Trust and Structural Response to Natural Disaster: Some Implications to Government Reform^{*}

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The Philippine government is a representative democracy. It has three co-equal branches of government namely the executive, legislative, and judicial, operating on the principle of check and balance. Issues that had riddled top officials of government remained unresolved hitherto; and, the local government units had their own lingering issues. The government structure therefore did not seem to have the mechanism to correct itself. This paper argues that responses to, as well as the ensuing conditions of the survivors of natural disasters, are affected by how much trust the incumbents of relevant government structures have of each other and that actors outside of the government hierarchy can offer avenues for reform. Tropical Storm Washi that hit Cagayan de Oro City could be a case in point. It left thousands of people dead or missing, millions of dollars in damages, and thousands of internally displaced persons (IDPs). The local government, tasked by the local government code to handle matters related to social welfare, did not seem to have performed as expected. In an apparent lack of trust, donor agencies preferred to course cash and relief items through conduits others than the local government. While the system remained unable to correct itself, the victims of the disaster continued to suffer. Civil society organizations and non-government organizations were trying to re-establish people's trust in the system through legal measures, and hope that electoral reforms could be instituted.

Keywords: civil society organizations, government structure, natural disaster, Iron Law of Oligarchy

Introduction

Many scandals involving top government officials including the mess in the Philippine National Broadband Network deal with China (Alave, 2011), the "Hello, Garci" electoral fraud (Coronel, 2005), the Jocjoc Bolante fertilizer fund scam (Dedace, 2011), and the Dengvaxia controversy (CNN Philippines, 2018), hitherto have no closure. When democratic government structures are unable to resolve the ambiguities attendant to scandals like these, trust in what good can these structures provide becomes a major issue. Trust, in the social context, is based on one's sense of confidence that a person or an entity will respond as expected and act consciously in ways that will be mutually beneficial to parties involved (Bullen & Onix, 1998). The nature of interconnectedness among government structures implies that if there is the crisis of trust in the higher levels such may permeate the lower levels of the hierarchy in a culture-like mode. When this happens, corrective measures may have to be provided by actors from outside the hierarchy, the non-government organizations (NGOs), and the civil society organizations.

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When Tropical Storm Washi (local name, *Sendong*) hit Cagayan de Oro City in southern Philippines in December 2011 that left more than 2,000 people dead or missing, government structures were expected to respond accordingly. This paper argues that responses to, as well as the ensuing conditions of the survivors of natural disasters, are affected by how much trust the incumbents of relevant government structures have of each other and that actors outside of the government hierarchy can offer avenues for reform.

Natural disasters are bound to happen especially in places where residential options are limited for those who are wanting in wherewithal. It is vital that institutional deficiencies are identified and corrected or at least managed to restore trust and for the prevention of, and as pro-action against natural calamities.

An organization, government or otherwise, may be described by the interdependence of its parts, that is, the functional interrelationship among structures and layers. Each structure is assumed to have adequate positions, functions, and moral and legal grounding to pursue integrated societal goals. Trust among incumbents of structures is a major requirement for them to meet societal expectations for human welfare and social, economic and political stability: There is trust that each incumbent knows: (1) the role expectations associated with his/her position; (2) the norms that govern the execution of these roles; and, (3) the societal values being pursued by the structure itself. The incumbent is expected not only to know but also to have the posture to pursue the ideals of the structure and the agency of which it is a part. In other words, ignorance of the character of the position and the structure, and poor attitude towards the functions that the position demands, can derail efforts in pursuit of common values. In this case, trust, that element of social capital that fosters unity, cooperation, and collective confidence, will likely be lost.

Government of the Republic of the Philippines

The Republic of the Philippines has a representative democracy where sovereignty resides in the people and all government authority emanates from them. It has three co-equal branches of government operating on the principle of check and balance: executive, legislative, and judicial. The executive branch, in particular, enforces the laws passed by the legislative branch for *inter alia* the maintenance of public order. The president, elected for a term of six in a general election, is the head of the Weberian structure.

The Office of the President has an official family, the Cabinet headed by Secretaries (e.g., Department of Social Welfare and Development, Department of Health, Department of the Interior and Local Government) appointed by the President to perform specific mandates.

The country is politically subdivided into levels: province, headed by a Governor; city/municipality, headed by a Mayor; and, *barangay* (village), the smallest political unit headed by a Barangay Chairman. The Office of the President exercises general supervision over local government units (LGUs). The incumbents of the LGUs, except barangay officials, are elected for a term of three years. Each of the three levels has a legislative body.

