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The Philippine Social Climate

Mabar Mangabas



Some time ago, an article called "A Damaged Culture" misinformed Americans and unnecessarily damaged Filipino self-esteem by allegedly finding in Filipinos, "a failure of nationalism," "total devotion to those within the circle, total war on those outside," "a contempt for the public good," "submission to doctrine and authority," and "the national ambition to change your nationality." It was written by an American journalist (Fallows 1987), after a six-week visit to the Philippines, who apparently thought that lines such as "it can seem bullying or graceless for an American to criticize the Philippines," and "I don't pretend that my view of the Philippines is authoritative" were sufficient caveats to excuse a piece that would obviously hurt Filipino feelings.

However, the damaged-culture thesis—which probably received much more attention in the Philippines than in the United States, thanks to a Filipino penchant for self-bashing, is quite false. Its perspective is accepted only by the upper-class and not by Filipinos in general. (I suppose it is because the upper class thinks that this portrayal applies to ordinary people and not to them.) The evidence, from a Social Weather Station (SWS) survey of Metro Manila (March 1988, statistically representative sample of 300, 6 percent error margin), is as follows:

Asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement that "most Filipinos are capable of breaking the law for the benefit of their friends and relatives," there were 38 percent in the sample who agreed and 37 percent who disagreed, implying a "net agreement

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score" of +1, meaning that opinion was evenly divided on this matter. However the upper class (in Metro Manila, roughly the richest 12 percent) had a very different net agreement score of +18, showing a clear tendency to accept this negative portrayal of Filipinos.

Secondly, as to whether "Filipinos are used to being commanded by high officials and so they just follow without question," those surveyed tended to disagree, with a net agreement score of -18, whereas the upper class tended to agree, with a net score of +12. Thirdly, as to whether "Filipinos easily sacrifice their personal benefit for the sake of the common interest," those surveyed tended to agree, with a net score of +29, whereas the upper class again felt the opposite way, with a net score of -9. Considering the great influence of the Metro Manila upper class on public affairs, its tendency to downgrade the Filipino is an unfortunate thing for the country. But such a tendency is definitely not characteristic of Filipinos in general.

As for the alleged common ambition to change nationality, surveys (1990, 1993) show that about 15 percent of Filipinos would like to migrate to another country. However, given that 9 percent of Americans (1991) and 49 percent (!) of Britons (1993) would like to settle in another country, and that 13 percent of Italians are unhappy to live in Italy (1992), it may be more appropriate to say that Filipinos share a common global wanderlust rather than suffer from a culturally peculiar disloyalty to their motherland.

The point here is that, with the coming of age of social survey research in the Philippines, the time for parachute journalism is over. In 1987, when "A Damaged Culture" was published, regular social surveys and opinion polls in the Philippines were just getting started, and a visitor's ignorance of them might be forgiven. The fortnightly Social Weather Bulletin began publication in 1988. It reported the SWS survey cited above in August 1988. In addition to SWS, Ateneo de Manila University published several public opinion polls during 1988-92. The Philippines now has a steady stream of professionally-done social surveys and polls of public opinion, highly accepted by both government and nongovernment circles, providing vital data on all important social issues. This stream is itself an indicator of the vigor of democracy in the country. At present, for any serious analyst, Filipino or non-Filipino, of Philippine conditions to be ignorant of survey data (as in Fallows' 1994 book, *Looking at the Sun*) is no longer excusable.

This note makes a sketch of the social climate in the Philippines, based on contemporary survey data. It looks into some elements of Filipino character, Filipino attitudes towards America, and political and economic sentiments of Filipinos. The surveys are from nationwide samples (the Metro Manila survey cited above was an exception) of 1,200 voting-age Filipinos (implying a 3 percent error margin). The world-class quality of the survey data is attested by SWS's membership in the International Social Survey Programme, of which the US member is the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, and other international survey projects.

The rest of this note will try to be less technical, since statistics can easily become tedious and indigestible. It accepts that much about Philippine social conditions is still unknown, and that much of what one thinks one already knows may yet be mistaken. Opinion polling on a steady basis is only a decade old in the Philippines, compared to six decades old in the US. One would hope, at least, that paradigms about Philippine society will be based henceforth more on hard empirical evidence than on casual observations.

