

Barangay: Grassroots Democracy or Clan Politics?

Without programs for desperately-needed economic necessities, the barangay as a political unit is an oxymoron: A governance entity that is in theory cut out for bringing about much-needed change in grassroots communities but in practice serves as an appendage of clan politics where political patronage and corruption thrive.

By the Policy Study, Publication, and Advocacy (PSPA)
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Effectively empowered and mobilized to deliver basic services, the country's 42,025 barangays can serve as the community-based engines for democratic governance and development. The barangay serves as "the primary planning and implementing unit of government policies, plans, programs, projects, and activities in the community." (Section 384, 1991 Local Government Code) Its governing council, Sangguniang Barangay, exercises legislative, executive, and quasi-judicial powers in order to enact local measures that enhance the enforcement of laws, deliver basic services, and settle local disputes.

Despite the potential opportunities for governance and development at the grassroots, the barangay council attracts a low appreciation among many Filipinos. Elections are held within the barangay itself yet the average voter turnout is 67 percent. As in past elections, the Oct. 25, 2010 elections were marred by killings, vote buying, and election failures in many places due to Comelec ill-preparedness.

The barangay is a microcosm of oligarchic politics, misallocation of resources, and corruption. It serves as an extension of ruling political dynasties and as a base of future traditional politicians. Many candidates for punong barangay (barangay captain) are the children or relatives of the local mayor or councilors. It is also a stepping stone for future municipal and congressional leaders. Many members of Congress started their political career in the barangay. Candidates for barangay posts – totaling 336,200 – also receive backing from congressmen and other local politicians who seek to maintain their power base particularly during elections.

These practices make the barangays' constitutionally-mandated "non-partisanship" and "independence" a farce and infuse their elections with the highly-partisan, personality-oriented, and fraud- and violence-ridden elements seen in the national and local polls. "Village democracy" is promoted by

negative example through rampant vote buying, harassment, and other types of fraud. Clan politics in the barangay where elections are dominated by influential families is bound to create and sustain local dynasties and these serve either as appendage or extension by kinship of bigger political dynasties.

Ineffective tools

Reduced to playing the role as political mechanisms of traditional politicians, barangays in the main have not become effective tools for community government in a manner that makes governance accessible to the people. If at all convened, the barangay assembly which serves as the interactive consultative forum between the local government on the one hand and the residents and NGOs, on the other, is just pro forma with decision making on major plans largely made by the barangay executives. The local government code mandates the barangay to institute people empowerment mechanisms through the boards of health, women, and human rights but hardly is this followed.

Aside from supplying votes for influential politicians during national and local elections, the barangay through its peace council is used as a tool for counter-insurgency. Being under the presidency through the interior and local government department and with the presence of military and police forces that exert armed authority in the community the barangay supplies the para-military elements and intelligence-surveillance networks essential for counter-insurgency. In this program, barangays bear the brunt of militarization and human rights violations that have enraged both local and international human rights groups.

Economic development, not a priority

The barangay is touted as the frontline unit for combating poverty and addressing basic social services like health and education. However, in general economic development such as

livelihood programs receives no priority in barangay development funds (BDFs). Programs, activities, and projects (PAPs) are often equated with barangay hall improvement, new basketball courts, "beautification," and other infrastructures that have superficial impact on the community's economy or to "conferences" and "seminars" that are actually a front for junkets. Corruption in the form of kickbacks laces these PAPs including those funded by pork barrel funds given to favored barangays.

In the end, community residents are left in the dark on how funds are spent since many barangay units do not publish any report as the local government code demands. Many residents are unaware that the barangay sources its funds from: 35 percent of 40 percent of total government revenues; 20 percent of the internal revenue allotment (IRA); 30 percent of community tax collections; 25-35 percent of real property tax; and other revenues derived from barangay clearances and business permits. Many barangays are also beneficiaries of foreign grants and "corporate social responsibility" (CSR) projects.

Without programs for desperately-needed economic necessities, the barangay as a political unit is an oxymoron: A governance entity that in theory is cut out for bringing about much-needed change in grassroots communities but in practice serves as an appendage of clan politics where political patronage and corruption thrive. Opportunities for making governance participatory are lost and so are favorable conditions for human growth and strengthening public trust in government. The barangay is yet another layer of public administration that reflects a major institutional weakness of the national bureaucracy, where all the bad traits of governance are put to practice -- political patronage, corruption and nepotism.

Reflective of the national bureaucracy, the mechanisms of transparency and accountability are unknown in the barangay.

For the people

What then are the chances of making the barangay work in the service of the people?

There is actually no shortage of material lessons and tested ideas that can be harnessed toward instituting transformative politics in the barangay. Paradigms in community work, mass mobilization principles, and even alternative land use, literacy, health practices, environment protection, and disaster preparedness have been accumulated and enriched by recent decades of social advocacy by people's organizations, NGOs, party-list groups, and people-oriented institutions.

There is no dearth as well in the number of community mass leaders and change multipliers who can be mobilized to plant the seeds of people empowerment in the community toward using the barangay as an institution for real change. Given the much-needed reorientation and inspired by the "politics of change," even the present crop of barangay leaders with proven performance can help provide the backbone of a new community politics and governance.

The barangay has organic functions and units where those working for politics of change can engage in, such as fielding or supporting candidates as well as playing an active role in barangay assemblies and programs. Engagement in barangay politics can be enhanced through community-based organizations equipped with the mission and skills of alternative governance. In due time, this new barangay politics will minimize if not put to irrelevance the power of clan politics.

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