

**[Interim Report Series: Vertical Accountability in Asia]**

**Vertical Accountability:  
Reforming Representation in the Philippines**

**Francisco A. Magno, Anthony Lawrence Borja, Jeuny Mari D. Custodio  
(De La Salle University)**

## **1. Introduction**

The Political landscape of the Philippines is dominated by the rich and the famous. This unfortunate situation is abetted by the underdeveloped character of political parties in the country. Political parties are important actors in a democratic system. They are expected to provide an organizational avenue for the aggregation of interests, the formulation of policy choices, the cultivation of leaders, and the engagement of citizens in electoral processes and the holding of governments to be accountable for their actions.

However, historical evidence indicates that Philippine political parties frequently prioritize the narrow objective of providing partisan vehicles for candidates seeking election rather than mobilizing the public in pursuit of coherent policy programs that would benefit the general population. Consequently, candidates are selected on their ability to command resources and their potential for success in an election, rather than on the strength of their commitment to specific policies, values, and principles.

The weak party system in the Philippines has contributed to the rise of populism and the erosion of the essential checks and balances that are vital for a vibrant democracy. Given the lack of effective disciplinary structures within political parties, politicians, including legislators typically align themselves with the party or parties of the winning presidential candidate. This facilitates the deterioration of legislative oversight and the advancement of executive aggrandizement. It is imperative that a Political Party Development Act be enacted to reinforce the political party system and foster the growth of democratic institutions. The legislation of a Campaign Finance Reform Act would serve to regulate campaign contributions and promote transparency with respect to the sources of funds and campaign expenditures. Furthermore, reforms are necessary to align the Party-List system with the objective of amplifying the voices of marginalized sectors through the electoral process.

To elaborate on these points, we will attempt to address the following questions: To what extent are political parties effective in aggregating interests, crafting policies, cultivating leaders, and engaging citizens to hold governments accountable through the electoral process? What measures might be taken to enhance the efficacy of political parties as institutions of representation in the Philippine democracy? What electoral reforms are required to promote voice and accountability?

## 2. Between Citizens and Leaders: The Question of Representation

The question of citizen-leader relations is a fundamental aspect of representative democracy. The way citizens perceive their relationship with leaders, the interactions between the represented and representatives, and the expectations of ordinary citizens regarding the role of elected officials as representatives of the public good are fundamental aspects that shape the dynamics and activities of elites within such a system (cf. Dovi 2012). Schmitter (2015, 36) sums it up as a two-way system, wherein citizens “with equal political rights and obligations have at their disposal regular and reliable means to access information, demand justification, and apply sanctions on their rulers,” who in turn can enjoy political legitimacy and a level of support despite criticisms from the public.

Tied with a Schumpeterian interpretation of democracy as a process of political elites circulating through competitive elections, the issue of citizen-leader relations can be seen as intimately tied with that of electoral accountability. Ashworth (2012) posits that electoral accountability can be construed as a system of rewards and punishments that can ensure policymakers remain responsive to the will and welfare of their constituents. In essence, it is a congruence between the interests and conduct of policymakers and their constituents (cf. Hellwig and Samuels 2008).

Despite the ideals that underpin such a schema, the circulation of elites can result in the consolidation of power in the hands of a few if conditions become disempowering for the ordinary citizen (Borja 2015, 2017). In other words, electoral accountability can collapse under the weight of power asymmetry. Consequently, such a vicious cycle can result in a democratic crisis driven by the disempowerment of the ruled and a lack of obligations and accountability among rulers (Stoker 2006; Stoker and Evans 2014; Schmitter 2015).

Overall, from the perspectives of both structural analysis and political psychology, electoral accountability becomes a question of values, expectations, and the institutional arrangements that can facilitate a confrontation between the decision-making processes of citizen-voters and policymakers (cf. Svolik 2013). Placed in electoral cycles, the question becomes whether electoral accountability is pursued under virtuous (i.e. democratizing) or vicious (i.e. oligarchic) conditions.

Turning to the case of the Philippines as a defective democracy (Rivera 2016; Teehankee and Calimbahin 2020) that is more oligarchic than democratic, this short essay elucidates the accountability deficit identified by Arugay (2005). This deficit refers to the lack of accountability among government officials that has led to abuses and corruption. From a historical and structural perspective, this can be considered a consequence of a long-standing rule by oligarchs whose sense of accountability is primarily oriented towards their relations with one another (e.g., inter-elite patronage) rather than their constituents (cf. Hutchcroft and Rocamora 2012; Rivera 2016).

Thus, what are the challenges facing electoral accountability in the Philippines from the perspectives of both structural and political psychological factors? The following section addresses this issue from both a structural and a psychological perspective. This section will illustrate that alongside limitations in the electoral system of the Philippines, there is a value system that allows leaders to avoid accountability as public servants.

