

## **Blessed Ballots: Bloc Voting in the Iglesia ni Cristo and the Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines**

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### **Abstrak**

Artikel ini menyoroti sikap politis dari sebuah kelompok kekristenan eksklusif di Filipina, Iglesia ni Cristo (INC). Kelompok yang berkembang sejak awal abad 20 dan beranggotakan sekitar 1 juta orang ini membedakan dirinya dari Gereja Katolik maupun Gereja-gereja Protestan arus utama, bukan hanya dalam hal doktrin tetapi juga dalam hal kebijakan politis. Gereja-gereja Katolik dan Protestan cenderung mengambil jarak terhadap politik praktis, kecuali pada saat negara dalam situasi krisis. Tidak demikian halnya dengan INC. Dalam Pemilihan Umum, INC menetapkan calon tertentu sebagai satu-satunya calon yang boleh dipilih oleh setiap anggotanya. Kebijakan ini didasarkan bukan semata-mata karena pertimbangan politis, tetapi juga alasan teologis terkait dengan gagasan mengenai kesatuan gereja yang sejati. Karena kebijakan politis yang seperti itu, maka INC menjadi kelompok yang sering didekati oleh para politisi.

Kata-kata kunci: etika politik, sekte kekristenan, Iglesia ni Cristo, agama dan politik Filipina.

### **Introduction**

“Religious solidarity” is almost always a misnomer or sociological synecdoche, inasmuch as what it involves is never just belief or ideology, but involvement in and identification with a whole community... [T]he compellingness of that identification is never just a spiritual or ideological fact. It emerges from participation in a social world, with its distinctive patterns of morality, class, and power. Religion in this broader sense, therefore, is always an index of more than itself. However rich its meanings, its authority is never just ideological. It depends, too, upon the social and political structures in which it is embedded and their ability to reproduce commitments to its ideals and lifeways.<sup>1</sup>

While Robert Hefner’s assessment of the place of religion in the construction of solidarity and identity was initially ascribed to the communities of Java, his observation holds true for societies in general. While religion serves to create certain demarcations

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<sup>1</sup> Hefner, Robert W. *The Political Economy of Mountain Java: An Interpretive History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), p. 223.

within society, these boundaries are inextricably bound up with other relationships; in some cases, religion may draw the overt boundaries, but other, more covert differences are always in play. This is not to say, however, that religion becomes only a tool – or at worst, a marginal factor – in the construction of identity. In the life of an individual, religious identification can be more powerful than national identification, and the solidarity found in religious groups can provide a sense of community which citizenship cannot. Moreover, religious groups can exert power as a subgroup within the context of a particular society; enough power, at times, to change the way society is configured and affect state policy. Inasmuch as there exists in certain regions of the world a so-called separation between religion and state, it is naive to assume that religions and states do not exert influence upon each other.

This essay will reflect upon two examples of religion-state dynamics in the Philippines. These two examples are not meant to be representative of the situation in the Philippines; they reflect, rather, two possibilities in which religious groups are able to exert force upon the Philippine state. First, we will examine the phenomenon of bloc voting in the group Iglesia ni Cristo (Church of Christ), a cult of Christianity which emerged in the Philippines at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and has gained a large following over the last 95 years. “Under the leadership of the Manalo family, the Iglesia has played a quiet but often decisive role in elections through its membership of one million.”<sup>2</sup> Second, we will turn our attention to the somewhat more complex pressure exerted by the Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines, which takes form not in bloc voting but in lobbying for policies. We shall also examine how sub-groups in the Catholic Church are perceived to influence election outcomes.

### **Religion and Societal Cleavage**

Before we examine these two cases, it will be necessary to justify our selection of these examples. The second example is a bit more obvious, as Catholicism is the majority religion in the Philippines, and the Catholic Church (in particular, the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines or CBCP) still has clout in influencing the actions of its

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<sup>2</sup> Abinales, Patricio N. and Donna J. Amoroso. *State and Society in the Philippines* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), p. 267.

adherents. The Catholic Church has been a key player in Philippine history, most significantly in the 1986 EDSA Revolution; furthermore, the Church still finds it necessary to comment on certain social and political issues in the form of pastoral letters and statements. While members of the Church hierarchy are forbidden from interfering directly in politics,<sup>3</sup> bishops and parish priests are still influential enough for their endorsements to matter.

