


REJECTING “OLD-STYLE” POLITICS? Youth Participation in the Philippines

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Introduction

THE CHRONICLE OF THE PHILIPPINE NATION IS THE history of youthful aspirations for change.

Some of the major figures of the Philippine struggle of independence from Spain had barely reached adulthood when they produced their bravest deeds. José Rizal published his seminal novel *Noli Me Tangere* (which meant “Touch Me Not”) that exposed the abuses of the Spanish clergy in 1886, when he was just 25 years old. Andres Bonifacio and Emilio Jacinto, the founders of the clandestine insurgency movement, began organizing the resistance to the colonial state when they were in

PHILIPPINES		Country Background	
		Head of State	President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo
		Government	Democratic, Republic
		Capital	Manila
		Population	86,241,697 (2004 est.)
		Language	Filipino, English
		Religion	Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism
		Independence	From Spain: 12 June 1898
		Suffrage	Voting age is 18 years old, universal
		Currency	Peso
The Official Website of the Republic of the Philippines, Websites of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Wikipedia [date accessed 11 April 2005]			

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their twenties. Bonifacio's wife and comrade, Gregoria de Jesus, was just 21 years old when she joined the struggle in 1896. And Emilio Aguinaldo was only 29 years old when the flag of the First Philippine Republic was unfurled in 1898 and he assumed the presidency.

Fast-forwarding to the early 1970s, it was again a strong, socially committed youth movement that began to mobilize against another repressive regime, that of President Ferdinand Marcos. After the declaration of martial law in 1972, these youth activists provided the backbone to the organized anti-dictatorship movement throughout those dark years.

People Power of 1986, which resulted in the bloodless ouster of Marcos, was yet another landmark in Philippine history. It was made possible with the help of young volunteers who exposed electoral fraud at the hands of Marcos and provided logistical support to day-long mass mobilizations. People Power II was no different. Again, young Filipinos provided the muscle to peaceful mass actions that led to the downfall of President Joseph Estrada in 2001 over his grave misuses of power and public funds.

The contributions of the youth have not gone unnoticed. In the Philippines, there is no dearth of policies that acknowledge the significant role of civil society participation and youth involvement in nation building. However, even if the state's rhetoric is hinged on progressive language of empowerment and participation, these frameworks are continually undermined by the realities of "old-style" politics. Patronage, class and elite politics continue to undermine Philippine democratization—as will be shown in the course of this chapter.

Who are the Youth?

In the Philippines, the “Youth in Nation-Building Act” (Republic Act 8044) defines youth as:

“... the critical period in a person’s growth and development from the onset of adolescence towards the peak of mature, self-reliant and responsible adulthood comprising the considerable sector of population from the age of fifteen (15) to thirty (30) years of age.”

However, disparate operational definitions of “youth” exist across government agencies. This is shown in *Table 1*:

Table 1: Definitions of youth sector across government agencies

Government Agency	Definition
National Youth Commission (NYC)	15-30 years
Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE)	15-24 years
Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG)	15-21 years
Department of Health (DOH)	10-24 years
Department of Education, Culture and Sports (DECS)	7-18 years
Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD)	7-18 years

These variations are not unproblematic and, in fact, result in administrative overlaps. The situation also presents a formidable obstacle to systematic data collection on the sector for purposes of planning and policy formulation.

The National Youth Commission (NYC) thus has a defined youth constituency of 15 to 30 year olds, while the National Council for the Welfare of Children (CWC) is concerned with all children below 18 years of age. As will be discussed later, this may explain

the current compartmentalization of youth development interventions by the state. For as long as inter-agency mechanisms for coordination remains weak, this may result in duplication of policy recommendations, programs and projects.

Profile of the Filipino Youth

With a median age of 21, it is no understatement to say that the Philippines has a young population. Half of the population is below 21 years old. The age structure of the Philippine population is typical of many developing countries. There is a broad base, composed of a large number of children and young people, and a relatively small number of elderly at the top of the population pyramid. The dependency ratio was about 69 percent, meaning for every 100 persons in the working age group (15 to 64 years), they had to support 63 young and six old dependents (National Statistics Office, 2000).

The National Statistics Office pegged the Philippine population at 82.6 million in 2004. Young people from 15 to 30 years of age comprised 28.43 percent of the total.

In 2002, working youth accounted for 20 percent of the total number of employed persons. Unemployed youth made up 47 percent of the total number of unemployed Filipinos. The magnitude of youth unemployment should not be taken lightly. As the country's domestic capacity to absorb the growing labor force constricts (as overall unemployment stood at 11 percent in 2004), more and more young people seek jobs abroad. About 35 percent of Filipino overseas employees were between ages 15 to 20 in 2002. Six out of ten young overseas employees are female.

Gender as well as urban-rural differentials is instructive here. Young women registered a significantly lower labor force participation

rate (38.2 percent) than their male counterparts (58.7 percent) in 2002. For both sexes, unemployment rates were higher in urban areas, especially for young men. The unemployment rate for young men stood at 29.7 percent in urban areas, while in rural areas it stood at 12.2 percent. There is no available data on the percentage of young workers who are unionized (National Statistics Office, 2002).

In terms of schooling, 14.7 percent of children and youth aged 6 to 24 were out of school. Broken down by regions, the lowest incidence was registered in Cagayan Valley (10.6 percent), while the highest out-of-school rate was found in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) at 23.1 percent (National Statistics, Office 2002).

The Philippine schooling system is comprised of six or seven years of elementary school—depending on the school—and four years of secondary school or high school. After obtaining a high school degree, students are eligible to enter a vocation school (to become mechanics, hairdressers, secretaries) or they can apply for college for university degrees in science, law, education or the arts, among others.

Children enter elementary school at age 6 and enter secondary school by age 13. By the time they enter college, they are about 16 to 17 years of age. It usually takes about four years to complete an undergraduate degree, which means that Filipino graduates enter the labor market at a comparatively young age of 20 to 21 years.

The sad reality is that out of ten school-aged children, only nine enroll in first grade. Only four will finish high school. And only one will finish college.

Government census figures from the year 2000 indicate noteworthy gender differentials when it comes to school completion rates. Among academic degree holders, there were more females (57.9 percent) than males (24.1 percent). The same is true for post-baccalaureate courses, where females outnumbered males (58.2 percent versus 41.7 percent).

