Manuel L. Quezon and the Filipino women's suffrage movement of 1937

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Abstract

Manuel L. Quezon is often credited by historians like Encarnacion Alzona (1937) as a staunch advocate of women's right to vote. Indeed, the history of the struggle for women's suffrage often highlights the role that Quezon played in terms of supporting the 1937 plebiscite as the president of the Philippine Commonwealth. Various print media of the period like dailies and magazines depicted him, and consequently, the success of the women's suffrage movement, in the same light (e.g., Philippine Graphic, Manila Bulletin). However, closer scrutiny of Quezon's speeches, letters, and biography in relation to other pertinent primary sources would reveal that Quezon was, at best, ambivalent, on the cause of the suffragists. His appreciation of the women's suffrage's merits was tied and anchored on certain political gains that he could acquire from it. In contrast to the appreciation of his contemporaries like Rafael Palma, Quezon's appreciation of the women's right to vote was based on patronage politics and not on the view that the right to suffrage is a right of women and not a privilege. His support for the cause was aimed at putting himself at the forefront of this landmark legislation and thus the real champions of the cause—the women—at the sidelines

Keywords: women's suffrage, Manuel Quezon, Commonwealth, political discourse, democracy

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Introduction

On the 140th birth anniversary of first Commonwealth President Manuel L. Quezon last August 19, 2018, the *Manila Bulletin* lauded his numerous and significant accomplishments as the Chief Executive (140th birth anniversary of Manuel L. Quezon, 2018). Listed among these accomplishments was the women's suffrage finalized in 1937. Indeed, it was a historical piece of legislation that was approved through a plebiscite in what appeared to be a quintessential democratic exercise performed by a developing postcolony in the 1930s. The said plebiscite witnessed overwhelming favor among women and received wide support even among male politicians, most prominent among them was the President himself.

In this paper I am going to explore the development of the women's suffrage campaign in the Philippines and the positions taken by Quezon on the issue. Often hailed by suffragists as a staunch women's suffrage advocate and having claimed to be for women's voting rights through and through (Alzona, 1937; Villanueva-Kalaw, 1952), this paper shall study statements made by the president contained in his presidential speeches, newspaper articles, and biographies concerning the issue.

There should be an examination of speeches, accounts, editorials, print media, and other primary sources in order to plot the development of the women's suffrage movement and locate the position of Quezon at different junctures. In the process, this paper will demonstrate that Quezon's support for the enfranchisement of Filipino women was anchored on the belief that the women's suffrage is a privilege and not a right, and that his contributions to the campaign were made in the framework of patronage politics. Quezon's support for the woman's suffrage is not backed up with an ideological and principled commitment to the idea that suffrage is an inalienable right of women. In lieu, his support for the cause was dependent on the answer to the question of whether or not women like to vote.

From the point of view of political communications, Quezon's perspective and rationalization of his changing and ambivalent positions to the question on women's suffrage should be analyzed in terms of intent or purpose (Denton & Woodward, 1990), i.e., what was the purpose behind Quezon's adamant insistence that Filipino women did not have any desire to be enfranchised despite the consistent clamor from many women's groups? Inferences about his intent can be derived from analyses of the political, discursive, and structural contexts of the time like the political climate of the American colonial period and the subsequent Philippine Commonwealth, the preoccupation of the political elite to the independence question, and the heavily patriarchal and feudal Filipino society of the early twentieth century.

In analyzing Quezon's position on the question, a political discourse analysis is in order on the very discourses that emanated from Quezon speeches, statements, and political correspondences that he made as a politician and Commonwealth president before and after the plebiscite. But aside from these, political discourse analysis also entails an account of statements and utterances that came from other political actors (van Dijk, 1997) like his contemporaries in politics, suffrage advocates, journalists, and newspapers. This was done in the course of this paper. The pitch and coverage of various mainstream dailies regarding Quezon's position in the matter were recounted, together with the arguments of women's associations as described by women's magazines like the *Women's Home Journal* and memoirs from individual suffragists'. The speeches of Quezon, other male politicians, and the account of the debates on the 1934 Commonwealth Constitutional Convention were also included in this analysis.

Revisiting these discourses and communication uncovers the dynamics of political and social relations of the period that birthed the women's suffrage movement—a period of struggle for independence from the Americans, elite and patronage politics, feudal and patriarchal relationship and an emergence of modern and liberal politics that started to articulate the most nominal idea of gender equality and feminism.

Reexaminations of Quezon's pronouncements about women's political participation would belie the commonly held view that he was a hard-line women's suffrage advocate. Similar to his views on other issues that confronted the Philippines in the early decades of the twentieth century, like Philippine independence from the United States (Churchill, 1983), Quezon was ambivalent on the question of women's enfranchisement. And while historical records and testimonies cannot deny his contribution to the final passage of women's suffrage in 1937, this paper argues that (1) he also contributed to several setbacks that the campaign suffered, especially in the events that unfolded during the Constitutional Convention in 1934, and that (2) Quezon's appreciation of the idea of political equality between men and women was not informed by liberal democratic values, as compared to the discourses articulated by other pro-suffrage politicians of his time like Rafael Palma.

At best, Quezon's contribution to the eventual success of the women's suffrage was fastened on his position of power and influence, and not necessarily on his conviction for the value of political equality. Thus, while he might have allowed women a token to access the ballot through convincing other politicians to support the 1937 plebiscite, he was not able to influence the transformation of the Philippine politics' and society's attitude toward women. At worst, Quezon's support for women's suffrage was a mechanism

for political gains. The way that he hoisted himself and claimed credit for granting women the right to vote speaks volume about the President's motivation in publicly throwing his support behind the cause.

