

Direction and Ambivalence in the Local Governance Work of Akbayan¹

Akbayan is unique among the small left parties in the Philippines in having had recent attempts to build a political base among elected local officials. Yet it would be an understatement to say that the party has no consensus about the value, direction and plan concerning local governments. There is, at best, a great ambivalence towards the idea of power accumulation at the local level in the context of an unreconstructed social and political system.

While attempts to theorize about the place of local governments in the project to accumulate power are not lacking, there is just as often a surprising inability or unwillingness among officers and ordinary members alike to speak about local governance work and the takeover of municipalities as central to the repertoire of the party strengthening project.

It is worth highlighting several important circumstances that might explain this:

The involvement of the left in contentious politics in the country directed at the symbolic centers of state authority in Manila is the main experiential base of engagement with power. More often than not the main reference to being left is still the militant politics of groups that associate themselves with the Maosit insurgency (CPP/NDF). To paraphrase a former party president -- the CPP is already a dead star, but a significant number of the planets of the left still revolve around it.

The membership, especially those who were there since the founding Congress of the party, has had very limited prior experience in engagement within political institutions. What should only be necessary warnings about caution and deliberateness in the engagements with entrenched traditional powers within local government institutions often morph imperceptibly into messages about the unredeemability and changelessness of local politics in the country and the need to avoid being contaminated by that logic and often of staying away from it altogether. This attitude is widely shared, even among middle class activist who may not view themselves as being of the left.

In the context of elections that happen every three years, entrenched local politicians have highly dependable organizations and networks for mobilizing votes. In comparison to these the left has yet to demonstrate that it can be effective in the electoral terrain of local politics or that it can be a valuable ally in local elections. (Case of sour grapes perhaps?) Consequently, it has been difficult to achieve some degree of parity with vested interests (business interests, public works contractors, churches, political families, armed groups)

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that try to influence the agenda of local politicians. In other words the above-ground left has not yet tried to establish its claim to a place in the table of local politics. The political projects of the left have usually been those that require a generation to achieve, aside from the other non-trivial prior requirement of first achieving a decisive seizure of national state power. On the other hand, those projects that can demonstrate the credentials of the left in local politics are still just being developed.

when leftist mayors come to power, it has not been easy for them to make a mark on local politics. For while there is no lack of knowledge about best practice and innovative approaches to governance, innovation is a highly destabilizing process that can unite vested interests and challengers. And because those from the left who manage to come to power are able to do so only because of what may be temporary divisions among the local elite, their hold on power is tenuous, without a power base of their own that can be quickly established during their incumbency these mayors cannot hope to survive unless they enter into compromise with one of the elite camps and calibrate reforms corresponding to the alliances that they are often compelled to enter into. One suspects that it is actually those politicians from long-lived political families or those who have no credible challengers that are able to innovate in local governance and build reputations as modernizing local elites.

When the party still had access to Congressional pork barrel funds those resources were put to good use as entrypoints for building relationships with local politicians. This has been especially useful and effective in the poorer municipalities where a project of half a million pesos can already go a long way to satisfying very urgent needs. If nothing else those local officials reciprocated by ensuring that his own election watchers would also guard the party list votes of Akbayan. In other settings the visibility of "Akbayan financed projects" made it very easy for mayors to endorse the party to his own constituents. This was until around 2004.

Earlier on the party's local governance committee began a programmatic attempt to make use of pork barrel funds as an inducement for local politicians to start engaging community groups, including incipient local party formations and respond to priorities identified by local communities. After years of participatory planning exercise in around two thousand barangays many NGOs and people's organizations had folders and folders of plans, waiting for dusting off. It was hoped that these pork barrel funded projects would allow both local governments and community groups to initiate mutually beneficial relations.

But these efforts would not last long. As soon as the party became prominent in the efforts to impeach and unseat the incumbent president after the 2004 elections the president cut all access to pork barrel funds (P60 million pesos a year). This also happened to a handful of other Congressional representatives.