The dismal prospects of today's youth on education and employment need to be located within the larger context of poverty. Figures of the Asian Development Bank indicate that the Philippines had a 45.4 percent poverty incidence in 2001. The Philippine government, burdened by billions of foreign debt and low revenue collections, thus seems to be perennially strapped of resources for social development.

While poverty spares no one in its reach, the young and elderly are often the hardest hit. Those who fall through the public school system and find no options in the workforce, end up on the streets or in the hands of the criminal syndicates. Disconnected from community support systems, they often become vulnerable to substance abuse and crime. In conflict-torn Mindanao, children and youth additionally suffer from the consequences of displacement, coupled with malnutrition, poor health and psychological trauma.

What the Surveys Say: Youth and Politics

In 1996, National Youth Commission (NYC) conducted the first nationally representative survey of 15 to 30 year olds' attitudes, values, needs, aspirations and problems. This survey has not been updated since, although the NYC conducted a qualitative assessment of the situation of Filipino youth in 2004 entitled "Youth Attributes, Participation, and Service-Providers" (YAPS).

A Social Weather Stations (SWS) survey conducted in 1996 asked respondents to identify areas where government should give more attention for the youth. Unfortunately, no data on attitudinal differences between men and women is available, since the published survey does not disaggregate responses by gender. National aggregate results are shown in *Table Two*:

Table 2: Areas where government should give more attention for the youth

Response	Percent
Campaigning against illegal drugs	67
Giving scholarships to the deserving	63
Providing jobs for those who want	41
Promoting sports	37
Providing health services	34
Protecting the youth from abuse and discrimination	34
Helping those who want to have their own business	24

Source: SWS 1996

What these responses seem to suggest is that young people are not ignorant of the social problems and inequalities of Philippine society. However, becoming involved in transforming the youth's needs into policies, programs and reforms is an altogether different issue.

The survey revealed that there is an equal number of youth who claim to be active members of sports or recreational organizations and religious organizations (12 percent each). Ten percent belong to youth organizations, followed by six percent who are active in arts, music or educational organizations. Only three percent were involved in charitable organizations. Membership in political parties, labor unions and professional organizations registered a marginal one percent.

The same survey showed that a majority of 60 percent of young people are “not interested in politics.” Having a good marriage and family life, finding stable employment and having a good education ranked significantly higher in terms of priority setting.

SWS data also revealed that as of November 1997, only 14 percent of Filipinos aged 15-30 have ever participated in government youth programs. However, of those who have participated, 91 percent say that these programs are very or somewhat effective, five percent are undecided and four percent say that these are not very or not at all effective.

Considering the fact that the above survey was conducted in 1996 notwithstanding, the youth’s general attitude towards politics may not have necessarily changed much over the years. A survey commissioned by the Episcopal Commission on Youth of the Catholic Church in 2002 reveals interesting trends (cited by Rufo, 2003). Thus only 11.8 percent of young people polled believed that being a responsible voter is the best expression of love of country. Being law-abiding (35.6 percent), speaking your dialect (30.3 percent) and patronizing Philippine products (19.9 percent) ranked significantly higher.

Moreover, only four in ten say they are socially involved in one-way or the other. 41.7 percent say they’re “afraid to get involved,” followed by 30.5 percent who feel their participation “will not make a difference.” Close to 20 percent say social involvement is a “waste of time.” The fear of getting involved is not unfounded, as students and young workers may be concerned that their performance might suffer, if they become too busy with social involvements. There is also the average Filipinos’ perception of activists being “troublemakers” or even “communists.”

Another nationwide survey conducted by NFO-Trends (cited by Rimando, 2001) among respondents aged seven to 21 years of

age does little to inspire hope either. It shows that only 75 percent are able to name their local chief executive (mayor or village chief), while only half were able to identify their representative in Congress. And although young people on an average watch 10 to 14 hours of television a week, only one in two have read a newspaper in the same span of time.

Formal Processes: Bringing Young People into the Loop

The legal frameworks of the Philippine state place high premium on youth participation. The 1987 Constitution, in its declaration of principles and state policies, explicitly states that

“The State recognizes the vital role of the youth in nation-building and shall promote and protect their physical, moral, spiritual, intellectual and social well-being. It shall inculcate in the youth patriotism and nationalism, and encourage their involvement in public and civic affairs.” (Article II, Section 13).

Albeit paternalistic in its tone, this declaration reflects a historical state policy of encouraging young people to become involved in politics.

It was no other than former President Ferdinand Marcos who first enshrined youth participation in politics. The *Kabataang Barangay (KB)* or “Village Youth” was a youth organization at the grassroots level created in 1975. Essentially the youth wing of Marcos’ support base, the motives behind its creation had more to do with quelling opposition to the dictatorship rather than providing genuine youth representation in community affairs.

The KB's demise was concurrent with the return to constitutional democracy in the aftermath of the 1986 People Power Revolution. In its place, several openings for youth participation were brought about by the increased democratic space, from the community up to national-level decision-making processes. All these are discussed in this section.

The Sangguniang Kabataan

As a successor of the KB, the *Sangguniang Kabataan* (SK) is a unique system of youth representation at the grassroots level. As stipulated in the Local Government Code of 1991, it provides for the election of *barangay*² youth councils by those from 15 to below 18 years of age. The SK president is an automatic member of the municipal or city council. Aside from participation in local policy-making, the SK also receives a 10 percent allocation from the *barangay* budget to implement youth oriented welfare programs. With this mandate and fiscal elbowroom, the SK is in a good position to harness youthful energies for self-development and contribution in community affairs.

But what are the realities behind this well-meaning provision?

The 1996 SWS survey revealed that 94 percent of young people aged 15 to 30 are aware of the SK. Out of these, 62 percent find that the SK gave very big or big help, 22 percent were undecided, and 17 percent said that the SK was of “little,” “very little” or “no help” to young people.

Nevertheless, whether out of lack of interest or confusion arising from the registration process, less than half (2.374 million out of 5.026 million) eligible voters registered for the SK elections in 2002.

