

The Rise of Women Leaders in the Philippines: A Study of Corazon Aquino and Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo

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Introduction

Two women have risen to the presidency in the Philippines in the last fifteen years. Corazon Aquino, the first female to ascend to the presidency in the country's history, was elected after the ouster of Ferdinand Marcos amidst charges of criminal wrongdoing. Fifteen years later, Vice President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo succeeded Joseph Estrada, who had been accused of corruption and plundering the Philippine economy. Not only is it rare for a woman to be elected president, but it is also least expected in countries like the Philippines that have a long history of patriarchy, oligarchy, and subordination of women. Even though the Philippines has an elected bicameral legislature and elected officials in lower levels of government, there are few female elected officials. In 1939, women were given suffrage and the right to stand for elections. Since then, only 9.8% of the 224 lower-house seats have been held by women (*Who's Who of Women in World Politics* 1991). In spite of the Philippines' patriarchal institutions, narrow elite class, and repression of women, other social variables such as family ties, the Catholic Church, a context of corruption and gender symbolism allow women to enter into the male-dominated political arena.

The Rise of Women Leaders

To understand how women are elected in the Philippines, this paper is structured as a comparative study that explores Corazon Aquino's and Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's successions and their interaction with these four variables: family ties, the Catholic Church, the context of corruption and gender symbolism.

Previous studies of Southeast Asian women leaders have found that family ties are necessary for women candidates to win elections (Richter 1990). Family ties, specifically those to politically active men, explain why Aquino and Arroyo received immediate recognition. The dramatic death of a prominent political husband was most significant in Aquino's rise to power, while Arroyo's father-daughter relationship with the former president of the Philippines, Diosdado Macapagal, increased her campaign recognition. Family ties might explain how both women attracted voters' attention in their campaigns but does not explain how they successfully managed to work against the assumption that men should be at the forefront of leadership and decision-making.

In addition to family ties, scholars believe that without the Catholic Church's support, a woman would not have succeeded (UST Social Research 1986). Even though the Philippines' political structure is modeled after the American system, the Philippines' political culture has its roots in the oligarchic system established during Spanish colonialism. Since the Catholic Church is a male-dominated institution, it is reasonable to question why the church mobilized voters to support a female candidate. Jaime Cardinal Sin, the Archbishop of Manila, requested corrupt leaders to step down from power. He led the mass non-violent movement against corrupt leadership at Epiphania de los Santos Avenue (EDSA), the focal point for Aquino's and Arroyo's rise to power. While the Catholic Church's involvement explains the development of candidate support, it fails to explain why that candidate was a woman. The Catholic Church's concept of a woman being morally superior to a man perhaps explains the Church's support of women candidates in movements against corruption.

Both Aquino and Arroyo ascended to the presidency after the removal of a corrupt leader. There are two approaches to looking at corruption and how it affects the fate of political leaders. Jon Moran (1999) asserts that corruption is pervasive and affects politics, economics and social relations in general. Social movements arise because corruption affects an individual's economic well-being, and these social movements push for fundamental change. Another view of corruption is that it involves only top political leaders who come to symbolize corruption. In this interpretation, social movements seek to defeat top political leaders (Wurfel 1988). Like Moran, Wurfel argues that social movements arise because corruption affects an individual citizen's economic well-being and that individuals join together to push for fundamental change, but in this case change means calling for a shift among those who rule. The context of corruption explains the demand for new leadership but does not explain the candidate choice made by elites and voters.

Culture also plays a role in determining how elites and voters choose their candidate (Iwai 1993). One element of Filipino culture that may explain why people elect a female candidate is the symbolic role of women in Philippine society. Since the colonial era, women have been taught to conform to the behaviors of their ideal mother, the Virgin Mary, upon whom is built a "cult of feminine spiritual superiority, which teaches that women are semi-divine, morally superior to and spiritually stronger than men" (Stevens 1973, 91). Women leaders who embrace the Catholic faith represent a positive image in society and are distinguished by purity (Iwai 1993, 108). Both Aquino and Arroyo invoked this cultural belief in women's morally superior role in order to legitimize their entrance into public office at a time of political upheaval.