The Church of Christ or Iglesia ni Cristo, on the other hand, aside from being in conflict with other Christian denominations in the Philippines, has been perceived to play a key role in Philippine elections. Inasmuch as the INC leadership takes pains to denounce Catholics, Protestants and other Christian groups as being “false churches,” INC finds itself courted by Catholic and Protestant politicians alike during election season. Filipino politicians make a great effort to attend large INC celebrations due to the fact that the INC leadership prescribes bloc voting for INC adherents. While some Catholic and Protestant groups are suspected of engaging in bloc voting, there is no official directive from the Council of Churches or the Roman Catholic archbishopric. INC, on the other hand, even takes pride in its tradition of bloc voting, for reasons that will be explained later.

From these very brief descriptions, we can already see how these particular groups are able to define and position themselves in the political sphere. Manza and Wright provide a general rubric of how groups in societies participate in political conflict. According to Manza and Wright, “any enduring and significant social cleavage, whether based on class, race/ethnicity, linguistic preference, region, gender, or religion, will find varying degrees of expression in political conflicts at four distinct levels: (a) social structure; (b) group identity; (c) political organizations and party systems; and (d) public policy outcomes.”<sup>4</sup> While the Catholic Church in the Philippines generally tends to favour political exertion in terms of public policy, INC has a more direct hand in affecting electoral outcomes by its endorsement of certain candidates.

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<sup>3</sup> A Catholic priest who ran for governor in Pampanga, a region in Luzon, was given dispensation from his priestly duties and was disallowed from serving as a cleric. Although his governorship has been recalled due to an election dispute, he is no longer considered a member of the Catholic hierarchy. Another priest who has been quite outspoken in his activism regarding national issues has been quietly reassigned outside the country.

<sup>4</sup> Manza, Jeff and Nathan Wright. “Religion and Political Behavior” in *Handbook on the Sociology of Religion*. Ed. Michele Dillon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 298.

Manza and Wright, however, look more deeply into the dynamics of voting behaviour, and identify four factors or key differences which seem most significant in influencing how religious groups vote.

The first and most basic of these cleavages is between voters who attend religious services and consider religion important in their lives, from those who are not engaged in religion. The most straightforward measure of engagement is attendance at religious services. Church attendance may be important for political preferences for several reasons: (a) it provides reinforcement of religious beliefs and ethical precepts; (b) it may reinforce group identities, especially in ethnically- or linguistically rooted churches; and (c) it connects religious beliefs to the larger world, including politics.<sup>5</sup>

Despite being the majority religion in the Philippines (and perhaps because of it), the Roman Catholic Church obviously counts among its number nominal or Sunday Catholics. While many Catholics will say that their faith remains important for them, many will also hesitate before obeying any recommendations from the archdiocese. From personal observation, those Catholics who tend to be more active in their parishes or other communities will be more receptive to pastoral letters. The greater number will probably listen but not necessarily agree or follow. The situation in INC is quite different, and perhaps better described by the second key factor:

The second, and most commonplace, way in which the religious cleavage shows is to examine differences between denominational families, at least in those countries where at least two or more denominations claim the allegiance of substantial proportions of the population.<sup>6</sup>

Within the Christian context of the Philippines, INC is one of the larger groups, and as has been mentioned earlier, quite active in denouncing the heresies of other Christian denominations. Aside from their criticism of Catholics and mainstream Protestants, INC also targets other Christian groups.<sup>7</sup> The cleavage created by these rivalries tends to be more apparent outside of Metro Manila, where entire towns are fought over by competing ministers. Still, INC has grown to nearly 10 million members all over the world, spread primarily by migrant workers who are INC members. Non-Filipinos who become members

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., pp. 298-299.

<sup>6</sup> Manza and Wright, p. 299.

<sup>7</sup> One Christian group in particular, *Ang Dating Daan* (The Old Way), has engaged INC in a multimedia war over television and radio programs, print media.

of INC usually do so by marrying into an INC family. As such, INC tends to be more exclusive, and religious solidarity is perceived to be strong. The Catholic Church, on the other hand, because of its history and majority presence, has tended to be more loose in terms of enforcing doctrine and practice. According to Manza and Wright, “a third religious cleavage concerns the impact of religious beliefs held by individuals, as opposed to denominational memberships or identities.”<sup>8</sup> Such a cleavage is quite apparent in the Catholic Church in the Philippines, typified by the recent debate regarding reproductive health.