² The *barangay* is the lowest political-administrative unit, corresponding to a rural village or urban neighborhood.



This mixed picture is reflective of general impressions people have of the SK. While SK councils in rich areas have enough funds to engage in feeding programs and support scholars, their counterparts in poorer *barangays* are struggling with funds. In many localities, the SK is best known for staging beauty contests and basketball tournaments rather than critically engaging in issues of the day.

Although *barangay* politics and the SK in particular are supposed to be non-partisan, it is often said that the SK has become a training ground for so-called “*trapolitos*,”³ who are learning the ropes of wheeling and dealing in politics from their elders. More often than not, the ability of a local SK council to implement projects depends on their ability to foster good relations with *barangay*

³ *Tra-po*, in Filipino political parlance, refers to traditional politicians who use patronage politics to further their self-serving goals. It literally means dishrag. A *trapolito*, as a diminutive, therefore refers to a “little *trapo*.”

officials and local ward leaders. In some places, SK representatives are children or relatives of established politicians who are being groomed for higher office. This is how politicized the situation has become on the ground.



Implementation is another problem. Due to the fiscal crisis of the national government, the barangay elections slated for 2005 have been postponed indefinitely. Costs are certainly a consideration here. The last synchronized *barangay* and SK elections of 2002 cost the Philippine government 461 Million Pesos (about US\$8.5 million) to staff 192,109 polling precincts nationwide. It is also in the interest of incumbent officials to retain the present set of *barangay* and SK officials, which make up their loyal, well-oiled machinery for the next elections.

These machinations are no secret. There have been numerous legislative proposals to abolish the SK altogether. However, some progressive groups feel uneasy about such moves. Comments *Akbayan* Youth leader Jonas Bagas: "Corruption and incompetence in the *Sangguniang Kabataan* is not a function of age. It is a product of patronage politics and the absence of transparency and

accountability in the use of public funds. Abolishing the SK is a knee-jerk reaction that would not only fail to address corruption at the *barangay*-level, but would also deny the Filipino youth political representation in an arena so crucial to their rights and welfare.”

The *Akbayan* Citizens’ Action Party has filed a “SK Reform and Empowerment Bill of 2005” in the Philippine Congress, calling for the establishment of Youth Development Councils to help in the formulation and monitoring of annual youth development plans at the local level. The bill further calls for an anti-dynasty provision, the implementation of a check and balance system, fiscal transparency and expansion of the coverage of the SK from 15 to 17 years to 15 to 25 years of age.

National Legislature

In the current Philippine Congress, only 14 out of 236 national legislators are below the age of 35. This is equivalent to about 6 percent of the total (while only 14 percent were females of all age groups). Of these 14 representatives, at least 6 are members of prominent political dynasties, whose older relatives sit in the Senate or other branches of the government.

Introduced in 1998, the party-list system of representation provides an inroad for broad-based electoral politics at the national level. It reserves 20 percent of congressional seats for groups representing marginalized and underprivileged sectors. The youth are one of the sectors identified in the Party-List Act.⁴

⁴ The Party-List Act (Republic Act 7941) defines a sectoral organization as a group of qualified voters bound together by similar physical attributes or characteristics, or by employment, interests or concerns. The twelve sectors enumerated are: labor, peasant, urban poor, indigenous cultural communities, elderly, handicapped, women, youth, overseas workers, fisher folks, veterans and professionals.

However, no youth formation has yet been able to hurdle the 2 percent threshold to earn a seat in Congress. In 1998, the votes of all seven registered youth party-list organizations taken together amounted to a measly 4 percent of the total votes cast for the party-list. The most successful youth party-list to date is *Anak ng Bayan* (“Children of the Country”), which garnered 1.69 percent of the total votes cast in 2004—but still not enough to win a single seat. It was only in the short period prior to 1998 that Sectoral Representatives, the forerunners of the present party-list system, also included Youth Representatives who were appointed by the President of the Republic.

The National Youth Commission (NYC)

The National Youth Commission (NYC) was established by virtue of the “Youth in Nation-Building Act” of 1995, hailed as landmark legislation in the promotion of youth welfare. It is the government agency tasked to “provide the leadership in the formulation of policies and in the setting of priorities and direction of all youth promotion programs and activities.”



NYC's 9th anniversary in Manila

The religious tone of some of the provisions is hard to miss, making it strikingly clear that in the Philippines, state discourse is still heavily imbued with conservative, sectarian values:

“The Commission commits itself to the survival, protection, development, and participation of youth towards empowerment, global competitiveness, patriotism, social and moral responsibility, and *love of God* [italics mine].”

“The Commission shall accomplish its mission inspired by the idealism, dynamism, integrity and drive for excellence of the Filipino youth *under the guidance of the Almighty God* [italics mine].”

In essence, the NYC is the government arm that advocates the youth's causes from within the bureaucracy. It coordinates and partners with agencies that are already implementing youth programs. It also acts as “repository” and “clearing house” on youth concerns in aid of policy-making, providing feedback and input to legislators and government executives.

At present, the NYC is involved in advocating for the Magna Carta of student rights. This proposed legislative measure provides for the participation of student council representatives in decision-making that affects the rights and welfare of students, including tuition fee hikes. Other current programs are the Youth Entrepreneurship Program to jumpstart young businesses through revolving loan facilities and the *Kapit-Bisig Laban sa Kahirapan*, which provides short-term employment for out-of-school youth to address pressing needs of this sub-sector.

Significantly, the NYC also hosts the Medium Term Youth Development Plan (MTYDP) secretariat. The first Medium Term Youth Development Plan as a derivative product of two and a

Medium Term Youth Development Plan 2005-2010: Policy Agenda Statements

On Youth Education

1. Enable access to quality and responsive education at all levels.
2. Develop globally competitive youth.

On Youth Employment

3. Decrease youth unemployment and underemployment.
4. Prevent the exploitation of young workers and working children.

On Youth Health

5. Ensure the acceptability, accessibility, availability, and affordability of culturally and gender sensitive/responsive and user-friendly health services and facilities for adolescents and youth, especially with regard to adolescent health and youth development (AHYD).
6. Reduce the incidence of risk behavior among Filipino youth.