The Journey of the Woman Vote in the Legislature

The question on women's suffrage started as early as the 1900s. Pura Villanueva-Kalaw (1952), a pioneer suffragist, recounts that Cebu Congressman Filemon Sotto presented the first bill for women's suffrage in 1907 in the First Philippine Assembly. Historian Encarnacion Alzona (1937), however, differs and records that the first bill for the women's suffrage did not come until 1912 and was presented by Melecio Severino in the Third Philippine Assembly. Many generations of mostly upper and middle-class women struggled long and hard for suffrage. Some of these women were Constancia Poblete, Concepcion Felix Rodriguez, Rosario Lam, Nieves Hidalgo, Rosa Alvero, Sofia de Veyra, Paz Policarpio Mendez, and Encarnacion Alzona (Villanueva-Kalaw, 1952). They were doctors, lawyers, students, writers, factory workers, and entrepreneurs who had different justifications in fighting for their right to vote. The Filipino suffragists found allies with the American women who, in 1920, won their own suffrage after their ardent struggle against the patriarchal American society of the early twentieth century.

The Americans, an influential sector in the Philippine government and politics, were consistently supportive of the cause. American governor-generals Francis Burton Harrison, Leonard Wood, and Frank Murphy flexed political muscles to have the women's suffrage law be passed in the legislature (Roces, 2004). The first American executive who proclaimed his support for the enfranchisement of women, Francis Harrison, addressed the Assembly in 1918 and recommended that the ballot be extended to women as well (Alzona, 1937). This 1918 statement might be the impetus for the growth in momentum that the campaign of women's suffrage witnessed (Alzona, 1937). Harrison's declaration put the question on the legislative spotlight; this is a feat that was not achieved by early suffragists and politicians who initiated discussions on the issue before 1918 (Alzona, 1937) Governor-General Murphy, on the other hand, refused to sign any bill that interests several politicians, unless the women's suffrage was passed in the two legislative chambers (Villanueva-Kalaw, 1952). At this juncture however, the conservative forces were strong and adamant and the matter was hardly taken up in congress.

Hope for the bill was found in the younger blood of Filipino politicians like Rafael Palma and Pedro Sison. Sison was the major proponent of the first women's suffrage bill that was passed in the upper house in 1920. Despite

this, it still took suffragists and allied politicians more than a decade to get a sizeable number of votes in both the upper house and the lower house to amend the Administrative Code and extend the right to vote to women (Alzona, 1937; Villanueva-Kalaw, 1952). It was only in 1933 when women's right to vote was approved into law through Act No. 4112: An Act to Amend Section Four Hundred and Thirty-One of the Administrative Code, as amended, by Granting the Right of Suffrage to the Women and Making them Eligible to All Public Offices, and for Other Purposes (Philippine Commission on Women, n.d).

After the passage of the women's suffrage law in 1933, its opposition continued to hinder its implementation. Women were not allowed to vote in the 1934 elections, and when the Tydings-McDuffie Law was enacted, the woman's vote was delayed once more (Villanueva-Kalaw, 1952). Tydings-McDuffie mandated the creation of a Constitutional Convention that would draft and ratify the Constitution of the Philippine Commonwealth. In this convention, Filipino suffragists fought a difficult and a more crucial battle. The finality of the Act No. 4112 was challenged and the Convention opened up a space for the anti-suffrage politicians to argue against the proposal (Villanueva-Kalaw, 1952).

The ramifications of the battle that the suffragist fought in the Constitutional Convention were more permanent and foundational. If women's suffrage would not make it in the Commonwealth Constitution, then any future attempt to legislate for the women's enfranchisement would easily be shunned by virtue of unconstitutionality. Nevertheless, the suffragists could not help but be hopeful. After all, the long battle was already won in 1933. If the spirit of the law were to be upheld, the inclusion of the women's suffrage in the Constitution should no longer be a subject of further discussion and be granted as an automatic constitutional right.

The turnout was different. Act 4112 was repealed in the ratified 1935 Constitution. In lieu, the constitutional provision on suffrage stated that male citizens of the Philippines, unless disqualified by law, of 21 years of age and above, able to read and write are eligible for suffrage (Commonwealth Const. art. 5). In the same paragraph, the Constitution stated that: "The National Assembly shall extend the right of suffrage to women, if in a plebiscite which shall be held for that purpose within two years after the adoption of this Constitution, not less than three hundred thousand women possessing the necessary qualifications shall vote affirmatively on the question" (Commonwealth Const. art. 5).

With the inception of the transitory government, the cause of the women's suffrage took a huge step backward. If this development is to be viewed along the history of the women's suffrage since 1907, this was

actually a monumental defeat. This resolution effectively undid the hard-won victory of 1933.

Women's Enfranchisement and the Quest for Philippine Independence

The struggle for women's suffrage was fought in the same juncture as the quest for Philippine Independence from the United States, where Quezon, alongside other prominent politicians like Sergio Osmeña and Manuel Roxas, played important roles. The problematic and complicated independence missions that followed the Jones Law, albeit being characterized as a peaceful political process, preoccupied the affairs of Philippine politics for a more than a decade (Churchill, 1983). At this period, Quezon cemented a dual reputation. For the Filipino people who followed his quests in the United States, he was an uncompromising patriot who battled for absolute and immediate independence, but for American politicians who had the chance to deal with the Philippine senator, Quezon was a master politician who says one thing in public and another in private (Churchill, 1983).

The quagmire that surrounded the independence question revealed two sets of different but related backdrops to women's suffrage. First, the preoccupation of politicians, especially Quezon, to the independence missions sidelined the campaign for women's enfranchisement. This was a reality acknowledged even by the suffragists (Policarpio-Mendez, 1993). Women leaders seemed to agree that the priority of the Filipinos at that time should be the independence (Policarpio-Mendez, 1993). This was manifested on the way the suffragists reacted to a bill proposed by the Republican American legislator Charles Underhill ("March el representante Underhill por el sufragio femenino en Filipinas," 1927). He proposed a law before the United States Congress intended to give the Filipino women the right to vote.