The last factor identified by Manza and Wright has to do with local context:

Finally, a number of analysts have examined the “contextual effects” of local religious communities or individual churches. Individual church leaders provide sources of information and opinions to lay members that may sometimes be at odds with national denominational positions. Local congregations sometimes engage in political projects that draw in members into various forms of political action and experience.<sup>9</sup>

While it is true that at the parish level, the Catholic Church may engage more directly in the political life of the local community, it does so without any directive from the hierarchy. Parish priests are given autonomy to cooperate with local government, and at certain times, even oppose it. Local branches of INC, on the other hand, follow directives issued by the national church leadership, including whom to vote for in the national and local elections.

### **Iglesia ni Cristo: Theological Considerations**

While we have thus far alluded to the bloc voting practices of the INC, we have not yet explained how this particular policy fits into its identity as a religious group. It is time, then, to provide a brief summary of the history and theology of the Church of Christ.

The Iglesia ni Cristo was incorporated on 27 July 1914 by Felix Y. Manalo (1886 – 1963). The verb “incorporation” is significant because in INC theology, the Church of Christ was founded by Jesus Christ himself, but Felix Manalo was “God’s last messenger, whom he

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<sup>8</sup> Manza and Wright, p. 299.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

sent to re-establish the Christian Church to its true, pristine form.”<sup>10</sup> Manalo had been raised a Catholic in Rizal province, but drifted away from Catholicism when he witnessed the sound defeat of a Catholic priest by a Protestant minister in a public debate. Manalo then became an evangelist in the Methodist tradition, then a pastor in the Presbyterian Church, then a pastor among the Seventh Day Adventists, but eventually grew dissatisfied with all established religions. Manalo reportedly withdrew from religious affairs, became acquainted with free-thinkers and atheists, found their views fallacious as well (Manalo apparently found the time to open a barber shop, too). In 1913, Manalo supposedly had reached a point when his search for truth could no longer be set aside, so he sequestered himself and studied the Bible intensely for three days; he emerged afterwards with a sense of clarity that “that religion or man’s ways back to God must be fully in accordance with the will of God contained in the bible, and that he was being sent to preach and the true religion so that God may bring near his righteousness to men in these last days.”<sup>11</sup> While we do not have room to cover the entire history of the INC, suffice it to say that their growth has been steady over the past decades, enough to claim that they are the second largest religious group in the Philippines and are larger than the population of Jehovah’s witnesses worldwide.<sup>12</sup>

In terms of theology, however, Erano Manalo, son of Felix Manalo, has produced a booklet outlining the basic tenets of INC. A sampling runs as follows:

1. The words of God are written only in the Bible. The Bible should be the only basis of service to God. This is the truth which will teach man salvation from punishment on Judgment Day.
2. The Father who created all things is the only true God. There is no Trinity, no three persons in one God.
3. The belief that all churches belong to God is false. Christ founded only one true Church - the Church of Christ (Iglesia ni Cristo).
4. The Church of Christ is the Church that Jesus will save (Acts 20:28) because he made this Church His body and heads it Himself - before God, the Church and Christ are one new man (Eph.2:15 NKJV; Col.1:18 NKJV). This is the reason why Christ is able to answer for the sins of His Church without violating God's law that whoever commits a sin, the same must die for that sin (Dt.24:16). Hence, the belief that salvation can be attained by means of faith in Christ alone, even without

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<sup>10</sup> “Iglesia ni Cristo” at Wikipedia.org. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iglesia\\_ni\\_Cristo#History](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iglesia_ni_Cristo#History), accessed 03 April 2010.

<sup>11</sup> “Felix Manalo” at Wikipedia.org. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Felix\\_Y.\\_Manalo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Felix_Y._Manalo), accessed 03 April 2010.

<sup>12</sup> These claims can be found in the “Iglesia ni Cristo” Wikipedia entry, which was, we must note, written by an INC member.