On Youth Participation

7. Strengthen youth participation in community and youth development activities, such as in planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating youth programs and projects.
8. Integrate the youth agenda and concerns in local and national development plans.

On Specific Youth Groups

9. Eliminate all forms of discrimination and abuse against youth.

On Youth Values

10. Promote a positive and healthy self-image, critical thinking, love of country, social responsibility, and the spirit of volunteerism among youth.

Excerpt from Medium Term Youth Development Plan 2005-2010

“Young Filipinos, in general, feel that they are adequately involved in decisions that affect their lives. The youth—regardless of gender and type of residence—are involved in, and have significant influence in, key activities and decisions that affect their lives at home, in school, and the organizations to which they belong. What they severely lack is involvement and influence in community and local affairs.

Although the youth participate in government programs and projects during the implementation states, they are not involved in the more crucial stages of program/project development, such as identification and selection, project planning, and evaluation.... For their part, national government agencies have programs and services that address the different needs and problems of the youth. However, much should still be done to strengthen institutional support for youth participation. Adequate financial, physical, and human resources for youth development interventions must be provided. Inter-agency coordination and collaboration, especially regarding youth-centered programs, should be further promoted. The potential resources and expertise that can be maximized through the private sector and civil society have yet to be maximized.”

half years of consultations, animated by the Social Reform Agenda process of the Fidel V. Ramos administration. It served as the Philippine government’s blueprint for youth promotion and development from 1999 to 2004.

The PUNK document (*“Pambansang Ugong ng Kabataan 2001”*), a study commissioned by the administration of President

Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, does not mince words in its commentary on the MTYDP. It states that the MTYDP's development vision was limited to "trite generalities." What was envisioned was the emergence of a "generation of enlightened and empowered Filipino youth who are value-driven, with a strengthened belief in a Supreme Being and imbued with patriotism, yet open to global competition and cooperation." Aside from a lack of detailed indicators, there was no articulation of "the youth's location in society, how this location is shaped by socio-economic and political conditions, and what the youth's potentials and limitations are in determining their own, and society's, future."

The second (MTYDP) from 2005 to 2010 is dramatically improved. It has gone through an even broader consultation process and presents impressive recommendations. Its vision is that of an "empowered and enlightened youth; actively participating in governance and decision-making, self-reliant and confident, recognized as agents of change; globally competitive, productive, and well-informed, patriotic, with a strong love of country and culture; and physically, mentally, and spiritually healthy."

The language and declared vision of the NYC, by and large, match those of progressive young activists. The second MTYDP thus includes youth participation at various levels of governance as one of its cornerstones. Young people are not just seen as *beneficiaries*, but *partners* in development.

Beyond the rhetoric, however, youth activists are not impressed with the NYC's performance as an institution. Even though the advocacies of the commission are based on real, perceived needs of the youth, the operationalization of programs remains unclear. There is also no transparency on how insiders find their way into the commission. Attached to the Office of the President, the commission is hardly autonomous. The president appoints NYC

commissioners in a political “spoils” system. The agency is perceived to be a “floating” body, detached from its constituency.

National Youth Parliament (NYP)

Another product of the “Youth in Nation-Building Act,” the National Youth Parliament is another innovation in youth representation. It has been convened every two years since 1996.

The responsibilities of youth parliamentarians are to:

- ▷ act as local/sectoral coordinators of the NYC for a two-year term;
- ▷ liaise and network for the NYC and provide feedback in line with MTYDP;
- ▷ participate actively in youth activities and projects; and
- ▷ assume the role of youth advocates in their respective areas and sectors.



Youth parliamentarians casting their vote

Sorely missing in this official “job description” is how delegates ensure that they are indeed representative of the youth in their localities. There are no provisions on consulting constituents and establishing accountability mechanisms.

The same can be said of the national selection process of convention delegates. The NYC single-handedly selects youth parliamentarians on the basis of geographical and gender balances. The only stated requirements are the age limit (below 30 years of age) and people who are not guilty of crimes of “moral turpitude.”

It is important to note, however, that the resulting resolutions submitted to the NYC are merely recommendatory in nature and therefore may or may not be incorporated into youth policies. There has been no assessment of this mechanism since its inception.

National Anti-Poverty Commission (NAPC)

The National Anti-Poverty Commission (NAPC) is another hallmark of the post-authoritarian era. It was created by virtue of Republic Act 8425, also known as the Social Reform and Poverty Alleviation Act of 1997. Its mission is to institutionalize the participation of basic sectors in the anti-poverty initiatives of the government. The President of the Republic chairs the body. There are two vice chairpersons: one from government and another representing the 14 basic sector representatives.⁵

As with the other sectors, the Youth Sectoral Assembly elects a Sectoral Council among themselves. From this Council, one Youth

⁵ The 14 basic sectors are: farmers and landless rural workers, artisan, fisher folks, urban poor, indigenous cultural communities/indigenous peoples, workers in the formal sector and migrant workers, workers in the informal sector, women, persons with disabilities, victims of disasters and calamities, senior citizens, NGOs, cooperatives, and of course, children, youth and students.

Sectoral Representative represents the sector at the NAPC top-level policy-making and coordinating structure, together with 20 national executive government agencies and umbrella organizations of local government units.

Aside from its coordinative role between government and private sector stakeholders in development, the NAPC's overall mandates and functions are to recommend policy and other measures to "ensure responsive implementation of the government's Social Reform Agenda and the meaningful participation of the basic sectors." It is also tasked to monitor the implementation and management of related programs and advocates for the mobilization of resources for poverty alleviation, including working with local government units.

Being a recent innovation, there has not been a comprehensive assessment of the impact NAPC has had on improving the lives of poor people. Certainly the lessons of the NAPC experience on making the poor people's voices heard will be useful for designing appropriate venues for youth participation in the future.

National Movement of Young Legislators (NMYL)

The National Movement of Young Legislators (NMYL) came into existence in 1991, as a formation comprising vice governors, vice mayors, board members, city and municipal councilors and *Sangguniang Kabataan* presidents from ages 18 to 35. According to the movement's website, such young officials comprised around one third of the total local bureaucracy in 1997.

