

# philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

---

## Party Responsibility in Legislation

Antonio B. Lambino

*Philippine Studies* vol. 12, no. 3 (1964): 511–516

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

---

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at [philstudies@admu.edu.ph](mailto:philstudies@admu.edu.ph).

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>  
Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

## Notes & Comment

### *Party Responsibility in Legislation*

The 1963 senatorial elections took place in what is referred to as an "off-year", i.e., no president was to be elected in that particular year. But if one examines the leading campaign issues of 1963, he might be led to think that this was a presidential election year. The eight Nacionalista candidates who were seeking election (or re-election as the case may be) wasted none of their campaign ammunition shooting at the "obstructionism" of the Liberal party senators who then happened to be the minority; instead, the Nacionalistas spent all their rounds firing at President Macapagal and his then two-year-old "new era". The issue, as Tolentino identified it, was the alleged failure of President Macapagal and the unrealized promise of his "new era". More in particular, the Nacionalistas claimed that "the nation was beset with the grave problems of high prices, rice shortage, and the dictatorial tendencies of the President.

In other words, the Nacionalista candidates were pitting themselves not so much against their senatorial opponents of the Liberal party as against the President himself. The battle was not fought directly against the eight aspirants of the Liberal party; rather, it was fought indirectly through presidential issues. The campaign issues had less to do with legislative performance than with executive performance. The *Free Press* leader writer who signs himself Quijano de Manila came out with following analysis of the 1963 senatorial campaign:

The campaign has thus been reduced to a fight between the NP's and just one man: Macapagal. The NP candidates never mention the names of their LP adversaries; it's the President who's lambasted from start to finish at every *miting*. The presidential campaign of 1965 is being fought 2 years in advance.<sup>1</sup>

One might of course remark that the NP's choice of campaign strategy was only to be expected: after all the Senate sessions of that year had not been much different from that of recent years. There

---

<sup>1</sup> *Philippines Free Press*, Oct. 5, 1963, p. 3.

was really not much that the Senate had done to make a campaign issue of. Whatever one might say of the number of useful bills that the NP-controlled Senate did pass, "the 100-day session was broken up into 90 days of wrangling and fooling around and 10 days of frantic activity and pandemonium."<sup>2</sup> It was therefore, one might say, only natural that the NP's chose to organize their campaign issues around President Macapagal's record rather than on the law-making record of the Senate. But the point is not that the Nacionalistas made a wise, if expected, choice of campaign issues; the point is that they chose what we might call a "beside-the-issue" issue and got away with it. As everyone knows, the NP's gained four of the eight senatorial seats at stake—which was quite a good feat for a party that did not count the President among its ranks.

We have thus come upon a characteristic of Philippine senatorial elections.<sup>3</sup> A party can apparently stake the election of its candidates on issues that have little or nothing to do with that party's performance in the Senate. Senatorial candidates can secure election (or re-election) not necessarily by pleading their own past or promised achievements as law-makers but by pleading the inefficiency of the President (if he belongs to the other party), or his efficiency (if he is a member of the fold). Supposing then that a president were unpopular: it would be greatly to a candidate's favor to have the reputation of being a vigorous critic of the President. If we grant that President Macapagal's popularity was low in 1963, then those NP's who were known to have opposed him should, according to our theory, have benefited from their anti-Macapagal attitude. In this connection it would be interesting to find out how many votes were cast in favor of Tolentino and Diokno for being outspoken critics of the President. As a matter of fact, Senator-elect Diokno observed that the five senators at the top of the election lists (Roxas, Tolentino, Diokno himself, Padilla, Puyat) shared one characteristic in common: they were all, so goes the claim, "uncontrollable" by President Macapagal.<sup>4</sup> One might of course challenge the accuracy of Diokno's observation: perhaps not all of the senators mentioned were exactly noted for opposing the President. Certainly Tolentino and Diokno were.

To avoid oversimplification it must be mentioned here that the elected senators, regardless of their attitude toward the President, did have that most fundamental vote-getting characteristic: real parliamentary or legal ability. But it remains a fact that the NP campaign strategy was to wave before the electorate the problems of high prices (as the President's fault), rice shortage (as the President's fault), and the alleged dictatorship of the President. The validity of the accusations

<sup>2</sup> Napoleon G. Rama in May 9, 1964 issue of the *Philippines Free Press*, page 39.

<sup>3</sup> For the sake of clarity and convenience we shall, for the most part, limit our study to the Senate. With the proper adaptations, however, many of our observations about the Upper House can be made to apply to the Lower House.

<sup>4</sup> *Philippines Free Press*, Nov. 23, 1963, p. 71.

is not in question here. The fact is that four Nacionalistas won on such an issue.

