

In Defense of Filipino Liberal Democracy

*Remigio E. Agpalo**

Tonight, as we wind up our two-day discussions, I find myself in a difficult situation because I am tasked to articulate a message which is supposed to serve as a fitting conclusion to our conference on "Political Science, Philippine Politics, and National Development." This responsibility is made more difficult by the fact that, after having a good dinner, you should be spared from a long and serious academic discourse.

But, holding a national conference in the midst of a martial law regime which at present is already almost four years old, I believe we cannot run away from serious and fundamental issues. This is the reason why I chose the topic "In Defense of Filipino Liberal Democracy." A subject such as this, however, cannot easily be presented in a brief address, unless the speaker is willing to articulate mere generalizations not supported by concrete data and reasoned argument.

Realizing that we have been discussing and arguing with one another since yesterday, I owe it to you that I make my speech brief. I shall, therefore, present my defense of Filipino liberal democracy without an elaborate and exhaustive analysis. However, I shall make it as comprehensive as possible within the limited time allotted to me.

In arriving at a valid vision for the Philippines, it is necessary to relate this to the basic problems, history, political culture, and constitutional tradition of the nation.

At the most general level, there are three fundamental problems of the Philippines — as a matter of fact, of all polities. These are the primordial issues of plurality, change, and liberty.

The Philippines, before and during the martial law regime, is composed of various social strata, interest groups, economic

*Dr. Agpalo is the holder of the Manuel Roxas Chair in Political Science at the University of the Philippines. Presidential address delivered during the dinner and closing ceremony of the Second National Conference of the Philippine Political Science Association, Aberdeen Court, Makati, Rizal, June 27, 1976.

sectors, governmental agencies, heterogeneous individuals, and the like. This condition of plurality is a basic political problem because it gives rise to conflict or competition, for each of the constitutive plural elements of the political system is pursuing some kind of interest or desideratum which, in many cases, is in conflict or competition with the others. This is so because desiderata or interests sought or claimed in the polity or society are subject to the control of other individuals and groups.

Change is also another basic problem which the Philippines, before and during the martial law regime, had or has to cope with. The leadership, objectives, and resources of interest groups change. The literacy and other attributes of the people also change. The concerns, resources, and policies of the political elite change. The legitimacy of the government likewise is subject to change. As Heraclitus, more than two thousand years ago, declared: "All things flow; nothing abides."¹

The result of change, no matter in what direction it goes, naturally is a change of the balance of power in the political system. This change of the balance of power inevitably gives rise to conflict or competition. Thus, change, like plurality, is similarly a fundamental problem.

Finally, there is the problem of liberty. This is a basic issue of the Philippines, as in all other polities, because the human elements of the political system—the individuals and groups—are inherently free, i.e., endowed with the capacity to be, to become, to move, to expand, to grow in accordance with their nature. As these elements are, become, move, expand, or grow in the polity, again conflict or competition emerges, for their interests or desiderata are controlled significantly by others.

What means should be devised in order to cope with or solve these basic problems, as well as the conflicts or competitions which they beget?

In the history of human societies, these problems were coped with or solved by means of political systems, which take on various forms, such as, *polis*, *civitas*, *barangay*, monarchy, oligarchy, democracy, or dictatorship.

The Philippines since the pre-Spanish era has adopted various types of political systems to meet the problem of plurality, change, and liberty.² During the pre-Spanish period, the polity regnant in the archipelago was the *barangay*. It was an autocracy—a traditional autocracy—dominated by the *barangay* chief, who exercised legis-

lative, executive, judicial, and military powers. During the Spanish regime, after the archipelago was conquered by Miguel Lopez de Legaspi and his successors, the government of the Philippines remained an autocracy, although it was a modernizing and bigger autocracy since the Spanish *conquistadores* integrated the fragmented archipelago by sword and cross, introducing a Roman Law system of administration and a Roman Catholic religion. During the Spanish regime of about 350 years, the Filipino people, then called *Indios*, were Hispanized, tyrannized, and modernized.

During the Reform Movement (1872-95) and the Philippine Revolution (1896-1901) Filipino reformers and revolutionists dreamed and attempted to establish their idea of a liberal-democratic regime. Their idea of a liberal-democratic system was a native plant grown in response to Spanish domination and oppression. In other words, it was not a foreign species transplanted from abroad to Filipino native grounds. However, it was a variety significantly influenced by exogenous ideas from European or Western countries during the nineteenth century.