No one supposed that the party could subsist, or do better than other parties and politicians on the basis of pork barrel funds. Still the sudden disappearance of central government grants that can be coursed to local governments and communities with growing party units had an inevitable impact in the ability of the party to follow through on relationships that were starting to be built. Without a doubt this contributed to the election setback suffered by the party in 2007. Nasty rumors that the party pocketed funds that it committed for specific projects circulated in a number of provinces. This seemed to have some credibility at first because before Gloria Arroyo there was never a time when the president selectively denied pork barrel funds to congressional representatives. From this experience the party has made a public stance in favor of abolishing the pork barrel system as we know it and clipping some of the president's key budget powers, especially those that pertain to the "juggling" of funds, even making pork barrel funds available to political opponents.

There have been recent efforts to put the work at the local government level back on track:

Immediately after the post-2007 setback it was the consensus of the national council that there has to be an emphasis in the local, not only because it is here where votes are cast but also because it is here, rather than in the party's highly visible national engagements, where the life of the party needs to be seen even when there are no forthcoming elections. It is also presumed (as in previous years) that it is at the local level where there can often be found both: i) a high degree of fluidity (declining clans, rising education, rise of new competing elites, mobilization of church and civil society groups) ii) and the possibility of achieving sufficient organizational reach and capabilities to allow organized communities to matter in policymaking and to be seen as desirable ally to office seekers in the 2010 elections. A paper was prepared written on these themes.

Immediately after the post-2007 setback there has been an emphasis by the National Organizing Committee on re-consolidating party units organizationally and actively seeking local (often contentious) issues that could be the focus of local advocacy. The expectation is that the local advocacies will bring about a restart of relationships with progressive local politicians and prominent civic personalities. Many of these attempts lead to policy dialogues, popular mobilization and legal cases filed to cause local government and other public agencies to perform their duties. There have been issues around corruption in public infrastructure, peace-keeping, pollution of watershed due to commercial farming practices and issues of unattended and stinking garbage. As often as these issues open the possibility of creating alliances with people influential in politics they also give rise to friction with local authorities. What might be said about this approach is that it is often more about the local than about the governance. While there are exceptions the impression one gets is that entrypoints for long-term local movement building and are emphasized, in contrast to entrypoints for relationship building with local politicians who may be persuaded in the short-term to shift strategies or to open up spaces for experimentation governance.

Continuing with its original initiatives the Local Governance Committee worked with non-government organizations and convened local officials affiliated with the party to deepen discussions on the expansion of the delivery of urgent municipal services especially around livelihoods, community-level health services, potable water and housing and resettlement. The approach entails organizing communities to begin to invest their own time and financial resources around the municipal services that are most urgent to their communities. There are several ideas associated with this effort:

- i) The approach assumes that change can also be about changing the strategies chosen by politicians, rather than only thru changing the politicians;
- ii) People are incurring high costs anyway in addressing their needs for health services, housing, water and environmental services – there are existing and often huge cash flows that only have to be reorganized and re-channelled to collective, long-term and more efficient responses.
- iii) At the local governance level there is a similar cash flow (for sickness for the repair of crumbling infrastructure etc) that is available, but deliberately deployed on an ad hoc manner and deployed, more often than not, with an intent of establishing relationships of political dependence using public funds;
- iv) Communities that bring in their own resources into a proposal to expand and improve municipal services will be able to shape municipal priorities around their own priorities. Local governments that meet self-help communities halfway and provide partial support to these will be able to reach more communities with their limited resources in a given year.
- v) Depending on the circumstances, this can make as much electoral sense as trying to nurture anarrow, select group of loyal supporters to the exclusion of others. This is an example of an innovative approach that creates new constituencies for the reformers at the same moment that it creates enemies through the disrupting old practices of patronage politics. This means that even incumbent politicians who won through the logic of patronage can shift towards this new atrategy set.
- vi) For the party, this approach does not only result in an ability to influence the deployment of public funds it also results in new governance practices that can lead to a radical break away from the ubiquitous micropolitics of patronage;
- vii) The ability of party organizations to orchestrate such new rules and new roles in the delivery of municipal services can be a powerful starting point for achieving reach and organization in a significant number of communities of a municipality. Because this is all in the course of engaging local governments and politicians in fulfilling their mandates the expectation is that the organizing effort can also draw partly from the resources of the local governments, reducing reliance on a central party structure that will not be in a position to fully subsidize core operations of party building in-between

elections. Presumably, such organizational reach and effectiveness will be just as highly valued during elections as other resources that politicians must mobilize in order to win.