While family ties and the Catholic Church play a role in determining the outcomes of these presidential elections, the cultural construction of women as "Madonnas" allowed first the election of Aquino and then the succession of Arroyo to the presidency at times

when political leaders had been charged with corruption. Philippine culture encourages voters to view women as less prone to corruption than men. This means that in times of political corruption, women who seek higher office have an advantage over male politicians.

From Dictator to Housewife

Aquino would not have gained immediate recognition nor have been selected to run for office without her relationship to a prominent male politician. Corazon Aquino was the wife of Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino, the candidate who opposed Ferdinand Marcos and exposed his corruption. Marcos had demonstrated his abuse of power by manipulating his men to assassinate Ninoy Aquino. As the widow, Corazon Aquino was urged to run in the election against Marcos. The political party of her husband was sure that Aquino was the best candidate to defeat Marcos in the 1986 election. Not only was she seen as the victim of Marcos’ corruption but “almost as a Madonna, a saint in contrast to the wily, corrupt Marcos” (Richter 1990).

The turning point of Corazon Aquino’s rise to power was the involvement of the Roman Catholic Church in the fight against corruption.

Marcos’ dealings with the church remained cordial until the late 1960s, but following the imposition of martial rule in September 1972, church-state relations began to deteriorate with the loss of civil liberties, increased abuses of human rights by the military, and the rise of graft, corruption, and economic mismanagement.

(Youngblood 1990, xi)

The Church’s inability to lift the poor from their economic struggle gave Cardinal Sin, the Archbishop of Manila, the necessity and urgency to mobilize a nation-wide movement for the poor and fight for socio-economic change. During the election, Cardinal Sin served as Aquino’s personal campaign manager and asked the people to “vote for

persons who embody the Gospel values of justice, humility, truth..." and thus elect a candidate "immune" from corruption (UST Research Center 1986, 38).

Aside from the Church's support in invoking the Madonna image, a woman candidate benefits from her close association with the head of the Catholic Church. Since the Philippines' religious population is made up of Roman Catholics (83%), a devout Catholic woman closely affiliated with the Archbishop of Manila is likely to succeed in elections. According to the Social Weather Stations (SWS) 1991 national election report, 67% of voters would favor a candidate that his or her church supports. This study reported that 49% of female voters found a church endorsement important, against only 29% of male voters (Mangalindan 1991). A relationship with the Church is thus an important asset for women voters.

Ferdinand Marcos' corrupt leadership heightened the support for Aquino's candidacy. Aquino was an unusual candidate: a politically inexperienced woman who took the risk to compete against a corrupt leader who had murdered her husband. Ferdinand Marcos' twenty-year rule of corruption pushed people to demand a new form of leadership. The first family's accumulation of wealth, Marcos' manipulation of the army, and the increased economic disparity between rich and poor exposed Marcos' manipulative power and "immoral governance." At the same time, women were growing more involved in the political process after a large number of women had been recruited to work outside of their home by manufacturing and textile concerns. Women were paid below minimum wage and worked under hazardous conditions. In response to the increasing abuse of women, radical groups of women organized against Marcos' dictatorship. As guardians of morality, these women fought for peace, justice and democracy. Perhaps this explains Aquino's sense of duty to run against Marcos as well as the rise of a feminist movement that supported her candidacy. According to the 1991 national election report, the reputation of a politician matters in his or her success. Relatives and close associates of former president Marcos were found

to be least likely to succeed: only a fourth of potential voters would have favored the relatives of Marcos as opposed to 68% of those who would not have (Mangalindan 1991). This study shows that perceptions of corruption affect Filipino voters' candidate preferences.

Even though Aquino was accused of being inexperienced and a housewife by her opponent, it was this image that gave her mass support and worked against her opponent. Aquino's campaign rhetoric stressed her difference from her male opponent: "I admit that I have no experience in cheating, stealing, lying or assassinating political opponents" (Gwilym 1989). The media portrayed her as a housewife, a widow of a political leader and a religious woman, suggesting that Aquino was not just "pure" but "immune" to corruption.