The stated objectives of the NMYL are:

1. To organize and consolidate local young legislators nationwide;

2. To advance the cause and interests of the youth in particular and the people in general;
3. To promote and work for the legislative measures which push forth the rights of our youth, particularly in the areas of: equality education, progressive culture and arts, decent jobs, a humane and peaceful environment, and freedom of speech and expression; and
4. To work for a clean, honest, and service oriented government.

The organization stands for the principles of empowerment, political pluralism, equality and “genuine nationalism.” The declaration of principles is an interesting mix of progressive and conservative expressions. For example, “genuine nationalism” is framed in terms of young legislators representing the “hope of the Fatherland.”

The section on political pluralism, by contrast, calls for “alternative politics to transform Philippine politics as to accommodate a greater variety of ideas and/or ideologies.” Equally encouraging is the description of NMYL’s appeal for equality: “Because traditional politics thrives on inequality, alternative politics seeks to correct this problem by promoting greater equality among people not only in the politics sphere, but also in the socio-economic spheres. Electoral reforms aimed at “de-linking” money power (or greater chances of winning elections) are part and parcel of the program of alternative politics.”

No updated records on the NMYL’s achievements or regular activities were available at the time of writing.

Political Parties

Political parties with youth wings are the Liberal Party and *Aksyon Demokratiko*, which are parties identified with mainstream politicians. The party of President Arroyo, the *Lakas* Christian-Muslim Democrats, also formed a youth team in the run-up to the 2004 elections. However, this formation merely functioned as vote generation machinery. Unlike in other countries, Filipino youth have yet to come forward as a unitary force in pushing for a youth electoral agenda.



Youth and students belonging with AKBAYAN take to streets against mining (www.akbayan.org)

Among alternative parties, the *Akbayan* Citizens' Action Party is one of the few parties with a youth program and legislative agenda. Organizationally, *Akbayan* youth are represented by their own sectoral representative in the National Council, the second-highest governing and policy-making body of the party.

Getting Involved: Rules and Regulations

Age requirements for public office vary by position:

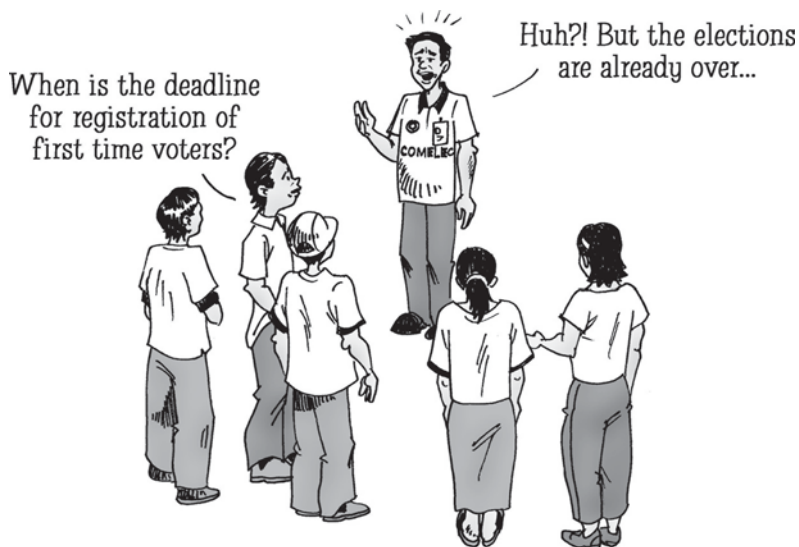
- ▷ The Philippine Constitution states that to qualify for senatorial elections, one must be at least 35 years of age;
- ▷ Candidates for District Representatives at the Lower House of Congress must be at least 25 years old;

- ▷ Candidates at the provincial level (governor, vice governor, board members) must be at least 23 years of age on Election Day;
- ▷ At the city and municipal level, candidates for mayor and vice mayor must be at least 23 years of age on Election Day, while candidates for city or municipal legislative councils must be at least 18 years of age on Election Day;
- ▷ At the *barangay* level (*barangay* captain and councilors), candidates must be at least 18 years of age on Election Day.
- ▷ *Sangguniang Kabataan* must be at least 15 years of age, but not more than 17 years of age on Election Day.

The 1973 Constitution amended the earlier suffrage provision of the 1935 Constitution, thus lowering voting age from 21 years of age to 18. For SK elections, all Filipino from 15 to 17 years of age are eligible to vote.

Sadly, the Philippine system is not designed to encourage electoral participation. The enlistment of voters is neither automatic nor mandatory. Consequently, there are little efforts by the Commission of Elections (COMELEC) to educate voters on the necessity and requirement of registration. In recent history, this has led to massive disenfranchisement of some 4.5 million young voters⁶ who were not able to register in time for the May 2001 elections, since there was only minimal public information on the deadline of registration. There was some improvement in the run-up to the 2004 elections, as 4.2 out of 4.9 million eligible new voters were able to register.

⁶ Estimates from the First Time Voters Project, 2004.



On a more positive note, the Philippines can boast of greater freedom of expression and assembly compared to other countries in the region, where organizational life on school and university campuses is strictly regulated (e.g. Malaysia or Myanmar). Although there have been reported cases where school administrators interfere in campus publications and student organizations' affairs by imposing overt or covert sanctions, there are no official restrictions on students' self-organization in the Philippines.

The Student Council Alliance of the Philippines (SCAP)

Vision Statement

An educational system co-determined by all stakeholders in the society who actively participate in making education accessible to all, responsive to the needs of the sector, and capable of producing competent and empowered citizens for a just and humane society.

Mission Statement

To advocate social and education reforms through executive and legislative engagements; promoting unity, awareness, solidarity and cooperation among student councils; recommending policy proposals for quality, accessible and relevant education and serve as catalyst for social change.

Key Involvements

SCAP initiated and supported various formations based on specific issues and took part in major campaigns. Its engagements include: abolition of Reserved Officers Training Corps (ROTC) Movement, First Time Voters and Reform-Oriented Elections Campaign, Resignation, Impeachment or Ouster (RIO Campaign) of former Pres. Joseph E. Estrada, Education (E-Campaign) for public awareness on the impact of policy recommendations of Presidential Commission on Education Reform (PCER), Volunteer Work in National Movement for Free Election (NAMFREL), support in AKBAYAN Citizens' Action Party's campaign for peace and an end to all-out war, and Civil Society Network For Education Reform (Education Network, E-NET).