- membership in the Church of Christ is false. The Church is necessary, not because it saves, but because it is the entity that Christ will save (Eph.5:23 TEV).
5. The Church built by Christ during the first century has apostatized (Acts 20:29). It was led away by false prophets which arose in the Church after the time of the Apostles (Mt.24:11 RSV), and those who remained firm in the faith were slain by ravenous wolves (Mt.7:15). The prophesied false teachers who led the Church away were the Catholic priests. They introduced false teachings (1 Tim.4:1,3) into the Church, until the Church became the Catholic Church - a church essentially different from the Church of Christ as described in the Bible.
  6. The apostasy of the Catholic Church from the Church established by Christ in the first century took place with their turning away from the teachings of God taught by Christ and His Apostles (Worship of Images, Mass, Popes and Priests as vicars or successors of Christ, Mediator Saints, Purgatory). Therefore, the apostasy takes place whenever there is a teaching of God the Catholic Church violates. In view of this, all the doctrines and practices of the Catholic Church should be rejected.
  7. We should not be surprised at the number of churches today that are not of Christ. It is not Christ who established them but the enemy or the devil (Mt.13:24-30,36-39 NKJV). These churches that do not belong to Christ are the Catholic Church and her offspring, the various Protestant denominations and sects. Only one Church belongs to Christ, the Church of Christ.<sup>13</sup>

Of course, the INC ministers will be more eloquent in their exegesis of Bible passages confirming these beliefs. Among other beliefs are the super-humanity of Jesus Christ, an obligation to attend worship services, and prohibitions against eating blood and marrying those of other faiths. What is of interest for us, however, are certain articles emphasizing the necessity and unity of the Church of Christ. For example: "One should not deny the necessity of one organized church as the Church of Christ;" and even more telling: "Each member should submit to the Administration placed by God in the Church by means of total agreement with the teachings and rules observed in the Church of Christ." Finally, the clearest articulation of unity vis-a-vis politics: "The Church of Christ believes that unity is God's teaching and that division within the Church is an evil thing. This unity is implemented by the Church of Christ not only during election time but also in all its works in the service of God."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> "Fundamental Beliefs of Iglesia ni Cristo" at Wikipedia.org. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fundamental\\_Beliefs\\_of\\_the\\_Iglesia\\_ni\\_Cristo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fundamental_Beliefs_of_the_Iglesia_ni_Cristo), accessed 03 April 2010. It must be noted that these are not "commandments" per se, but simply an enumeration of points of doctrine. The document lists 26 such items.

<sup>14</sup> "Fundamental Beliefs of Iglesia ni Cristo"

While these are principles held in common, based on the teachings of the INC, its members are also eloquent in defending these views. As one blogger emphatically states in a post responding to criticism against the INC:

**No. 3 “INC members are just puppets of their church administration; they were dictated and forced. They takes away the freedom of their members instead of voting in their own conscience.”**

Really? This was the kind of mind of many nonmembers because they cannot understand well, they were blinded what maybe church authorities statements about voting in OWN CONSCIENCE. First of all, no individual members of the INC have been DICTATED or FORCED to JOIN THE CHURCH. Converts baptized in the church through RECEIVING DOCTRINES and BIBLE LESSONS. THEREFORE, If they wholeheartedly believe on it and understands it, they will be BAPTIZE. In the CASE of the UNITY in the CHURCH, this called “BLOCK VOTING” is a right of suffrage. Meaning, members HAVE THE TRUST to the Church administration whether whom to VOTE. BECAUSE THE CHURCH HAVE THE DOCTRINES THAT IS WRITTEN IN THE BIBLE THAT IS, BE UNITED! (in all ASPECT) Second, IT WAS THE MEMBERS who will write the name and put in the ballot boxes therefore, it is not contrary to the LAW. Meaning, it is IN THE MEMBERS if they will FOLLOW AND OBEY DOCTRINES IN THE CHURCH AND COOPERATE TO THE CHURCH ADMINISTRATION, period! Furthermore, members were not DICTATED or FORCED whom to vote because it is in THEM or it is their DECISION if they will follow one of the teachings in the bible. It is like this; they were not forced and dictated to do good because it is IN THEM if they will do good/god’s will or to be bad/evil.

In addition, there are advantages to this practice, HOW? Ok, may I ask you:

WHO CAN BE INFLUENCED BY THE POLITICIANS WHOM TO VOTE? a regular voter or voter who participates in the called “BLOCK VOTING”? WHO CAN BE PAID BY THE POLITICIANS WHOM TO VOTE? a regular voter or voter who participates in the called “BLOCK VOTING”?<sup>15</sup>

As the fiery rhetoric of this blogger indicates, for the INC members, the logic behind bloc voting appears to be theological. Inasmuch as individual voters still cast their own votes, these votes have been decided in advance by the Church leadership in order to demonstrate the unity of the Church of Christ. Despite this theological underpinning, however, the INC remains a powerful operator in the electoral process.

