit G. Machado, "Changing Aspects of Factionalism in Philippine Local Politics," *Asian Survey* 11 (1971): 1182-1199.

15. Wolters, *Politics, Patronage and Class Conflict in Central Luzon*, p. 225.

16. Otto D. van den Muijzenberg, "Political Violence in Ilocos Sur," University of Amsterdam, no date.

MARTIAL LAW: ACTION AND REACTION

On 21 September 1972, on the pretext of a serious breakdown in law and order, increased subversive activities and a Muslim secessionist movement, Pres. Marcos placed the country under martial law. Democratic politics were suspended: congress and senate were disbanded, the presidential elections, due in 1973, were cancelled, and political offices at the provincial and municipal levels were frozen. In La Union, the Nacionalista congressman, Joaquin Ortega, who represented the northern part of the province which included San Fernando, lost his position, but the elected Governor Guerrero, also a Nacionalista, and his provincial board remained as before. In San Fernando, Mayor Feraren, another Nacionalista, and the councilors maintained their offices with the exception of one councilor who was removed and not replaced. This continuity in the membership of the provincial and municipal political elites was sustained through the early years of martial law. It is questionable whether such security of tenure would have prevailed if the majority of incumbents had not been Nacionalistas. They were the electoral and factional allies of the president and of Jose Aspiras, formerly the Nacionalista congressman for southern La Union. He had become a member of the martial law cabinet and hence the province's major link with the national level political elite.

In La Union, the most immediate beneficial effect of the imposition of martial law was the rapid decline of political and criminal violence. The gunmen, many of whom had worked for politicians, were imprisoned, disarmed or simply disappeared, and this included the Gallardo brothers who allegedly controlled and used the largest firepower in San Fernando. The removal of this violence was much appreciated by the vast majority of the population who had become increasingly subject to the attention of 'goons' and private armies struggling for power or simply engaging in crime. Even in 1976, the memories of these violent times were kept very much alive by media and members of the municipal and provincial political elites. The eradication of the violence was stressed as a positive benefit of martial law and it was strongly implied that if martial law was abolished the improved law and order situation would revert to the 'bad old days.' Certain of the new defenders of martial law among the ranks of the political elite omitted to indicate to audiences their leading contribution to the previous escalation of violence.

The disarming of 'goons' and private armies left the Philippine Constabulary (PC) as the unchallenged coercive force in La Union, the guardians or perhaps the enforcers of the New Society of President Marcos. Thus, the provincial commander of this quasi-military organi-

zation rose in the local hierarchy of power. But, his allegiance was to the president and central authorities from whence his orders came. The politicians of La Union had no formal authority over the PC although they may have been able to exercise influence through informal channels. The strength of the provincial commander's position was further consolidated in 1976 when the municipal police forces were placed under PC control. Authority over the police had previously been a mayoral function, and the police had often been utilized by mayors to further their personal political and economic ambitions. The new arrangements pointed to the centralization of power in the Philippines, a process which is discussed in more detail later in this section.

A second feature of the New Society in San Fernando was the rapid profession of allegiance to the martial law regime by all past and present members of the political elite. Political leaders from all factions quickly proclaimed their support for the president's actions and maintained a publicly-stated commitment to the aims of the New Society and loud admiration for its gains. The long-acknowledged political wisdom of aligning with strength, plus the history of frequent interfactional movement, meant that to become a champion of the New Society was an easily-accomplished maneuver in La Union and San Fernando, even for the leading Liberals. It was well-appreciated that Marcos had gained full control over the state's coercive apparatus in La Union and that he had demonstrated the ability to crush even the largest adversary at the national level. Also, there was no legal role for an opposition under the new regime. These factors gave considerable impetus to all politicians, whether in or out of office, to support martial law.

