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Francisco A. Magno



In this article, the historical dynamics and sociopolitical configurations of a Philippine town are explored in depth. The choice of Malabon for study stems from the fact that it exemplifies the dramatic social transformations which affected the character of power competition in many municipalities in the Philippines, especially in the postwar period. The effects of such social processes as market expansion, urbanization and regime change are considered as they influence the shape of Malabon politics.

Malabon, which belongs to the national capital region of Metro Manila, is situated about 8 kilometers northwest of Manila along the low-lying areas of Manila Bay. It is bounded on the north by the towns of Valenzuela and Obando, on the east and south by Caloocan City, and on the southwest by Navotas.

The town of Malabon has an area of 1,576 hectares. The western and central areas which occupy 85 percent of the town are generally low and flat lands. The municipality is located close to the mouth of three big rivers: the Malabon-Navotas River, the Quenabalian River and the Tullahan River. These water arteries wind their way into Manila Bay. Considering that the town consists mostly of tidal lands, which are further aggravated by the absence of a good drainage system, floods have become a normal part of Malabon life especially with the advent of the rainy season and with the cyclical rise in sea level. The terms "high tide" and "low tide" have entered the daily vocabulary of Malabon residents. In fact, most households are equipped with special calendars which provide information as to when and what time the tide will rise in the town.

There are currently twenty-one barangays comprising the town of Malabon. In terms of land area, the largest barangays are Potrero and Dampalit which cover 303 hectares and 262 hectares respectively. The smallest barangays, on the other hand, are Bayan-Bayanan

which occupy eight hectares and Flores which has a land area of ten hectares.

Malabon was originally known as the town of Tambobong. The name Tambobong was derived from the word *tambo*, a local tree whose leaves are made into soft brooms called *walis tambo*. Later, Tambobong became Malabon which came from the old Tagalog word "labon" which referred to the muddy water which was a familiar sight in the place during the early times. (See De los Santos 1975, 11-54). Before the dawn of Spanish colonialism, the present barangays of Malabon such as Tinajeros, Maysilo, Dampalit and Bayan-Bayanan were, like Tondo and Caloocan, small villages confederated under the leadership of Rajah Lakandula. The nearby settlements which constituted the Manila area was headed by Rajah Matanda.

With the Spanish subjugation of Manila in the sixteenth century, the precolonial settlements were converted into parishes and centralized into districts, towns and provinces. Maysilo, for example, was incorporated as a *visita* by the Augustinian friars under the district of Tondo in the province of Manila. This was clearly expressive of the Spanish policy of "bringing the people under the bells." The presence of the Spanish colonial state was initially felt in the Malabon area through Fray Juan Perando, when the first taxes were collected by the Augustinian friar in the form of asking the people of Maysilo to give him one chicken each as tribute. In 1670, the town of Tambobong or Malabon was created which included, among others, the old settlements of Maysilo and Navotas (De los Santos 1975, 13).

Local Elites

With the creation of Malabon in 1670, the first town officials under colonial rule were likewise appointed. The local elites were initially defined through their access to local-level political positions awarded by the state. They were privileged to use the title "don" to emphasize their *principalia* status and distinguish them socially from the "indios." Agustin Salamante became the first *capitan municipal* of Malabon. The *capitan municipal* or *gobernadorcillo* held the highest town position for one year. However, from 1863 up to the end of the Spanish colonial regime, the term of office of *capitan municipal* was extended to two years (De los Santos 1975, 13). Nevertheless, the racial divisions were clearly defined even among the Spanish-

sponsored local elites in Malabon. Hence, for 153 years (1741-1894), the town had two *gobernadorcillos*, one for the "mestizos" and another for the "naturales" or native elites.

Distinct political clans emerged in Malabon during the Spanish period by virtue of their control over the town's premier post. This is hardly surprising considering that the *capitan municipal* was exclusively recruited from the ranks of the *principalia* which had evolved into a hereditary political class under Spanish rule. The political families which were able to produce two or more *gobernadorcillos* in Malabon included the Marcelo, Sevilla, Matias, Manapat, De Molina, De los Santos, Gatchalian and Oliveros clans.

In 1827, the *principalia* of San Jose, Navotas and Bangculasi petitioned the colonial government to separate their *barrios* from Malabon and consolidate them to form the new town of Navotas. They argued that the people in their *barrios* found difficulty transacting business and attending church services in the town's *poblacion* because of the wide body of water then dividing their area from the mother town of Malabon (Navotas Historical Commission 1983).