In the context of local autonomy, certain functions of national agencies like those related to health, social welfare, and the environment were devolved to the LGU (RA 7160, Local Government Code of 1992). With revenue generating powers granted to them, the framers of RA 7160 trust that the devolved functions can be performed well by LGUs.

Data for this paper were taken from interviews with a random sample of 480 respondents (Margin of Error = 0.05) from households in a survey in evacuation centers and survivor households in affected barangays, with key informants in-depth interviews and participants in focus group discussions (FGDs), from published sources

and service statistics of government agencies and aid groups.

Findings

Tropical Storm Washi hit northern Mindanao; swollen rivers washed away over 4,000 houses and destroyed thousands of others. It left thousands of people dead or missing in its wake (Tan, 2011). The damage was estimated at PhP1.3B (about US\$29.5M). The LGU had been evidently remiss in taking safety measures before the flood and mitigating its effects when it happened.

The weather bureau and the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC) were reported to have issued a series of advisories to local government units about the storm, but were apparently ignored by Cagayan de Oro (CDO) LGU. There was the “business-as-usual attitude of the city government in allowing the Night Café, a beer garden-cum-used goods bazaar at the city center, to operate on the night the storm was expected to hit” (Adorador & Pastrano, 2012).

Natural phenomenon becomes a disaster when life and property are involved. Why were there so many houses near the river banks? Many interviewed flood survivors revealed that they were living in the city’s socialized housing zones (SHZs) in sandbars called *Balangay* and *USA* (United Settlers Association). In these SHZs, as in similar others in sandbars along the river under the *Piso Piso* program, residents paid one peso (< 1 US cent) per day to the city government (Pecojon, 2012).

Earlier, following the flashflood that came with Tropical Storm Ketsana in 2009 when some 200,000 persons were displaced, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) conducted a geo-hazard mapping. Many of the SHZs were found to be in danger of destructive inundation. The office submitted a report to the CDO LGU. The report was not acted upon (Pecojon, 2012).

Not only was there no disaster mitigation measures like dikes, reliable drainage infrastructure, and active barangay-based disaster response team as recommended in the report of the DENR prior to the event, there was no direction from the CDO LGU in the rescue, recovery, and relief operations when the predicted storm Washi finally came. Days after the storm, dead bodies were still being recovered. The manager of a funeral home lamented that when the earliest set of dead bodies came, they could not process the corpse because there was neither electric power nor water. Many of those that could not be identified and processed were ordered placed in the city’s garbage dumpsite (Pecojon, 2012).

There was no command center. A national newspaper column reported, “Foreign and local private donors as well as national media...are brought instead to a one-man command center where they are made to wait for hours to pay obeisance to the mayor” (Montalvan, 2012). The coordinator of a local Catholic school’s own relief efforts said, “When the DSWD Central Office (personnel) came in to take over (the rescue, recovery, and relief operations), they decided to base their operations inside Xavier University because we are already a system there”. An international observer was quoted to have said, “It is unfortunate that the city government was unable to seize the moment to become the central command to synergize the various efforts from the private and the public sectors, from the local and international organizations, from volunteers to aid workers” (Adorador & Pastrano, 2012).

The phenomenon subsequently necessitated the establishment of makeshift evacuation centers (ECs). Many ECs were situated inside public school premises. As of February 24, 2012, there were 40 ECs, with 3,609 households, and 41 affected barangays with 18,284 affected households in CDO. Donations in cash, temporary shelters, and relief goods, from various groups and individuals local, national and international, poured in.

Crisis of Trust

A national government official expressed fears that donated funds could be misused. A foreign diplomat confirmed that donations from his country were given to the national government through the foreign affairs department (Rulona, 2012). But an LGU official said that the City Treasurer's Office had received no foreign aid at all for Washi survivors. A bank donated 1.5M pesos but it took so much time for the CDO LGU to make use of the money intended to address an emergency situation (Adorador & Pastrano, 2012).

Mature democracies have ways of dealing with incumbents who deviate from established role expectations. In fact, Rule XIX, Art. 124 of Republic Act (RA) 7160 (Rules and Regulations Implementing the Local Government Code of 1991) provides that local officials may be disciplined or removed from office in case of dishonesty, gross negligence, or dereliction of duty. For failure to heed the warnings of the DENR and the government's weather bureau about Washi, for its inability to observe the law on risk reduction on time, and for having encouraged people to build houses on areas long identified by the DENR as flood-prone, Save CDO Movement, a civil society organization, filed a complaint against the local chief executive (LCE) for dereliction of duty. The Office of the President ordered the LCE on January 18, 2012 to answer the complaint. As of April 30, 2012, subsequent action has yet to be taken by the Office of the President on the case (Elizaga, 2012).

