

THE RULEMAKERS: HOW THE WEALTHY AND THE WELL-BORN DOMINATE CONGRESS

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The legislature's primary purpose is to enact laws for the benefit of the people as a whole, since it exists for the people, by the people, and of the people. Like any branch of the government, it exists to cater to the ever growing demands of a civilized society. Theoretically at least, it is. The present status quo of the Philippine legislature reveals itself how it has transformed into what it is today. History is the silent witness. From the Malolos Congress in 1898 down to the present 14th Congress, Filipinos have witnessed and experienced how congressmen and senators handled the power lodged in said institution. The manner by which the power is wielded in most cases is outside the control of the Filipino citizenry. More often than not, limitations and prohibitions by the Constitution, and the general principles of law are not enough to stamp out the illegitimate and selfish acts of those in charge of running the government.

The Rulemakers testifies to the flaws that have infested the Philippine Congress through the years. But said flaws were inexistent at the time the word 'congress,' 'legislature,' 'parliamentary,' or 'senatus' was conceived. They developed from some point in time and were eventually carried up to the present times. The book identifies the plagues contaminating the Congress, how they came into existence, and how they continue to affect us. Political dynasties, pork-barreling, entrepreneurial legislation, patronage, and similar others, are among the issues bravely and thoroughly discussed.

In general, the book describes the individuals that make up the Philippine Legislature. It is divided into five major parts consisting of interrelated articles under each. The book starts by investigating the common characteristics of these politicians with respect to their educational background, age, social status, net worth, the kind profession or business they usually are engaged into, past government post held, and family lineage. From the factual findings collected, significant conclusions were inferred. One is that there is this distinct set of

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characteristics that they possess. Another is that, upon assumption of office, they tend to carry out acts that are particularly beneficial to them and their families. In the long run, poor 'Juan dela Cruz' suffers the loss.

The first part entitled "The Houses of Privilege" describes the people which usually make up the Philippine Congress: male, middle-aged, college educated, and mostly likely with a degree in law. In the past, most legislators were landlords themselves until such time when there were new entrants from the world of business. A lot of them are also "professional politician" who have made a career out of politics. The authors, by painstakingly pinpointing the peculiar characteristics of our legislators, send a message to the readers of the qualities the Filipino voters tend to install in power and the consequences when they are already assuming office. It is also noteworthy that the authors are able to present a solution at the latter portion.

The second part is entitled "Born to Rule." The title itself suggests political dynasties. In this section of the book, the authors extensively discuss the role of political clans in Philippine politics. Specific cases are cited such as the Aquinos, Dys, Cuencos, Singsons, and others, and their strategies on how to remain in power. They also disclose the history of political families in general and explain how it has become an effective mechanism even as compared to political parties.

The third part, "The Perks of Lawmaking", reveals the anomalies taking place beyond the reach of our watchful eyes. Most legislators especially the representatives, on a typical day, spend five or more hours only attending to callers to their offices. The number of local bills filed is drastically declining. The Chief Executive will have to compromise with legislators by releasing large amounts of money so that a particular bill will be passed into law. The Christmas gift from the Speaker ranges from P100,000 to P200,000. Allowances for foreign travels cost \$300 per diem. These are the realities which the author seeks to make the readers realize.

The fourth part is all about pork barrel. Indeed, it is "For the Love of Pork" that makes an individual run for a congressional or a senatorial post. Even though it has gone through many names and forms (SLDP, CDF, PDAF, etc.), pork barrel has always been a subject of criticism. It is like free money given to the legislators without being accountable for it. Nowadays, a senator receives P200M and a congressman gets P65M.

Lastly, "In Search of Alternatives" is about the party-list system and the participating party-list groups and representatives, and how it affects the culture

in Congress ever since R.A. 7941 or the Party-List Law came into existence. In a way, the system gives the voters a choice- a choice to elect representatives not on the basis of their personalities but based on the causes they fight for.

Although the major divisions of the book are interesting, however upon reading it there are premature ideas that came up which may not be suitable for discussion on that particular part of the book. The authors tend to discuss on certain matters which may have a better place for an extensive discussion on another part of the book. As a consequence, there are some ideas that are scattered all over the book. However, that is not to say that it is not a good book. It still has a lot of good features in it.

One of the highlights of the book is the presentation of striking facts shown in tables and figures that precisely gives us a clear view of what is going on. For example, there is a declining efficiency with respect to passage of local bills as compared to national bills filed. During the 8th Congress the ratio of national bills to local bills is 1:6 which dropped to 1:1.2 during the 12th Congress. This could be an indication that more and more congressmen tend to focus on their constituents rather than lawmaking which has become their secondary function nowadays. Another fact would be that, the average net worth of Senators during the 11th Congress was P32M which ballooned to P59M during the 12th Congress. The tendency is that these legislators accumulate more money while they stay in power. Interesting they may be, however, there are some tables in the book which lacks sufficient explanation that could have prevented the reader from being at lost.

Together with the presentation of the different concepts and facts, the book also presents the different trends in Philippine politics. One of which is that there exists this hierarchy of political office wherein before running for a higher posts, politicians start from local posts, which is very true with respect to representatives. However, with respect to running for a senatorial post or for the presidency, due to the influx of movie and media personalities to national posts, that trend may not necessarily apply. Another trend is that, it seems that political marriages are inevitable if only to secure a politician's goal of winning in the elections. A classic example would that be of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos and also Ninoy and Cory Aquino, whose marriages in effect gave birth to an alliance and unification of resources. Nowadays, politicians also marry celebrities like in the case of Jules Ledesma and Assunta de Rossi.

The book also identifies how some politicians have taken advantage on prevailing systems by either circumventing it to work in their favor or just simply benefit from it. For instance, the three-term limit provided for in the

1987 Constitution has for its purpose to prevent the accumulation of power. However, it is not that effective in the process as politicians resorted to political successions where their children or wives can run for the meantime to the same post. Also, the modern tendency of the voters, specifically with respect to national elections, is to vote for a candidate whose name is very familiar (such as movie personalities) and not primarily because of his past achievements or background. These candidates in a way benefited from our election system that requires voters to write a particular name of a candidate instead of merely choosing from a list.

Although apparently, the discussion in the book is geared towards giving a negative impression on the Philippine Congress, it is not blind to the other side of the story. The book provides a space for the justification of pork barrels like being one of the resources most readily available for developing local communities and that through it the government's presence is felt by the constituents, made possible by the representatives who are likely to be more knowledgeable with respect to their needs.

Indeed, it is a strong move for the authors to make an extensive research of the Philippine Congress and to produce the book. Aside from giving significant information, it opens the minds of the readers to the realities of politics which escape the eyes of the public. It serves as a guide for every Filipino to do some reflections and to be catalysts for reforms. Perhaps, if there is an opportunity, one must have to take an active part to pave a way for reforms in what has been customary through the years. If people would just be not like the members of Congress who are resistant to change, then perhaps, poor Juan dela Cruz's condition will somehow be uplifted.