

Social Democratic Lessons and Challenges for the Philippines

**Opening Ceremonies
Exhibition “For Freedom and Social Justice,” Friedrich Ebert Stiftung
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Introduction

His Excellency Christian Ludwig Weber-Lortsch, German Ambassador to the Philippines

Mr. Ronald Llamas, President, Akbayan Citizens Action Party

Mr. Mirko Herberg, Resident Representative to the Philippines, FES

Dr. Alma Salvador, Chair of the Ateneo Political Science Department

Distinguished guests from the FES and its partners, colleagues in the academe and civil society, students from the Ateneo de Manila and other universities/colleges

Friends and fellow hopeful advocates of Freedom, Social Justice and Solidarity

Last Wednesday during our meeting to talk about some details of the program this week, I was kidding Mirko that finally the FES exhibit on German social democracy has come to the Ateneo de Manila! I remember almost two years ago, when renowned social democratic theorist and professor Dr. Thomas Meyer visited the Philippines, I started my reaction to his paper by saying how I found it a little amusing that the forum on social democracy was being held in UP Diliman where historically social democracy has not exactly received a warm reception. So I said then that times have indeed changed! Last August upon the invitation of FES, I was very privileged to speak at the closing ceremonies of this same exhibit at San Beda College in Mendiola, Manila. I was also grateful then for the opportunity to come home to my grade school and high school alma mater. But I find the exhibit and program here at the Ateneo particularly meaningful. As we open the exhibit on German social democracy, we have an opportunity for a different kind of homecoming – a more political and ideological one – in order to revisit and reflect on the significance of social democracy. After all, it was here at the Ateneo de Manila, that young people in the 1960s and 1970s started thinking about the notion and relevance of a Philippine social democracy. This perspective became central to my own

political formation and involvement beginning in the 1980s. But we are here not primarily to reminisce about the past but to ask ourselves: what are the lessons and challenges that social democracy offers for the Philippines and for Filipinos committed to genuine democracy today?

Let me start by congratulating the FES for organizing this very informative and thoughtful exhibition “For Freedom and Social Justice” on the history of the German Social Democratic political platforms and practical politics which has been going around various campuses around the country. I would like to point out two key insights and lessons from this exhibition which we can draw upon when reflecting about the challenges of social democracy in the Philippines:

- First, German social democracy has not been static nor dogmatic. On the contrary, the SPD has been characterized by political dynamism and a capacity and willingness to reimagine itself under changing conditions. To quote from the text of the exhibition handbook, “German Social Democracy has constantly given proof of its courage for reorientation. By changing itself, it has been able to preserve its identity in different political and social systems: during the 1848 revolution, the German Confederation, the German Empire, the Weimar Republic, National Socialist dictatorship, old and new Federal Republic of Germany.”
- Second, despite its transformation over time amidst changing historical conditions, German social democrats have been conscious of the need to remain anchored on firm core values which have guided the party from its beginnings: “a striving for freedom which is based on social justice and proves its strength in solidarity.”

How can we learn from these two basic lessons and insights? How can we apply this perspective of the need to be politically creative and dynamic in the particular context and changing situation of the Philippines (and the world), while at the same time being solidly grounded on the values and vision of promoting freedom, social justice and solidarity?

What I would like to propose is to see social democracy as a framework in the three spheres of politics, economics and culture: the challenges of democratization, socioeconomic development and cultural renewal.

1. Social Democracy as a framework of democratization

Social democracy is grounded in and has flourished under conditions of liberal democracy. The extension of citizenship rights (institutionalized social civic rights) from the political to the socio-economic realm (and thus the fullness of democracy) is to be achieved via the parliamentary/electoral mode of struggle. Freedom or democracy is seen as the means and end of socialism.

But just like in the case of SPD at various points in its history, the concrete context in which social democracy is pursued may very well be less than democratic if at all. This was the real dilemma faced by those wanting to build and advance a project of social democracy during the Marcos years. How does one advocate social democracy under conditions of authoritarianism and political repression, when there is very little democratic space to push for political rights, let alone social and economic rights of citizenship? It is significant that we are opening this exhibition on the birth anniversary of the late President Corazon “Cory” Aquino and at the very moment when there is an ongoing tribute to her at the Church of the Gesu on this campus for her lasting contributions to democratization in the country. The struggle for social democracy in the Philippines cannot be separated from the struggle against dictatorship. The struggle for freedom is the context and framework in which social democrats struggle for justice.