Under the American regime (1896-1946), the Philippines was introduced to the American system of liberal democracy; and under the post-independence Republic (1946-72), the Philippines continued its liberal-democratic regime strongly influenced by American political institutions and ideas. During the martial law regime (since September 21, 1972), the present system of polity is a modernizing authoritarian type, or, as called by President Ferdinand E. Marcos, a constitutional authoritarianism.³

The martial law regime is also said to be in a state of transition. Both President Marcos and the 1973 Constitution recognize the transitional situation of the country today. In the book *Notes on the New Society of the Philippines*, President Marcos said "Martial law is a temporary constitutional expedient of safeguarding the republic; at most, it is a necessary transition, in our specific case, between the old and the new society."⁴ Article XVII on "Transitory Provisions" of the new Constitution provides in Section 5 that "The Interim National Assembly shall give priority to measures for the orderly transition from the presidential to the parliamentary system."

Placed in the middle of this transitional state, we must confront the question: "*Quo Vadis?*"

My answer to this is my vision of a political system for the Philippines which is a Filipino liberal democracy.

Why a Filipino liberal democracy?

In making a defense of Filipino liberal democracy, it ought to be clear that I do not prescribe American liberal democracy, English liberal democracy, French liberal democracy, or any other liberal democracy.

Liberal democracy, the *genus*, exists only as an idea. The empirical varieties — the species — are found in particular countries, such as the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and the Philippines. All liberal democracies, however, have common properties or attributes. Otherwise, they will not be recognizable as such. The essential properties of these political systems are two—liberty and sovereignty of the people. Other attributes may be incorporated into the basic form. Polities which enthrone liberty and sovereignty of the people *ipso facto* are liberal democracies.

When liberal democracy become embodied in an actual political system, however, vigorous elements of the history, culture, and tradition of the nation stamp it with its distinctive characteristics. American liberal democracy, for instance, is distinguishable from other liberal democracies because it puts much emphasis upon the idea of equality.⁵ This is so because the United States did not have a feudal past, was characterized by a levelling frontier during its formative stage, and was populated by immigrants from various parts of the world. English liberal democracy, however, owing to its feudal background and tradition of monarchical rule and pragmatism, does not destroy status, honor, and the monarchy.⁶ It also gives much importance to the concept of liberty. On the other hand, French liberal democracy puts a premium on authority and individualism, swinging back and forth from Bonapartism to anarchism, depending upon which of the two—authority or individualism—is dominant.⁷

We return to our original question: Why a Filipino liberal democracy? And, by the way, what is Filipino liberal democracy?

Filipino liberal democracy is the synthesis of the idea of liberal democracy, essentially composed of liberty and sovereignty of the people, a concept with an exogenous origin; and an indigenous and vigorous value, which I call organic hierarchy.

The value of organic hierarchy⁸ is the Filipino value which views the family, the society, and the polity as a body composed of unequal elements, such as the head, torso, arms, hands, fingers, legs, and feet. In this body, the head is superior and paramount. The relationship among the various parts of the body is not a conflict relationship. Instead, it is one of symbiosis or cooperation. Its institutional manifestation in the polity is the dominant executive or *pangulo*.

Filipino liberal democracy is the appropriate political system for the Philippines because history, culture, and tradition have socialized the Filipinos to this type of polity.

Let us consider first the liberal-democratic aspect of Filipino liberal democracy. As pointed out earlier, it was advocated as the political formula for the Philippines by the Reform Movement during the 1870's, 1880's, and early 1890's. Its principal exponent was the famous triumvirate composed of Graciano Lopez Jaena, Marcelo H. del Pilar, and Jose Rizal. A passage in Jaena's editorial in the maiden issue of the organ of the Reform Movement, *La Solidaridad*, reads:

Modest, very modest indeed are our aspirations. Our program aside from being harmless is very simple: to fight all reaction, to hinder all steps backward, to applaud and accept all *liberal* ideas, and to defend progress; in brief, to be a propagandist above all the ideals of *democracy* so that these might reign over all nations and beyond the seas (underscoring supplied).⁹

Marcelo H. del Pilar analyzed various aspects of liberal democracy in his essays. Rizal celebrated it in his novels *Noli Me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*; in his essays, especially "La Indolencia de los Filipinos" and "Filipinas Dentro de Cien Años"; and in the *Liga Filipina*.

