

PERSPECTIVE

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Christian Megachurches and Politics in the Philippines

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Non-Catholic megachurches in the Philippines have been expanding their political influence by engaging political elites, galvanizing the grassroots, and ‘ministering to the middle’.
- Megachurches engage elites through electoral endorsements and the fielding of church leaders for political office. This allows church agendas to be pushed as national policy.
- Megachurches galvanise grassroots by sending their members out on the streets for political causes. Objectives tend to be narrow and urgent, and relative success depends on the manoeuvres of politicians.
- Finally, megachurches adopt the indirect strategy of ‘ministering to the middle’. Acting through intermediaries both within and outside of government, churches diffuse their agendas through the bureaucracy and civil society.
- A brief comparison with Indonesia is made in this article. The authors posit that Indonesian churches will utilise the third strategy in their interactions with society at large in the near future.

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INTRODUCTION

The intertwining of religion and polity has a long history in Southeast Asia. Secularism rests on shaky cultural grounds in most countries in the region where the vast majority of the population remain religious in terms of affiliation and practices. Furthermore, religious organisations historically acted as active agents of nation building and some have longer histories and deeper roots in society than the postcolonial state, for example, the Nahdlatul Ulama in Indonesia and the Catholic Church in the Philippines.

In the Philippines, Christianity has been a major influence on state formation and politics. American colonialism removed the political dominance of the Catholic Church and installed a secular state with formal separations of power. But it also produced a cacique democracy where the elites jostled for power by dispensing resources through patronage, in which the Church participated and maintained its social power. Missionary and indigenous non-Catholic churches formed during the American era and after independence in 1946 were able to thrive by engaging with patronage democracy. Social justice issues became prominent and mobilised civil resistance during the Marcos dictatorship, which the Church helped to overthrow. After the EDSA Revolution of 1986, politics became more pluralistic with the opening up of democratic space and the rise of civil society organisations.

Based on ongoing field research, we suggest that in the post-EDSA period, non-Catholic megachurches have increasingly engaged in political actions to influence the state. Though comprising a small minority dwarfed by the Catholic Church, these churches have been able to mobilise financial and electoral power through careful organisation and disciplined pastoral teaching. We suggest that the churches influence politics through three different routes that are not mutually exclusive, by: (a) engaging the elites, (b) galvanising the grassroots, and (c) ministering to the middle.

ENGAGING THE ELITES

This is the most visible form of church influence on politics. Churches that participate in this form of political action do this in two ways: dispensing electoral endorsements to individual politicians or parties, and supporting church leaders in bids for political office.

In dispensing endorsements, churches cultivate patronage relations with politicians. As politicians could potentially gain a large support base, they actively court churches for favour especially during elections. The Iglesia ni Cristo (INC) is one successful user of this method of exercising political influence, especially with its practice of bloc voting. As early as the 1960s, it was observed that the INC leadership would announce political candidates it favoured during religious services several weeks before the elections. Appeals to appropriate Biblical passages would be made to justify the church's stance.¹

The INC's effectiveness at getting out the vote attained a mythic status that has lasted until the present day. Every election cycle sees news outlets tracking the success of INC-endorsed

candidates. This has led several megachurches that have matured since the late 1980s, such as Jesus is Lord, El Shaddai, and the Davao-based Kingdom of Jesus Christ, to replicate INC's method, albeit with less success.² One factor that accounts for the INC's effective bloc voting is that the church strongly imparts on its members such values as unwavering unity and strict obedience.

The INC, however, stops short of the second method mentioned above. It is limited by its doctrinal prohibition on participation in worldly politics, as politicians need to attend events held by other religious groups and to partake in behaviours the church considers un-Christian. Therefore, for INC members to remain morally untainted, they must refrain from personally entering the political sphere. This includes civil society activism.

The Jesus is Lord Church engages in the second method. Its leader Brother Eddie Villanueva campaigned to be president in 2004 and 2010, and for senator in 2013. By openly bidding for political office, church leaders obtain unmediated access to the political process, in order that they might negotiate power with the political elites and push the church's interests. At the time of writing, he has become one of the Deputy Speakers of the Philippine House of Representatives while he continues to preach in his church.