Under the Spanish colonial administration, towns were created to facilitate the process of tax collection. Spanish authorities did not allow the establishment of towns unless the inhabitants could raise the minimum requirement of 500 tributes. In 1859, the *Interdencia General de Ejercito y Hacienda de Filipinas* certified that the Navotas residents rendered 1,378.5 tributes. It was then that the Spanish Royal *Audiencia* promulgated a decree providing for the creation of a new parish with a church and parochial house for the *barrios* of San Jose, Tangos, Bangculasi and Tanza to comprise the new town of Navotas (Navotas Historical Commission 1983).

However, Navotas would again be incorporated under Malabon at the start of American colonial rule. Under Act No. 137 of the Philippine Commission, the new province of Rizal was created. Ironically named after the Filipino hero whose martyrdom precipitated the 1896 Philippine Revolution, the new province was established to facilitate the administrative consolidation of American colonial power in the geopolitical center of the country. For administrative purposes, Malabon was placed under the province of Rizal.

Navotas was once more merged with Malabon in 1903, with the municipal government located in the latter. This was done by virtue of Act No. 942 which reorganized Rizal province by reducing its number of municipalities to fifteen in accordance with the American regime's policy of centralization. This arrangement was deemed

unacceptable by the local elites of Navotas who lobbied for the annulment of the union before the American governor-general. Their efforts eventually paid off with the separation of the two towns in 1906 (Rizal Cultural Committee 1967).

Rebellion and Assimilation

Colonialism came to Malabon in different guises. While the first Spaniard who set foot in Malabon was a friar, the first American who arrived in the town was a soldier. American colonial rule was imposed in the municipality when it was placed under a state of martial law under the command of Col. John Beacon in 1899 (De los Santos 1975, 22).

The employment of military might by the Americans in claiming colonial domain over Malabon was understandable considering the town people's record of defiance against colonial rule. With the outbreak of the Philippine Revolution in 1896, Malabon became the site of fierce fighting between the members of the pro-independence Katipunan and the Spanish Guardia Civil. For their rebellious actions, many captured Katipuneros were executed at San Bartolome Church, transforming its backyard into a graveyard. On 19 June 1897, the Malabon insurrectos arrested the town's capitan municipal Timoteo Sevilla and threw him into prison (De los Santos 1975, 22).

The independence fighters of Malabon continued with their struggle even after the arrival of the new colonizers. The town, consequently, became a hotbed of anti-American guerrilla resistance. The neighboring areas where guerrilla activities against American colonialism were heavily waged included the towns of Polo, Obando, Meycauayan and Malolos in Bulacan province. Not surprisingly, Malabon was placed under military occupation in 1899 as part of the American pacification campaign.

To facilitate its control over town politics in Malabon, the Americans absorbed the old local elites into the new colonial bureaucracy. Local elites willing to collaborate with the new colonial power were encouraged by the American colonial regime to seek local governmental positions. Vicente Villongco became the first *presidente municipal* (mayor) of Malabon under US military rule in 1899.

In 1901, the Second Philippine Commission passed Act No. 82 (Municipal Code of 1901) which provided for the election of town mayors. However, the suffrage restrictions embodied in this municipi-

pal code virtually ensured the continuity of traditional local elite power in such a way that only those who were male, literate and propertied could vote and be voted into power. Therefore, the mayors of Malabon in the early 1900s were elected into office by just a narrow segment of the population.

Malabon, Manila and the World Economy

In the initial stages of Spanish colonial rule, Manila—the politico-economic capital of the Philippines—was just a remote outpost of Spain's empire, whose marginal relationship with the world market system was expressed through the galleon trade. Manila simply functioned as an entrepot reexporting Chinese silks and luxury goods to Europe via Mexico. Despite coming under a European power, Manila was separated from sixteenth century Europe by time and space. Improved maritime technology, as well as industrial growth, which impelled the industrial states of Europe to seek untapped markets and look into new sources of raw materials, especially in the 1800s, brought Manila into closer contact with the European market (McCoy 1982, 6).

In the nineteenth century Manila was fully integrated into the world economy, opening up market links not only with Europe but also with North America and Asia. Manila's integration into external trade networks provided the impetus for the growth of export-oriented commodity production, particularly in the areas surrounding the primate city. Hence, it was hardly surprising that the town of Malabon would become an export-processing site of cash crops like tobacco and sugar in the last century of Spanish rule.