Another Victory against Corruption

Aquino's succession opened a new door for women to run for national positions. Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo was the second woman to rise to power after the ouster of a corrupt leader. She was in the right position to become the Philippines' second female president when she succeeded Joseph Estrada.

Legislative elections in the Philippines are based on proportional representation, and the President and the Vice President are elected separately. This can result in a President and Vice President from opposing political parties, such as Arroyo and Estrada. Estrada was unlike the autocratic Marcos. He was a former movie actor who enjoyed widespread popularity and won the presidential election with the support of the poor. Arroyo ran in 1998 as the Vice Presidential candidate of the coalition that opposed Estrada. This election was described in the media as a race between a *babae* [woman] and a *babaero* [womanizer] (Delgado-Yulo 2000). The media therefore identified Arroyo with her gender in such a way as to connote inferiority and undermine her candidacy.

Arroyo's political experience prevailed over attempts to weaken her candidacy. Unlike Aquino, Arroyo was a woman accustomed to power. The public recognized Arroyo as a former senator and the daughter of a former president. In 1998 she was elected

Vice President of the Philippines with almost 13 million votes, the largest mandate in the history of presidential or vice presidential elections (Mangahas 1998). Estrada's impeachment and resignation meant that Arroyo succeeded to the presidency without having to run for that office. The question is, what made it possible for Arroyo to succeed Estrada legitimately? What gave her the confidence to take the risk of confronting a sitting president who was popular with the poor?

In the 1991 national election study, a slim majority of voters agreed with the statement that a woman is capable of governing the country. Table 1 shows men and women to be surprisingly close in their responses. The most interesting result is the large net difference in Metro Manila (GMA) in favor of a woman, which suggests that female candidates in general find most of their support in Metro Manila.

Table 1
The Balance of Public Favor for Female Candidates, by Socio-Economic Class, Gender, Age Group and Locale
SWS July 1991 National Survey

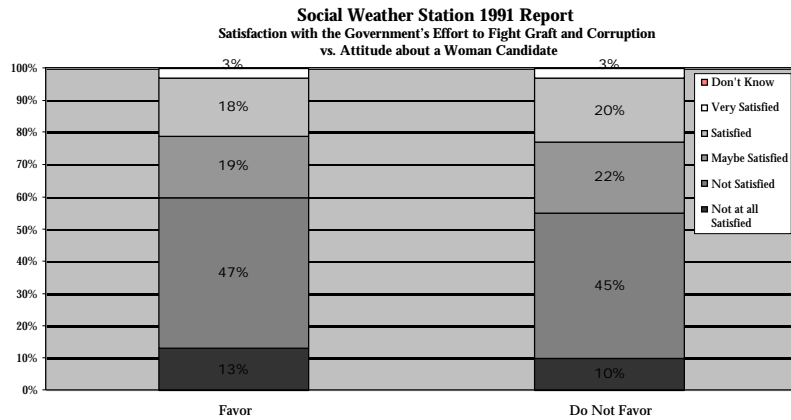
Question: In the coming national election of 1992, would you be in favor or not in favor of a candidate for the presidency, vice-presidency or senator who is a woman?

	Favor	Not in Favor	Net Difference
RP/Majority	52	45	+ 7
<i>Socio-Econ. Class</i>			
ABC (elite and middle class)	50	49	+ 1
D (poor)	52	44	+ 8
E (destitute)	50	44	+ 6
<i>Gender</i>			
Male	51	45	+ 6
Female	52	44	+ 8
<i>Age Group</i>			
18-24	54	44	+ 10
25-34	50	47	+ 3
35-44	51	45	+ 6
45 & above	53	43	+ 10
<i>Locale</i>			
Urban	55	41	+ 14
Rural	49	47	+ 2
GMA (Metro Manila)	58	38	+ 20

The grounds for Arroyo's confidence in confronting Estrada and for her succession to the presidency include the direct support of the Church and its effort to mobilize a second mass movement, EDSA II. Jaime Cardinal Sin, who led the revolution against Marcos, condemned Estrada at mass in Manila and supported Arroyo as "one who epitomizes the Christian, feminine ideal" (Delgado-Yulo 2000). Women leaders could not have gained the tremendous support they enjoyed without the support of Cardinal Sin and religious women who joined the movement to oust the sitting president. Having a close affiliation with the head of the Catholic Church turned Arroyo's gender identity into an advantage over male leaders accused of corruption, as had been true for Aquino.

