

BOOK REVIEWS

***Strong Patronage, Weak Parties: The Case for Electoral System Redesign in the Philippines.* Edited by Paul D. Hutchcroft. Mandaluyong City: Anvil Publishing, Inc, 2019. Softcover: 209pp.**

Efforts to change the Philippines' 1987 Constitution have been a recurring feature of that country's contemporary politics. Despite existing for more than three decades, the post-Marcos dictatorship charter has yet to be amended. Previous campaigns for revising the Constitution were often led by politicians with the support of academics and civil society activists. The persistent failure of Asia's oldest democracy to implement deep constitutional reforms has caused its politico-economic order to ossify and its democratization process to stagnate.

It is within this context that this timely project must be placed. Led by one of the world's experts in Philippine politics, Paul Hutchcroft, this edited volume seeks to shift the frame of the debate over amending the Constitution to a much-neglected aspect of institutional design: the electoral system. Roughly defined as the institutional mechanism that translates votes into seats or elected positions, the Philippine electoral system has been identified as the main factor behind the country's patronage-oriented and personality-driven politics. Supported by the extensive literature on institutional design, this book argues that political reforms advanced by the administration of President Rodrigo Duterte should not be monopolized by a single-minded focus on federalism, but should also include a serious consideration of redesigning the country's electoral system. This includes reviewing the mechanisms for electing the president and representatives of the two legislative chambers, as well as the regulation of political parties.

The ten-chapter volume can be divided into two main sections. The first half of the book discusses the various components of the country's electoral system, from the problematic party-list system to the unique multi-member plurality system in the Philippine Senate. This section also offers possible institutional reforms to improve gender representation and build a credible party system through regulations and campaign financing policies. The strength of this project lies in this section since it provides deep empirical insights from local experts with the credibility to analyse and advocate for institutional changes. The second half of the volume focuses more on lessons that the Philippines can learn from its Southeast Asia neighbours about the possible unintended consequences of redesigning the electoral system. It also contains analyses of how the existing Philippine electoral regime has generated unfavourable political and economic outcomes. Written by Southeast Asian specialists, this latter section will be better appreciated by readers who are less familiar with regional politics and debates over institutional design. Experts of Philippine politics and the comparative politics in the region may find less utility in these chapters.

The book is a valuable intervention in the debates over constitutional reform due to its specific focus on the Philippines' electoral regime, especially in examining how redesigning electoral mechanisms can act as a major catalyst for political reform and has an impact on the purported benefits of federalism. Hutchcroft and the volume's contributors are correct in arguing that without changing the electoral regime, constitutional reforms such as federalism may not result in the desired changes, but can instead worsen existing conditions and precipitate unintended negative consequences. This book has successfully sounded this alarm, although it remains to be seen whether the country's politicians are willing to heed the contributors' admonitions.

However, this volume tends to simplify a discussion of the highly technical field of institutional design. Electoral systems are complex political institutions: this is acknowledged in the decisions of many governments who often go to great lengths to commission studies in order to carefully calibrate their electoral system according to their historical context, social composition, politicians' incentive structures and economic conditions. As someone familiar with comparative electoral systems, this reviewer found the book wanting (with the exception of the chapter by Nico Ravanilla) in terms of

the level of technical sophistication and analytical rigor involved in fleshing out the different aspects of the country's electoral regime. It is my hope that other scholars of Philippine politics will take up the challenge of diligently examining the impact of the country's electoral system and mapping the political consequences that the system generates over time.

As a political comparativist, it was also difficult to be persuaded of the logic of comparison of the Philippines with other countries in Asia. This may be due to the regional specialization of the volume's authors, but a wider net should have been cast in order to draw comparative lessons from democracies that more resemble the Philippines, specifically those in Latin America. If the editor had pursued this possibility, the book could also have opened another dimension to the debate: that is, the role of informal institutions in either substituting, complementing or competing with formal institutions such as the electoral system. This could also temper the volume's prescriptions, as it would prompt deeper reflection about the efficacy of redesigning the formal components of electoral systems while neglecting the resilience of informal norms, practices and ways that predate these institutions.

Reflecting on the resilience of these informal elements could have prompted Hutchcroft and the contributors to rethink their firm conviction that a redesign of an electoral regime can change the incentive structure facing politicians and nudge them towards broadening their political interests, including a commitment to socio-economic development and democratic outcomes. Their belief is anchored in the optimistic assumption that politicians need only to be convinced to embrace change so that everyone, including themselves, will benefit from a reformed political system. But as the experiences of other countries demonstrate, institutional reform is both an outcome and a process. In fact, the main challenge in the Philippine constitutional debate is not to design an enhanced electoral system, but to ensure that the process of constitutional change is public, popular and participatory. This is problematic as only a minority of Filipinos are familiar with the 1987 Constitution. Without the active involvement of the public, initiatives to amend the charter will lack credibility. Such efforts would merely be vanity attempts either by politicians seeking to perpetuate their grip on power or by academics with noble intentions but unrealistic visions for the country.

In sum, *Strong Patronage, Weak Parties* represents the most sophisticated discussion of constitutional reform in the Philippines to date. Those seeking deeper knowledge about contemporary Philippine politics and the state of its political institutions will greatly benefit from reading it. Hopefully, the book will be able to stimulate more robust debates as well as inspire academics to go beyond preaching to the converted.

ARIES A. ARUGAY is Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of the Philippines in Diliman. Postal address: 2F CSSP Faculty Centre, University of the Philippines, Diliman, Quezon City 1101, The Philippines; email: aarugay@up.edu.ph.