A boon to the New Society in La Union was the early realization by the economic elite that despite the egalitarian rhetoric issuing from Manila, the economic status quo was under no serious threat. Presidential writings and speeches stressed progress in terms of social justice, economic and social development, and a full-scale war on poverty. Such changes were not evident in La Union and San Fernando where pronounced inequality in the distribution of societal resources was maintained. Such measures as the much-publicized raising of the nonagricultural minimum wage in 1976 from ₱8 to ₱9 per day in no way compensated for the doubling of the consumer price index since 1970, the year when the eight-peso minimum had been established. The national policy which was likely to encounter the stiffest opposition from municipal and provincial elites in the Philippines was that of land reform. In La Union, where landholdings were typically small-scale, land redistribution was not a contentious issue. Capital was not

under attack by the New Society, and the major goal of stability was proving advantageous to the leading businessmen and urban landlords. For the economic elite to ensure the security of the New Society was also to safeguard their privileged class position and high status. For them to merely reiterate ideology was an entirely different matter from actually attempting to transform it into reality.

New Society ideology underplayed or even ignored cleavages in society. In San Fernando, all members of elite groups, led by the political elite, were most willing to promote the notion of a national Philippine consensus. The possible existence of conflicting class interests received scant attention in the brand of national populism which declared that the New Society was of benefit to all and that Philippine social unity was crucial. The consensual model was decreed from the center and vigorously propagated in La Union whether or not it conformed to the prevailing social reality. The elite demonstrated greater ideological unity than before martial law thus boosting the solidarity of the elite formation. Competing ideologies, previously excluded from politics by the factions, were now banned by the guardians of martial law. Their task was aided in San Fernando and La Union because the president was a fellow Ilocano from the province of Ilocos Norte, and so the common identity of people and president could be stressed on ethnolinguistic grounds.

The enthusiastic reception given to martial law and the New Society by San Fernando's elite groups facilitated the easy communication of the virtues and advantages of these political developments to the mass of the population. The vertically-oriented dyadic links which characterized many significant relationships both within and between classes acted as convenient vehicles for the effective promotion of the New Society. Thus, members of functional elite groups, who by definition occupied strategic positions in municipal and provincial society, could feed the population at large with a steady diet of pro-martial law revelations and claims. These efforts supplemented the central government output of New Society aims and achievements which were faithfully reproduced in the mass media. Radio, television and national-circulation daily newspapers were readily available in San Fernando. Media reports were necessarily favorable, as the leaders of the New Society exercised an effective monopoly in accounting for their own performance. The formal education system provided yet another convenient method of inculcating support for martial law among the young. As a center of regional, provincial and municipal government, administration, education, commerce and communication, urban San Fernando received maximum exposure to this propaganda. People appeared to accept with few questions and often

indifference the New Society messages transmitted to them. It was of course realized that active dissent from this acquiescent attitude would produce retaliatory measures from the elite supporters of the New Society. Anyway, persons who had always been without power thought it quite futile and even stupid to oppose proven strength, especially on an individual basis. The lack of any prior model of organization and action by the poor to further their own interests largely precluded the occurrence of grassroots movements in La Union. Official vigilance ensured that such movements would encounter great difficulty in starting.

The networks of interclass relations which had characterized the pre-martial law political factions withered away as martial law asserted its control. By cancelling electoral politics, Marcos had at one stroke removed the *raison d'être* of these loose factional structures. There was no longer any motivation for members of the political elite and their leading opponents to disburse considerable financial resources in efforts to build or maintain support. This was a bonus to the economic elite who, even if not engaged in direct electoral competition, were previously called upon to fund election campaigns. However, there did appear to be certain opportunities to continue intra-elite political struggles without building interclass factions and challenging the security of the martial law regime. Accusations of corruption or other misdemeanors, made in the name of 'the people' or 'justice,' seemed on occasion to be old political battles couched in modified forms. A possible example of this strategy was a criminal complaint issued by a local attorney, Pedro Peralta, against the provincial governor, Juvenal Guerrero, accusing the latter of violation of the Anti-Graft and Corrupt Practices Act. The attorney had been an important figure in the Liberal faction and had held elected provincial positions and appointed national government posts. The governor had come to power before martial law as a Nacionalista with the backing of Pres. Marcos, supposedly a 'classmate' from university days. Although the accuser claimed that his aim was to secure justice for the people, it was widely believed in San Fernando that his motives were less altruistic — witness the newspaper headline, "A moral Crusade or Politics?"¹⁷

