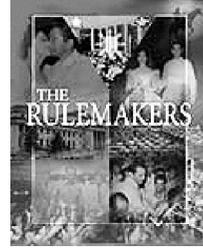


Plutocracy, Philippine Style

Paz H. Diaz

Book Review of ***The Rulemakers: How the Wealthy and Well-Born Dominate Congress***
By Sheila S. Coronel, Yvonne T. Chua,
Luz Rimban, and Booma R. Cruz
Quezon City: Philippine Center
for Investigative Journalism, 2004 (270 pp)



A plutocracy (from the Greek *ploutos* meaning “wealth” and *kratein* meaning “to rule”) is a government system where those who hold economic power also hold political power. Plutocracy, Philippine style, is the subject analyzed by *The Rulemakers: How the Wealthy and Well-Born Dominate Congress*. The book is a coherent, reflective, and easy-to-understand inquiry into how the “wealthy and well-born” continue to keep seats in Congress, as they award themselves privileges never experienced by other agencies of government or by the people they claim to represent.

The Rulemakers brings this disturbing reality in front of its reader: The Philippine Congress is made up of well-connected and well-born multimillionaires setting “the rules for a poor nation” (viii). The book connects the dots of demographic information, scholarly publications, public documents, and numerous personal interviews collected over a two-year period and adds to the data already published in two earlier books published by the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ), *Pork and Other Perks: Corruption and Governance in the Philippines* (1998) and *The Ties that Bind: A Guide to Family, Business and Other Interests in the Ninth House of Representatives* (1994).

Journalists stand to benefit most from reading the book. It is not only a handy reference on the who’s who of Philippine Congress (from the Malolos Congress in 1898 to the 12th Congress in 2001-2004) but is also a sourcebook that answers the many “whys” they need to be aware of when reporting on Philippine politics. The book gives reporters an idea of why Congress acts the way it does; why long-term developmental goals are lost in the minds of legislators; why the patronage network is not so easy to dismantle; and many more.

One of the peculiarities of the Philippine Legislature is that the legislators since 1921 have mostly belonged to the privileged classes. “Legislators in 1921, 1932, 1946, 1954, and 1962” (11) were, citing a study by Robert Stauffer, from extensively or moderately wealthy families. Rich families have been the source of membership in both houses; in fact, these families have wealth that the authors were able to trace back 100 years or more. Today, most of these families still belong to the upper 10% of society’s wealthy classes and still hold seats in Congress.

“Political entrepreneurship” (51) is used to describe the activities of families who have stayed in government and gained from politics through the years. This, according to the authors, should not come as a shock because “after all, families [in politics] control big business as well” (57).

Table 2.5 (64-65) shows the clan alliances in the 12th Congress (2001-2004), and names the families that have stayed in power. Table 2.6 (72-73) follows this up with data on families that have stayed on, from the Malolos Congress to the 12th Congress. These family names appear throughout the other tables in the book, which synthesizes the “7 M’s of Dynasty Building” (86-97) — money, machinery, media and/or movies, marriage, murder and mayhem, myth, and mergers (alliances).

“Inheriting” one’s office is very common. Neophyte members of the House of Representatives from 1987 to 2001 were not really that new, being relatives of third-termers keeping the bench warm for their return, or being members of political clans that have always been in power (101-109).

With all this preoccupation about staying in power, a reader cannot help but ask: How could these families then truly represent the people they vow to serve? How can they have time for lawmaking?

The present-day Congress continues to remain an exclusive club in many ways. Besides the wealth that makes them feel they were “born to rule” (11), the senators and representatives are most often males who are better educated than the rest of the population, and have mostly served in administrative or political positions in government.

In 1937, only males could vote and be elected. Today, with these rights granted to women, the number of females in Congress has risen only to a mere 40, with 18 as replacements of male relatives

previously in the House — males waiting for the next elections to be eligible to run again for the same position. Eight of the 40 women are members of political clans while only five are party-list representatives. Nine do not belong to political families and they are also not affiliated with party-list groups.

Lawyers dominate the House of Representatives (92 out of 228 representatives in 2001), followed by 54 business and economics graduates; 17 medical and health sciences graduates; 30 engineers/architects/mathematics and natural science graduates; 17 social sciences graduates; and 13 arts, design, education, and communication graduates. Five members of the House of Representatives did not disclose their professions (13).