The idea of liberal democracy, conceived and advocated eloquently and vigorously by Jaena, del Pilar, and Rizal, was passed on to the Philippine Revolution, whose leaders were Andres Bonifacio and Emilio Jacinto during the first phase, and Emilio Aguinaldo and Apolinario Mabini in the second phase. These revolutionists accepted the legacy of the Reform Movement with alacrity.

From the Philippine Revolution this heritage was handed down to Filipinos during the American regime, the post-independence Republic, and the present regime. Moreover, it was reinforced by the Americans during the American era, for after all it was the political formula of the Americans. Hence, liberal democracy has become a tradition in the Philippines. This liberal-democratic tradition is most visible in the 1935 Constitution and the 1973 Constitution.

With regard to organic hierarchy, the indigenous element of Filipino liberal democracy, it is plain in Philippine political history that this value has been strong in Filipino leadership from the pre-Spanish barangay chief to President Ferdinand E. Marcos. However, it should be noted that there were numerous occasions in the past when this value was so weakened by factionalism that during such times the Philippines or parts of the country were plunged into

instability and turmoil. But during periods when it was vigorous and operative, the political system was effective or efficient.

What is the justification for a Filipino liberal democracy? From our analysis, it is now clear that, because it has a dominant *pangulo*, the political system is provided with an organ which can insure the effectiveness or efficiency of the political system. The fact that the Philippine polity today is burdened by problems of plurality, change, and liberty, which have been aggravated by the unstabilizing process of modernization, makes this kind of polity even more necessary.

The objection, however, may be raised that the *pangulo* in a Filipino liberal democracy might become too powerful, becoming a dictator. How will this grim state of affairs, then, be remedied?

Such a dismal situation, however, will not occur if the liberal-democratic element is not discarded or emasculated. This element, in fact, is the countercheck to the organic-hierarchical element. As long as both liberal-democratic and organic-hierarchical elements are in balance or harmonious relationship, the system of Filipino liberal democracy will work.

Filipino liberal democracy, however, does not only insure governmental effectiveness and efficiency; it also develops the legitimacy of the polity, as well as the political elite. When people participate in policy formation and in the election of governmental officials—in other words, when the sovereignty of the people is operative—they do not feel being imposed upon by the government even if they are asked to obey laws which carry penal sanctions because obeying such laws is merely obeying what they themselves had formulated and adopted, or obeying laws which were formulated and adopted by leaders whom they have chosen. And when people's liberties are recognized, they feel that their dignity as persons has been honored.

Moreover, liberal democracy, a necessary element of Filipino liberal democracy, recognizes and legitimizes plurality. Liberal democracy does not impose uniformity. Since it recognizes and legitimizes plurality, it encourages and promotes toleration, compromise, civility, and social justice. Through such practices and principles, liberal democracy can still achieve unity. As the formula in liberal-democratic United States says: "*E pluribus unum.*"

The liberal-democratic element of Filipino liberal democracy also recognizes and legitimizes change. The people control the government and influence the policies of the government. Since people change with the times, or under the influence of changing

circumstances, as long as the polity is liberal-democratic, the policies of the political system can be adapted, i.e., revised or changed, to the people or the circumstances that have changed. This aspect of Filipino liberal democracy, especially when related to the aspect which promotes toleration and compromise, strengthens and institutionalizes the rule of law, a *sine qua non* of peace and justice.

And finally, the liberal-democratic element of Filipino liberal democracy recognizes and celebrates the value of liberty, for this is the distinctive mark of all liberal democracies. In other words, if there is no liberty, there can be no liberal democracy. Since Filipino liberal democracy recognizes and legitimizes liberty, and liberty is sacred to Filipinos and pivotal in their history,¹² Filipino liberal democracy, therefore, is vital to the national development and legitimacy of the Filipino polity.

To conclude my defense of Filipino liberal democracy, let me devote a few paragraphs to a discussion of the question whether Filipino liberal democracy is the preferred political formula of our national heroes. My answer to this is definitely in the affirmative.

Dr. Jose Rizal,¹³ the national hero of Filipinos, believed in Filipino liberal democracy. So did Emilio Jacinto,¹⁴ the "brains" of the Katipunan, Apolinario Mabini,¹⁵ the "brains of the Philippine Revolution," and Jose P. Laurel,¹⁶ one of most ardent Filipino nationalists and constitutionalists, as well as one of the most systematic thinkers of the country.