The most significant change was the marked increase in central government's control over the municipal and provincial political elites of San Fernando and La Union. Under pre-martial law conditions control by the center was weak and congressmen, governors and mayors, at least in the Ilocos region, had displayed considerable autonomy in their own domains. With the imposition of martial law,

17. *Ilocos Times* (San Fernando), 2 April 1976.

a new trend was initiated with national government bureaucracies encroaching into what would have previously been regarded as the elected politician's territory. The former need of these bureaucracies to accommodate with the local political elites was reversed under martial law. It was now the turn of provincial and municipal politicians to tailor their activities to the centrally-directed bureaucracies which bore the major responsibility for implementing the president's policies. The Department of Local Government and Community Development (DLGCD) was crucial in this respect. It was vested with wide powers, ranging from the investigation of complaints against local politicians to the promotion of family planning. The DLGCD acted as a supervisory body which ensured that presidential policies and wishes were correctly interpreted by the provincial and municipal politicians and their staff. The fact that the DLGCD could suspend and recommend dismissal from office maintained a constant threat over the local politicians and gave them a strong incentive to agree with whatever Manila proposed. The DLGCD led various other central government departments in channelling 'development' funds to rural areas. Barrio captains and other influential village leaders were thus reoriented from their factional allegiances to particular politicians to a dependency on and competition for the financial favors of central government. They could no longer rely on the patronage of municipal and provincial political elites.

The terms of office of all elected officials were placed firmly under presidential control. On two occasions during my field study (1975-76), the president extended the terms of these officials throughout the country. Some elected officials were dismissed following complaints to and investigations by the DLGCD, but no municipal official of San Fernando or provincial official of La Union were removed in these exercises. The vacant council seat in San Fernando was created at the outset of martial law by the ejection of the incumbent, one of the Gallardo brothers. Employees in the national government bureaucracies were not overlooked, and in 1975 there was a purge in these organizations resulting in extensive sackings. Several national officials in San Fernando, including one departmental head, were dismissed. Thus, the central control of the president over all political and administrative positions located in the provinces was firmly established, while a climate was created in which expulsion from office was a constant threat. Although these measures were taken to rid government of corrupt elements, they also served to ensure adherence to central policies by emphasizing the power of the center over local political elites and appointed officials at all levels. A form of political paralysis overtook the local political elites with municipal council and provincial board meetings

producing decisions of negligible import. Closer scrutiny of politicians' actions, especially those of governor and mayor, by central government watchdog also worked to limit the extent of their powers. However, years of mystification as to the true range of these powers meant that the mayor and governor were still regarded by the community as the most important and influential local power figures.

Throughout the colonial and independence eras, two conflicting tendencies, centralism and localism, have been evident in the Philippine state formation.¹⁸ Prior to martial law, despite inroads made by national political parties, localism still flourished in San Fernando and La Union with the local political elites possessing considerable power. With the advent of martial law, the president appeared to be encouraging localism. According to official doctrine, greater power was to be given to local forms of government so that the latter could play a more significant role in national development. The reality in San Fernando and La Union was quite the reverse with a process of administrative decentralization increasing the role of the center in the running of lower level politico-administrative territories. In San Fernando were many regional offices of central government departments and agencies. The national political, administrative and military elites based in Manila dictated policy and procedure leaving their decentralized subordinates to implement them. While the administrative elite in San Fernando had little independence and autonomy in decision-making, these officials had assumed greater authority over local affairs and had acquired much of the power previously exercised by local politicians. No longer was it the case that the leading elected office-holders 'fixed things' while the provincially-based bureaucrats accommodated themselves with these political decisions. 'Fixing things' now became the prerogative of the appointed administrators. While the provincial and municipal politicians in La Union had entered a period of decline, the administrative and military appointees of Manila had risen to new heights. Centralism was in the ascendant.

THE NEW SOCIETY AND POPULAR PARTICIPATION

According to Pres. Marcos, the political reforms of the New Society heralded the advent of 'participatory democracy' in the Philippines. The 'humble citizen' was no longer powerless but had been fully integrated into the national system with ready access to political authority. The 'oligarchs' and entrenched political elites of provinces and municipalities would be ousted or at least reoriented in the process of democratization and liberation.