In 1851, the construction of the tobacco factory called La Princesa, which was owned by the Spanish Crown, began in Hulo, Malabon. The La Princesa factory was a component of the state-controlled tobacco monopoly during that period. On the other hand, the Malabon Sugar Company, a sugar refinery, was set up in the town in 1888. Later on, other tobacco factories and sugar mills sprouted in Malabon (De los Santos 1975, 19).

Sugar refining and trading became a major base of local elite power in Malabon. The elites who engaged in this economic enterprise accumulated immense economic surplus. They resided in large stone houses with tile roofing, known as the "bahay na tisa." The "bahay na tisa," which were located along the banks of both sides

of the Malabon-Navotas River, became a symbol of wealth and power in the town. The sugar elites did not allow the source of their wealth to stray far from them. Hence, their sugar warehouses called "paldohan" were located right beside their houses.

The emergence of export commodity production in Malabon ushered in the beginning of the local economy's subordination into the global division of labor. This process saw the appearance of transnational factors influencing the formation of local elites in the town. Malabon's insertion into the world economy was mediated by Manila which served as the central linkage between market demand for raw materials in the industrial countries and the local production areas. For a discussion on the nature and patterns of the world economy, see Wallerstein (1984).

Lands, Fishponds and Power

Aside from local elite linkages to the export economy, a traditional base of economic power in Malabon was the ownership of land and fishponds. In many areas in the Philippines, landownership has been a traditional economic base of local elites in their bid for local elective posts (See Cortez 1990 and McCoy 1991, 105-42). During the Spanish period, the biggest landowners in the town were the Augustinian friars. They controlled vast areas of land in Malabon which they leased to local tenants. The friars were able to accumulate large landholdings, considering the eminent position they occupied in the civil administration, especially in towns lying outside the city proper of Manila (Doeppers 1984, 22-23). When the Americans came, the friar lands which the Augustinians promised to sell to the original tenants were instead acquired by the local elites of Malabon. A sizeable number of the friar lands and public fishing grounds during the Spanish period were converted into private fishponds under the American rule. The big fishponds in Malabon were located in the Dampalit and Letre areas. Fishpond ownership was a traditional base of local elite power in Malabon. Former town mayors who came from political clans identified with the fishpond business include Basilio Bautista (1918-23, 1936-37), Paterio Aquino (1946-51, 1956-59), Lucio Gutierrez (1960-71) and Jose Cruz (1971). The land and fishing grounds comprising the Letre area were controlled by the Augustinian friars during the Spanish period. Within the letre area was a body of salt water known as Dagat-dagatan which used to be open

for public fishing. When the Americans came, Dagat-dagatan was closed off to public fishing and subdivided into private fishponds under the ownership of the Camus, Gozon, Cayco, Lerma, Dionisio,, Tiangco and Gonzales families. /

Most of the fishpond elites benefitted from regime patronage in acquiring the right to set up private fishponds in Dagat-dagatan. A fishpond elite in Malabon served as Director of the Bureau of Plant Industry and Undersecretary of Agriculture under President Manuel Quezon. Another fishpond elite was a Bureau of Mines Director and Secretary of Natural Resources during the Macapagal administration. On the other hand, the withdrawal of regime patronage was equally decisive in undermining the economic base of the Dagat-dagatan fishpond elites. Employing its power of eminent domain, the martial law regime in the late 1970s proceeded to expropriate the private fishponds in Dagat-dagatan. The fishponds had to give way to the Dagat-dagatan Reclamation Project which was a pet project of Metro Manila Governor and Human Settlements Minister Imelda Marcos.

Through a presidential decree issued by Malacañang, the fishpond owners were required to make a public declaration of their assets. In expropriation proceedings for the use of land and fishponds for public infrastructure purposes, the owners were to be compensated based either on the declared value or the assessed value of their property, whichever was lower. When the Dagat-dagatan project started, most of the fishpond owners were paid only 10 percent of the assessed value of their properties. Given the martial law conditions prevailing at that time, it was not surprising that none of the fishpond elites affected by the project openly opposed the government move, although court cases were filed by the aggrieved parties.

From Fishponds to Slums

The reclaimed Dagat-dagatan area was intended to be the site of a massive low-cost housing project planned by the Ministry of Human Settlements. The showpiece project, however, ended up as a grand failure. The few row houses built by the Ministry of Human Settlements were left uncompleted and in shambles. The Dagat-dagatan Reclamation Project succeeded though in contributing further to the flood problem in Malabon as natural water arteries were converted into roads and urban poor settlements.

