

Book Review

Administrative Culture and Political Change

NELIA R. BELEN*

A review of Amelia P. Varela, *Administrative Culture and Political Change* (Quezon City: College of Public Administration, University of the Philippines, 1996). xi + 325pp.

Philippine society manifests characteristics and properties considered contrary to the Weberian model and standards of bureaucracy. Many scholars have noted that such incongruence happens in other societies too. Why? Because it omits an important variable generally regarded by many social scientists as an important influence on the behavior and dynamics in and among social organizations—culture.

In a general sense, this book, *Administrative Culture and Political Change*, is not the first word on the relevance of administrative/organizational culture in understanding organizational behavior and action. However, as regards the relevance of the culture perspective in understanding the Philippines' politico-administrative dynamics and its effects on the behavior of the country's administrative system, this can be considered a pioneering effort taking into consideration the fact that it provides empirical data to back up its conclusions.

This book does not have an introductory chapter. Hence, one may only infer the real objectives, significance and overall direction of the study after going through all the five component chapters that make up this volume.

Acknowledging the potentialities of the administrative culture perspective and the inability of the structural and system approaches to address inefficiencies in the Philippine bureaucracy, Amelia P. Varela, a noted expert on human resources development and organization studies, herein provides a critical review and analysis of the roots of conflict between the values prescribed by the borrowed bureaucratic system and the values

*Director, Finance and Administration Division, Philippine Council for Agriculture, Forestry and Natural Resources Research and Development (PCAARD), Los Baños, Laguna.

espoused and practiced by the Filipino society within the country's politico-administrative context.

The book starts with a review and analysis of the different organization and management theories upon which the administrative culture perspective evolved and then uses them as her framework in mapping administrative culture in the Philippine bureaucracy. Specifically, she applied Schein's¹ three level conceptualization (focusing on the values level) as her model in operationalizing the administrative culture concept.

In order to show and to emphasize the point that politics-administration relation is shaped by the culture and personal motivation of the political leadership, the book moves on to recount the interactions between the bureaucracy and the societal, political, and administrative cultures during the administration of Presidents Macapagal, Marcos and Aquino. In her account, the incumbency of Macapagal is characterized by the prevalence of positive culture and behavior in government offices. Despite the 50-50 plan scandal² and other shortfalls (particularly in the economy), his administration continued to enjoy the support and confidence of the public employees because of his strong political will to maintain the integrity and morality of the bureaucracy. The politics-administration relation that evolved during his administration is characterized by their shared understanding of the positive and negative aspects of governance. In contrast, the Marcos and Aquino regimes, despite the difference in their persons and their motivations, applied common approaches (e.g., reorganization, personnel purges, cronyism among others) in their administration which later on elicited negative perceptions of their respective intentions.

The book proceeds further by presenting the results of her case studies of six government organizations on the role of the political leadership in directly influencing the political culture, and the value systems existing in the bureaucracy. The facts gathered from the case studies are quite revealing in the sense that in order to counter their demoralization and insecurity, the employees concerned resorted to graft and corrupt practices and actions. On the contrary, they also put high premium on good organizational image and efficient delivery of services. The criteria for the selection of the agencies which participated in her case studies are not explicit. However, it can be inferred that the agencies³ which participated are those whose functions and services are very vulnerable to graft and corruption and/or negative public opinion. Hence, a generalization might not prove conclusive for all and at different levels of the government organization.

Using the same government institutions, the book moves on to present the role of organizational leadership in instituting administrative culture change at the implementation level of executive agencies. Varying patterns of

cultural change are noted in each of the six organizations studied, due perhaps to the differing cultures existing in them and the kind of leadership they each have. Final analysis of the case, however, would lead us to the same pattern of conclusions as in the preceding paragraph. Thus, there is sufficient reason to believe at this point that, for government organizations with functions as those of the agencies mentioned, patronage and graft and corruption are a general phenomenon.

The book ends by presenting the different faces of the Filipino administrative culture and makes a call for its reinterpretation in order to remove its conflict with the prescribed and accepted standards of the borrowed bureaucratic model. The culture of patronage for instance, which is supposed to be the positive expression of Filipino cultural traits like familism, social acceptance, the values of *pakikisama*, *utang na loob*, *awa*, and *pagkamatulungin* needs to be reinterpreted to remove its conflict with the merit system. Perhaps instead of looking at patronage negatively it can be taken as a control mechanism to guarantee personnel competence and excellent performance. On the other hand, the underlying principles and assumptions of the culture of bureaucratic mediocrity, bureaucratic ambiguity, dualism and graft and corruption need to be reexamined too so that such negative connotations may become positive influences on Filipino social, political and administrative culture. Necessarily such shifts in orientation require strong political will and commitment of the administration.

Moreover, Varela further encourages the continuing application of the administrative culture perspective to provide for a sharper analysis and understanding of the behavioral dynamics taking place in the Philippine bureaucracy. However, she warns and I agree, that in the absence of a static and definitive description of the administrative culture phenomenon, the administrative culture perspective must not be looked upon as the universal explanation for all the bureaucracy's shortfalls because it cannot be the sole explanation. At the very least, it is as much determined by the structures, systems and competition existing between and among organizations (Keraudren 1996: 76).

The book merits the attention not only of students of politics and administration but also of politicians, government officials and employees. The findings and conclusions could serve as reminders or perhaps be eye openers for the bureaucrats and politicians in the Philippine administrative system. It would also have been better if she made an integration of the five chapters so that her conclusions would be more or less wholistic.

The author nevertheless must be congratulated for taking pains to complete this book because it was able to put into context the relevance of administrative culture in Philippine politics and administration. Also, given

her call for a Filipinized bureaucracy, this study seems very timely in the sense that indigenization is the "call of the hour."

Endnotes

¹Schein's three level conceptualization are as follows: Level 1 is the observable or tangible artifacts such as norms, rites, habits, symbols, jargons, dress codes and behavior itself. Level 2 consists of beliefs and values which reveal how people communicate, explain, rationalize, and justify what they say and do as a group. It also includes ethos, philosophies, ideologies, ethical and moral codes and attitudes. Level 3 consists of basic underlying assumptions that guide behavior, and which tell people as members of group how to perceive, think about, and feel about things. Of these levels, only the first can be directly observed while the other two can only be inferred from the observables.

²The 50-50 plan was a scheme devised by members of the House of Representatives in the Old Congress whereby the filling up of all new positions in the 1959 budget would be divided on a 50-50 basis between the Executive (Malacañang) and the Congress. The plan was arrived at after newly-elected congressmen from the majority party complained that their recommendees for the new positions in the budget they had approved were being ignored or not acted upon by the department heads and bureau directors.

³The participating agencies are: Bureau of Customs (BOC), Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH), Commission on Immigration and Deportation (CID), National Power Corporation (NPC), Department of Health (DOH), and Civil Service Commission (CSC).

References

- Endrigo, Jose N.
1985 Stability and Change: The Civil Service in the Philippines. *Philippine Journal of Public Administration*. 29(2) (April): 132-154.
- Flores, Ben Oliver
1966 Out with the Casuals. *Philippines Free Press*. 59(4): 12. 22 January.
- Keraudren, Philippe
1996 In Search of Culture: Lessons From the Past to Find a Role for the Study of Administrative Culture. *Governance: An International Journal of Policy and Administration*. Vol. 9 No. 1 (January): 71-98.
- Schein, Edgar
1985 *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass, Inc.: 18.