18. Wolters, *Politics, Patronage and Class Conflict in Central Luzon*, pp. 16-17.

Grassroots participation in local government was supposed to be practised through 'barangay democracy.' Barangays were municipal divisions, previously known as barrios, with the legal status of quasi-municipal corporations. A barangay captain and councilors were elected every four years by the qualified voters of the barangay. A secretary and treasurer were appointed by the elected officials. In theory, the barangay assembly, potentially all the voters in the barangay, had to meet once per year. The ideal powers of these quasi-municipal corporations were wide, with the ability to issue ordinances, undertake public works, enter contracts, levy taxes and fees, and call for a plebiscite. In fact, the urban barangays of San Fernando tended to confine their activities to campaigns for barangay 'beautification' and 'cleanliness' and to fiestas. Local interest was low as people did not view the barangay as an influential instrument of grassroots government. Few citizens knew the names of barangay officials in the urban area as they had little effect on people's lives and were largely incapable of exerting power over the local inhabitants. Although the position of barangay captain may have been important in rural villages, within the urban area no such kudos or power attached. Functional elite groups at the municipal, provincial and even regional levels were present in San Fernando and overshadowed the status and powers of barangay officers. Furthermore, the barangays were subject to the supervision of the mayor, the municipal and provincial treasurers, and the omnipresent DLGCD. The autonomy of the barangays was thus largely illusory and 'barangay democracy' did not in practice represent a challenge to elite power in the higher level territories of municipality and province. However, the barangay system was introduced by the center, and the possibility existed of the center supervising, via the DLGCD, a form of passive political mobilization which could eat still further into the diminished powers of the municipal and provincial political elites.¹⁹

A second innovation officially accredited with increasing Philippine democracy was the introduction of the Sangguniang Bayan and Sangguniang Panlalawigan. Like the barangay system, the *sanggunian* model appealed to a distant precolonial past and supposedly promoted freedom and democracy. Pres. Marcos had always maintained that martial law was a transitory form of government which would eventually give way to parliamentary rule. As an apparent step in this direction, Presidential Decree 826, issued in November 1975, declared

19. Passive political mobilization refers to situations where initiative is taken by the center to involve in the political process the population which has hitherto not taken part in it. Citizens may become involved against their will. See Otto D. van den Muijzendberg, "Political Mobilization and Violence in Central Luzon (Philippines)," *Modern Asian Studies* 7 (1973): 693.

that local government bodies called Sangguniang Bayan and Sangguniang Panlalawigan would be created to replace the municipal councils and provincial boards. The incumbent members of these latter bodies were to be incorporated into the new organizations, but their numbers were to be supplemented by the recruitment of sectoral representatives from labor, business, the professions, barangays, and youth. The official powers of the Sangguniang Bayan and Sangguniang Panlalawigan remained essentially the same as the old municipal council and provincial board. And these powers were slight under martial law.

Despite the great enthusiasm shown by leading politicians and the media for the introduction of this new institution, the popular response in San Fernando was, to say the least, muted. It generated minimal public debate and interests. The system was unveiled with little or no advanced warning and without any consultation with the people, or in fact the local political elites. Although purported to enable the will of the people to be heard in government, the new bodies were passive mobilization by Manila and were accepted as such by a population which held little belief that there would be an increase in democratic participation or that social inequality would be reduced. The experiment was not seen by people as a radical departure from the prevailing situation while many remained ignorant of the details of what was being done. In part, this lack of both public and official comprehension was due to the piecemeal revelation and rapid introduction of the sanggunian system. Four months after the sanggunian 'elections,' the local press could still carry a leader article which attempted to iron out misunderstandings relating to the sanggunian.²⁰

Although there was no publicly-stated opposition to the sanggunian system, there were some private complaints from within the ranks of the existing political elite. Several councilors indicated that the doubling numbers for the Sangguniang Bayan might result in a diminution of their prestige and personal power. One councilor even suggested that people might begin calling the sanggunian members by the name *sunggo* (monkey or ape). A further cause for private dissatisfaction among council and board members was the reduction in payments for positions on the sanggunian. For example, the basic monthly salary for a municipal councilor in San Fernando was ₱300, but the Sangguniang Bayan member received only ₱150 monthly.