Similarly, under RA 7160 (Rule XXI, Art. 157), voters can seek for the removal of government officials by way of a recall election for "loss of confidence" which can be initiated by a petition of at least 25 percent of the total number of voters in the local government unit. In the case of CDO, it would be about 45,000 signatures. Save CDO Movement had initiated the gathering of signatures for the recall of the LCE. As of March 7, 2012, some 53,000 signatures were gathered but only 38,000 were verified within the prescribed period (Gallardo, 2012; Yu, 2012).

Iron Law of Oligarchy

The LCE and many of his party mates in the LGU legislature had been in office for the last 13 years. They kept on winning elections reminiscent of Robert Michel's (1876-1936) counter to Max Weber's spirit of strict hierarchy in organizational structure. According Michel's "the Iron Law of Oligarchy", the pyramid shape of bureaucracy places a few leaders in charge of the organizational resources. While rigid hierarchy of responsibility may result in high organizational efficiency, it endangers democracy because "officials can—and often do—use their access to information, resources, and the media to promote their personal interests.... bureaucracy insulates officials from the public...and reduces the accountability of leaders to the people" (Macionis, 2003). Reworded on the basis of Michel's proposition, the LCE and party mates were able to hold on to power because they have learned the skills to manipulate a democratic institution, the ballot. There were stories about the LCE buying votes, cheating in the elections and rigging the election results, about media personalities in the payroll of the LCE, and many others (Montalvan, 2012). But many believed that the most effective was the *Piso Piso* housing program for the poor. Those in the program were captive votes.

Was the check and balance principle not working? An interesting dimension to explore in answer to this question would be the range of influence that political dynasties could cover vis-à-vis check and balance. Would check and balance work if the daughter of the incumbent LCE and the son-in-law were elected to serving at the city legislature, at the same time, if the son was an elected congressman of a district, and the brother was Mayor of a neighboring municipality? In the words, the principle of check and balance remained

just that, a principle. It was not self-executing. It needed a big push from civil society organizations whose movements were also being challenged by political dynasties.

Aftermath

The crisis of trust seemed to have resulted in deficient coordination among groups and organizations that responded to the Washi survivors' call for help. A volunteer of Child Fund International commented, "At the outset, there was the instinct to look for the leadership of the city government which was also unprepared to handle the situation" (Sealza & Abesamis, 2012). In the absence of trustworthy orchestration from an embattled LGU leadership, donor organizations had to make do with volunteer groups as partners. And the survivors, the internally displaced persons (IDPs) continued to be in congested ECs and homes/temporary shelters and in want of basic necessities: food, water, sanitation, medicine, sources of livelihood, and shelter. The IDPs in the ECs complained about being given the same kind of food (rice and canned sardines) everyday. In the barangays, many IDPs reported that they were given rice that had started to decay. A barangay chairman said that supplies of food and medicine were always short and slow in coming. Problems with food, water and hot and congested tents resulted in malnutrition, sanitation issues and subsequently, ailments.

About one-fifth (n = 96) of the respondents in CDO said that they were not having standard 15 liters of water per person per day. Complaints on water shortage were more common among IDP households in the barangays than those in the ECs. But even in ECs, there was water shortage. In one EC, a 34-year-old woman in an FGD complained, "Water supply is not enough for all of us, 182 families. Water delivery is only once a day, and everything is taken from the *bladder* (UNICEF-donated 5000-liter water tank): for laundry, bathing, cooking, and washing".

Unemployment made the conditions worse. In the survey for example, close to 30 percent of the household heads, many of whom were widows and children (< 18 years old), have not engaged in any gainful occupation during the last seven days, meaning, the members of these households had to depend entirely on donations for the last five months. Unfortunately, many of the international humanitarian relief organizations had begun to pack up. A camp manager said that life was difficult for the IDPs with international donor groups still around; it would be doubly difficult with the donors gone. Asked whether they trust the government could help them out of their difficulty, the respondents gave answers like: The government is unfair and does not have a clear system of management; the politicians do not cooperate with one another, instead they compete even in moments of giving relief to disaster victims; our barangay captain does not care; the government does not have a clear relocation and resettlement program.