The 1987 Constitution had provided for 52 seats or one-fifth of the House of Representatives (238) for the entry of representatives of marginalized sectors in the 11th Congress. However, only 14 candidates from 13 party-list groups were proclaimed. In the 12th Congress of the House of Representatives, elected in 2001, only 20 representing 12 groups took their seats, with many coming in only after the Congress had finished half its term.

What's a day in the House of Representatives like? The authors describe it this way:

On a regular session day at the House of Representatives, the hall is two-thirds empty. The congressmen who are present look bored. Some are busy texting messages on their mobile phones; others are engaged in small talk with those around them. Many more have hied off to the lounge to have merienda. The unfortunate representative who is on the floor delivering a speech is largely ignored. (120)

Perks of Power

So what keeps the people's representatives busy? There are the perks, of course, if not the "pork", as well as keeping their districts happy so that they and their relatives can get re-elected.

The perks include foreign travels, memberships in committees, consultancies mostly for relatives, and a big "budget mystery" (144) which no one is able to account for. "Expensive Senators" and "Costly Congressmen" are the titles of Tables 3.10a and 3.10b (150-151) that list all the expenses that the Commission on Audit (COA) identified

as amounts paid to and expenses incurred by each Senator and House representative from 1994 to 2002. There is still a debate going on whether or not these amounts are subject to audit, or have been audited at all. As the authors have discovered, the Philippine Congress is all about “money, money, money” (162). Generous perks listed in Table 3.18 show why a congressman could be “rolling in money for as long as he keeps his seat” (163).

The “pork” is yet another source of income for the lawmakers, although this is mostly disguised as assistance to their districts in the form of infrastructure, schoolhouses, and other needs. But, as the authors saw, these expenditures cover what most congressmen feel as “investments” for future election campaigns. The pork barrel is used by the lawmakers to get projects and be patrons and brokers in their districts for future favors such as getting re-elected themselves or ensuring that a member of the family is elected to keep the bench warm until they are eligible to run for the particular position again. Meanwhile, members of the representative’s clan who are local government officials also receive allocations mainly for the same reasons.

If most legislators are there for the money, who then has time for making laws? Of course, one could argue that the country now needs fewer laws because most of the essential ones are in place. Nevertheless, there are still important concerns that need legislation. According to the representatives themselves, some bills of “local application are routinely passed with 30 to 40 members in attendance” (168). The sad part is that to get representatives to be present at the session hall whenever an important bill is tabled for voting, the speaker is often forced to give “appearance fees”, normally pegged at P50,000 (168).

Party-list Representatives as Countervailing Forces

Rimban analyzes alternatives that can correct some of these excesses of the Philippine Legislature. She singles out the party-list system as “countervailing centers of power for the grassroots” (219). According to her, one of the tangible benefits of having representatives from the marginalized sector is a “kinder, gentler view of Congress” (220).

Party-list members are now able to put alternative programs in the mainstream agenda. The sectoral representatives, although lonely voices in Congress, have managed to have themselves heard on some occasions. They have filed resolutions focused on concerns that affect the people they represent. However, many bills have not seen the light of day. Nevertheless, their very presence in Congress augurs well for the long, uphill battle of bringing the Senate and the House of Representatives closer to the people.

The book pieces together, through graphs, charts, vignettes, and boxes, a more understandable picture of Congress. As a whole, the book makes the reader understand how the wealthy and well-born continue to dominate Congress in a supposed democracy where all voices and all sectors should be heard. The authors point out that 18 years after the fall of Marcos, Congress has not become a more representative institution. Today's legislators are richer than before. While poverty levels since 1986 have remained at roughly between 30% to 40% of the population, lawmakers have become wealthier.

Although the authors' frustration over these events is quite apparent, the book ends with some hope because old-style politicians now have to rub elbows with party-list representatives. Political and electoral reform may yet be possible. Genuine democracy may still prevail.

Paz H. Diaz obtained her Ph.D. in Communication from the University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication (UP CMC). She is an associate professor at the UP CMC Department of Journalism. She is also dean of the Faculty of Management and Development Studies of the UP Open University.