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Reforming Land Reform in the Philippines

For over a century, the Philippines has been characterised by fierce, sometimes bloody, power struggles over land. Typically, governments have won votes and appeased protestors by promising to reform land ownership, but have then failed to deliver more than token levels of redistribution. However, this Research Summary shows how an alliance between civil society and state reformers helped drive a remarkable period of land reform in the Philippines from 1992 to 1998. Change was made possible because of mobilisation by autonomous rural organisations, independent initiatives by state reformers, but also, significantly, by the sophisticated interaction between both groups of actors.

From 1972 to 2007, six million hectares of land (half of the country's farmland) was redistributed to three million poor households (two-fifths of the country's agricultural population). Fifty-three per cent of the total accomplishment in land redistribution during this 35-year period was achieved within six years from 1992 to 1998. Of course the period of reform was not without its problems, and many issues remained unaddressed, but the speed of reform did mark a significant departure from previous or subsequent periods. This was also unusual as at that time land reform was absent from the official agendas of most other governments and international development institutions.

Political opportunities

By the early 1980s a revolutionary peasants' protest movement had spread across the country. It succeeded in putting agrarian reform on the national agenda, and contributed to the fall of the Marcos regime. The social movement gained new liberal rights under Aquino's government (1986 to 1992), but the land reform agenda was weakened partly by the left's half-

hearted electoral participation in the subsequent election, and a resurgence of the landed elite. A compromise land reform bill was passed called the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP). Although widely derided as weak by the left, the land reform law nevertheless became the basis for the accelerated period of land redistribution during Ramos's subsequent presidency (1992 to 1998). Ramos was not known as a reformer, but shifting political alignments and a divided elite meant he entered office with a very weak electoral mandate. To broaden his political base Ramos recruited civil society activists into important positions in the bureaucracy. Simultaneously, a new autonomous broad and progressive peasant movement emerged, and the influence of the revolutionary Communist left diminished.

The new progressive peasant movements and the newly-appointed state reformers became the key drivers of change during this period. Within the government, a significant actor was Ernesto Garilao, the former head of one

of the country's largest mainstream Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). He was appointed by Ramos as the new secretary for the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR), and used his appointment to give several civil society activists senior positions in the DAR, creating an unprecedented opportunity for reform. The progressive peasant movements took advantage of these political openings to create a critical alliance with the state reformers and accelerate land distribution.

State reformers

The presence of reform-minded officials at the top of the DAR bureaucracy provided important backing to junior officials to carry out expropriations, and to neutralise or isolate anti-reform officials. Garilao also deliberately exposed officials to militant autonomous peasant groups and NGOs, in order to help convert them to a reformist orientation. This was an important contrast to previous administrations during which lower ranking land reform officials had often been easily immobilised by anti-reform influences and manipulation by landlords. Having

Reforming Land Ownership in the Philippines

“ New political opportunities, such as regime changes and divisions in elites, can provide openings for civil society engagement ”

high-ranking pro-land reform officials also allowed DAR to better fight its corner with Congress, the judiciary and other state agencies. Also, neither Ramos nor his wife came from a big landowning family, thereby widening the space for reform. Significantly, Garilao sought to engage the peasant movement and their allies in helping implement the CARP. Previous governments had tended to work with farmers associations they could control, in exchange for limited land reform concessions as a means of containing rural unrest. But Garilao saw the peasant movements as ‘autonomous partners with whom we intersect in areas where there are common agreements, and seek resolutions in areas of difference.’ He also used the sympathy and support of the peasant movement to strengthen his leverage within the broader state bureaucracy.

Another important initiative was Garilao’s establishment of the Agrarian Reform Community (ARC) development programme in 1993. This programme aimed to make the land holdings productive and viable. Although not without its failings, it reinvigorated donor interest in CARP which in turn made anti-reformists less willing to attack CARP for fear of antagonising them. It also provided empirical evidence that agrarian reform could actually work, again helping shield CARP from attack.

The rural social movement

In contrast to the revolutionary left which had rejected the CARP and demanded ‘confiscatory’ land reform, the progressive peasant movements called for its implementation. This change in framing provided a legitimate legal framework which was difficult for opponents to attack.

Subsequently, land reform began to be discussed in terms of a broader anti-poverty framework which also made it hard for anti-reformists to undermine and attract donors as allies.

The peasant movements developed a groundbreaking approach called the ‘bibingka’ strategy (‘Bibingka’ is a rice cake-cooked from below and above). Used in this context it refers to the mutually reinforcing interaction between militant mobilisations of peasant movements ‘from below’ and reformist initiatives ‘from above’ by state reformers. The strategy marked a significant departure from the oppositional strategies of the revolutionary communist left and the traditional ‘patron-client’ based strategies of the conservative peasant organisations. The revolutionary left feared that engagement with the state would lead to co-option, but the positive outcomes of the period indicated that the ‘bibingka’ strategy delivered real change. A concrete example of the alliance was the creation of NGO-peasant-DAR joint campaigns, called Provincial Campaigns for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ProCARRD).

Insights

The research reveals how an alliance between civil society organisations and state reformers, resulted in positive and significant gains for poor people on a contentious issue. Co-option was avoided because of the critical mass of reformers within government, and the independence of the peasant movements who were able to back their demands with militant mobilisation.

Credits

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