

# The Philippines – Have We Moved From Democracy To Plutocracy ?

By John Edmiston

Plutocracy is “rule by the rich” and I think that is what we have arrived at here in the Philippines. I will argue that politics has been commercialized in the Philippines so now power is bought and sold openly in a well understood, but not openly acknowledged marketplace. This marketplace is often referred to as “corruption” but is rather based on the premise that power **should** be treated as a commercial commodity and that the Filipino voter is entitled to commercial recompense for their vote.

Two incidents illustrate this clearly:

Firstly a Christian friend of mine, involved in a micro-finance venture was campaigning for Bro. Eddie among a group of indigent women. These ladies said “We like Bro. Eddie and his policies but how much is he going to pay us for our votes?” The fact that Bro. Eddie was not going to pay them caused some small consternation and it was concluded that they would not vote for him. There was a sense in that meeting that any politician who takes the poor seriously will pay for votes.

Secondly the way that multi-level marketing has become a national addiction. You are likely to be “sold something” at nearly any major event you attend and even committee meetings can be interrupted by someone raising their latest product. This commercialization of relationships and the implicit “you are not my friend if you do not buy this from me” is a reduction of all relationships to that of being financial trading partners.

The idea that “if you want my loyalty/vote you will have to pay for it” underlies the shift in power relationships in the Philippines – where power must be paid for and those ruled over demand financial recompense from those they put in power.

As the Asian Institute of Management teaches “Your customers are the people who pay you money, if they do not pay you money, they are not your customers.” So who is paying money here? The politicians. So the politicians are the customers – and what are they buying? Votes, positions and power. They are buying precious social status and all that attends to it. This commercialization of political processes leads to a subtle redefinition of terms which can be put somewhat cynically as follows:

**The Golden Rule:** He who has the gold – rules.

**Politics:** The marketing of power.

**Election:** The process of purchasing power by paying for votes.

**COMELEC:** An organization that ensures that only people with money can attain power and which dismisses those such as Eddie Gil who do not have the financial resources to attain to power.

**Fair Election:** When the person who has paid the most for votes ends up getting the most votes.

**Transparent Election:** Where the purchasing of votes is obvious and everyone can see through it.

**Power:** The ability to extract money from others.

**Position:** A control point in the culture that enables one to dispense favors in return for money.

**Nuisance Candidate:** One that tries to attain power without purchasing votes.

**Folly:** Assuming that Filipinos will give their vote away for free.

**Idealism:** Voting on the basis of the candidate's virtues and policies alone without thought of financial remuneration.

**Election Promise:** Buying large blocks of votes on credit.

**Canvassing:** A complex piece of political theatre designed to placate idealists and give the impression that the election was not a commercial process.

**Voting Block:** A group such as the INC that can deliver many votes and whose leadership requires a large payment to deliver these votes to the candidate.

**Voter Registration:** a) The process of deregistering the voters who would support candidates who lack the funds to purchase votes and b) allowing room for candidates with sufficient funds to purchase the right to these deregistered votes and insert properly paid for (erroneously termed "fake") votes in the ballot boxes.

**Canvassing Period:** The time required to remove votes that have not been paid for from the ballot boxes and replace them with votes that have been properly paid for.

**Election Machinery:** Printing presses, which produce ballot papers and certificates of canvass that have been properly paid for by the candidate.

**Surveys:** Market research.

**Mainstream Press:** Those journalists that have agreed to join the political marketplace and accept money in return for favorable political opinion.

**Destabilizers:** Those who have opted out of the political marketplace and who strongly advocate that power should be attained by non-commercial means and thus refer to the current fair commercial system as "cheating".

Thus there is a strong internal logic to the current political process based on the premises that social status, power and privilege should be paid for and that the poor are entitled to receive some benefit from this process and that their vote should not be given away for free. The only problem with this logic is that by commercializing that which our consciences know should not be commercialized it creates a very unstable and unjust form of government.

A government that buys its way into power is not seen as legitimate and a government cannot survive long without legitimacy. Thus the Philippines is faced with a stark choice – either properly legitimize plutocracy as a system of government and change the constitution to create a regulated commercial marketplace for power and position, or ruthlessly eradicate the market for power and thus become a true modern democracy. We cannot have a veneer of democracy over a plutocratic reality. Such invidious hypocrisy rankles deeply and results in utter contempt for those in power and a loss of faith in the major institutions that is deleterious to the national interest.

So we are at a cross-roads, will it be democracy or plutocracy? Shall we declare openly "we are a plutocracy and we like it that way!" ? Shall we invert the usual political paradigm and call good "evil" and call evil "good"? Shall we enshrine Mammon as our god? If we do then we shall have to give up the notion that the Philippines is a Christian nation.