GALVANISING THE GRASSROOTS

Churches may also flex their political muscle by rallying members to demonstrate for certain causes. The agenda they push for here tends to be narrow and focused on events of immediate urgency. Furthermore, churches are unlikely to be in full control of the consequences of the mass demonstrations they unleash, and they tend to depend on politicians reacting in ways that are able to placate their demands.

The most striking example of such intervention would be in 1986, when Cardinal Jaime Sin utilised the church-run Radio Veritas to mobilise the faithful to protest on the EDSA Highway, which toppled Marcos. This was repeated in 2001, when he backed another popular movement to oust Joseph Estrada. In September 2017, thousands of Christian churches of various denominations and traditions, including the Catholic Church, joined the rally in Luneta Park against Rodrigo Duterte's brutal war on drugs which they perceived as flagrant disobedience of God's commandments.

As the third largest religious group, after Catholicism and Islam, the INC has employed similar tactics. In 2015, members of the church occupied the same EDSA thoroughfare, claiming that the Department of Justice was meddling with internal church affairs. Their act was in response to the filing of a complaint by a former INC minister against the church.

This political galvanising of the grassroots is an extension of mass religious events, which megachurches organise to invoke the revival spirit. Large evangelical rallies or mass Praise and Worship celebrations are often held in venues such as stadiums and large fields. The INC organises large charity walks, often jamming up the roads of Metro Manila and acting

as shows of people power aimed at capturing political attention. The INC also built the state-of-the-art Philippine Arena in 2014 for the church's grassroots to come together for its centennial celebrations.

MINISTERING TO THE MIDDLE

Between elite engagement and grassroots galvanising lies a spectrum of political action available to churches that we shall term as “ministering to the middle”. The common thread in this range of activity is the tendency for churches to cast themselves as moral observers situated outside the political arena. Objectives are often filtered through the agency of political intermediaries, relying on them to initiate and sustain action, thereby allowing churches to retain some distance and even appear passively agnostic about politics. The churches develop the actions within the framework of Christian ministry targeting the intermediaries, who are usually professionals and technocrats from the middle classes. We discuss two ways of ministering to the middle.

Developing Soft Power

From our observations, churches that choose this path of action successfully adopt an aura of moral authority by deliberately building good personal relationships with middle-class elite functionaries. Interviewees told us about their ambitions to reach out to future leaders or “the A/B market”, that is, business managers and government officials at the upper socioeconomic rungs of society. Their hope is that through personal transformation of these individuals, Christian values and their churches' influence would then affect the rest of Philippine society.

There are two preferred tactics to facilitate this outreach. The first is via prayer meetings. The most spectacular of these is the National Prayer Breakfast, an annual gathering that was founded in 1975. Smaller-scale meetings exist, with church pastors entering government offices to pray over government leaders. The second is the formation of Bible study groups. Christ's Commission Fellowship (CCF), a church that reports an overall attendee count of 80,000 nationwide, organises annual Holy Land trips, wherein the sole requirement, apart from the steep cost of US\$5,000 a head, is participation in daily Bible studies led by its senior pastor, Peter Tan-Chi.

These means of outreach are also used to connect with mid-ranking civil servants. As we discovered in our interviews, at this level, they are public and prolific, with both Catholic and non-Catholic Christian groups active. The Fellowship of Christians in Government (FOCIG), as an example, conducts Bible studies and religious talks within government offices. CCF also has a dedicated ministry for civil servants, Government Movers Enlightening the Nation (GMEN), which it publicises in its services.

As D. Michael Lindsay points out with regard to the US National Prayer Breakfast, the political clout of the church or individual facilitators of such meetings is highly reliant on

an image of non-partisanship and an apparent lack of ulterior motivations.³ Once this image is called into question either by church congregants or outsiders, authority easily evaporates. The leaders at one megachurch we spoke to expressed this very concern, worrying that a more active and explicit engagement of political matters would lead to a church split.

Rising Above the Fray

Most churches that minister to the middle are also constrained in terms of their public performance. They act in the political realm by sponsoring civil society organisations and using language that emphasises the public good. Should their presence be seen, it is generally only amongst a whole host of strategic allies. Pinning down their exact demands, and assessing the efficacy with which they advance those demands, is tricky.