### 3. Challenges to Electoral Accountability in the Philippines

According to the *Varieties of Democracy* (V-Dem) database (Coppedge et al. 2023), the vertical accountability index of the Philippines scores with an average of 0.76 from 1986 to 2023 (post-Marcos period). The index is scaled between low and high (0-1), measuring electoral accountability (i.e., the quality of elections, enfranchisement, and direct election of the chief executive) and the general quality of political parties (i.e., barriers to party formation and the autonomy of parties from the ruling regime).

This result is, however, juxtaposed with the following: firstly, there is an average score of 0.19 for the party institutionalization index. This index assesses the following aspects of the incumbent political party system: (1) party organization, (2) linkages with civil society, (3) the presence of distinct party platforms, and (4) party cohesion within an elected legislature. The average score indicates that while Filipino politics enjoys a vibrant electoral system, it is primarily based on the influence of individual leaders rather than on the development of party politics.

Secondly, the Philippines also exhibits a low score about the participatory democracy index, with an average of 0.35. This suggests that political participation is largely confined to the electoral process. The recent study by Borja, Torneo, and Hecita (2024) provides further insight into this phenomenon, illustrating how for many Filipinos, political participation is largely confined to the ballot. Following to the casting of their votes, most individuals return to silence as spectators to a politics that they deem as beyond their capacity to control or comprehend.

Lastly, in relation to the value ascribed to the person of the president (whether they are imbuing the leader with extraordinary characteristics and abilities), the Philippines exhibits a relatively low score of 1.99 on a scale of 1 to 4 (low to high). However, there was a notable increase from 2016 to 2021, with the current value exceeding 2.0 at 2.32. The 2016 spike reflects the impact of Rodrigo Duterte's populism on pre-existing leader-centric tendencies among Filipinos (Borja 2023). The mythos constructed around him as a strongman exacerbated the emphasis on the individual leaders tied with fanaticism among supporters of representative politics in the Philippines.

Furthermore, the spike did not revert to pre-Duterte levels due to two possible factors. The Duterte family continues to exert influence in the political sphere, with Rodrigo Duterte, his daughter Vice President Sara Duterte and son Davao City Mayor Sebastian Duterte, representing the family's distinct leadership style. Conversely, the incumbent President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. embodies the long shadow cast by the authoritarian legacy of his father and namesake – the shadow of a unifying and strong-handed form of leadership (Teehankee 2023).

How might these seemingly contradictory tendencies surrounding the issue of vertical accountability be made sense of? To address this, it is important to note that expectations play a crucial role in generating demand for electoral accountability. Nonetheless, expectations are not isolated phenomena; they are shaped by multitude of cognitive factors. Such attitudes can in turn shape the evaluation of the entire political system (Svolik 2013). A consequence of repeated exposure to the corrupt and abusive practices of policymakers is that citizen-voters may come to perceive all politicians as corrupt. Consequently, this can lead to a pervasive pessimism over government, which in turn can facilitate the establishment of lower barriers for actual crooks.

From Svolik's (2013) insights on the matter, we identify two general concerns: the structural and psycho-political factors that shape expectations and the barriers that constitute electoral

accountability. When considered collectively, the question arises as to whether citizen-voters can effectively (i.e., they desire it and there are institutional arrangements that accommodate such a demand) impose costs and disincentives on elected officials through the ballot. As we will demonstrate, the challenge to electoral accountability in the Philippines can be construed as a vicious cycle of weak institutions and a lack of demand from ordinary citizen-voters.

In terms of structural-institutional factors, the Philippines is confronted with two significant challenges: a weak party system and a pluralistic electoral system. These two factors have the potential to undermine the fundamental principles of majority rule, both in terms of quality and quantity.

A weak party system, driven by entrenched structures of patronage and clientelism, characterizes Filipino politics (Hutchcroft and Rocamora 2012; Rivera 2016). This, in turn, constitutes the essence of what Teehankee and Calimbahin (2020) identify as the defective democracy of Filipino politics, wherein regular elections serve merely to legitimize members of an oligarchy. Moreover, this phenomenon contributes to the anarchy of political parties that are founded upon a proliferation of such organizations, which are driven more by patron-client relations, money politics, and turncoatism (changing party affiliation) rather than party discipline and distinct political programs (Kasuya and Teehankee 2020). Overall, the structures of representative politics in the Philippines breeds a limited system of accountability that caters more to sustaining the rule of elites rather than holding policy-makers responsible to their constituents.

Adding to this, the pluralistic “first-past-the-post” electoral system of the Philippines places government in a “winner-takes-all” situation. Tied with patronage and turncoatism as the norms of the ruling elite, this pluralist system combines a weak popular mandate with super-majorities in the legislative branch. This may result in a diminution of the voice of criticism and opposition within the halls of government. Consequently, it also results in a diminished accountability of policymakers to citizen-voters following elections. This is particularly the case for those who become members of supermajorities driven by patronage. Overall, while there is a lack of incentives to maintain a robust chain of accountability between electors and the elected, there are greater incentives for elected officials to align themselves with a patron.