The Filipino Character

Contrary to what damaged-culture believers might think, the sense of civic responsibility in the Philippines is not deficient compared to elsewhere. Consider the moral issue of cheating the government in order to pay less income tax. From surveys done in 1991, the proportions in various countries who consider it excusable to under-report one's income in order to evade tax are:

Proportion (%) Who Say That
Under-reporting of Income
In Order to Lessen Tax Is
Not Wrong/Only a Bit Wrong

| | |
|----------------|----|
| Philippines | 19 |
| USA | 16 |
| Great Britain | 26 |
| (West) Germany | 55 |
| Ireland | 34 |
| Italy | 27 |

This shows that Filipinos are about as strict as Americans when it comes to dislike for cheating on income taxes, and more strict than the British, Germans, Irish, or Italians. It is interesting to include Ireland and Italy in comparisons because, like the Philippines, these are predominantly Roman Catholic countries. Yet the Philippines is significantly different from these countries on certain matters of moral beliefs.

Surveys prove that Filipinos are a very highly religious people. Like the Irish, three out of five Filipinos go to church each week, compared to only two out of five Italians, and one out of three Americans. Three out of four Filipinos pray every day, versus only three out of five Irish, two out of five Americans, and one out of three Italians. At the same time, over three out of five Filipinos, like the Irish and Italians, feel that religious leaders should not try to influence government decisions. This compares to only about one out of two Americans who resent such church interference.

Three out of five Filipinos favor the death penalty for murder. This is not quite as high as among Americans (three out of four), but much higher than among Irish and Italians (one out of three). On the matter of sexual relations, Filipinos are highly conservative. For instance, three out of five Filipinos consider premarital sex always wrong, compared to only one out of three Irish, one out of four Americans, and one out of six Italians. Filipino non-Catholics tend to be even more conservative and more religious than Filipino Catholics.

Filipinos are strongly supportive of family planning in general, but not of abortion in particular. Slightly more than half say that it is always wrong for a pregnant woman who expects a baby to have an abortion, though the fact that the rejection of abortion is far from universal would be shocking to Filipino church hierarchy! This compares to only one out of two Irish, only one out of four Americans, and only one out of five Italians who think that an abortion in this case is always wrong. Fifty-three percent of Filipinos say that they are "very proud" to be Filipinos (1993 survey). By the same measure, from surveys in twenty-two other countries, the proudest people are Americans (76 percent), followed closely by Greeks (72 percent), while the least proud are West Germans (20 percent), Belgians (26 percent), and Japanese (30 percent). Filipinos, being neither extremely proud nor extremely modest about their nationality, are similar to the Irish (53 percent) and the British (54 percent). What are Filipinos proud about? To the question of what are the Filipino traits most worthy of emulation by foreigners, the most common answers

pertain to the quality of interpersonal relationships, such as hospitality, courtesy, helpfulness, kindness, friendliness, etc.

The sense of being part of a geographic region is as strong in the Philippines as it is in Europe. The proportion of Filipinos who say they "often" think of themselves as not only Filipinos but also as ASEAN is 24 percent (1993), compared to a 21 percent average (1991) among twelve European nationalities who think of themselves as European and not only as French or German etc. The proportion of those saying they "sometimes" identify themselves regionally, and not just nationally, is 34 percent in the Philippines and 32 percent in Europe. This strongly suggests that Filipinos are just as ready for programs of regional cooperation as Europeans are.

Filipino Attitudes Towards America

The United States is undoubtedly the country most liked by Filipinos. (It is followed by Saudi Arabia and Japan, where very many Filipinos work.) Notwithstanding this special position of the US, it is important not to take Filipino trust in America completely for granted. This trust has been tracked in eighteen SWS surveys since 1985, by asking whether people agree or disagree that "most of what the US government wants to happen in the Philippines is good for the Filipinos." The net agreement to this survey item was a high +35 to +40 during 1985-86, then declined during 1987-89, falling to as low as +4, and then rose moderately since 1990, recovering to +24 in September 1993, the latest available reading. In Metro Manila, where people are relatively more skeptical, its net agreement was negative (implying positive distrust for America) eight times in twenty-four surveys. The September 1993 net score regarding trust for the US government was only +7.

Filipino public opinion about the US military bases issue in particular was tracked during 1987-91 in eight national and fourteen Metro Manila surveys of SWS. These surveys found that about one out of two were willing to extend the bases' stay under existing terms, that about one out of four wanted more benefits from the US in exchange for an extension, and that the rest were for termination of the bases agreement by 1991 if not earlier. In July 1991, the last survey prior to the expiration of the bases agreement, 47 percent favored extension under existing terms, 20 percent were unconditionally opposed, 28 percent said "it depends," and the rest had no opinion.