The supreme significance that Philippine politics attaches to the office of the President makes it rather easy for candidates to side-step painful legislative issues and to propose to the electorate more pleasant, if not so relevant, issues. All that is needed is a presidential issue to catch the attention of the people. Party responsibility for legislative work is thus obscured in the account that both parties are supposed to give of themselves during the campaign for evaluation by the people. And it may be noted that the majority party who may be guilty of sloth, and the minority party who may be guilty of non-cooperation, can both take comfort from this obscuring of party responsibility in legislation. There is no need for a party to worry about its legislative performance.

This predilection for presidential issues is not entirely without reason. Given the broad powers which the Chief Executive enjoys, it does not seem unreasonable to make his performance in office the focus of campaign issues even in off-year elections. NP Senator Tolentino seems to suggest that it is the President's responsibility to win the cooperation of the senators. Replying to President Macapagal's charge of obstructionism in the 1963 campaign, Tolentino pointed out that "Eisenhower faced during his second term a Congress both houses of which were in the hands of the opposition, but Eisenhower had no trouble getting his work done. In fact, Kennedy is having more trouble with his Democratic congress than Eisenhower did. So there's no basis to Macapagal's contention that he needs a congress of his own political complexion."<sup>5</sup> If President Macapagal fails to win Senate support for his program, he has only himself to blame—so Tolentino's argument would seem to conclude.

Another explanation for the predominance of presidential issues can be derived from a look at the extent of the President's powers. Since the Chief Executive can put a finger in practically every important development in the political life of the country, it would be decidedly difficult to find an issue that does not involve the President.

Perhaps, then, the strongly centralized structure of the Philippine government all but predetermines the nature of election issues.

But all reservations having been made, the Philippine emphasis on presidential issues in presidential years and off-years alike, and the consequent obscuring of party responsibility in legislation, are quite out of the ordinary.

Election time is political judgment day when the candidates have to render an account of themselves to the electorate. The vote is the sanction that encourages good legislative work; if that vote can be won

---

<sup>5</sup> *Philippines Free Press*, Oct. 5, 1963, p. 39.

independently of how the work has been done, then the sanction is nugatory. A senator could chalk up for himself a record of legislative inactivity without fear of losing in the next elections.

Now, what of the candidate seeking a senatorial position for the first time? The new candidate should certainly, according to custom, put forward promises of the great things he would accomplish if he were elected. But more important than this he must involve himself in a presidential issue. In an off-year, as we have seen, the issue is built around the incumbent President's performance. In a presidential year the senatorial candidate must either join the bandwagon of a popular incumbent President seeking re-election, or he must attach himself to a popular challenger who is making an issue of the incumbent President's inglorious record. The candidate who joins the ticket of an unpopular incumbent has of course lost the issue but not necessarily the election as anyone who is acquainted with Philippine politics will readily see.<sup>6</sup> (The candidate who attaches himself to an unpopular challenger has lost his senses.) Note again how the idea of party responsibility for legislation can be so dimmed in the consciousness of a new senator. Now in office, he realizes that he does not owe his victory primarily to any legislative work he has promised to do. This realization is no encouragement to exert himself in the business of legislation.

The problem is aggravated when we consider the senators collectively, working as a party unit in the Senate. Let us suppose that the party in power<sup>7</sup> has the majority vote. Normally one would expect that the administration would find it smooth sailing given such a situation. The President would presumably find it easy to push his legislative program. This does not seem to be verified in the experience of many past administrations, or of the present administration for that matter. Neither Quirino nor Garcia expressed satisfaction over the cooperation he received from his party in the Senate. This year saw the Liberal party unable to take advantage of its initial majority vote in the Senate. To take another example, not from the Senate now but from the House of Representatives: in the 1964 special session,

<sup>6</sup> In the 1953 elections Magsaysay's popularity was so overwhelming that not a single Liberal was elected senator. Five Nacionalistas (Rodriguez, Pelaez, Cea, Cuenco and Mabanag) rode on the crest of Magsaysay's victory. Two candidates of the Democratic party (Lopez and Kangleon), and one of the Nationalist Citizens party (Tañada) also made it. In the 1955 off-year elections, Magsaysay's record was, to say the least, a very strong factor in the Nacionalista sweep of the senatorial elections. After 1955 not one Liberal was to be found in the Senate.

Magsaysay died in 1957, and Garcia—not quite as popular as his predecessor—took over. In the November elections of the same year, two Liberals (Padilla and de la Rosa) finally made it. In 1959, with Garcia's popularity unenhanced, two more Liberals (Marcos, Fernandez) were elected into office.

