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Genuine elections can only take place in a society that has ridden itself of the dominating power of political families. They can only happen in a new society where the social and political structures provide equal opportunities for participative governance toward enhancing the quality of life.

Political families: Forever in the grip of power

By the Policy Study, Publication, and Advocacy
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Until the country undergoes a sweeping social change, elections will remain to be monopolized by political families with no substantial impact on the people's lives. Not having served as an accountability mechanism, Philippine elections are exclusivist enabling political families to persist through generations while non-dynastic but otherwise qualified aspirants are shut out.

The latest study by CenPEG* on election outcomes in the country's congressional districts and governorships from post-Marcos 1987 to 2010 gives a snapshot of the continuing dominance and resilience of about 178 political families of which 100 (56%) are old elites or those before Marcos' martial rule while 78 (44%) are new ones. The most dominant of these families won all elections for governor and House seats during the period, the study further reveals. Six provinces – either high-income or low-income – have been ruled by a single family. A typical example is the Ortega family of La Union in northern Luzon who have won all gubernatorial races since 1988 whilst dominating the province's first congressional district from 1969-2010.

Based on regional distribution, Regions III (Central Luzon), IV-A (Calabarzon), and XI (three Davao provinces) host the biggest number of political families

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averaging at least three in each province. Of the 77 provinces covered by the CenPEG study, 72 (94%) have political families, i.e., at least two members of a family have won a congressional and/or gubernatorial seat. The average number of political families in each province is 2.31. These regions have the oldest and most resilient political families, such as the Josons (Nueva Ecija), Cojuangcos and Aquinos (Tarlac), Nepomucenos and Lazatins (Pampanga), San Luis and Chipecos (Laguna), Alcalas and Envergas (Quezon), and the Rodriguez family (Rizal).

Interestingly, provinces that are more populous and relatively “richer” with at least two House districts are more conducive to the rise and consolidation of dominant political families. Conversely, poorer and less-populated provinces with single congressional districts are less conducive to generating and sustaining bigger numbers of political families. Illustrative of the former provinces ranked according to human development index (HDI) based on income, health, and education indicators during the period are Cavite, with three political families; Pampanga, 6; and Laguna, 3. Among the latter set of provinces are Apayao, 2; Kalinga, 0; and Abra, 2.

The study also suggests that provinces in Luzon and Visayas, where exist the oldest and most enduring political families – with many tracing their roots to the

colonial era – have been the traditional centers of landed and business power, the export crop economy, and favored access to national state resources. Their counterparts in the poorer provinces have less resources and machineries to expand their power bases that allow political families to capture and consolidate high elective positions. Despite their resilience, some political families suffer electoral setbacks under the hands of new families that eventually consolidate to form new centers of political domain. The system perpetuates old political families and serves as the breeding ground of new dynasties.

The election outcomes of 1987-2010 show many families winning elections for no less than 8 consecutive terms – or 24 straight years. Yet many of these provinces controlled perpetually by political families show low or very low HDI, e.g., Sijuijor, Albay, Camiguin, Sorsogon, Negros Oriental, and Davao Oriental.

Introduced as a formal political institution by American colonialists, the election has served to provide legitimacy and resiliency to the traditional elite. Held regularly as a constitutional mechanism where voters choose their candidates for national and local positions, the election has been equated with democracy even if it provides unfair competition to non-dynastic candidates and voters themselves don't really get to choose the candidates they believe have the heart of the masses. There is increasing skepticism among many people about the viability of the electoral exercise given the absence of any tangible evidence that it has resulted in effective governance and, more important, in improving the quality of life. In the current presidential elections, this widespread frustration with the ineptness of traditional politicians has also pushed many voters to gamble with strong, authoritarian figures perceived to be more effective in addressing the endemic dysfunctions of the political system.

The key to understanding the persistence of political families and their dominance as a permanent fixture of electoral exercises is to look at this so-called modern

institution as being borne out of a feudal, oligarchic society. Enforced by colonial powers, this modern bourgeois political institution was implanted in a backward society dominated by an oligarchic elite – political families – who subsequently used it as an instrument for power perpetuation or, more accurately, class dominance over the lower classes of peasants, workers, fisherfolk, indigenous peoples or national minorities, and other marginal sectors.

As the CenPEG study explains, political clans centralize the structures of economic and political power and are “an enduring feature of the country's social structure and political system” whose impact is to weaken state-building and obstruct democratization. Choked in the neck by powerful political clans “with narrow and exclusivist interests” state formation and democratization is deterred especially in the absence of viable political institutions like real political parties and an election that ensures fair competition and credible results.

Clearly, political families are not the archetype of democracy and accountability not only because of their centralization of power but also because their hegemony promotes social inequities, bureaucratic corruption, and plunder of state resources. They oppose real reforms like the enactment of an anti-dynasty law or measures that promote the democratic rights of the poor like minimum wages, land redistribution, and lower tax or even enhancing the Party-list system to protect it from subversion by elite politicians.

Under the system of political dynasties, Philippine elections are essentially personality- and kleptocracy-oriented preventing this process from maturing into a platform for choosing party-based policy alternatives and proven performance. With elections never been used as accountability mechanisms, their outcomes are determined by misplaced popularity, massive resources, patronage, vote buying, as well as, especially today, electronic fraud. Retrospectively, elections perpetuate illusory promises including the myth that equates popularity with reform or so-called

“democracy icons” with good governance. Since its inception some 80 years ago, the role of the Comelec is to act as mediator of political rivalry between political dynasties and to provide the blessing for winning candidates regardless of the fraud that attended their election. The commission has never been a modernizing or reform-driven agency given its lack of institutional autonomy and with many of its members believed to be involved in partisan politics and election rigging.

Genuine elections can only take place in a society that has ridden itself of the dominating power of political families. They can only happen in a new society where the social and political structures provide equal opportunities for participative governance toward enhancing the quality of life. Until these conditions are met, the country will continue to suffer the pernicious effects of dynastic rule and forever consigned in the bottom pit of Asia's development index.

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