In the aftermath of the 1986 presidential elections, shanties sprouted like mushrooms all over the Dagat-dagatan area. Slum-dwelling families from the depressed areas of Malabon like Potrero, Tinajeros, Maysilo and Catmon transferred their mobile residences to the reclaimed area following the Batasan proclamation of Ferdinand Marcos as the winner in the 1986 presidential elections. The KBL (Kilusang Bagong Lipunan) electoral machinery purportedly made the campaign promise that the urban poor of Malabon could have a piece of land in Dagat-dagatan provided that Marcos was reelected to the presidency.

In the wake of the 1986 EDSA Revolution which installed Corazon Aquino as the legitimate Philippine president, a new set of poor migrants coming from the slums of Caloocan and Tondo arrived in Dagat-dagatan waving the banner of people's power. New arrivals from the provinces continue to pour into Dagat-dagatan whose environmental landscape undertook a tremendous overhaul within a span of just twenty years. Its waters teeming with fish have been replaced by slums teeming with hungry people. To the machine politician, however, Dagat-dagatan is a vote-rich area where political loyalties are short and votes, like goods in a market, are readily sold to the highest bidder.

The high density of people in Malabon brought about by rapid urbanization could be attributed to the town's proximity to the primate city of Manila, which has been the politico-economic capital of the Philippines since colonial times. The accelerated migration of Filipinos from the rural to the urban areas, especially in the post-war period, was precipitated by the tendency towards the concentration of economic surplus in the cities (Caoili 1988, 161).

The urbanization process in the Philippines is characterized by the unabated migration flow of the population from the rural to the urban centers. The tendency of economic surplus to be concentrated in a few core areas of the country serves as a push factor in accelerating migration rates from the peripheral provinces and intensifying, in the process, population pressures in the metropolitan centers, especially Metro Manila, and increasingly Metro Cebu. As in Latin America, a single city or a national capital region serves simultaneously as the political capital, the place of residence of the dominant classes and the preferred site for industry (see Portes 1989, 7-44).

In the 1950s, the city of Manila was already overcrowded with business establishments. The previously suburban towns surrounding Manila like Malabon, Valenzuela, Parañaque and Muntinlupa

became alternative sites for new factories and business enterprises. The new commercial and manufacturing establishments served as virtual magnets which attracted rural migrants looking for jobs. As a result, the urbanization process had spilled out from the confines of Manila into the surrounding cities and towns. In the 1970s, the three cities and thirteen municipalities surrounding Manila were consolidated with the primate city in forming the extended politico-economic capital of the Philippines—the national capital region of Metro Manila. The consolidation of the Metro Manila area was effected through the passage of PD 824 which placed the cities of Manila, Quezon, Pasay and Caloocan and the towns of Malabon, Navotas, Makati, Marikina, Las Piñas, Mandaluyong, Parañaque, Pasig, San Juan, Muntinlupa, Taguig, Valenzuela and Pateros under the Metro Manila Commission (MMC). The neighboring provinces of Rizal and Bulacan, however, became smaller in terms of political jurisdiction because a number of their original towns were integrated into the national capital region (Duka-Ventura 1978, 81–92).

The creation of Metro Manila may also be related to the interest of state officials in establishing public order in the cities and securing acceptance of the state's authority among the urban populace (Gurr and King 1987, 30). Indeed, it was with the intent of stamping its political control over local politics in the areas surrounding the primate city of Manila that the Marcos regime constituted Metro Manila as an enlarged seat of power.

Rural poverty has been a primary reason for the unabated migration of people from the countryside to the cities. Hence, it was projected by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission that as Metro Manila enters the next century, its population would reach 11 million. The environmental capacity of Metro Manila to accommodate further population pressures appears to be close to a breaking point. With its present population of 8 million, it is estimated that 50 percent or 4 million people in Metro Manila live in the slums (Prede 1990, 11).

In Malabon, migrants have settled themselves in areas close to factories and other work sites. As of 1990, there were 558 manufacturing establishments in Malabon. Tinajeros and Potrero, the *barangays* in Malabon with the most number of factories, are among the areas with the heaviest concentration of migrant workers in the town. Significantly, the expansion of the working class population in Malabon provided the basis for the emergence of a radical counterpoint to patronage politics in the town. The presence of an organized labor

sector served as a major base of support for the candidacy of left-wing activist Leandro Alejandro in the 1987 congressional elections.

The large number of migrant workers which settled in Malabon through the years has considerably pushed up the town's population level. Population growth has been unabated in Malabon especially in the postwar period. From a population of 46,455 in 1948, the town's population jumped to 141,514 in 1970, and almost doubled to 276,770 in 1990 in just a matter of 20 years. (See Table 1).