Arroyo symbolized opposition to a corrupt leader. Her rise to the presidency began on October 12, 2000, with the disgrace of Joseph Estrada. Corruption charges against Estrada emerged after a close friend, Governor Luis "Chavit" Singson, exposed him for pocketing millions of dollars in illegal gambling payoffs and tobacco tax kickbacks (Filipino Express 2001). Impeachment by the House of Representatives followed. In response to the corruption charges, Arroyo and other members of the Senate resigned from office. Arroyo built the People Power Coalition to call for a peaceful mass demonstration to request Estrada's resignation from office. Aside from the charges of economic plunder, Estrada's past as a womanizer, gambler and an alcohol abuser were made public (Tanglao-Aguas 2001). It is possible that women supported their own kind in response to a male opponent who represented the "machismo" character who degrades women; Marcos had stated in public that "women belong in the bedroom," and Estrada had been accused of abusing women. Arroyo represented the democratic choice and a positive image for women in society. Her devout Catholicism helped distinguish her as a female politician who was "serious," "clean" and "pure" (Iwai 1993, 108). Corruption thus increased support for Arroyo's succeeding Estrada.

A Philippine polling organization, Social Weather Stations, has collected data analyzing the links voters make between corruption and female candidacy. In a 1991 survey, voters who were dissatisfied with the government's effort to fight graft and corruption were likely to be in favor of a woman candidate (see graph below). Sixty percent of voters who favored women candidates for president were dissatisfied with the government's performance in combating corruption, while 55% of voters who did not favor women candidates were dissatisfied with the government's performance in fighting corruption. A one-tailed t-test ($p < .05$) shows that although the difference is substantively rather small, it is statistically significant. The smallness of the difference is probably due to voter's disappointment with Aquino's performance in office.



The effects of corruption on voters' attitudes are also evident in the 2001 senatorial race. Voters were asked if they believed that Estrada committed economic plunder—46% believed that he had and 53% believed he had not (Laylo 2001). Among those who believed that Estrada had committed plunder 45% responded that they had much trust in President Arroyo while 22% showed little trust in Arroyo. Aversion to corruption thus did influence voter preference.

On January 20, 2001, the Supreme Court unanimously declared the position of President vacant, and Arroyo was sworn in as the 14th President of the Philippines (Filipino Express 2001). Estrada argued that Arroyo's succession was "unconstitutional," an illegal seizure of power. However, like Aquino, Arroyo used statements promoting herself as the "best" candidate to take the place of Estrada. Arroyo supporters such as the KGMAers (*Kaibigan ni* [Friends of] *Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo*) called for "a leader with compassion, humility, resourcefulness, perseverance, and identity with all sectors of the Filipino community," traits that Arroyo presented herself as possessing. She increased her mass support during her inaugural speech by stating that Filipinos "must improve moral standards in government and society in order to provide a strong foundation for good governance" (Arroyo 2001). Arroyo's moral tone differentiated her from male politicians and defused allegations that she was illegally seizing power.

Conclusion

While family ties and the Catholic Church gave Aquino and Arroyo the recognition and support to run for office, cultural symbols and the context of corruption legitimized and made it possible for these women to rise to power. Aquino and Arroyo would not have succeeded to the presidency without gender-typing and corruption. Both strategically embraced gendered moral and religious identities in order to differentiate themselves from their male opponents. In addition, these women rose to power with the aid of prominent political leaders and their alliance with the Catholic Church, which offered them immediate public recognition. Although this study discusses the factors that contributed to Aquino's and Arroyo's presidential successions, the research is still incomplete. Scholars need to further explore how powerful actors like the Catholic Church and political parties manipulate or appeal to gendered identities to bolster support for women candidacies. Further investigation will also need to focus on how gender is constructed in political competitions and how

voters differentiate candidates by their gender identities. It is important to keep in mind that women may have been elected to top political positions, but this has not necessarily changed society's patriarchal system.

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