Interestingly, Filipino suffragists rejected Underhill's proposal because they saw it as tokenistic effort coming from the American legislator. Rosa Sevilla de Alvero, a foremost suffragist, spoke in behalf of her comrades and declined Underhill's initiative because they preferred a suffrage law that would emanate from the Philippine legislature ("March el representante Underhill por el sufragio femenino en Filipinas," 1927). They suspected that an American law sanctioning the women's right to vote would set a dangerous precedence of Americans intervening with Philippine domestic affairs. Alvero added that if Underhill were sincere in his desire and interest in the welfare of the Filipino people, he would instead file a bill for the complete and immediate independence of the Philippines. Another suffragist, Paz Policarpio-Mendez (1993), recounted in her memoirs how 200,000 women

voted for the ratification of the Commonwealth Constitution despite the fact that the same Constitution took back the voting rights already granted to them through the Act No. 4112 of 1933. She interepreted this action as suffragists prioritizing the interest of this nation above their sectroral struggle.

However, Filipino women still lamented the oft sidelining of the women's suffrage in the legislative agenda. In an editorial published in the *Woman's Home Journal* in November 1928 ("What about women's suffrage?", 1928), women called out the apparent silence of then Senate President Manuel Quezon on the women's suffrage bill and the non-mention of it in the program of legislation that he outlined. They said that such silence was as bad as Governor General Henry Stimson's deliberate and obvious erasure of the advocacy in his messages to the Philippine Assembly. This ran in contrast to the passionate and unrelenting advocacy of two previous governor-generals, Francis Burton Harrison and Leonard Wood. This piece of information speaks a lot about the attitude of Quezon to the women's suffrage. He was a primary sponsor of the bill in his first term as a senator and when the governor-generals at that time were staunchly pro-suffrage, but he also treated the issue with silence when the current governor-general was silent about it. This leads us to the second point.

The events surrounding the independence missions revealed the politics of Manuel Quezon. It became apparent to his contemporaries like Teodoro Kalaw and Claro M. Recto that Quezon tended to be inconsistent on his views about different political issues. In 1953, Recto appraised him as someone without political philosophy. He relates that

> Quezon did what was politically useful and convenient, whether or not it was consistent with any preconceived and formal program of action. He was a good fighter and, above all, a master political strategist and tactician whose consuming and overriding objective was victory (p. 391).

This is also the reason why Quezon could be both pro- and anti-American, work for both gradual and immediate independence, be both supportive and critical of student movements, and be partisan and non-partisan depending on which fits his narrative.

With this kind of disposition and temperament, it is not surprising that Quezon, not only changed his mind on the issue of women's suffrage from his days as a resident commissioner to his days as a senator but also had his official acts and thought process on the matter be in utter incongruence with one another. Indeed, it is worthwhile to scrutinize not only Quezon's utterances on the suffrage question, but also his moments of silence. Such

silence was sharply pointed out by the *Women's Home Journal* in 1928 ("What about women's suffrage?", 1928). Political communication theorists put due emphasis on the intent behind each communication; hence in this case, it is also worthwhile to ascribe the intent behind the conspicuous silence.

The most plausible reason behind this was a prioritization of political agenda. At this point, Quezon sought political independence more than anything else. One of Quezon's important weapon in this fight was the popularity of the cause among the Filipinos. Indeed, at this point, the independence agenda was a great unifying campaign among Filipinos from different ranks. Quezon would not want to surface an issue as acrimonious as women's suffrage on a period when he should be capitalizing on unity. But aside from this, it could also be inferred that Quezon wanted to be on the good side of the Republican governor-general, who, while not expressing any direct opposition to the cause, was not enthusiastic about it either.

Debates on the Suffrage Question

Despite the historical reality of women's continuous engagements in national affairs, the conservatives still refused to acknowledge the capacity of the Filipino woman to make sound political decisions. Unfortunately, the conservative bloc in Philippine society and politics was a real and strong force to reckon with.

In the first public hearing for the suffrage bill on October 28, 1918, a number of legislators including Ricardo Gonzales Lloret and Felicisimo Gomez expressed their support for the cause (Alzona, 1937). However, arguably the most important speech made by a progressive politician was the one delivered by Rafael Palma before the senate in 1919. Palma's arguments were compelling in terms of logic and oratory. In the speech, Palma claimed that women's suffrage was a core characteristic of a modern society. For him, women's enfranchisement was a part of the "moral movements" toward justice (Palma, 1919). He argued that the opposition to the women's suffrage was no different from the opposition hurled against the education of women in secondary schools and universities a generation prior; such opposition was proven to be founded on false fears and beliefs. Indeed generations after, educated women never harmed families, institutions, and moralities. Palma further argued that the education of the Filipino woman bestowed upon her by the society would be for naught if she would not be allowed to meaningfully participate in politics and society.

Despite the compelling arguments expressed by the likes of Palma, conservative politicians like Perfecto Salas dismissed the proposal and called women ambitious albeit knowing next to nothing about politics

(Villanueva-Kalaw, 1952). In 1931, then Zambales Representative Gregorio Anonas spoke before the lower house and argued that women's participation in politics would work against her purity and selflessness, and that it would demote her from the pedestal where she was currently placed (Villanueva-Kalaw, 1952. Like other politicians who opposed universal suffrage, Anonas believed that participation in politics would soil the perceived purity of the Filipino woman, and make her greedy for power and abandon her family and (Villanueva-Kalaw, 1952).

However, one of the most recurring arguments used by anti-suffrage politicians was the assertion that majority of women at that time did not want to vote. In fact, Quezon himself, as a resident commissioner in 1914, would oppose the women's suffrage along the same line. Carlos Quirino (1935), in his biography, would quote Quezon saying that:

> I believe in the political equality of men and women. I would not subscribe to the theory that the right to vote belongs exclusively to man because of his sex; I would not withhold the franchise from women if they wanted to exercise it; but neither would I impose this duty upon them against their will … I am opposed (to suffrage) because the women of my country—practically all of them, so far as I know their will—do not want to vote. (p. 92).