Table 1. Population of Malabon

Year	Population
1903	20,136
1918	21,136
1939	33,285
1948	46,455
1960	76,438
1970	141,514
1975	174,870
1980	191,001
1989	243,208
1990	276,770

Source: Office of the Mayor, Malabon, 1990.

According to figures released by the Malabon Development Office, as of 1990, out of a labor force of 119,545 in Malabon, 102,450 or 85.7 percent are employed, while 17,095 or 14.3 percent are unemployed. On the other hand, the workers in the manufacturing sector number around 23,051, making it as a potentially significant factor in Malabon politics. (See Table 2).

In the 1970s, the environmental landscape of Malabon was significantly altered not only by the transformation of fishponds into slums, but also by the simultaneous rise of numerous middle class subdivisions. What used to be fishponds and ricefields were converted into sprawling residential subdivisions. For example, the Doña Juana subdivision was previously a fishpond in Dampalit, while the Rodriguez subdivision used to be a ricefield owned by the Santos family. The other subdivisions which were developed in Malabon in the last twenty years include the Sto. Rosario Subdivision, Lagman Subdivision, Panghulo Subdivision, Merville Park and Paezville.

Table 2. Employed Persons According to Industry Group

Industry	No. of Employed Persons
Agriculture	2,664
Manufacturing	23,051
Electricity, Gas, Water	307
Construction	8,298
Wholesale, Retail Trade	20,285
Transportation and Communications	9,323
Financing, Insurance	8,606
Community, Social, Personal	29,916
Total	102,450

Source: Malabon Development Office, 1990.

The rise of these middle class residential subdivisions indicates the emergence of a substantial middle class sector in Malabon. The middle class in Malabon consists of small entrepreneurs and professionals. This sector tends to be oblivious to traditional political loyalties. There is, likewise, a strong middle class preference for electoral candidates who are professionals like themselves, and who epitomize clean and reform-oriented politics. It was widely acknowledged that the middle class vote went to Ramon Maronilla in the 1987 congressional elections and to Manuel Abad in the 1988 mayoralty elections in Malabon. Both candidates have law degrees from the University of the Philippines and ran under the banner of PDP-Laban.

A Changing Political Economy

The process of capital and market expansion in Malabon, especially in the last 40 years, has led to tremendous changes in both the geographical and sociopolitical environment of what used to be a suburban town. The construction of numerous factories in the 1950s facilitated the massive migration of people into Malabon. Capital expansion and the urbanization process it engenders has a shattering effect on traditional social interactions and old town politics. The barangays in Malabon with the fastest rising population are Potrero (40,902) and Longos (31,093), which includes the Dagat-dagatan area.

These barangays are known for their large slum communities. Evidently, old patronage politics will not work for the largely new town residents in these areas.

Traditional political clans and elites who failed to diversify into the modern modes of surplus accumulation were rendered politically paralyzed amidst the highly competitive character of contemporary electoral politics in Malabon. Reliance on traditional political loyalties and networks has become insufficient given the diminution of old town residents relative to the migrant population. New political linkages have to be created in the face of rapid urbanization. Urbanization results in the separation of home from work and the division in the economic and social roles of the family (Burnley and Forrest 1985). Political choices are no longer exactly made within the boundaries of the home and family. The urbanization process has led to an expanded electorate in Malabon. Given this context, personalized patron-client relationships have been replaced by machine-type organizations capable of galvanizing political support from an amorphous mass electorate. The transformation of Malabon from a semi-urban, semi-rural town, dotted with fishponds and farms in the early 1900s, into a highly urbanized municipality whose streets are lined with commercial establishments, factories, slums and subdivisions in the postwar period stems from two major factors: Malabon's proximity to the primate city of Manila and regime interest in consolidating state authority through the creation of Metro Manila, the expanded politicoeconomic capital of the Philippines.

The rapid pace of urbanization in Malabon also led to the emergence of at least three social sectors whose interests do not readily conform to the designs of old patron-client politics. The sectors referred to are the urban poor, the organized labor sector, and the middle class. The incorporation of these social groups into the political arena has altered the complexion of electoral politics in Malabon.

The presence of a big urban population serves as the basis for the ascendancy of the political machine over the clan network as the main organizational apparatus for harnessing votes by means of channeling rewards to the needy electorate of Malabon. Despite the dominance of patronage-oriented politics in the town, the existence of an organized labor sector and a significant middle class provides the constituent foundation for the future entry of alternative politics into the political mainstream of Malabon.

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