

Democratic Local Governance in Transcultural SEA Societies*

I. Introduction

Culture and history are very strong determinants of government and governance.

Political sociologies claim that government and politics and or public administration are culture bound. Both exist and operate within a system of cultural norms and social values in a given pluralistic polity.

The historic past is the timeline and the temporal dimension of the evolution of a government and as the ethos of the concept of governance. In the continuum of history, the past shapes the present and the present will be the history of the future.

Every society both developed and developing has its own cocoon within which its specific culture and history are nestled into one.

II. Southeast Asia Country Cultural Perspective

The countries in Southeast Asia have transcultural societies. These are societies of multifaceted diversity as well as constantly changing environments.

Consider for example Buddhist Cambodia which was under the French for a long time and which currently has initiated democratic reforms with the first election of the members of the Communes and *Sangkats* held in the 2006.

The government of Cambodia organized the National League of Communes and *Sangkats* as institutional vehicles for democratization and in achieving local autonomy. Local Ombudsmen were organized as mechanism for interactive governance and as medium of interest articulation of the peoples' voices to the corridors of power. An Organic Law was

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recently passed supporting this local decentralization process. The same Law provided the administrative link for the communes to the district and provincial levels.

The history of Cambodia, its religion, local traditions no doubt are crucial considerations in the governance of the country. The initiation of democratic local governance no doubt will have to reckon with the culture, historical environment including the political realities in the Kingdom of Cambodia.

Muslim Indonesia with a multi-ethnic population has been under Dutch rule for more than a hundred years. The Dutch influence in its administrative system is an accepted historical heritage in the history of the country. Indonesia's multi-culturism requires a more complex strategy in the initiation of democratic local governance. The implementation of regional autonomy under the umbrella of Law 32 and Law 33 attempts to resolve the allocation of functions and powers between the *Kabupaten* and the *Provinsi*.

The clarification of this specific issue is crucial in the implementation of democratic local governance, and in the process of government decentralization.

In Southeast Asia, the predominantly catholic Philippines is way ahead in the advocacy and implementation of government decentralization and local autonomy. The key legal framework is the Local Government Code passed by Congress in 1991. However, the country is far from attaining full local autonomy.

The three century Spanish domination and the almost half century of American colonial administration of the country have greatly influenced both, the form and structure of Philippine government as well as its way of life.

The Catholic religion is a strong political force as well as the bedrock of the norms and values of Philippine society.

The culture and history of the country is very much western oriented. The concept of democracy and democratic government are very much part of the country's social system.

Just like the cultural traditions and norms in other countries, Philippine cultures are factors important in formulating the implementation strategies of democratic local governance.

Thailand, a constitutional monarchy is very much influenced by Buddhism in many of its ways and social practices. In 1999, the Parliament passed the Decentralization Act of 1999. This Law allowed greater people participation in regional and local affairs.

The Act likewise decreased the role of the elitist central government bureaucracy in local governance. Being the only country in Southeast Asia which has not been colonized, Thailand has kept most of its culture, norms and values with minimal foreign influence. However, the country is fast modernizing, a process that usually destroys cultural traditions.

A tinge of British and French administrative characteristics is visible in its governmental system. An active institution strongly advocating democratic local governance is the Municipal League of Thailand.

Vietnam, like Cambodia, was previously part of the French Indochina; then the colony of France in Southeast Asia.

The country has substantial Buddhists and Christian population. Its early Chinese and French oriented culture is now mixed with Russian cultural influences. The exposure of the Vietnamese to American culture was predominant during the Vietnam War.

These foreign influences are parts of the emerging Vietnamese norms and values in present Vietnamese way of life.

While the central government is a strong centralist regime, the Peoples' Councils including the Peoples' Committees in all levels perform substantive governance tasks and decision making under its *Doi-Moi* program (Economic Reform)

This particular situation is a Vietnamese paradox where a centralist government allows decentralized decision making.

Just like the other countries in Southeast Asia, Vietnam undergoes acculturation absorbing global social values, as the country continue to march towards modernization.

III. Multiculturalism and Democratic Governance

The introduction of western concepts like democratic governance in transcultural societies in Southeast Asia can be fast tracked with the application of a combination of effective strategies. The action agenda in this regard is multidimensional. The agenda may call for the "indigenization" of the puritan concept of democratic governance in order to fit the concept into a specific cultural environment; thereby avoid conflict of values.

It is not for example functionally feasible to adopt western institutions and manage such institutions with eastern or oriental values. It simply will not work because conflicts of values set it.

In this case, a period of adaptation and adjustment are needed. Local institutions for democratic local governance do not operate in a vacuum but within well entrenched customs, traditions and social mores. Ignoring this cultural setting will trigger a clash of cultural values.

The implementation strategies of democratic local governance can be strengthen if it recognizes local wisdom as well as seek the assistance of academic institutions which have studied the ramifications of culture in government and politics.

In capacitating project stakeholders, it is very important for them to understand that established customs and traditions ultimately will change in the process of modernizing local governance.

One thing is clear, culture and history are strong driving forces as local institutions are reconstructed for democratic local governance. And in this regard, people's behavior and social values will also change or metamorphose adapting to specific environments.

IV. Concluding Guidepost

Sensitivity to the culture and history of a country is important in project planning and project management.

The introduction of concepts or ideas like democratic local governance should begin with the understanding of the inescapable influences of culture in governance and development administration.

All these, without doubt, are instructive guidepost.