But if we simply give up on the idea of Christian morality and ethics would that be such a bad thing? I mean the new prophets could speak like so:

*Woe unto the poor for they shall dwell in darkness and pain because they cannot purchase justice.*

*Woe unto those who mourn over the Philippines because they are wasting their breath.*

*Woe unto the meek for they shall be laughed to scorn by the arrogant rich.*

*Woe unto those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be frustrated because they are fools and idealists.*

*Woe unto the merciful for they have given away their money to fools and paupers and have not looked after themselves so as to prosper.*

*Woe unto the pure in heart for they do not know the power of greed and the joy of lust and they will be affronted day and night by the acts of the wicked and they shall behold Hell on earth.*

*Woe unto the peacemakers because demand justice and truth and equality in the land and they shall be jailed and called sons of the Devil because they stand against the rich.*

*For the dead shall rise, and they shall seem to vote for the wicked, for their souls have been purchased from Purgatory and again placed on the electoral roll.*

*And there shall be judgment and they shall be brought before the thrones of Jezebel and Ahab, and they shall be put in two groups on the right and on the left. To those on their left they shall say "Die in your righteousness because you did not understand the times and you came without gift or bribe or payment or powerful friends and sought justice on the basis of the truth alone and did not understand the order of things or the desire of those that sit upon the throne." But to those on the right they shall say "Blessed are you wise and understanding ones who came respectfully before our thrones with gifts and bribes and payments and sought the help of powerful friends. You are truly on of Us and understand the order of things and you shall sit upon the heights and eat the best of the land."*

*And the Devil will dance on that day and the demons will be exceedingly glad for they shall have come into their kingdom and they shall reign over the islands. And the wolf shall gulp down the lamb and the lion will tear apart the ox and they shall defile the innocent and sell the young into the sex trade for all shall be for consumption and devouring on the mountain of Mammon.*

Well, when you put it like that!

But how else can it be put?

We are on the brink of Hell and if this electoral process is calmly legitimized then it will place the Philippines firmly and forever into the camp of the plutocrats, the wicked and the unjust.

Hell is a totally commercialized society – where there are no sacred spaces, where the environment is chewed up for profit, where sex is sold, where marriages have money as a main motive, where the worth of a man is solely on how much he owns and the status of his possessions, where values like nobility and truth and honesty are seen as the stuff of fools and where power is bought and sold for cold hard cash.

But what is the alternative? How can we move back towards the Kingdom of God, and the truth, and peace and justice and human dignity and an environment that is cared for and not just exploited? We must take the stance of those that cared for this world, the stance of Jesus and Mother Teresa and St. Francis of Assisi. There must be some absolutes, some things that are not merchandisable, a sense of the sacred and holy in the midst of life, a restoring of the Sabbaths, a blessing of small children and the dying and a love of beauty and of the intangible, non-commercial aspects of life.

We must start denying power to Mammon. We must start saying "No, this will not be commercialized."

And we must refuse multi-level marketing and its consequent commercialization of friendships and family relationships.

We must believe in art for art's sake, and the gospel for the gospel's sake and knowledge for knowledge's sake – and stop asking the question "Will it sell..."

We have to have faith in the Truth, that if we follow it we will be blessed, maybe not in this life but certainly in the life to come and that somehow the glory of a life well-lived in the Truth will outshine all the wealth of Bill Gates or Warren Buffet or the Ayalas.

We have to believe in One Creator God who made the heavens and the earth and that which is under the earth, and the seas and the rivers and the springs of waters and all that is in them. We have to believe that He did not make this world so it could end up on the stock market.

We have to believe that He made this world to function in love and peace and joy and that God wants a heaven and an earth in which righteousness dwells.

We have to believe that we are going to die, that worms will eat our body, and all that we own will rust and decay and bear testimony against us in our folly. We have to know with absolute certainty and conviction that it is not a good thing to gain the whole world and lose our soul in the process.

We have to believe there is something worse than being poor - and that is moral destitution, and there is something worse than not having social status - and that is not having a soul at peace with God. Worse than poverty is powerlessness and when we sell all power to the rich we make the poor even poorer.

The blind see, the deaf hear, the lame leap for joy and the gospel is preached to the poor. The poor are given access to God Himself. Mammon cannot rule over them forever. One day they will be free of its tyranny, free from worrying about pesos and centavos, dollars and cents, free from a commercialized world. When money loses its power to buy all things, when the gospel is free, when eternal life is without cost then Mammon loses its power to terrify us. When money means nothing then the poor will be kings.

If the whole burden of life is the quest for Mammon then poverty is the equivalent of being lost and in Hell. But if life is the quest for God then poverty is a mere circumstance. If personal value is identical with financial value, then we are simply another marketable commodity with a "net worth". But if personal value is based on how we reflect the image of God, then we are eternal beings of infinite and enduring value. We have a choice, the Market or the Kingdom, the Dollar or the Truth.

Shall we take up the chains of Marley's ghost – the cashbooks and ledgers of Mammon, or shall we be free? Shall we stand by and allow the sale of all power to the rich and the devouring of this green and beautiful nation by the greedy and powerful? Shall we let this existential moment in the life of the Philippines pass with a shrug the shoulders? Or shall we say "No!" and say it loudly?