Thus public opinion towards the 1991 RP-US treaty was not hostile. This fact was known to both the Philippine and the US governments. Although most Filipinos were miffed initially by the Senate rejection of the treaty, they changed their minds not long after. Surveys showed that, in November 1991 and February 1992, only 42 to 45 percent thought that the government should respect the Senate veto. But by September 1992, this proportion had grown to 82 percent. What made Filipinos change their minds?

Surveys had also shown that, in considering the future of the bases, Filipinos were mainly concerned with economic, rather than military, security. Few Filipinos felt a threat of military invasion by another country. Most were worried primarily about the future of the Filipino base employees and of the welfare of the communities nearby. The fact that the US bases were the second-largest employer in the Philippines and accounted for a considerable fraction of the GNP seemed to be critical. There even was one claim that, without the bases, a "basket-case" economy would result. By the second semester of 1992, however, when it became evident that the Philippine economy had survived the departure of the bases, public interest in the status quo ante had fizzled out.

The outcome of the military bases question was unimportant for Philippine domestic politics. The Senators' individual popularity as surveyed in 1991 was uncorrelated with their stances on the RP-US treaty. This was borne out by the electoral results of May 1992. The anti-bases winners were Estrada (for vice-president), Mercado, Maceda, Guingona, Tañada, Aquino, and Enrile (for representative), while the pro-bases winners were Shahani, Herrera, Gonzales, Romulo, Angara, Osmeña, Lina, Rasul, and Alvarez. The anti-bases losers were Salonga (for president), Pimentel (for vice-president), Ziga, and Laurel (for president), and the sole pro-bases loser was Tamano. The order of names in each category is according to popularity in 1991.

The military bases outcome seems to have been irrelevant to Filipino attitudes towards America. Pertinent to this is a 1993 survey finding that four out of five Filipinos say that the country needs foreign investments, 58 percent consider American investors good for the country, while only 12 percent regard them as bad for the country, thus giving Americans a net investor-rating of +46. American investors are more popular than Japanese (net rating +34), ASEAN (net +17), European (+12), and Chinese (+11) investors.

Political Sentiments of Filipinos

In 1986, the Philippines played a leading role in the grand movement for restoration of democracy in the world. At present, out of every ten Filipinos, six consider their political system as democratic, while only one disagrees. The net percentage of those who feel free to speak openly even on matters against the government is now +28 (1994), compared to only +4 close to the end of the Marcos regime (1985). The ratio of those satisfied to those dissatisfied with the way democracy works is 58:42 in the Philippines, or better than the 42:55 in Europe (average of twelve EC countries, Eurobarometer 1993). In the European Community (EC), only in the small countries of Denmark, Luxembourg, Netherlands and Ireland is satisfaction with how democracy works more widespread than in the Philippines.

Political stability and genuine democratization are closely linked together. The fact that two out of three Filipinos disapproved, in 1984-85, of Marcos's powers to legislate by decree and to detain persons by executive fiat was a sign that such a political system could not endure indefinitely. In 1987 and 1989, again two out of three Filipinos regarded the coup-attempts by rebel military elements as unjustified, even as they sympathized with rebels' complaints of inadequate pay for soldiers, of graft and corruption in government, of great economic difficulties, etc. President Aquino's performance rating rebounded each time she defeated a coup-attempt, as the public rallied around her. Based on surveys, the trust in armed rebels, such as military rebels, Communist groups, Muslim rebel groups, and now the Abu Sayyafin particular, has invariably been limited to small minorities.

Most people oppose further tinkering with the form of government. Four out of five prefer to stay with the present Presidential system rather than shift to the Parliamentary system. Three out of five prefer to stay with the present bicameral system of legislature rather than shift to the unicameral system. In short, the attitudes of grass-roots Filipinos, if these are heeded by politicians, are themselves a basic factor making for political stability.

Filipinos have been generally satisfied with the performances of both Presidents Aquino and Ramos. There was a general downward trend exhibited by Pres. Aquino's performance rating in the course of her term; but that is not at all unusual by global standards. All post-war US presidents, except for Eisenhower, went through the same experience, and many of them, including Pres. Clinton, even registered

net negative ratings at certain times (meaning disapproval exceeding approval), whereas Pres. Aquino's lowest net rating was about +10.