Since I have no time to elaborate on their political ideas, I believe it is most fruitful if I analyze at least one notable example. I shall use for my illustration the political philosophy of Emilio Jacinto. I draw my data from Jacinto's philosophical work, *Liwanag at Dilim*, and his constitution for the province of Laguna, *Pagkatatag ng Pamahalaan sa Hukuman ng Silangan* (hereafter, *Pamahalaan*).¹⁷

In the *Pamahalaan*, Jacinto explicitly states his advocacy of democracy. Thus, Section 2 of this constitution provides: "Sovereignty resides in the people. This is the guiding principle upon which the Government of the East is established."¹⁸ The *Liwanag at Dilim*, in a chapter entitled "The People and the Government," likewise advocates democracy. Jacinto remarked that "in short, we must not recognize that the political elite are sovereign over the people. The obedience and respect due them are derived from the sovereignty of the people who gave the political elite the authority to govern."¹⁹

As regards liberty, Jacinto considered this concept so basic that

he used it as the foundation of his political philosophy. Thus, his ideas on equality, democracy, and other important concepts constituting his political philosophy in *Liwanag at Dilim* are all based on the conerstone of liberty. In fact, the chapter on "Liberty" is the actual beginning of *Liwanag at Dilim*. It is also noteworthy to observe that Jacinto named the *Katipunan* newspaper, of which he was the editor, *Kalayaan* (Liberty). To Jacinto, liberty is "the reason carried by man by virtue of his humanity to think and do whatever is desired if this is not contrary to the reason of others."²⁰

Considering these ideas of Emilio Jacinto, there is no doubt that he was an advocate of liberal democracy. This conclusion is definitely clinched by Jacinto's ideas on constitutionalism. In the *Pamahalaan*, he subordinates all government officials, especially the military, under the law. Section 61 of *Pamahalaan* provides: "All officials of the government, civil as well as military, have the duty to cooperate with the judiciary in the maintenance of peace and order within the territory of this government."²¹ Section 55 of the *Pamahalaan* is specifically addressed to the military. It states: "The officers and men of the armed forces shall be under the authority of the Court of Justice, if their crimes do not pertain to military matters."²² And in the *Liwanag at Dilim*, Jacinto declares: "The Constitution, which was formulated and adopted by the Representatives of the people or the Congress, should be given the highest respect and complete obedience by all persons from the highest government officials to the humblest citizens."²³ Jacinto clinches the idea of constitutionalism by the following exclamation: "What error on the part of the scheming who attempts to show off their powers by means of the power of the gun!"²⁴

While Jacinto advocates liberal democracy, he also prescribes organic hierarchy. In the *Pamahalaan*, he provides for a government composed of barangays, towns, and districts all of which are completely centralized under and governed by a Supreme Council with extensive powers. Among the powers of the Supreme Council were the powers to establish a judiciary, to organize the assembly as delegates representing the towns, to establish an army, to assign the heads of districts and towns, and to make, promulgate, and enforce the laws. The Supreme Council was to be composed of a President, a Vice President, a Treasurer, and a Secretary. These members were to be elected by delegates of the towns.

In the *Liwanag at Dilim*, organic hierarchy is explicitly upheld by Jacinto:

Dapua't ang alin mang katipunan at pagkakaisa ay nangangailangan ng isang pinakaulo, ng isang kapangyarihang una sa lahat na sukat makapagbigay ng magandang ayos, makapagpanatili ng tunay na pagkakaisa at makapag-akay sa hangganang ninais, katulad ng sasakyang itinutugpa ng bihasang piloto, na kung ito'y mawala ay nanganganib na maligaw at abutin ng kakilakilabot na kamatayan sa laot ng dagat, na di na makaaasang makadadaong sa pampang ng maligayang payapa't kabuhayang hinahanap.