Nevertheless, women leaders and male supporters of women suffrage would not let this argument slide. Their rebuttals were sharp and thorough. For example, leaders of the National Federation of Women's Club would counter the argument by citing the overwhelming number of local women's clubs supportive of the women's suffrage ("Why the Inferiority Complex," 1931). On the question on whether or not majority of Filipino women want to vote, the suffragists shot back with the challenge: "The proof of the pudding is in the eating" ("Why the Inferiority Complex," 1931, p. 31). Majority of women's clubs in the Philippines had already expressed a "preponderant sentiment in favor of extending suffrage to the women" ("Dilatory," 1931, p. 31), and if the legislators want to prove this, the only way is to give them the chance to practice this right. Mariano de Castro (1931) also wrote for the *Woman's Home Journal* and argued that to say that women were not interested in suffrage was simply false because "(t)here is not a single instance of a man suffrage movement so persistent, uncompromising, and self-sacrificing as the women's suffrage movement" (p. 30). And even if it is true that women did not want to vote, granting women this right would still infringe on their preference because "the right to vote is not mandatory but

discretionary" (p. 30).

One important event occurred in September of 1931 when the Committee on the Revision of Laws of the lower house held a hearing on women's suffrage (Villanueva-Kalaw, 1952). The public hearing provided a convenient and meaningful space for suffragists to argue for their causes. In the said hearing, suffragists and politicians manifested different justifications for the approval of the women's suffrage.

For the likes of suffragists Encarnacion Alzona and Concepcion Felix Rodriguez, giving women the right to vote is a step toward a better representative government that gives voice to the half of the population (Villanueva-Kalaw, 1952). Pilar Hidalgo Lim, on the other hand, insisted that before Filipino men can demand full and irrevocable independence from the United States, they should first grant the Filipino women political independence and freedom (Villanueva-Kalaw, 1952). Josefa Llanes Escoda argued along the lines of the traditional roles of women, i.e. assisting their husbands in politics (Villanueva-Kalaw, 1952). She asserted that women's participation in elections is just another way for them to help their husbands. Others like Asuncion Perez and Josefa Jara Martinez insisted that women should be allowed to vote for the simple reason that suffrage is and should be universal (Villanueva-Kalaw, 1952).

Dr. Maria Paz Mendoza Guanzon had an interesting way of defending women's suffrage. She essentially argued that if her male servants can vote, then she, a woman of good education and higher social status could not be any less qualified (Villanueva-Kalaw, 1952). Guanzon's argument was interesting because on the one hand, she attacked the idea that all men are politically more qualified than women to vote (setting herself in comparison with her male servants), and on the other hand she implied that someone like her who belonged to the upper class is more qualified than those who belonged in the lower class like her male cook and gardeners. It is noteworthy to observe the irony in this argument because while fighting for the political equality between men and women by saying that women are just as adroit as men when it comes to politics, Guanzon made an assertion that a person can be more politically astute or perhaps simply more entitled than others based on her class or social status.

The most decisive moment of defeat for the Filipino suffragists however happened in the 1934 Commonwealth Constitutional Convention. In his recounting of the proceeding of the convention, lawyer Jose Aruego (1936) narrated in detail how the delegates of the convention debated the question on suffrage. In his account, Aruego mentioned that "(a)ny observer could easily tell that one of the greatest fights in the Convention would be that on women's suffrage" (p. 216). The battle started at the Convention Committee

on Suffrage headed by a staunch opponent of women's enfranchisement, Jose Altavas.

In the said committee, the oppositionists had an easy victory despite the efforts mustered by women leaders like Pilar Lim, Ines Villa, and Avelina Lorenzana (Aruego, 1936). In the report that the committee sent to the convention president, Claro M. Recto, they explicitly refused to state the reason behind their decision in withdrawing the women's suffrage granted in Act 4112. However they mentioned the core idea, which was "the sweet womanliness of the Philippine women should be pro(t)ected from political strife and passion in order that sweet home may not lose any of its sweetness" (p. 216). The committee's resolution read: "Resolved, that the right of suffrage under the Constitution be granted to male citizens only" (p. 217).

When the resolution reached the Convention, lengthy debate ensued (Aruego, 1936). Old timers on the pro-suffrage line delivered their pieces including Senator Rafael Palma and Camilo Osias, while new and young allies like Wenceslao Vinzons and Delegates Joven, Cuaderno, Buendia, Saguin, Sevilla, Delgado, and Moncado also expressed their support (Aruego, 1936). On the other side were Delegates Sotto, Carin, and Guzman, with Committee Chairman Altavas as their leader (Aruego, 1936). In the floor debate, it was observable that both sides agree that women are capable of making political decisions. However, as Aruego (1936) summarized, the opposition anchored their arguments on the following:

> that there was no popular demand for suffrage by Filipino women themselves; that women's suffrage would tend to disrupt family unity; and that it would plunge to women into the quagmire of politics, dragging them from the pedestal of honor in which they had therefore been placed. (p. 217)

To these assertions, pro-suffrage delegates replied on the fairness that the convention is obligated to bestow to women, especially since legislation had been passed a year prior that already granted women their right to vote (Aruego, 1936). Pro-suffrage delegates demanded that women be given the chance to prove that they are indeed deserving of this political right (Aruego, 1936). In addition, pro-suffrage in the convention contested their opponents position by saying that:

> the extension of suffrage to (women) would make them more interested in the management of the affairs of the government; and that it was necessary as a matter of justice, to say the least, to extend the frontiers of democracy to our

> women who labored hard side by side with our men for the progress and development of the country." (Aruego, 1936, p. 217)

In these debates participated in by an all-male delegation, women leaders of the suffrage movement expressed their highly significant piece in a petition written and signed by Pilar Hidalgo Lim, Concepcion F. De Rodriguez, Pura Villanueva-Kalaw, Geronima Pecson, Maria Kalaw Katigbak, and Josefa Llanes Escoda (Aruego, 1936). The petition contained strong words and arguments. They demanded that: "It is not a matter of plebiscite nor specific numbers. It is a right earned, deserved and therefore claimed" (Aruego, 1936, p. 218). One of their finer points stated, "(u)nder the law women suffer penalties, are summoned before the courts by law—laws they have had not voice in making—and pay taxes. 'Taxation without representation is tyranny' and more so in 1934 than in 1776" (Aruego, 1936, p. 219)

Nevertheless, despite the strong statements from the women themselves, women's suffrage was not granted as an immediate constitutional right in that Convention (Aruego, 1936). In Aruego's (1936) assessment, the odds were against the suffragists especially when the chair of the Convention Committee on Suffrage Jose Altavas and Convention President Claro M. Recto were themselves against the enfranchisement of women. The same was the assessment of Alzona (1937). She related how an editor of a prominent Manila newspaper told her even before the suffrage debate in the convention, that the delegation was "strongly against women's suffrage and it would certainly kill the new law" (p. 93). The anti-suffrage forces were so strong in the said convention that "(e)ven the delegates who had helped to pass the women's suffrage act as members of the Ninth Legislature were indifferent, swayed by the strong opposition in the convention" (p. 94-95).