David Buckley argued that Catholics in post-authoritarian societies adopt any combination of three different strategies to maintain relevance in public political life: democratic preservation, comprehensive mobilisation, and defensive reaction.⁴ The first aims at electoral accountability, pushing for free and fair elections. The second pursues a broad set of policies under a rhetorical umbrella of human dignity. The last prioritises counter-moves against perceived threats to the church's religious teachings. He noted, with reference to public debates over reproductive health legislation in the early 2010s, that the Catholic Church in the Philippines implemented all three strategies, acting as an all-encompassing pressure group for the public interest.

To the extent that non-Catholic churches share doctrinal ground with the Catholic Church, they frequently used the latter as political cover for their defensive reactions in public. Their energies had been mostly directed at efforts to strengthen the democratic process. From our interviews, a megachurch, for instance, is in talks with a faith-based institute to establish a school of leadership to train Christian politicians-to-be in making ethical decisions when in power. The interdenominational People's Choice Movement is also preparing materials to educate communities prior to the 2022 elections. These churches work hard at positioning themselves not as rivals to the secular order, but as guardians of it for the sake of the nation. In this way, their moral authority is preserved.

A COMPARATIVE GLANCE AT INDONESIA

In Indonesia, we have not seen many churches exercise their influence in politics openly nor having a deep interest in civic affairs. Instead, their concern predominantly centres on meeting the immediate needs of their congregants. In contrast to Manila-based Christian NGOs such as the Institute for Studies in Asian Church and Culture, Christian activist groups in Indonesia are poorly supported and connected. This is in spite of Indonesia sharing many characteristics with the Philippines: substantive democracy, constitutional guarantees of religious freedom, and religious pluralism.

One reason appears to be obvious. In the Indonesian case, the majority religion is Islam. Given that non-Catholic Christians constitute a minority in both states,⁵ this affirms the notion that intra-religious boundaries are far more porous than inter-religious ones. In the Philippines, the religious affinity between Catholic and non-Catholic groups is recognised, resulting in the extension of political goodwill.

Another reason is historical. The Philippines, since the 1898 Revolution against Spain and the subsequent struggle against American usurpers, have a stronger tradition of mass democratic politics, in which religion has played a critical role. Indonesian democracy has a recent pedigree and its postcolonial history is marked by the Suharto regime's suppression of both faith-based activism and secular civil society. Furthermore, the fast-growing megachurches in Indonesia were only established in the late 1980's, nurtured by the wave of conservative evangelical revivals in the region. On the other hand, many non-Catholic churches in the Philippines trace longer lineages to revival movements in the American period. They had a longer time to come into entanglements with the secular state.

Entanglements with the state are inevitable because social outreach is a central mission of evangelical churches. Furthermore, churches seeking to preserve the conservative mores of society must come to see the state as a bulwark against cultural liberalisation. In time, the Indonesian churches will find themselves called to engage with politics to secure their position and interests. After the prosecution of former Jakarta Governor Ahok, a Christian, for blasphemy against Islam, engaging the elites has become difficult. Galvanising the grassroots is also dangerous for the churches, especially after the terror bombings of churches in Surabaya made church leaders wary of public visibility. We believe we will see the Indonesian churches exploring ways to minister to the middle to increase their political influence in the coming decades.

¹ Ando, Hirofumi, 'A Study of the Iglesia Ni Cristo: A Politico-Religious Sect in the Philippines', *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (1969), pp. 336-337.

² Lim, David S., 'Consolidating Democracy: Filipino Evangelicals between People Power Events, 1986-2001', in David H. Lumsdaine (ed.) *Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 244-245.

³ Lindsay, D. Michael, 'Is the National Prayer Breakfast Surrounded by a "Christian Mafia"?: Religious Publicity and Secrecy Within the Corridors of Power', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 74, No. 2 (2006), pp. 390-419.

⁴ Buckley, David T., 'Catholicism's Democratic Dilemma: Varieties of Public Religion in the Philippines', *Philippine Studies: Historical & Ethnographic Viewpoints*, Vol. 62, No. 3/4 (2014), pp. 313-339.

⁵ ~7% in Indonesia and ~10% in the Philippines. See Table L3.4 in *Kewarganegaraan, Suku Bangsa, Agama, Dan Bahasa Sehari-Hari Penduduk Indonesia: Hasil Sensus Penduduk 2010* (Jakarta: Badan Pusat Statistik, 2012) and Table 8 in *2015 Census of Population*, retrieved from psa.gov.ph.

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