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<sup>15</sup> “The Iglesia Ni Cristo Vote” on <http://readmeinc.blogspot.com/2010/02/inc-vote.html>, accessed 11 April 2010. I did not correct the grammatical errors, preferring to let the text remain in its pristine form.



When the last INC Executive Minister, Erano Manalo, passed away in August 2009, his son, Eduardo Manalo, took over. Eduardo Manalo had already been overseeing this aspect of administration in the INC even while his father was still living. According to a local article, “the younger Manalo called the shots on political decisions ‘at least in the last two elections.’”<sup>16</sup> The article goes on to describe how the INC conducted itself in the 2004 presidential elections. “In the 2004 elections, the INC, instead of having to choose between actor Fernando Poe Jr. and Lacson, passed the ball to the two warring opposition bets. When Poe and Lacson failed to settle their differences, the INC did the next best thing: it threw its support to President Arroyo. Since it was a close race between Arroyo and Poe, the INC vote was seen as a deciding factor in favor of Arroyo.”<sup>17</sup> Moreover, “political analysts say that INC’s bloc-voting members can spell the difference in tight presidential, senatorial, and local races. Candidates fiercely contest the INC endorsement, and they will have to pass through a wringer before any endorsement is given.”<sup>18</sup>

Historically, though, the political influence of the INC has not been occasional, emerging only during election periods. The INC has also been known to influence the appointments of justices to the Supreme Court. “In 2006, the INC endorsed Presbitero Velasco Jr. for the Supreme Court. He bested four other shortlisted candidates... When asked in an interview weeks after his appointment to the Supreme Court about the endorsement he got from INC... Reyes replied, ‘Don’t I deserve backing?’”<sup>19</sup> Reyes’ rather flippant remark reveals the extent to which the endorsement of the INC is accepted, even desired, in the judiciary. This influence in the Supreme Court has produced decisions favourable to the INC, particularly in cases involving its rivals. One recent case involves derogatory remarks made by the leader of already-mentioned Ang Dating Daan (ADD), a known competitor of INC. “In a consolidated decision penned by Justice Presbitero Velasco Jr, the 11 majority justices upheld the MTRCB move to suspend ADD after its host, Eliseo Soriano, uttered offensive and obscene remarks against Ang Tamang Daan host Michael Sandoval. Soriano

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<sup>16</sup> Rufo, Aries. “No Shifts Seen When Ka Erdie’s Son Takes Over INC” in *Newsbreak Online* (01 September 2009) on [http://newsbreak.com.ph/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id](http://newsbreak.com.ph/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id), accessed on 16 April 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Vitug, Marites D. “Stacking the Court” in *Newsbreak Online* (20 December 2007) on [http://newsbreak.com.ph/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id](http://newsbreak.com.ph/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id), accessed on 16 April 2010.

founded the religious sect ADD, a breakaway group of the Iglesia Ni Cristo sect. The ADD TV program is aired on UNTV 37. Members of the two religious sects have been at odds for years, on and off court.”<sup>20</sup>

With the 2010 national elections just a few weeks away, the INC has yet to publicize its endorsements. I expect, however, that these decisions have already been made; the INC leadership is just waiting for the proper time to reveal their candidates. While the INC has had its history of exerting political pressure through bloc voting, the Roman Catholic Church has had a more complex history.

### **The Roman Catholic Church in the Philippines: *De jure* Separation?**

Catholicism has been part of the fabric of Philippine culture for the last four centuries; it is impossible to consider Filipino social history without a view to the role the Catholic Church has played. However, from the consolidated power of the church and colonial government in the Spanish era to the endorsement of candidates during the post-Commonwealth period, the Catholic Church in the Philippines has become more aware of the separation between Church and State. This separation became more dramatic in the context of oppression in the Marcos regime. Many factors converged to produce a Catholic Church that was more cognizant of the demands of nationalism:

Activism addressing national and social themes also emerged within the Catholic Church, whose political influence had grown with its anticommunist offensive of the 1950s. U.S. colonialism had left the Catholic hierarchy foreign, replacing Spanish clergy with American and European priests and nuns. The hierarchy also remained hostile to Philippine nationalism (notably in the Rizal bill debate), which it associated with the anticlericalism of the 1896 Revolution. It was only in the 1960s that the issue of Filipinization within the Church was finally addressed in conjunction with the call of Rome’s Vatican II council to “indigenize” the postcolonial churches. Activism was further encouraged in the 1960s and 1970s when popes John XXIII and Paul VI directed Catholics to be concerned with social justice as well as spiritual salvation. Younger priests, nuns, and lay members became directly involved with peasants and workers through the Church-sponsored Federation for Free Farmers and the National Social Action Secretariats.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Rufo, Aries. “SC Sustains Suspension of Ang Dating Daan” in *Newsbreak Online* (30 April 2009) on [http://newsbreak.com.ph/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id](http://newsbreak.com.ph/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id), accessed on 16 April 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Abinales and Amoroso, pp. 198-199.

These movements came to a head with Marcos calling for snap elections in 1986, and the EDSA Revolution which led to the presidency of Corazon Aquino. Corazon Aquino had the support of the Catholic Church during the election period, and it was the Archbishop of Manila, Jaime Cardinal Sin, who made the call for the citizenry to go to the streets and protect the elements of government who had finally rebelled against Marcos. In the years following the EDSA Revolution, with a whole country getting used to democracy again, the Catholic Church settled into the a more passive role, a role determined in part by the 1987 Constitution. Article II, Section 6, of the 1987 Constitution says that “the separation of Church and State shall be inviolable.” Joaquin Bernas, a Jesuit priest, lawyer and expert on the Constitution, clarifies the meaning of this separation:

The constitutional command, however, is more than just the prohibition of a state religion. That is the minimal meaning. Jurisprudence has expanded it to mean that the state may not pass “laws which aid one religion, aid all religions, or prefer one religion over another.” That is the “separation part” of the constitutional command. The other part is the “free exercise clause.” Both are embodied in one sentence which says: “No law shall be made respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”<sup>22</sup>

The Constitution guarantees that no religion shall be preferred and that all citizens are allowed the freedom of religious expression. By virtue of its majority status, however, the Catholic Church is still an influential voice in the political arena. Over the past decade, though, the question of how exactly to use that voice has taken priority. Owing to the conventions of canon law, members of the Church hierarchy cannot hold political positions, and so the major tactic used by the Catholic Church is the mobilization of its adherents in order to influence public policy. Such mobilization, however, has fallen short of actual bloc voting.

In 2009, an interview from officers of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines gave rise to speculation that the Church was going to endorse bloc voting for the 2010 elections. Reacting to the possible passage of the Reproductive Health Bill, a law which the Church sees as inimical to Catholic values, Fr. Melvin Castro floated the possibility of voting as a Catholic bloc:

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<sup>22</sup> Bernas, Joaquin. “Fundamentals of Church-State Relations” in *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 08 March 2010 on [http://opinion.inquirer.net/inquireropinion/columns/view/20100308-257275/Fundamentals\\_of\\_church-state\\_relations](http://opinion.inquirer.net/inquireropinion/columns/view/20100308-257275/Fundamentals_of_church-state_relations), accessed on 17 April 2010.

In an effort to ensure victory of “pro-life” lawmakers, the Catholic Church’s family and life ministry is seriously considering to enforce among its members to vote as a bloc. This will probably be first time that the Church will impose religious bloc voting for those who oppose the passage of a bill seeking to control the country’s growing population through artificial family planning. Fr Melvin Castro, Commission on Family and Life’s executive secretary of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines, said it’s high time to put “pro-family” people in elective government positions. “We want to be more proactive this time. This idea comes from the Catholic laity themselves and we are willing to support them,” he said. The CBCP’s Commission on Family and Life is at the forefront of the Catholic Church’s campaign against the passage of the controversial Reproductive Health bill. The bill on maternal health care, now pending in Congress, requires the government to promote artificial family planning if it becomes a law. The measure also will include sex education for students and advice on artificial contraception, which Church considers immoral. Fr Castro reiterated that there is no room for neutrality when it comes to a measure promoting birth control. He said candidates of the 2010 national elections must make a choice: either they are going to side with the Church or with the “anti-life” groups. “Candidates who will sign and give their commitment to our campaign, these are the candidates who will be supported by our commission,” Fr Castro said.<sup>23</sup>

Soon after this interview, however, Church officials clarified their stance regarding bloc voting. “The head of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) has reiterated the Church stance against bloc voting for Catholics in the next elections. ‘The Church is not in favor of bloc voting like what others do because our citizens should have the freedom to choose their candidates according to their conscience,’ Jaro Archbishop Angel Lagdameo told the Church-run Radio Veritas.”<sup>24</sup> A retired bishop took some of his fellow bishops to task for their endorsement of certain candidates. According to Bishop Francisco Claver, ““We must be mindful of our influence and make sure we do not stifle people’s conscience, but that we educate it.”<sup>25</sup> With such clear statements against bloc voting and even open endorsements, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church set itself apart from *Iglesia ni Cristo*.