In the end, an amendment proposed by a certain delegate Lopez triumphed. It read:

> "Resolved, that the right of suffrage under the constitution be granted to male citizens only; Provided, however, that the National Legislature shall extend the right of suffrage to women if, in a plebiscite held for that purpose, no less than three hundred thousand women otherwise qualified should vote affirmatively" (Aruego, 1936, p. 220).

This approved resolution responds directly to one of the major premises of the anti-suffrage group: Filipino women did not want to vote.

Quezon and the Woman Vote

In this gamut of discourses, it is important to locate the engagements of the Commonwealth's most influential man, Manuel L. Quezon, in the national question of women's suffrage. As the most powerful Filipino government leader at that juncture, it must be understood that Quezon's political will would influence the fate of the women's suffrage victory. In doing so, we aim to construct the political stature of women in the Commonwealth period; a period mired with various contradictions in terms of rhetoric on social justice and persistent poverty; democratic tutelage and authoritarian tendency; nationalism and imperialism; and transition and continuities.

Women's situations are not to be exempted in such contradictions. This will be demonstrated in Quezon's opinions and declarations regarding the issue, as evident in news articles, letters, speeches that he delivered, and a biographical account written in the period leading to and immediately after the plebiscite on April 30, 1937.

On September 30, 1936, Commonwealth Act No. 34, An Act to provide for the holding of a Plebiscite on the question of women's suffrage, was approved. The act was pursuant to the previously discussed Article V of the Constitution. It stated that women of Filipino citizenship, who are 21 years of age and above, resident of the country for at least a year, and of the municipality where she intends to vote for at least six months, and possess qualifications similar to the male voter may cast their ballots.

The day after the approval of the plebiscite, October 1, 1936, the *Graphic* reported that Quezon has already publicly expressed his unequivocal support for women's right to vote ("Quezon favors woman suffrage," 1936). The paper claimed that Quezon was a a leading advocate of women's suffrage advocate and quoted the president saying, "I was one of the original advocates of women's suffrage in the Philippines. In the first session of the first Philippine Senate, on my own initiative, I presented a bill giving the women the right to vote" (para 2.). In the same short article, Quezon also committed that he would not let the plebiscite be hindered on the grounds of fund shortage, saying that he would see to it that the needed 150,000 pesos or more would be provided. Indeed, accounts of hardline suffragists would consistently and unequivocally testify to the contributions of Quezon to the movement ("Quezon favors woman suffrage," 1936). In her narrative, Villanueva-Kalaw recounted Quezon's speech as a senate president where he stated that he was and always had been for the right of women to cast their ballots (Villanueva-Kalaw, 1952). Alzona (1937), another known suffragist, also put Quezon on the pedestal in the struggle for women's suffrage.

According to Alzona (1937), Quezon being the most influential man at that time helped the plebiscite a great deal by merely expressing his support for the women's suffrage. Upon finding out that Quezon was supporting the

suffrage, local and municipal politicians started endorsing it, not because they agree that suffrage must be extended to women but because they wanted to please and gain the favor of the president. For Alzona, "(t)he triumph of women's suffrage is [Quezon's] triumph. Had it not been for his public endorsement of the question, it was doubtful if the Filipino women could get the franchise through the plebiscite" (page 104).

A month before the scheduled plebiscite, Quezon addressed the nation from Washington DC regarding women's suffrage and Philippine Independence (Ravelo, 1937). He reiterated his support by calling on all qualified Filipino women, not only to register but to vote a resounding yes on the question. Various newspapers seconded Quezon's appeal. Pilar Ravelo (1937) of *Manila Bulletin* enjoined anti-suffragists and those who were apathetic to the cause "to weigh carefully every word said [by the president] on the suffrage" (para. 3). In the same speech Quezon (1937) stated that "The Filipino woman is the equal of the best in the world and there is no reason why she should not enjoy all the rights and privileges of women in more progressive countries" (para. 3). The president also invoked all the men in the country to encourage and seek the participation of their mothers, sisters, and wives in politics. He said: "I hope all the men of the Philippines will be willing to seek the advice and collaboration of their mothers, wives, and daughters in public affairs just as they seek them in their private business" (para. 2).

The first two years of the Commonwealth were crucial times in Quezon's attempt to stabilize his legitimacy and cement his leadership and influence if he wished to stay in power. It can be argued that his government's agenda on the women's suffrage is a part of a larger program, which included other programs like the Social Justice Program. The alarming rise of labor and peasant organizations, consolidating themselves in party formations and constituting opposition, was definitely not healthy for Quezon's agenda of hastening Philippine independence and securing a longer term of presidency (Terami-Wada, 2014). Indeed, Quezon seemed to see the women suffrage campaign corollary to the Social Justice Program. In his speech before the National Federation of Women's Club on November 25, 1936, he stated:

> This Government being determined to carry out a policy which means everything to our country—the policy of social justice, I wish to emphasize the necessity not only of the Filipino women's taking part in the discussion of political questions in the Philippines, but also of exercising their influence in their respective localities.

> Women, if given a share in the administration of our Government, can do more towards the promotion of social justice in the Philippines than when such a task is left in the hands of men alone, for women have a keener sense of justice than men. (para. 7-8)

In the same trope, aside from publicly expressing his support for women's suffrage, the president also supported maternity leaves and believed that female nurses who marry should be allowed to keep their job (Gripaldo, 1997). In a sense, women's suffrage is one of the many magnum opuses that Quezon consciously forwarded in order to reinforce his political capital.