Ang pinakaulong ito ay tinatawag na Pamahalaan o Gobierno at ang gaganap ng kapangyarihan ay pinangangalanang mga Pinuno ng Bayan.²⁵

In summary, Filipino liberal democracy is the appropriate form of government for the Philippines in order to meet the basic problems of plurality, change, and liberty, as well as the conflicts or competitions which they beget, for Filipinos are steeped in the indigenous value of organic hierarchy and socialized for about one hundred years in the idea and practice of liberal democracy. The organic-hierarchical value of Filipino liberal democracy provides the political system with the needed effectiveness or efficiency of the government; and the liberal-democratic value provides a check upon the government, in case the government attempts to institute a dictatorship or to violate the Constitution of the nation. Besides, Filipino liberal democracy, first, enables the people to elect their public officials and to participate in the formulation of governmental policies, thus recognizing the primacy of individuals or the people and giving them a feeling of pride and dignity; and second, it legitimizes their liberty, which is integral and sacred to their being and pivotal in their history. Finally, it is the political formula preferred and advocated by Filipino national heroes, such as Jose P. Laurel of the twentieth century, Jose Rizal of the Reform Movement, and Emilio Jacinto, the "brains" of the Katipunan.

NOTES

¹Quoted in Newton P. Stallknecht and Robert S. Brumbaugh, *The Spirit of Western Philosophy* (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1950), p. 6.

²Remigio E. Agpalo, "The Philippine Political System in the Perspective of History," *Philippine Journal of Public Administration*, 15 (July-October 1971), 239-58:

³Press Conference of President Ferdinand E. Marcos, January 20, 1973.

⁴(Manila: Marcos Foundation, Inc., 1973), paperback edition, p. vii.

⁵Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, ed. Philips Radley (New York, 1945).

⁶Richard Rose, *Politics in England* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965).

⁷Henry W. Ehrmann, *Politics in France* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1968), pp. 7-14.

⁸Remigio E. Agpalo. *The Political Elite and the People* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines, 1972), pp. 118-119. See also *The Organic-Hierarchical Paradigm and Politics in the Philippines* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines, 1973), pp. 1-4.

⁹*La Solidaridad*, Vol. I, 1889, trans. Guadalupe Fores-Ganzon (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1967), p. 3.

¹⁰Human nature and liberty were discussed by del Pilar in his essay "*Kalayaan*" and the plight of the Philippines under monastic rule in "*La Soberania Monacal en Filipinas.*" The full texts of these essays are included as appendices to Magno S. Gatmaitan, *Marcelo H. del Pilar, 1850-1896* (Quezon City: Muñoz Press, 1966), pp. 412-46.

¹¹The novels were translated by Charles Derbyshire into English as *The Social Cancer* and *The Reign of Greed* (Manila: Philippine Education Company, 1912). At present various editions and translations exist. The two essays and the constitution of the *Liga* are found in English translation in *Political and Historical Writings*, Encarnacion Alzona (Manila: National Heroes Commission, 1964), pp. 130-63, 227-65, and 309-16.

¹²Remigio E. Agpalo, "The Political Elite in Post-Traditional Society—The Case of the Philippines," in Arnold Wehmhoerner, ed., *Elites and Development* (Bangkok: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 1975), pp. 64-65. See also author's "Legitimacy and the Political Elite in the Philippines," *Philippine Political Science Journal*, No. 2 (December 1975), pp. 12-13.

¹³Remigio E. Agpalo, "Jose Rizal: Filipino National Hero and His Ideas of Political Modernization," *Solidarity*, 4 (December 1969), pp. 1-14.

¹⁴Remigio E. Agpalo, *Liwanag at Dilim: The Political Philosophy of Emilio Jacinto* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1976).

¹⁵Cesar A. Majul, *Mabini and the Philippine Revolution* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines, 1960).

¹⁶Remigio E. Agpalo, "Pro Deo et Patria: The Political Philosophy of Jose P. Laurel," *Asian Studies*, 3 (August 1965), pp. 163-92.

¹⁷These works are included in Jose P. Santos, *Buhay at Mga Sinulat ni Emilio Jacinto* (Maynila: 1935), pp. 27-46, 48-56.

¹⁸An English translation of Jacinto's *Pagkatatag ng Pamahalaan . . .* is found in Gregorio F. Zaide, *Philippine Constitutional History and Constitutions of Modern Nations* (Manila: Modern Book Company, 1970), pp. 122-27. The quoted article of the *Pamahalaan* is on p. 122.

¹⁹Author's translation of the Tagalog original in Santos, *Buhay ni Emilio Jacinto*, p. 37.

²⁰Author's translation of the Tagalog original in *ibid.*, p. 28.

²¹Zaide, *Philippine Constitutional History*, p. 127.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 127.

²³Author's translation of the Tagalog original in Santos, *Buhay ni Emilio Jacinto*, p. 38.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 36.