An important question concerning the launching of the sanggunian system was who would assume the newly-available positions? Also, how far did these persons reflect popular support and opinion?

20. *Ilocos Times* (San Fernando), 16 April 1976.

Comparing it to the old system, one national newspaper noted that "membership in the Sangguniang Bayan was increased, however, to give the people a greater voice in the administration of local affairs and to make them understand their problems and their solutions better."²¹ In San Fernando, the rhetoric of this statement did not correspond to the reality. It was certainly true that some of the representatives entering the Sangguniang Bayan of San Fernando were from class and status positions which had previously provided no elected municipal councilors. Thus, rural barangay captains, and the elected representatives of industrial and agricultural labor were able to gain admittance to the Sangguniang Bayan. However, the 'elections' of persons to the new political body was a confused, ill-publicized and occasionally expedient affair. For example, only two candidates competed for the industrial labor seat and neither obtained any wide degree of support from the industrial labor force of San Fernando which generally adopted a disinterested stance toward the proceedings. Some did not even know about the elections. There was so little competition for the capitalist seat that only one candidate put himself forward. The automatically-appointed president of the Association of Barangay Councils was not a relatively low status village headman but was the director of one of the local hospitals, while one elected urban barangay captain was an ex-municipal councilor. Although the Sangguniang Bayan recruited some new members from sections of the community who had previously enjoyed no access to such elected positions, a corresponding number of new members were from the urban classes which had dominated political office in the municipality in the postwar era.

Following the hasty installation of the Sangguniang Bayan, the population of San Fernando took little interest in its decisions and many persons remained ignorant of its composition. Furthermore, it is difficult to estimate how far the newer members of lower status saw themselves as the mouthpieces of those who occupied less privileged class positions. These representatives certainly did not form a coherent and articulate block which was adopting a stance on behalf of the peasant farmers or manual labor. The majority of members had no wish to challenge that status quo, and it was universally acknowledged that important political decisions were made in Manila. Given the dilution of local politicians' power, it is open to question whether many Sangguniang Bayan members could actually claim to belong to the political elite. Were they all occupying strategic decisionmaking positions? The Sangguniang Bayan merely gave some semblance of

21. *Times Journal* (Manila), 24 November 1975.

participatory democracy without any radical reorientation of local politics. After all, security of tenure for every political officeholder depended on loyalty to the New Society of Pres. Marcos.

The expanded membership of the Sangguniang Panlalawigan offered even less opportunity for political initiatives as envisioned in New Society ideology. The provincial body was composed of the original board plus one representative from each municipality of La Union, the president of the Association of Barangay Councils and the president of the centrally-directed Kabataang Barangay youth movement. Although the newcomers from the poorer rural municipalities did not usually match the wealth, education and status of the members from the major urban areas on the La Union coast, all held high standing in their home communities. San Fernando's representative was the ex-vice mayor, a member of the Ortega family which had dominated pre-martial law politics in the town and had often occupied national political office. It was difficult to see how the New Society was creating an innovative form of democratic participation with the introduction of the sangguniang panlalawigan. Like their predecessors on the provincial board, the new Sangguniang Panlalawigan representatives were drawn from the ranks of independent professionals, capitalists and landlords. They did not occupy the same class positions or status levels as the vast majority of the province's inhabitants. Furthermore, it is highly doubtful that the members worked to express and act upon the needs and aspirations of the underprivileged in accordance with the official ideology of the New Society. Certainly, the people had no say in the selection of their Sangguniang Panlalawigan officials and had little knowledge of what went on at the sessions at the Provincial Capitol. The practice of the system seemed far removed from the high ideals of a participatory democracy fully involving the 'humble citizen.'

Similar themes were evident when the La Union representative was appointed to the Executive Committee of the Katipunan ng mga Sanggunian for Region 1. The La Union member had previously sat on the provincial board and came from a family with a long and successful political history. He was chosen as the industrial labor representative for the committee although he was in fact an attorney and the general manager of the province's electrical cooperative. Such paradoxes were not remarkable in the context of a political system which had consistently denied the existence of opposed class and status group interests. Martial law had not altered this situation in La Union, and the new regime was promoting the consensual model of Philippine society with greater vigor than ever before.