These models of local public action already have actually existing ground level realities, often developed by politicians not affiliated with the party. But these have yet to reach a significant enough scale and a viral mode of transmission.

Again there are several reasons for this: i) training activists to become facilitators of collective action and to become negotiators for a range of municipal services requires creating brigades of highly skilled organizers, necessarily this takes time and resources ii) it also requires a communication infrastructure that allows conversations and knowledge transfer to take place among practitioners doing similar things but separated by distance iii) it also requires innovating financing approaches that will reduce the burden of upfront co-financing of initiatives among poor communities

As often as there are politicians who do not expect to rise to prominence and to go very far on the basis of their competence in patronage politics and would be attracted to the idea of building a political career around supported-self help there will also be traditional politicians who will undermine collective action by promising free goods on the strength of their alliance with district representatives and well-placed. Unfortunately, traditional politicians are sometimes also able to deliver on their promises. In other words, there might be a significant number of places and contexts where this approach might bear fruit and other places where it might not. needless to say this approach cannot be seen as a stand-alone strategy of building national power from strength at the local governance level.

There are important actions at the national advocacy level that can complement the work at the local level:

In the run-up to the 2010 elections alignment with a presidential candidate can increase the number of politicians who can run mainly under the Akbayan banner and subsequently be influenced to win through the new non-patronage modes being advocated by the party at the local level. They can do this because even though they would abandon affiliation with the major parties with which they are now officially affiliated with they will still have the benefit of being in alliance with a major party that has access to legal protections, access to redress and resources during elections and potential access to national resources in case of victory. At the ground level such politicians will have the benefit of complete identification with the Akbayan communities, which are often more consolidated than the traditional national political parties.

The pork barrel system is only the worst manifestation of this overarching logic of

how national politicians try to i) assemble provincial support in the run up to elections and ii) assemble protection by majorities (glued together by money politics) during the incumbency of a president. The power of national-to-local patronage ties, the mutual dependence that this reproduces between national and provincial politicians and the ladders to lucrative political careers that it builds for those who are able to master the art makes this a formidable fortress to breach.

It's resilience and its power to condition what is and what is not possible at the local level is the basis for the skepticism even of top party leaders about local government work as an independent entrypoint for the accumulation of political power.

The pork barrel system will have to be transformed i) into one that is not subject to the intervention of the executive branch ii) into one that supports baranggay-bayan (community-LGU) joint ventures in service delivery expansion and iii) into one that allows for the allocation of national grants for local governments' annual investment plans, rather than for individual projects chosen by mayors and thru specific contractors. Short of abolishing the pork barrel system in its entirety, there will at least have to be financing windows for progressive politicians who would like to win local elections by being effective at responding to the priorities of communities -- Alternative paths to re-election that do not plug into the proven power of patronage and money politics.

This will not be easy. It will be important for the party to make a vigorous move towards building national alliances with local governments and politicians who are marginalized by the current system of patronage-based national-local financial transfers. There is a strong basis for such a reform alliance and it may yet be possible to bring these groups together in time for the 2010 national elections:

vice mayors and vice governors who will have a say (veto power) in the approval of LGU annual investment plans that will be financed by what used to be known as congressional pork barrel;

congressional representatives who (through clipping the president's budget powers) would want their pork barrel funds automatically released even if these would be subject to greater institutional checks at the local government level;

mayors who know that there are political families who are more adept and who are more connected than they will ever be in the game of securing favor from national politicians for the needs of their constituencies;

mayors who bet on the wrong horse in the last elections and were punished for it;

Parties like Akbayan who are confident in their capability to take advantage of the new political opportunities created by LGUs and communities that attract

national resources through joint action in achieving effectiveness in delivering services.

city-based politicians who, because of their possession of fiscal resources that dwarf pork barrel resources and because of their organizational capacity to respond to new performance-based incentives from the national government, will not be defending the current system of national-local pork barrel politics. Certainly, it will be an added bonus if pork barrel funds of the city's congressional representatives will only be able to fund plans that are listed as being within city priorities.

Many of the propositions in this short presentation will probably prove contentious within the party. But this only goes to show the how far the party has yet to go in terms of specifying a firm direction and confronting the demons of ambivalence.

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