Carlos Quirino (1935) always attributed Quezon's changes in mind and opinion to his good politics. This is especially true regarding his opinion on suffrage. Despite his claims that he consistently forwarded the cause of women's suffrage, it was recorded that in 1914, Quezon, as an assemblyman and a Resident Commissioner in the United States, was of a different opinion:

> I believe in the political equality of men and women. I would not subscribe to the theory that the right to vote belongs exclusively to man because of his sex; I would not withhold the franchise from women if they wanted to exercise it; but neither would I impose this duty upon them against their will… I am opposed (to suffrage) because the women of my country—practically all of them, so far as I know their will— do not want to vote. (Quezon as quoted in Quirino, 1935, p. 92)

However, it will be wrong to say that Quezon was lying when he declared that in his first term as a senator, he advocated for the right of women to vote. In 1916, a mere two years after his quoted opinion above, Quezon, with Rafael Palma, actively campaigned for it in the senate ("Quezon favors women's suffrage," 1936). This was a huge shift from someone who admitted being an anti-suffrage into someone who became one of its primary advocates.

Curiously, Quezon's staunch advocacy on women's suffrage was watered down in the drafting of the 1935 Constitution. Instead of explicitly including a provision on women's suffrage in its draft, the matter was taken still as a subject of plebiscite, when it is known that Quezon needed only to snap his finger in the chamber full of men at his disposal and have the suffrage as an automatic constitutional right. He uttered his explanation to this on the same November 25 speech:

> And so, when the Constitution, or rather, the framers of the Constitution demanded that before you are given the right to vote a definite number of qualified women electors so expressed themselves affirmatively, their purpose was to see whether the women are interested or not in acquiring such privilege. (Quezon, 1936, para. 1)

Such a statement still resonated his view on women's suffrage in 1914. Despite his claimed support for the cause, he still maintained his belief that a number of women did not like to have the right to vote (Quezon, 1936). In the same vein, he warned the Filipino suffragists to brace themselves for the opposition that they may encounter in the course of their campaign. In simple terms, despite his other claims, these statements prove that Quezon saw that women's suffrage is a granted privilege and not a right.

It must be noted that Quezon's repeated assertions that women were not interested in voting were identified as one of the main arguments of the anti-suffrage bloc in the Constitutional Convention—similar to Quirino's account of the president's different position on the women's suffrage in 1914. In the Constitutional Convention, Aruego (1936) claimed that one of the deciding factor on the defeat of the women's suffrage is a letter sent by then Senate President Quezon "whose influence was still felt in the ranks of the delegates affiliated with the majority party" (p. 219). According to Aruego, Quezon sent a letter to Convention President Recto, which the latter revealed during the caucus of the majority party. Quezon expressed that

> (H)e was in favor of extending suffrage to women only if a sufficient number of them would approve of the idea in a referendum, with the understanding of course that they should also assume the civil obligations of men to the government. (p. 219)

Aruego (1936) further narrated that the letter was understood by the party delegates "to mean that President Quezon was against the extension of the right of suffrage to women" (p. 219). So while we cannot ascribe Quezon's instructions to Recto as an expression of his opposition to women's suffrage per se, it is quite telling that Quezon, despite expressing his support for the suffragists and supporting the suffrage bill as a senator and as the senate president, was not a hard-line pro-suffrage politician. Furthermore, while it is a fact that Quezon changed his pronouncements on the women's suffrage from his days as an assemblyman and resident commissioner to his stint in the senate, Quezon maintained his idea that women did not

want suffrage. This also confirms Alzona's reappraisal of Quezon's influence when she said that local politicians only supported the suffrage on the year of the plebiscite to please the chief executive. What she missed to mention, however, was the crucial fact that the plebiscite became a necessity in the first place because of the very same influence.

In pushing the logic implied in the assertion that women were not interested in voting, the other prominent pronouncement of Quezon (1939a) that "men willingly gave (the suffrage)" (para. 8) to women comes more viable. Quirino's (1935) explanation for Quezon's change of heart on the question was well within the same trope. He claimed that while Quezon had a radical change of attitude in this particular question, and that his sincerity was proven by the fact that he never changed his opinion since, the president was not to force his views on his legislators, leaving them instead to freely decide on the matter. This however is characteristically inconsistent with the rest of Quirino's picture of Quezon as a shrewd lawyer and a clever politician who always convinced the fellows he was in transaction with, either through charisma or undeniable influence.

Quezon's inadequate understanding of the value of women's movement is further shown in an article in *Philippines Herald* dated April 9, 1937 ("Woman suffrage from all angles," 1937). A perplexing statement by Quezon quoted in this article reads:

> To the women I want to say this. This is your opportunity to secure all the rights and privileges that the women of other countries enjoy. *The opportunity is not yours to mix in politics every day, attend meetings and make a lot of noise which is unbecoming to ladies*. What I mean is, that this is your opportunity to secure for yourselves that you and they deserve [sic]. (emphasis mine) (para. 7)

This particular statement demonstrates that for Quezon, the value of women's participation in politics is enclosed and limited to suffrage and that other forms of political participation and contestation is "unbecoming to ladies" and should not be encouraged. This is indicative of Quezon's archaic thinking when it comes to women's rights and participation. This is also revealing of Quezon's specific interests on the women suffrage campaign. It seems as though it was never his intention to advance women's empowerment in the first place. Instead, it may be argued that Quezon's support was only for the advantage of electoral support that he can potentially acquire in granting women's right to vote. In this sense, his support for suffrage thus was a tokenistic political mileage that he advanced

for his own leverage and was bereft of any deeper appreciation of women's deprivation.

His stance became even more confusing in a speech he delivered on October 28, 1939, before the National Assembly at the 21st anniversary of the first meeting for women's suffrage and civil rights and social responsibilities of women, and more than two years after the plebiscite. He stated that women's right to vote should not be expected to deliver anything new or any groundbreaking benefit for the country.