Regarding the psycho-political tendencies that underpin the pursuit of electoral accountability, it is evident that several Filipinos exhibit illiberal attitudes towards their leaders and incumbent institutions (Borja 2023). Many are willing to confer absolute power upon those they deem to be “morally upright,” despite supporting the sustenance of incumbent institutions for political representation. Moreover, many Filipinos perceive political legitimacy as contingent upon open and competitive elections, rather than upon virtue and capability sans electoral competition. Simply put, the appeal of strongman politics is juxtaposed with a warped understanding of representation and electoral legitimacy.

Focusing on the latter point, data from Waves 3 and 4 of the *Asia Barometer Survey* (ABS) indicate that a significant proportion of the population perceives government leaders as autonomous trustees, entrusted with the responsibility of identifying and pursuing the interests of their constituents, rather than as delegates bound by the obligation to execute the demands of their constituents. Furthermore, the government is regarded as a parent figure, who can decide what is “good” for the public rather than as an employee. Fleshing out the latter, Wave 5 of the ABS pins down the matter of accountability. It asks respondents whether it is more important for citizens to hold the government accountable, even if that results in slower decision-making, or vice versa, in favor of greater

decisiveness at the expense of accountability. Most respondents from the Philippines (53.1%) indicated a preference for decisiveness over accountability. From these observations, the psycho-political foundations of electoral politics in the Philippines are almost Caesarism in orientation, with a focus on leaders that is at the expense of incumbent liberal institutions.

Overall, the structure of Filipino politics and the political values held by citizen-voters have rendered the system incapable of generating a demand for electoral accountability. From the perspective of cycles and habits, it can be argued that this condition is self-perpetuating, creating a vicious cycle that renders political accountability a non-issue for many Filipinos, including both citizen-voters and policymakers. How can such a cycle be broken? This essay concludes with some general directions for reform.

#### **4. General Directions for Reform**

It is evident that changes do not occur instantaneously. However, this dictum conceals the reality that the relationship between structures and individual agency is shaped by the role of habits. In other words, the question of electoral accountability in the Philippines becomes a matter of disrupting the habits of policymakers and citizen-voters that devalue accountability itself. A great deal has been written about the possibility of reforming the political system in the Philippines, particularly in relation to the political party system. Proposals have been put forth to strengthen party discipline by imposing penalties for defections and encouraging parties to adapt a more programmatic approach to elections.

Moreover, mass-based parties continue to represent the gold standard for reformist efforts. Such a system can only function effectively if political parties can serve as a genuinely democratic conduit between ordinary citizens and the policy-making process. This democratic function must be twofold. Firstly, political parties must facilitate political participation outside of the electoral process. Such involvement need not be contingent upon formal party membership. Nonetheless, it is imperative that political parties are able to facilitate effective non-electoral modes of participation. Secondly, mass-based parties must ensure that representation is contingent upon accountability, rather than being based on idolatry or acquiescence. It is possible for a political party to be mass-based without being accountable. This can result in the formation of a mass movement that is dependent on the charismatic leadership of a single figure. This represents a potential future for party politics in the Philippines, given the sustained leader-centric tendencies among its citizens.

Consequently, addressing the issues of personality-centric and leader-centric politics, as well as the prevalence of patronage and clientelism in the Philippines, necessitates the development of a political party system that encompasses both leaders and citizens under the umbrella of a policy-oriented approach to electoral politics.

We endorse these calls and underscore the necessity of integrating accountability as a fundamental element of civic-political education in the Philippines. Considering Svolik's (2013) insights on expectations, it is imperative that civic-political education in the Philippines be geared towards lifting the expectations of citizen-voters regarding the ideal of electoral accountability. Nonetheless, such an approach necessitates the provision of exemplars; citizen-voters must observe and experience the possibility of holding elected officials to account in the periods preceding, during, and following elections. Thus, we return to the question of incumbent institutions, especially those

concerned with justice. This gives rise to the question of rupture. If we consider the electoral accountability deficit as a form of cycle, at which points is this process more vulnerable and susceptible to reform? We leave this question for future inquiries. ■

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- **Francisco A. Magno** is a Professor at De La Salle University.
- **Anthony Lawrence Borja** is an Associate Professor at De La Salle University.
- **Jeuny Mari D. Custodio** is M.A. Student of Political Science at De La Salle University.

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Edited by Hansu Park

For inquiries:  
Hansu Park, Research Associate  
Tel. 82 2 2277 1683 (ext. 204)      [hspark@eai.or.kr](mailto:hspark@eai.or.kr)

The East Asia Institute  
1, Sajik-ro 7-gil, Jongno-gu, Seoul 03028, Republic of Korea  
Phone 82 2 2277 1683 Fax 82 2 2277 1684  
Email [eai@eai.or.kr](mailto:eai@eai.or.kr) Website [www.eai.or.kr](http://www.eai.or.kr)