The Real Score: Reshaping Politics

As can be seen from the discussion above, the Philippine political system is not closed to the entry of young people. Existing legal frameworks ensure broad participation and consultation in the policy process by various sectors. Reality, however, does not quite live up to the spirit of these laws. Perhaps more than individual political will, the greatest obstacle to meaningful youth participation in politics is a pervasive political culture of personality and money politics.

In the electoral arena, the highly personalistic nature of campaigning often prohibits the entry of new political players. Power contests are still dominated by members of established political clans who field candidates at various levels from the Congressional districts to the provincial and city levels.

Name recall and financial resources are foremost factors here. In the Philippines, political parties and platforms are largely incidental. Voters are not asked to vote for parties, but write down the names of the candidates of their choice on the ballot. In such a setting, it helps to have a familiar last name and well-financed campaign machinery.

And so, it is not uncommon to find that young politicians who are second and third generation descendants of prominent politicians. It is interesting to note that during the 11th Congress, from 1998-2001, a handful of young legislators gravitated into an informal bloc in Congress. All of them were in their 30s, well educated and hail from elite families. In keeping with the typical Filipino penchant for popular culture, they were dubbed as the “Spice Boys.” Their youthful projection received much media attention. Yet in the end, they did not do much to break away from the traditional fold.

Even the bureaucracy is not spared from the influence of political dynasties. The incumbent appointee to the NYC, Chairperson Paolo Benigno A. Aquino IV, is the nephew of the famed martyr Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino Jr. The NYC Chairperson under President Ramos was Amina Rasul-Bernardo, the daughter of former Senator Santanina Rasul who is from a powerful Mindanao political clan.

In such a system, political education often lags behind. Politics, to ordinary people, is a combination of popularity contest and the calculated outcome of patronage exchanges. It is also common knowledge that if need be, intimidation and threats can do the trick in hotly contested elections. Where pragmatic gains dictate the conduct of elections, public debates on platforms and issues become secondary. This has bred a deep sense of cynicism among ordinary voters, in that they feel that it does not really matter who their elected officials are, since “all of them are corrupted by the system” anyway.

At the same time, however, a growing reform constituency is steadily contesting these old norms. Various elements of the progressive left movement together with reform-oriented civil society formations are strongly advocating political and electoral reforms aimed at re-designing the rules of the game and holding politicians accountable to democratic principles. By and large, these advocates have come from the student movement that mobilized against Marcos in the late 1960s and early 1970s, also dubbed as the “First Quarter Storm.” Others were politicized during the anti-dictatorship movement that culminated in the first People Power event of 1986.

To the extent that the present generation of young activists is becoming part of this movement, the future of Philippine politics might hold more promises.

The Youth and Political Change

The most emotionally charged events in recent Philippine history are People Power I and II, alongside the EDSA Tres phenomenon.⁷ All three witnessed significant participation by young people. While the two People Power hallmarks were about peacefully mobilizing against abusive and corrupt regimes of Marcos in 1986 and Estrada in 2001, EDSA Tres was a violent expression of urban poor rioters registering their dissent against the Arroyo government over the arrest of “their president” Joseph Estrada. While the former were largely middle class mobilizations, the failed siege of the presidential palace on the 1st of May 2001 was an action by Manila’s underclasses.

What comes to the fore here is the ugly class divide that is so characteristic of Philippine society. Perhaps this can explain why the youth has not been able to successfully mobilize as a unified *youth movement*, since class divisions provide more salient markers of identity than generational concerns.

Only when it comes to issue-based campaigns, have there been successful attempts at consolidating various youth groups. One such triumph is the First-Time Voters campaign, which emerged from the voters’ registration fiasco during the time of People Power II. As seen earlier, the lack of public information on the process and deadline of enlistment for new voters resulted in the gross disenfranchisement of 4.5 million young people. Although the youth groups that mobilized to assert their right to suffrage in 2001 were not able to reverse the COMELEC’s stance, their actions

⁷ People Power I was a peaceful demonstration that took place in Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (EDSA) and ousted dictator Ferdinand Marcos in 1986. People Power II of 2001 also took place in EDSA after the failure of the impeachment trial of former President Joseph Estrada on charges of abuse of power; this event is also known as “EDSA Dos.” In “EDSA Tres,” which immediately followed People Power II, angry protesters, who were mostly from the lower classes sympathetic to Estrada, stormed the Presidential Palace.

grabbed national headlines and engaged all three branches of government. Spearheaded by *Akbayan Youth*, the groups⁸ filed a case at the Supreme Court, forced the legislature into the special session and provoked a special intervention by President Arroyo.



"Educating the young generation while seeking their motivation & addressing the decline in their political & electoral participation..."

Vision

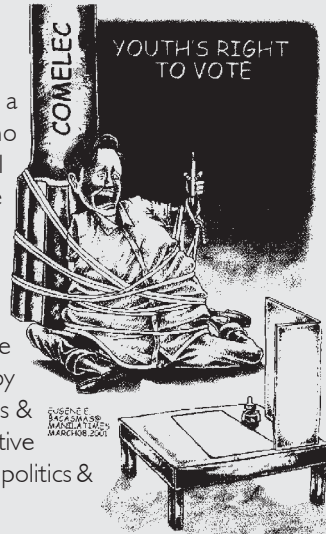
The First Time Voters Project envisions a critical and active young citizenry who continuously engages in socio-political processes towards developing a culture of social involvement, good governance and alternative politics.

Objective

To raise meaningful participation of the Youth in the Philippine political processes by examining socio-political economic issues & encouraging voter's critical choice & active political involvement towards alternative politics & good governance.

Mission

The First Time Voters Project tasks itself of building a network of motivated and educated young electorate that shall advocate for political and electoral reforms; initiating practical, youthful and action-oriented programs and approaches at the grassroots level; and building a learning system for stakeholders necessary in creating an alternative venue of participation.