Civil Society Organizations and Government Reform

Government reforms may be initiated by civil society organizations through electoral reforms. The Philippine electoral process is replete with splendid legal provisions for clean and honest election. But the electorate is apparently not ready for them. Electoral reforms in this case then will be more on changing the perspective of the voters so that they select leaders who know what to do, who have the posture to do what they are supposed to do. In the past, there were incipient civil society movements that had gained grounds along this line.

For example, church-based organizations pushed for legislation on total log ban in the province by obtaining the signatures from some 25,000 persons (Fabe, 2009). This did not last long. But it was a good start.

Likewise, a group led by volunteer lawyers once required that a candidate, to get its members' votes, should have a "green platform"; that is, the candidate should commit to the following: enactment of water code to ensure supply of safe water, and rainwater harvesting ordinance to reduce groundwater depletion; implementation of waste segregation and comprehensive drainage system to avoid flooding; support of organic and diversified farming; relocation of communities from hazard-prone areas; implementation of clean air and the anti-smoke-belching ordinance; and, help to contain global warming (SunStar Daily, 2010). Many politicians stood for the "green platform" and won in the 2010 election.

Conclusion and Discussion

The Philippine government is a representative democracy. With unresolved issues that riddled the incumbents occupying the highest positions in the structure of the previous government administration, it seemed that many elected officials had betrayed the trust of the electorate. This crisis of trust appeared to have seeped down to the lower levels of the government hierarchy.

Structural response to natural disaster was rendered practically inutile by the inadequate performance of the incumbents of the roles expected of them, and by the subsequent crisis of trust such inadequacy of performance had brought about. The functions of democratic structures are protected theoretically by formalized rules and the principle of check and balance among the three branches of government. But formalized rules and the check and balance mechanisms are not self-initiating. Movements from civil society organizations are needed before these mechanisms start to grind. Indeed, data showed that this was the case. What R. Michels called "the Iron Law of Oligarchy" posed inertia to the movements of civil society organizations.

Aside from gaining resources and expertise with strategies for winning popular elections, another convenient offshoot of being in power for so long was the creation of political dynasty that seemed to spite the Constitutional provision against it. Section 26, Article II, Declaration of Principles and State Policies, of the 1987 Constitution of the Republic of the Philippines provides that "*The State shall guarantee equal access to opportunities for public service and prohibit political dynasties as may be defined by law*" (Ngayan, 2011). This Constitutional provision however does not have an enabling law that ought to have been passed by Congress so that it can be implemented. Congress did not seem to be so keen in passing such a law. Consequently, political dynasties continue to flourish.

During the disaster, the incumbents probably knew: (1) the role expectations associated with their positions; (2) the norms that governed the execution of these roles; and, (3) the societal values being pursued by the LGU itself. But they did not seem to exhibit the posture to pursue the ideals of the structure and the agency of which it is a part. In other words, their posture vis-à-vis the functions that the positions demand derailed efforts in pursuit of common values, viz. extending protection and aid to victims of natural disasters. Human welfare was one of the functions of the national government that was devolved to the LGU in the spirit of local autonomy. Consequently, trust, that element of social capital that fosters unity, cooperation, and collective confidence, seemed to have been lost.

Four Anti-Political Dynasty Bills have been filed in congress: Senate Bill-2649 (SB-2649) on January 24, 2011; SB-1317 in 2004; SB-1468 in 2007; and, House Bill-2493 by also in 2007 (Ngayan, 2011). Understandably, the Bills could not get through congress whose membership had been dominated by scions of political clans. For example, the 2007 GMA News Research showed that at least 76% of the legislators in the

14th Congress of the Philippines came from politically active families” (Ngayan, 2011).

There are BONGOs (Businessmen Organized NGOs) and PONGOs (Politician Organized NGOs) that campaign for the *status quo*. But members of the civil society organizations like Save CDO, *Mata Ná*, (Cebuano Visayan for Wake Up), *Kagay-an Karon* (Cagayan Now), *Gising Barangay* Movement (Barangay, Wake Up), *netizens* and NGOs like *Ating Koop* (Our Cooperative), were confident about instituting institutional change at least at the local level since the Washi event must have shaken the sensibilities of the people on the ills of political dynasty and the pains of broken promises. Civil society organizations along with some NGOs hope that voters have become more open to electoral reforms.

These organizations offer avenues for government reforms. Only then perhaps can trust among government structures be restored and LGU structures become more responsive to the needs of the populace.

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