Social democracy in the Philippines emerged not only in the context of the Marcos regime in the 1970s, but also as a reaction to Marxism-Leninism, particularly to the political option offered by the CPP-NPA-NDF. In the search for an alternative to the Maoist-inspired national democratic people’s war strategy and its emphasis on political vanguardism and centralism, activists turned to social democracy because of its tradition of upholding political democracy, economic justice and social/human solidarity. For those who developed the embryonic Filipino social democratic alternative (e.g., Ed Garcia and Fr. Antonio Ledesma of Lakasdiwa, Fr. Jose Blanco and Charlie Avila of Kasapi and Fr.. Romeo Intengan of Hasik-Kalayaan and later the Partido Demokratiko Sosyalista ng Pilipinas), at the core of their philosophical and political framework was the emphasis on the basic dignity of human person and democratic sociopolitical change. It is not surprising that social democracy in the Philippines found fertile ground at the Ateneo de Manila University and other Jesuit institutions.

A central inspiration for Filipino social democracy was Catholic social teaching, particularly the social vision of post-Vatican II Catholicism which called for a “faith that does justice” and stressed the Church’s preferential option for the poor. In the case of the Philippines, there was a clear link between the development of Filipino Social Democracy and the political ideas and work of former Senator Raul Manglapus, the Christian Social Movement and organizations such as the Federation of Free Workers and Federation of Free Farmers. Filipino Social Democracy and Democratic Socialism found its early inspiration and roots in what may be referred to as Christian Democracy in other contexts. These links can be seen in different degrees in Kasapi or Lakasdiwa or PDSP, but also later in the Ateneo Sarilikha, the Workers’ College, Organizing for Rural Development (ORD), Office for Social Concern and Involvement (OSCI) of the Ateneo Center for Community Services. Beyond the Ateneo, there were also the Youth for the Advancement of Faith and Justice (YAFJ) and Kristiyanong Katipunan/Kristiyanong Ugnayan para sa Sosyalismo (Krus). These organizations and experiences shaped the social democrats who formed the Pandayan para sa Sosyalistang Pilipinas (Pandayan) and also those who joined the Bukluran para sa Ikaunlad ng Sosyalistang Isip at Gawa (Bisig).

The growth of above-ground independent people's organizations/ non-governmental organizations (later termed "civil society") also found in social democracy a perspective for advocating a more participatory democracy as contrasted with both the elitist/oligarchic democracy and vanguardist/doctrinaire approach of the CPP. The Akbayan Citizens Action Party combines these traditions of former national democrats, independent Marxists and social democrats coming out of Christian socialist/liberation theology traditions (Pandayan and Krus).

In the Philippines, even as democratic institutions were restored in 1986, what we have is often described as an oligarchic or elitist democracy. While there is formal democracy, the historic inequities arising out of concentration of wealth and income in a few families, renders democracy dysfunctional and elite-controlled. How will the project of social democracy be undertaken so that there is an equalization of power? How does one move from extra-parliamentary struggle to an electoral mode in which social democrats can contest state power?

What are the challenges in the present context during the last few months of the Arroyo government and as we prepare for national elections this coming May? Allow me to run through some key issues, dilemmas and tasks of democratization in the current situation in bullet-point style:

- The serious allegations of electoral cheating, systemic corruption and abuse of power since 2005 have remained unanswered and unresolved.
- There is a continuing pattern of anomalies, cover-up and efforts to survive politically and consolidate power even further among those currently in power (to the point of attempts at term extension beyond constitutional limits).
- Good governance has been sacrificed as political patronage is reinforced. A climate of impunity pervades and democratic institutions are undermined (to the point where they lose credibility as mechanisms of impartial resolution of contentious questions).
- The continuing anxiety about possible failure of elections, emergency rule and even "transitional revolutionary government" are manifestations of a serious crisis of trust. There remain continuing suspicions about the willingness of the present government to test the boundaries of the law and public opinion to allow the outgoing president to stay in power beyond 2010.