⁸ The core group of the movement includes the Student Council Alliance of the Philippines (SCAP), the Movement for the Advancement of Student Power (MASP) and Alyansa, a formation of urban poor youth. A full account of the problem is found in the article "First Time Voters: A Case of Continuing Political Disenfranchisement" by Jonas Bagas. Published by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, Philippine Office in http://www.fes.org.ph/papers_firstvote.htm (undated).

Indeed, the addition of the term “first-time voter” to the Philippine political vocabulary can be credited to these groups.

Another recent achievement is the suspension of the Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) following the murder of Manila-based University of Santo Tomas engineering student Mark Wilson Chua in March 2001. He had paid with his life for exposing alleged anomalies in his school’s ROTC program. Various student groups across ideological persuasions and geographic locations staged mass actions, which snowballed into calls for reforms to democratize and demilitarize the National Service Program. Legislative measures have since led the ROTC to become an optional program.

The collective political psyche of Filipinos was also shaken by the Oakwood Mutiny on 27 July 2003, when a group of young military officers attempted to oust President Arroyo and her Secretary of Defense Angelo Reyes over allegations of corruption in the military. The nation was captivated by the televised coverage of the aborted coup, as the protagonists of the plot were remarkably young, articulate and fearless. Even those who disagreed with their chosen means of advancing their cause sympathized with the young men’s outrage at the senseless deaths of fellow young combatants in Mindanao and the sickening opportunism of turning war into business. It was a rousing reminder that the idealism of youth prevails even in ultra-conservative institutions.

Youth participation in the Philippines can therefore be characterized as event-driven. Young Filipinos are not afraid to mobilize in extreme situations, such as when President Estrada plunged the country into a deep political crisis. Yet in “normal” times, only organized youth groups engage in advocacies and political debates, as average young Filipinos are no different from the rest of the “MTV generation” all over the world. Sad to say, the pull of popular culture is stronger than that of popular politics.

Conclusion

Three concluding points can be made.

1. The sheer magnitude of the country's youth population and the seriousness of the sectors' problems should spur more programmatic thinking and action. Even the latest MTYDP acknowledges that the Philippine government still lacks accurate and comprehensive information on the situation of the youth in the country today. Disparate definitions of "youth" across government agencies hamper coordination and the development of a coherent framework for youth development. Anecdotal input is not a sound basis for planning and targeting outputs. Existing government mechanisms (SK, NYC, NYP) are crying out for thorough review and reforms, as the scarce resources for youth development are not maximized. Fresh attention from supporting agencies from the private sector and civil society also needs to be channeled into the sector.
2. Although the institutional prerequisites for youth participation in politics are present in the Philippine context, the reality is that young people who do get involved in formal political processes are often co-opted by the conservative and sometimes even corrupt political system. Critical thinking and innovative political actions are still limited to activist circles. Political education is generally underdeveloped.
3. In a poverty-stricken country like the Philippines, young people are well aware of enormity of social ills. Most feel it in their own lives, as they struggle to earn a living for their



families. Political inaction is perhaps less a result of apathy (as claimed in countries of the North), than a sense of being overwhelmed by the enormity of problems and the resulting cynicism. The challenge to the country's youth therefore is to critically engage in the political system, as flawed as it may be. The thrust for reforms will largely depend on the ability of democratizing forces to build a strong constituency that rejects "old-style" political practices. The youth obviously have the numbers to do this. Galvanizing critical masses around a common agenda of youth concerns—across class divides and with a strong youth appeal—will be crucial in this long-term endeavor.

Political Participation and the Role of University Student Councils in the Philippines

by Lawrence Aikee Esmeli

(former Vice President for Operations and Communications

De La Salle University Student Council, 2004)

Advocating Civil Liberties from the Campus to Society

The student council has been an opportunity for the in-school youth in their assertion of civil liberties and struggle for political participation. Since the introduction of education of the Spaniards in the colonial era, student-led action has been attributed as a manifestation of the intellectual advancement and social activism of the youth. From the *ilustrados* to university students, the school has become the initial battleground in advancing the struggle against the injustices experienced by the Filipino youth even before the years of their formal education.

Students have been consistently present in civil society actions, advocating not just student issues but key national and international issues as well. Its organization can be traced to the student-led assemblies and organizations on political issues both inside and outside the university, from student harassment to labor issues.

The campus has been the microcosm of Philippine political system and society. In most of the universities where student activities are still monitored and most of the time, controlled by an administrative unit, students are learning to assert civil liberties as a defense of their rights. Since majority of the universities are private, the freedom to impose rules by the administration continue to hamper the exercise of civil liberties

on campuses. Harassment and repression are key elements of educational governance in these institutions and student councils play a crucial role in protecting the rights of the students. Students have mobilized themselves through the student council to assert their rights both inside the school and in the civil society, highlighting and promoting political participation.

According to Percival Cendaña in *Starting 'Em Young* (2002), "the Student Council's nature and orientation could be summed up in three characteristic roles" namely, service, activity and campaigns center. The service center performs as a support system of the school's inadequacy of services that are needed immediately by the students. Examples of these are book lending programs and student cooperatives. The activity center of the student council responds, as a supplement to academic and non-academic needs of the students to uphold holistic development and education to fellow students. They provide sports programs and alternative classes to bridge gaps in balanced education. The campaign center has been described as mobilizing the student body through increasing awareness and involvement and soliciting support to issues that concern the students both inside and outside the university. Student councils are active during national elections in promoting awareness and involvement in the political process.

The student council being the supreme student organization is the sole, unified, autonomous and democratic government of the university student body. It is mandated to pursue the student's common good in the policy-making processes of the university. Whether known as the "student union" or "student government," these four functions are present and are rigid in the dynamics of student politics. These mechanisms of the student council provide a venue to advance democratic participation inside and outside the university.

Progressive Students' Agenda in Civil Society

Progressive student councils have been always challenged to assert their involvement in issues. Pursuing the right to quality and accessible education is the priority issue of the student sector. The student's agenda would always be concerned with the repression of campus administrators with their rights and activities. Networks and alliances of student councils have been long forged to emphasize unities on both perennial and immediate issues on education especially in appealing for higher state subsidy for education.