> There is no special reason why we should expect anything unusual, because women have been given the right to vote; and those who believe the contrary, are simply deceiving themselves. Why have we granted the women the right to vote? Simply because we consider them as capable—or as incapable—of voting as the men. I am emphasizing this fact so that the country, as well as the women themselves, may not be disappointed if nothing miraculous happens, which is quite possible, merely by giving the women their suffrage. (Quezon, 1939a, para. 4)

Maria Kalaw-Katigbak, daughter of Pura Villanueva Kalaw, called the president out on these statements, for which she received an irate reply. In a letter sent to Kalaw-Katigbak dated November 4, 1939, by the office of president Quezon, he admonished Kalaw-Katigbak as "insolent" and "deserves no answer." He continued telling her:

> You are the type of the superficially so-called educated women of the younger generation. You are the type of Filipina who has lost the gracious dignity and self-restraint of her race. You believe you know it all simply because you have attended a college in an American university and secured a degree of Master of Arts. Having that piece of paper, you presume to give me a lecture as if I were one of the students who had the misfortune of having you as an instructor. (Quezon, 1939b, para. 1)

While no copy of Kalaw-Katigbak's letter was found, the November 4 letter, and another letter dated November 5 written on behalf of the president, implied that she commented on the president's speech and accused him of making fun of the women and that he did not have genuine interest in the cause. The November 5 letter read:

> Why should the President attend the celebration of the foundation of the League of Women Voters, busy as he is with the affairs of State, if he did not have genuine interest in the work of the League? The remarks of the President were made in earnest and he made them because he does not want the people to be disappointed by expecting too much from the enfranchisement of our women. Above all, he wanted to remind everybody that the first and most important duty of women is that of motherhood and rearing of the children to be good men and women, and law-abiding public-spirited citizens. (Quezon, 1939c, p. 2)

The same letter also did not fail to reiterate that Quezon "advocated this cause after he was elected President of the Philippines. It was through his influence that the provincial and national officials worked for the success of the plebiscite …" (Quezon, 1939c, p. 1). It is worth noting that the November 4 letter was concluded with: "Copies of this letter I am sending to your father, mother, and to your husband" (Quezon, 1939b, p 1.).

This was consistent with the president's statement in the speech at question that while he did not intend to take the credit for the success of women's suffrage, he can say as "a matter of historical record" that without his aggressive support, the plebiscite would not have garnered the necessary vote for the approval of the suffrage because "majority of you women were against your own suffrage" (Quezon, 1939a, para. 6).

The letter does not only reflect Quezon's patronizing view of women, his claim also goes back to the earlier discussion on how Quezon's discourse and narrative on the victory of the movement directs the credit to his leadership and not to the women as a collective who organized and campaigned for the plebiscite and for the subsequent landslide victory. This is in spite of the historical fact that he was speaking on the occasion of celebrating the 21st anniversary of the movement which started 17 years before he became president.

The women's suffrage plebiscite held on April 30, 1937, resulted in a monumental victory for the woman's vote, with a whopping 91 percent of voters or 447,725 women saying "yes" and only 44,307 voting "no" (Villanueva-Kalaw, 1952). The 1939 census recorded that the Philippine Islands had a population of 16,000,303. The male population was at 8,065,281, while the female population numbered at 7,935,022 (Concepcion, 1977). The voter turnout in the women suffrage plebiscite was pegged at 492,032. This is 6.2 percent of the total women population of the islands. The 91

percent yes vote was evidence disproving the repetitive claims by Quezon that majority of Filipino women did not want to vote.

Indeed, despite his undeniable help in the finalization of the universal suffrage in the country, Quezon maintained his patronizing view of women. It was not only once that Quezon mentioned how men leaders in the government "gave" women their right to vote. This is apparent in his 1939 statement where he said that: "I have to warn the women that they have not wrested that right from the men. The men willingly gave it to them" (Quezon, 1939a, para. 7). The *Graphic* issue on October 1, 1936, contained a positive editorial cartoon (fig. 1) portraying a caricature of Quezon and an illustration of a Filipina. In the cartoon, Quezon was giving a bouquet of flowers to the Filipina symbolizing the right to vote, while the elated woman accepts the bouquet.

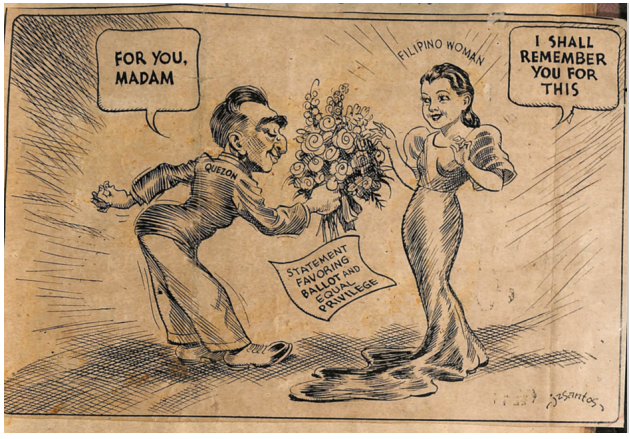

Figure 1. An editorial cartoon depicts President Manuel Quezon giving a bouquet of flower to a Filiipino woman (Santos, 1936). The bouquet symbolizes the women's right to vote. The woman replies "I shall remember you for this!", implying that their enfranchisement was a gift given by Quezon and not a product of ardent struggle that lasted three decades.

The illustration states a lot in terms of how Quezon hoisted himself on the national question of the women's suffrage. It is impressive indeed that the president had shown ample political will toward a political campaign that he consistently advocated for since he was a senator. The cartoon, however, was not flattering if seen from the standpoint of the women's movement. The image of a man, handing a bouquet of flowers to the Filipina, with a dialogue balloon saying: "For you, madam," impresses the idea that the women's suffrage was handed over to the Filipino women, like a gift that they should be thankful for. The Filipina, in response to this had her balloon saying: "I shall remember you for this!"