Despite the continuing political crisis, the sharp contrast between the unpopularity of President Arroyo and the huge public sympathy for the late President Aquino whose birthday we celebrate today is also a clear statement that Filipinos value democratic institutions. People have continued to send strong signals that circumventing the constitution and imposing authoritarian rule will be resisted. It is one thing for those in power to want and try to extend their term. It is another for them to be actually successful. And so far, attempts at cha-cha, emergency rule or other efforts at extra-constitutional change have failed.

But the fate of democracy and any attempt at term extension via “emergency rule,” “TRG” and “cha-cha” will still depend on how orderly and credible the May 2010 elections are going to be, and who gets elected to the presidency and Congress. Vigilance, active participation and committed and coordinated involvement (especially when there are persistent technical and logistical questions about the automated electoral system) will be critical to protect the Constitution, safeguard the electoral process and promote sociopolitical and institutional reform in the medium to long term. Youth participation in the forthcoming elections will be important to restore trust and strengthen democratic institutions. Voter registration and education initiatives have been significant (although we have not been as successful we would have wanted).

But promoting high voter registration and turnout and ensuring the integrity of the process is only the minimum challenge. The deeper problem is the largely unrepresentative and unaccountable nature of electoral democracy in the Philippines. The electoral process has not provided the citizenry with clear choices among contending views and programs. The problem of personality and patronage politics has structural roots in poverty and inequality but we also need to examine the character and institutions of electoral competition. The quality of choice depends on political parties, the main organizations that structure electoral competition through their platforms, policy positions and legislative behavior. Consistency and fairness of policy implementation depends on a professional bureaucracy/civil service and legal system.

The challenge for social democrats today is to develop processes that will help people articulate their real needs and aspirations. Beyond traditional voters’ education, mechanisms are needed for communities to choose candidates who are committed to sociopolitical reform and who can be made accountable for their campaign promises. In the absence of a developed party system, initiatives to approximate agenda-development, candidate-selection, constituency-building and coalition-formation need to be encouraged and supported, in a context where politics is still dominated by traditional families and patronage (even though this has also not been static).

The social democratic perspective sees democratization as a continuing, unfinished project. It sees liberal democratic institutions, for all their flaws, as genuine achievements of the people’s struggle, including those of the working classes. There is a need to push the limits of participation even in flawed formally liberal democratic institutions. It is important to being able to create opportunities for learning experiences in citizenship and at the same time also governance.

2. Social Democracy as a framework for economically dynamic and socially inclusive development

The challenge for Filipino social democracy has always been how to appropriate a political economic model that has flourished in economically developed industrial democracies, into conditions of underdevelopment, poverty and inequality. In such a context, the economy is dominated by the rural/agricultural, informal and service sectors rather than industrial production and employment. There is a problem of low levels of

saving and accumulation. There is a small middle class. The economy is characterized by dependency or subordination in the global political economy.

In the 1970s-80s, those of us who were trying to develop a social democratic alternative, did not have a ready-made theorization of underdevelopment and of a social democratic road to development (in contrast with both the modernization school/authoritarian developmentalism of the 1970s and neo-liberalism of 1980s-90s on the right; and Marxism-Leninism-Maoism of the 1960s-80s, i.e. national democracy, on the left). We found ourselves borrowing heavily from the categories of national democracy and to a certain extent, Latin American dependency theory. But we also emphasized the need for workers' democracy/co-determination and independent people's organizations among the basic sectors which we felt were not highlighted in the national democratic framework.

Our perspectives on political economy have always been shaped by a central insight: the fullness of democracy can only be realized under conditions of economic democracy and social justice. The building of democratic institutions cannot be divorced from the organization of the working classes and promoting equitable development and substantive reform in asset ownership, including agrarian reform, industrial democracy, and other measures to address poverty and provide basic services like housing, education and health.