Pres. Ramos, who pays great attention to opinion polls, is thus far doing somewhat better than Pres. Aquino in satisfying the Filipino voter. His 'honeymoon' with the public was longer, and his net rating of +55 as of August 1994 is roughly five points higher than Pres. Aquino's at the same stage of her term. Presently, he enjoys much more popularity with Filipinos than Pres. Clinton does with Americans, or, for that matter, the chief executives of many Western democracies. Comparisons with the performance of other ASEAN leaders would also be very interesting to do, but are not yet possible due to the less hospitable environment for and consequently lesser development of open public opinion polling in those countries compared to the Philippines.

Economic Sentiments of Filipinos

Over the past decade, major movements in economic sentiment and economic participation, tracked through surveys, have been directly related to the ups and downs of the democratization process. There was not only a political but also an economic crisis in 1984–85. Relief came in 1986–87, with zero inflation and a great drop in poverty from its record peak in 1985; economic optimism became widespread. There was a boom in the extent of people's participation in spending, not only for consumption but also for investment, in early 1987. The initial ceasefires and peacetalks with rebel groups also had much economic significance. But the positive economic trends were cut short by the shock of the August 1987 coup attempt. Poverty incidence grew steadily during 1988–91, then abated somewhat in 1992. It was mostly affected by movements in inflation, somewhat affected by unemployment, and not affected by the GNP growth rate. Economic optimism dipped severely in 1990–91, but it recovered together with the orderly political renewal in 1992.

Filipinos tend to have rather socialistic expectations of government. In this matter their attitudes are closer to Europeans than to Americans. For instance, eight out of ten think that the government should provide a job for everyone. This compares with nine out of ten Italians, eight out of ten Germans, six out of ten British, and only four out of ten Americans who feel the same way. Six out of ten Filipinos think that the government is responsible for reducing the gap

between the rich and the poor, compared to eight out of ten Italians, seven out of ten British, six out of ten Germans, and only five out of ten Americans who feel this way.

Meeting such high expectations requires a correspondingly large participation of the government in the economy. Thus it is reasonable that European governments acquire and spend a much larger proportion of GNP than the US government does. In the Philippines, however, the share of government in GNP is relatively small, at only 16 to 17 percent compared to about 20 percent in Thailand or Malaysia, 25 percent in Singapore, 30 percent in South Korea, and 35 percent in the US.

Thus, whereas Americans complain about government oversize, the problem facing Filipinos is quite the opposite, namely government undersize (this is not the same as underregulatory). The fiscal dilemma is that Filipinos, like taxpayers anywhere in the world, are also reluctant to give the government enough resources to enable it to perform as expected. The challenge, therefore, is to convince Filipinos that their tax pesos will not be wasted but will be put to proper use.

Notwithstanding the demonstrated efficacy of the market approach to development elsewhere in the world, surveys show that Filipinos are fearful of allowing full freedom in the economy. Thus, suggestions to deregulate oil product prices, the price of rice, and tuition fees all meet with great public skepticism, if not outright disapproval. Many Filipinos are not sure that lessening tariffs and import restrictions, establishing free trade ports, or privatizing the Philippine National Oil Company, Philippine Airlines, the Manila Hotel and the National Power Corporation, are good ideas for the economy. The main reason is, I think, because too many Filipinos are not yet accustomed to economic freedom.

The fear of the economic unknown is not peculiar to Filipinos, however. For instance, just before the North American Free Trade Agreement was established, surveys showed great dismay in all three countries. Americans thought that NAFTA would only benefit Mexicans, while Mexicans and Canadians thought that it would only benefit Americans (see *The American Enterprise*, 1993). In short, all governments having agendas of economic reform have to cope with popular anxieties.

It is critically necessary for the political leadership to continue to pursue the market approach to economic development, trusting that it can demonstrate the wisdom of this approach to the people in due time. They should take heart from the Senate's ability to demonstrate

the wisdom of its decision in 1991 not to extend the stay of the US military bases, despite initially unfavorable public opinion.

Concluding Remarks

There are no doubt gaps, and perhaps misinterpretations, in this rendition of the Philippine social climate. Improvements based on more and better data are always welcome, whereas criticisms based only on casual impressions and unrepresentative anecdotes are best ignored.

A gratifying part of the social survey work in the Philippines described here is that, even though academically-based, it is not ivory-tower or socially-peripheral research. All these survey findings have been directly reported to high officials, including the President and the Cabinet, diplomats, including US diplomats in the Philippines, business executives, politicians, academics and others soon after they are published. Sincere thanks are due to the many subscribers of the SWS survey series, including both the Philippine and the US governments, whose continuing support and encouragement is proof enough of their sincere interest in ascertaining the real facts about the opinions, attitudes, expectations, and welfare of the Filipino people.

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