This representation potentially devalued the success of the women's suffrage. It was made to appear as though, the right to vote of women was given on a silver platter and was not a product of decades of the women's movement. It shifts all of the credits, therefore, to Quezon, showing that ultimately, women's enfranchisement and political rights were male

politicians' endowment to women, and that this "gift" is something that women ought not to forget and shall forever be thankful for. In turn, this democratic victory did not become a battle won or results of rights asserted; but a gift, a subject of patronage and gratitude. The caricature shown above is emblematic of Quezon's posture on the woman's question and is actually reflective of the claims that were it not for Quezon's support, women's suffrage would not happen as soon as it did in 1937.

Some may say that it is unfair, even anachronistic, to negatively assess Quezon's views on gender equality. Indeed, the gender consciousness and awareness at that time were really behind compared to that of today. It is even arguable that Quezon was a bit advanced for his time. The Philippines, after all, was among the first Asian countries to allow women to exercise suffrage. However, looking at the way he hoisted himself on the top of the campaign, despite the fact that he allowed the repeal of the previously passed law on women suffrage in the Constitution whose drafting he had immense influence in (Aruego, 1936), we could see how Quezon perceived women's suffrage as an act of patronage and not a hard-earned victory.

Moreover, assuming without conceding that the claim that women themselves were not interested in voting, this should not have been an acceptable reason for leaders like Quezon, Altavas, and others to not pursue the cause, especially in the context of democracy. Senator Rafael Palma in his 1919 speech for women's suffrage proclaimed:

> To me it makes no difference that the number of those now demanding [women's suffrage] is small and insignificant. It would even make no difference to me if the women of our country did not demand or want it at all. Where rights fundamentally in accordance with the spirit of our institutions and with the ideals of our times are to be granted, I would not consult those who are entitled to demand them, but would give them without the asking, because it would be just. (p. 42)

Palma's appreciation of the women's vote in 1919 greatly differed from Quezon's view, and that Quezon's repeated assertion that women did not want to vote (until 1939) was more consistent to that of the anti-suffrage politicians than the pro-suffrage ones like Palma. For Palma, legislators should not be hampered by the unpopularity of a particular agenda as long as it is pursuant to what is just and moral. Palma's 1919 speech thus had already answered what anti-suffrage Filipino politicians' premise on their opposition: that women did not like to vote.

It is a matter of historical and public record that both Quezon and Palma

were sponsors of bills for women's suffrage as legislators and consistently expressed support for the cause until its final passage in 1937. Despite this similarity, the two politicians' arguments and stance on the matter greatly differed. Rafael Palma (1919) recognized that political equality is a non-negotiable value in a modern society and that political rights, like the right to vote, are inalienable rights. For Quezon, women should prove first that they want it if they are to be granted their right to vote (Quirino, 1935; Aruego, 1936; Quezon, 1939). For Palma (1919), it should not matter whether women like to vote or not, he will give it to them anyway because for him, that defines justice in a modern society. Upholding equal suffrage should not be determined by what the constituency desires but by the principle of democracy that grants equal chances for all its citizens.

It remains a fact that the suffrage movement in the country was a product of continuous engagement from the earliest feminist associations and women's organizations in the early part of the 1900s. In the long history of women's plight and struggle, the victory of the suffrage movement was a high point in the movement. But Quezon (1939a) characterized the campaign as easier compared to the suffragist movement in other countries:

> It is only in this country that the women acquired suffrage easily. In America and England the women struggled long and hard, and at times employed physical violence. On the other hand, here you received that right without exerting great efforts. That does not, however, diminish the credit which belongs to the organizers of the League, for courage was required on their part at that time when the Filipinos, both men and women, laughed at the mention of women's suffrage. I doubt very much if without their initiative the Filipino women would be exercising that right today. But, while I recognize that fact, I have to warn the women that they have not wrested that right from the men. The men willingly gave it to them. (para 7)

It is without a doubt that women's suffrage was a landmark legislation that can be ranked with the Social Justice Program, the Jones Law, and the Tydings-McDuffie Law. However, upon learning the ways Quezon stood on the question of the women's vote, it becomes imperative to question the depth of his commitment and appreciation of women's enfranchisement. When the Suffrage Act of 1933 was repealed despite his immense influence over the party that comprised the majority of the delegation in Constitutional Convention, then it is worthy to ask the indisputability of his sincerity in the years that he supported the bill as a senator. His position on the question

during the Constitutional Convention demonstrated that he might have changed his position on the question of woman's vote since 1914, but his consciousness and belief remained the same: the women's right to vote is only valid under certain conditions.

Quezon, in working on the women's suffrage, worked in the framework of patronage politics. This was illustrated in Alzona's (1937) claim that local politicians only supported the cause because they wanted to gain Quezon's favor. Consequently, Quezon might have granted women their suffrage, but he did not make Philippine politics any less sexist. Aside from this, the repeated assertion that women did not want to vote (Quirino, 1935; Quezon, 1939a), thus his conditional support for women's enfranchisement is also indicative of Quezon's inclination to patronage politics, in lieu of a principled one: he needed first the approval of the larger constituency to back up a cause because doing otherwise may lose him popularity and support. Finally, Quezon's claim for the credit on the victory of women's suffrage (Quezon 1939a; Quezon 1939c), both subtle and apparent, raises him as a patron of political equality between men and women.

The plebiscite, which was a public spectacle, would not have been necessary if his undeniable influence had been utilized toward the upholding of the 1933 Women Suffrage Law, and if he had maintained his commitment to Act 4112 that he himself sponsored as a senator. But such would not make women's suffrage be credited to his Commonwealth government; thus, the need for the well-publicized and historic plebiscite. The plebiscite thus, was political acrobatics of some sort, which capitalized on the struggle for women's suffrage in order to create a spectacle where Quezon emerged, ever the gentleman who gallantly provided women a huge favor by letting them vote again, after his constitution disabled them. Quezon hijacked the political victory of a sustained suffragist movement, while the legacy of women's collective action and success was once again relegated to the dustbin of history.

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