In the postwar era in San Fernando and La Union, power had never been the monopoly of leading politicians and administrators. The

economic elite who were not directly engaged in electoral battles and a few additional power brokers also exerted influence over official decisionmaking. In a highly personalized political culture such as existed in the Philippines, these individuals could affect the outcome of decisionmaking by the creation and maintenance of personal relationships with those who occupied strategic locations in municipal, provincial or national government. In some cases, economic resources needed to be expended in the forging and upkeep of these relationships. Alternatively kinship and friendship could be transformed into power bases. Despite the democratic rhetoric of the New Society, such power was still of significance in San Fernando after 1972.

In general, the higher an individual's class and status privileges, the greater would be the power or influence that he or she could exercise through the manipulation of personal relationships. Lack of status credentials and wealth entailed that a person would not be able to join the circles in which high government officials could be found. The most privileged members of the community could interact on approximately equal or sometimes superior status terms with many of the political and administrative elites.²² Thus, connections were made which could be mobilized for personal advantage when an appropriate situation arose. Kinship, fictive kinship, membership of the Lions or Rotary clubs or of religious organizations, common interests and friendship were the personalized social foundations upon which unofficial influence in decisionmaking were based. To be 'well-connected' was a conscious and perennial strategy which those who held high status and wealth were beset equipped to pursue and did pursue.

The shift towards political centralization was evident in the desire of members of the provincial and municipal levels elites to be associated with Jose Aspiras, the ex-congressman for southern La Union who had assumed the position of Secretary for Tourism in the Marcos cabinet and was known to be 'close to the President.' This leading member of the national political elite was the major power figure in the province and to forge social relationships with him provided a great measure of security and opportunity to individuals who were not incumbents of elite political and administrative positions at the municipal and provincial levels. The community certainly regarded this informal power by association with a minister as greater than the power of many of the officeholders in barangay and sanggunian. The Ilocano word (*baknang* although specifically meaning 'rich' or 'wealthy' carries distinct connotations of power. The economic advantages of

22. For the importance of wealth and income in determining status in San Fernando see Mark M. Turner, "Status Evaluation in a Philippine Town: Some Preliminary Observations," *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 6 (1978): 78-89.

high class and status positions could still be transformed into power under New Society 'grassroots democracy.'

CONCLUSION

The first four years of martial law in San Fernando and La Union were characterized by a shift towards higher levels of integration in the hierarchically-ordered politico-administrative territories of nation, province and municipality. Decisionmaking was increasingly centralized with control by Manila being exerted through the bureaucratic representatives of central government who were located in San Fernando. While the administrative elite rose in the local hierarchy of elite-groups, it did not attain the degree of autonomy in decisionmaking that provincial and municipal politicians had previously enjoyed. The leading civil servants were under central control.

Members of the local political elites found their power considerably reduced under martial law. So successful was the central government attack on this power, that it is open to question whether the majority of council, board or sanggunian representatives actually possessed enough influence over decisionmaking to qualify for elite status. Strangely, this loss of power was not accompanied by integration conflicts. Local politicians did not fight to retain higher levels of autonomy. In some cases they could still utilize informal channels to exercise influence over decisionmaking. But, Marcos had seized the initiative by suspending elections, closing congress, rendering the media compliant to his wishes, clamping down on private armies, centralizing control of the PC and police, and by safeguarding the best interests of capital. The threat of dismissal hung over the heads of all politicians while increasingly-powerful and centrally-directed bureaucrats supervised or at least maintained a close watch over the actions of municipal and provincial politicians.

In order to legitimate the 'revolution from the center,' various forms of passive mobilization were introduced as experiments in 'participatory democracy.' But, neither the barangay nor the sanggunian systems resulted in any radical redistribution of power. They were initiatives taken by the center and directed by the center. Power was still beyond the grasp of the people while the bases of class and status privileges were largely undisturbed. The high-sounding ideals of power-sharing under the New Society remained in the realm of rhetoric.