Finally, in the 1961 presidential elections, Macapagal—then somewhat more popular than he seems to be at present—captained a Liberal ticket of six (Manglapus, Manahan, Osias, Antonino, Katigbak and Rodrigo) to victory. Two NP's (Sumulong and Roy) won. In the off-year 1963 elections, with Macapagal's popularity on the wane, four NP's and four LP's were voted into the Senate.

<sup>7</sup> This term is here taken to mean the party of the incumbent President, the party in control of the administration.

the Liberal majority in the House is oftentimes not there literally, for lack of a quorum.

Let us suppose that the opposition party has the majority vote (which is the actual case in the present Senate composition). One might be led to believe that it would be in the best interests of the opposition party to come out with a good record of legislative work, an accomplishment on which the party can pride itself in the next elections. But recalling how election results hinge on presidential issues, one would understand how strongly tempted the majority opposition would be to prevent the passage of too many good bills, for fear that the President might decide to take the credit of good law-making done during his term of office.

It is interesting to note the kind of bills passed by Congress in the three years of the present administration. Two bills (now law) come to mind: the Land Reform Code and the Rice Importation Law. One notes at once that these are laws of great popular appeal. One obvious reason why they were passed is that no legislator, whether of the party in power or of the opposition, could have risked opposing a "people's measure." Party responsibility in legislation is not quite so obscure where rice or land is concerned.<sup>8</sup> But decentralization, general appropriations, foreign investments, the export tax, public works have to do with more complicated matters over which responsibility is not quite so clearly delineated. Hence, little except shelving, blocking or slashing is being done about them. The bill "to increase the public indebtedness from ₱1 billion to ₱2 billion" and the bill "to increase presidential capacity for borrowing abroad to finance his socio-economic development program"<sup>9</sup> are of course entirely out of the question as far as the opposition party is concerned.

A number of bills of somewhat less significance that have been passed by both houses of Congress may be briefly mentioned:<sup>10</sup>

Senate bill 567 (House bill 7416) converting the Nueva Ecija School of Arts and Trades into the Central Luzon Polytechnic College.

S-422 (H-6062) changing the name of the Bureau of Public Libraries to National Library.

S-430 (H-4346) regulating the payment of expenses of government personnel on travel within the Philippines.

S-44 amending section 835 of the revised administrative code regarding the duration of licenses.

S-409 (H- 4279) amending the General Banking Act.

---

<sup>8</sup> It is quite amusing to observe that Senator Marcos who led the senatorial moaning and groaning over the rice importation, later listed the passage of the same bill as one of the top accomplishments of the 1964 Senate of which he was President. (Cf. *Manila Bulletin*, May 22, 1964, p. 12, col. 6.)

<sup>9</sup> *Manila Bulletin*, May 22, 1964, p. 12, col. 4.

<sup>10</sup> *Manila Bulletin*, May 26, 1964, p. 10, col. 8.

S-348 (H-1915) amending the National Defense Act regarding military training.

H-1352 amending the Revised Charter of Manila to raise the salaries of city officials.

S-583 (H-4609) amending paragraph 1 of sec. 15, Article 8 of Republic Act 1135.

The 1964 Congress has presented additional difficulties regarding the delineation of party responsibility in legislation. What with the House under the control of the party in power and the Senate under the control of the opposition after it had first been under the control of the party in power, we can be reasonably sure that in the 1965 elections the President will complain about a "do-nothing Congress" and that many congressmen will, in turn, complain about an "inefficient President." If the majority of the Philippine electorate continues to be undemanding about party responsibility in legislation, President Macapagal may suffer a disadvantage.

It appears then, that the unitary structure of Philippine government and the wide powers conferred on the Chief Executive have led to a unique emphasis on presidential issues in election campaigns and a corresponding submersion, at least to a great degree, of the issue of legislative performance. The possibility of winning a seat in Congress independently of legislative issues seems to allow legislators and their parties the opportunity of shunning responsibility for legislation.

The problem of party responsibility in legislation is, in the final analysis, part of that broader problem faced by every democratic government, namely, intelligent participation by the people in democratic processes. It must be admitted that the greater part of the Philippine electorate is inadequately conversant with many of even the elementary processes of democratic government. But if, as one senator has urged, one considers that the Philippines is a young democracy and that the Philippine electorate has, by means of the democratic vote, brought about two changes of administration within the period of eight years (covering three presidential elections); and if one also considers how third-party candidates without the aid of strong party machinery have come very close to winning against the candidates of the established parties—then one can believe, with good reason, that democracy in the Philippines is on the way to maturity.

ANTONIO B. LAMBINO

## *Asia and America*

The great maritime discoveries sponsored by the Iberian nations put the Portuguese in contact with Asia in 1498 and the Spaniards