Student power in the civil society has been evident in the critical junctures of Philippine history. In 1970, the First Quarter Storm has mobilized mainly students who asserted action against the looming dictatorship of former President Ferdinand Marcos. This was a main factor for the imposition of martial law in 1972 where student organizations including the student publications were banned and outlawed. But since then, it moved together with the marginalized sectors of society and has been a significant force in mass movements. The student councils stood side by side with the peasants, laborers and the poor in fighting for civil rights.

This participation was initially characterized by the convergence of student councils from different schools that have built stances on issues that are calling for their involvement and action. Various coalitions and alliances have been established, both on single-issue and/or institutionalized groups. Single-issue groups have sprung over time on mobilizations against war, economic liberalization, discrimination and other specific national and international issues. Recently, students have mobilized against the war in Iraq. They have been involved in the process of the

national elections—from the registration, candidate scrutiny, and invigilation of the voting processes.

Some institutionalized groups such as League of Filipino Students (LFS), National Union of Students of the Philippines (NUSP), Student Council Alliance of the Philippines (SCAP), Union of Catholic Student Councils (UCSC), Student Christian Movement of the Philippines (SCMP), Movement for the Advancement of Student Power (MASP), College Editors Guild of the Philippines (CEGP), Network of Campus Journalists of the Philippines (NCJP) and many others bespeak of the strong and active student federations that are found in the country. These formations have chapters across campuses in various parts of the country and regularly campaign on student and youth issues. The student council's thrust to increase awareness and involvement to social issues promotes unity and greater engagement to other sectors of society.

Mobilizing the Sector for Students' Rights

The Magna Carta for Students' Rights aims to gain due respect, protection and fulfillment of the rights of the students in the secondary, tertiary, graduate and post-graduate education. Though there are existing national laws and policies protecting certain issues that affect the students, e.g. "Act Regulating Hazing and Other Forms of Initiation Rites in Fraternities, Sororities, And Other Organizations and Providing Penalties Therefore," "Act Declaring Sexual Harassment Unlawful In The Employment, Education Or Training Environment, And For Other Purposes," they only function as preventive measures not necessarily articulating the basic rights of students that should be recognized to ensure total development and welfare of young citizens.

The proposed charter aims to provide and institutionalize student representation in the policy-making body of the university and to recognize the rights of the students of the university. Some of the rights that have become most of the frequently violated rights in the university as an effect of the concentration of power to university authorities are the:

- ▷ right to organize and be able to run an autonomous student council,
- ▷ right to participate in policy-making,
- ▷ right to accessible and quality education through creating a multi-sectoral commission on fees,
- ▷ right to due process,
- ▷ right to free and responsible expression and the
- ▷ right to protection from campus violence.

The student council has also been a free avenue for political education both for the purposes of increasing knowledge of political issues and of forming young politicians. The exposure to university electoral politics have provided venues for exploring opportunities for practicing politics with complete mechanisms similar to that of a legitimate government. Political party formation is observed in elections and is usually based on two-contending parties. Training for leadership are self-conducted and researched by student political organizations. Most of the resources important for the formation of the leadership modules are shared by off-campus student organizations and alliances. The students are trained to analyze political issues, acquire skills on public relations and principles for governance.

Organizing the sector has been a perennial issue in the student movement. Though student leaders bear enough potential as young agents for democratization in society, this could be well-strengthened by sustaining the mechanisms that would enable them to answer their needs. Student leaders have a constant supply in schools but their abilities and potential need to be developed by sectors that have the capacity to provide and facilitate the growth of these future leaders. These leaders have the capacity to mobilize and influence a greater number of youth to be involved in political processes. Student councils house these leaders but the institution itself may not be enough. Sustained support of other sectors could establish the strong bridge for engagement of these young leaders from the schools to the political process.

Questions and Answers with Filipino Youth Leaders

Interviews conducted by Marie Chris Cabrerros, 2005

What is youth political participation?

"It is when young people, being aware of their problems, organize themselves to act without waiting for the government to do it for them. Youth participation is realized when the youth act as initiators and discover their strength on their own."—**PAOLO BENIGNO AQUINO IV**, *National Youth Commission (NYC) Chair and CEO*

"It refers to the meaningful engagement of the youth in political affairs. Meaningful participation allows youth to intervene directly in issues that affect them, they implement plans, make themselves accountable, and take responsibility for their decisions. It is not tokenism."—**JONAS BAGAS**, *National Youth Coordinator, Akbayan Citizens' Action Party*

"It is not just about being asked about certain issues. In fact, youth should not just be consulted on youth issues alone. Any issue in this country is also an issue of the youth."—**JAN ARGY TOLENTINO**, *Secretary General, Kabataan Liberal ng Pilipinas (Kalipi)*

How responsive is government when it comes to the youth sector?

"The National Youth Commission has been relating with young people for the past years, without much ado and less funding. Our situation at the NYC is the same as young people everywhere. But by leading by example and doing more, our projects have impact."—**PAOLO BENIGNO AQUINO IV**, *National Youth Commission (NYC) Chair and CEO*

“Among the marginalized sectors, the youth is even further marginalized. National government agencies are closed to youth and student participation, because they are protecting their own interests. There is selective responsiveness by the government. Much depends on the political configuration of the administration.”—GARY LAZARO, *Youth and Student Sectoral Representative, National Anti-Poverty Commission and former Secretary General of the Student Council Alliance of the Philippines (SCAP)*

What are your proposals to deepen the youth's involvement in politics?

“Although we may be proud that the Philippines is the only country that has institutions such as the Sangguniang Kabataan, the problem lies not in institutional mechanisms. It's about how elders treat young people. They are not allowed to grow, they are not trusted. It's more of a cultural thing.”—JAN ARGY TOLENTINO, *Secretary General, Kabataan Liberal ng Pilipinas (Kalipi)*

There has to be a conducive environment for principled engagement and partnership. There should be experimentation with new models and approaches in responding to youth issues and concerns. This requires political commitment.”—GARY LAZARO, *Youth and Student Sectoral Representative, National Anti-Poverty Commission and former Secretary General of the Student Council Alliance of the Philippines (SCAP)*

“There has to be genuine space for youth participation. I think the deepest cause of the lack of interest in politics among the youth is the perception that despite their participation, nothing happens.”—JONAS BAGAS, *National Youth Coordinator, Akbayan Citizens' Action Party*

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