Framing and addressing the problems of poverty, inequality and underdevelopment remains an urgent task for Filipino social democrats, especially in the context of globalization, even as the current global financial and economic crisis has exposed the flaws of neo-liberalism. To confront globalization/neo-liberalism, there is a need for global social democratic governance institutions. Quoting from the insights of contemporary German social democratic thinker Professor Dr. Thomas Meyer distinguishing social from libertarian democracy:

The champions of social democracy point to another aspect: there are not only limits to the welfare state from globalization but also social limits to globalization. A globalization that is merely economic proves first and foremost to be a process of silent de-democratization. In order to re-acquire democratic powers of decision making, the extent of the impact of democratic decisions must be just as great as the radius of the impact of interlinked problems whose resolution the majorities in societies demand. What the globalized world needs are political decision-making structures, forms of transnational cooperation that meet the requirements of actual globalization. For the transnational level, democracy must be reinvented (2008).

There is also the question of development cooperation/international solidarity among social democrats in the North and South. What forms should this take? What are the mechanisms of global governance and transnational social movement that can bring together social democrats around the world?

3. Social Democracy as a framework for renewing political culture towards the promotion of the common good, social solidarity and engaged citizenship

In a thoughtful pastoral letter issued two years ago on how to confront the “darkness of our national situation,” the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) said that the crisis is rooted in the subordination of the common good to private ends. The bishops pointed out that as a people, we have been weak in developing a social conscience. In many ways, what we often witness is a “democracy without citizenship.” We need to develop a culture of stewardship and solidarity. It is in this light that there is a continuing call for communal discernment and conversion leading to action.

As I have pointed out in my contribution to the Agenda for Hope project of the Ateneo Loyola Schools, the deeper crisis we face is not just the political crisis of corruption, abuse of power and lack of accountability under the Arroyo government, but a growing sense of alienation from national politics especially among the youth, who have come to doubt the integrity of democratic political institutions and actors, and the efficacy and meaningfulness of political involvement

During the height of the “Hello Garci” issue in 2005, I asked my senior Political Science class if it was true, as many people have accused the youth, that they had become “apathetic” or “indifferent” about national politics. The answer I received was that it was not that they did not want to get involved, but they thought that “even if we got involved, it would not make a difference.” I took this kind of response not as expressing apathy or indifference, but as a sign of a more disturbing problem of disempowerment, leading to disengagement and a feeling of hopelessness. The youth may in fact be very involved and committed in other ways, including various forms of social development work, but they find involvement in national politics less meaningful or removed from what they are doing.

Thus the challenge for political educators and organizers has been how to help our citizens, especially the youth, overcome this powerlessness and hopelessness. Where there is much confusion, and when choices are often not clear-cut nor attractive, a critical task is to help people make sense of the complex situation and provide avenues for action where they can make a difference both in the short and long term.

Political empowerment and engagement means becoming personally accountable and taking personal responsibility for the wider sociopolitical problems in our midst. This has been a key point of recent political education and organizing efforts which show that there is much capacity for taking personal responsibility, generosity and engaged citizenship. This has been the framework of involvement in Gawad Kalinga, Pathways to Higher Education, the Sumilao and CARPER campaign, Task Force Ondoy. It is also evident in such projects as Ehem, Bida Change, First Time Voters, Kaya Natin, I am Ninoy/Cory, Juan Tama, Ako Mismo, and the “Twelve little things I can do for my country.”

Young people today want to get involved in concrete forms of action that have visible impact. The challenge for social democrats is to connect concrete options for personal involvement with a larger framework and project for democratization (defending and deepening democratic institutions) and a network/coalition that can provide an organizational base for working for sociopolitical transformation. This has been the thrust of efforts at political education and mobilization, including Pugadlawin, One Voice, VforCE, Watch, Pray and Act/Busina, Task Force 2010.

Beyond national politics, there is also the social democratic challenge of forging a more inclusive culture and community, recognizing diversity (in language, ethnicity, gender), promoting peace and sustainability, and global consciousness and responsibility.

It is indeed significant that we are opening this exhibit on social democracy on the birth anniversary of President Cory Aquino whom we honor for her commitment to democratization. It is also a fitting time to call for new heroes of democracy who will also courageously, selflessly and consistently work to defend and deepen democracy – and thus achieve the fullness of democracy: in freedom, social justice and solidarity. This is what social democracy is about and thus I see it as central to an agenda of hope for our people today.