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<sup>23</sup> “Church Group Mulls Bloc Voting in 2010” in *CBCP News* (14 September 2009) on <http://www.cbcnews.com/?q=node/10461>, accessed on 16 April 2010.

<sup>24</sup> Pazzibugan, Dona. “CBCP Affirms Stand Against Bloc Voting” in *Philippine Daily Inquirer* (16 September 2009) on <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/breakingnews/nation/view/20090916-22544>, accessed on 16 April 2010.

<sup>25</sup> Lagarde, Roy. “Bishop to Bishops: Let People Vote According to Conscience” on *CBCP News* (21 April 2010) at <http://www.cbcnews.com/?q=node/12999>, accessed on 21 April 2010.

This, however, still left the problem of lobbying for their position against the Reproductive Health Bill. Instead of issuing guidelines on bloc voting, the Catholic Church has instead used the issue of reproductive health as a filter for discernment for its adherents. Issuing a document called “A Catechism on Family and Life for the 2010 Elections,” the CBCP has changed the location of pressure from policy to morality. The option for bloc voting would have been a change in policy for the Catholic Church, but it chose to forego that option in favour of individual freedom and discernment. This catechism, however, situates the pressure on the morality of the candidates, and by extension, the morality of the Catholic voters. For example, here is one strongly-worded passage from the catechism:

[I]t would not be morally permissible to vote for candidates who support anti-family policies, including reproductive health (in the particular understanding being presented in the recent debates, which includes, among others, promotion of abortifacients, penalties for parents who do not allow their adolescent children to engage in sexual acts, etc.), or any other moral evil such as abortion, divorce, assisted suicide and euthanasia. Otherwise one becomes an accomplice to the moral evil in question.<sup>26</sup>

By casting the exercise of voting in this light, the hierarchy hopes to influence the election outcome to satisfy certain moral-theological requirements. Certainly, a Catholic – even a nominal one – would think twice before becoming “an accomplice to moral evil.” While this tack falls short of a bloc vote, it appears to have been effective enough to forestall the progress of the bill in legislation, and it has also forced candidates to revise their position regarding the said bill. Although these appear to be favourable outcomes for the Catholic Church, it has yet to be shown that the catechism will make any real difference in the 2010 elections. As one analyst sees it, “the Catholic Church [is] a traditional force that is trying to make its way into the modern world. It is still grasping for its place – at times thinking that it still has the power to make kings – and it is still in denial about the harsh reality of our times.”<sup>27</sup> Moreover, this analyst continues:

Thus, politicians who try to curry favor with voters by falling in lockstep with the Church are equally confused. If their plan is to secure the Catholic voting bloc, there

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<sup>26</sup> Aniceto, Archbishop Paciano, DD. “A Catechism for Family and Life for the 2010 Elections” on CBCP News (27 December 2009) on <http://www.cbcnews.com/?q=node/12037>, accessed on 17 April 2010.

<sup>27</sup> “‘Election Catechism’ on the Population Issue” on Planet Philippines (04 March 2010) on <http://planetphilippines.com/current-affairs/is-there-really-a-catholic-vote/>, accessed on 10 April 2010.

is none; or if they fear a Catholic backlash if they support the bill, there isn't one either. They will neither gain nor lose votes, but their positions can suggest how they intend to move our country forward, or whether they are transformational or traditional politicians.<sup>28</sup>

Time will tell whether this prescriptive catechism is effective. Outside the hierarchy of the Church, however, there are still groups within the Catholic community that appear to be influential enough to be courted by politicians for endorsements. One of these groups is the El Shaddai community, led and founded by Michael Velarde.

El Shaddai is a Catholic Charismatic community which was founded from the following of Velarde's radio program. Velarde had recovered from a serious ailment and attributed his healing to God. Velarde's listeners claimed that they also were cured of their various ailments. In 1984, Velarde began holding prayer rallies outside the radio station, and as the crowds grew, they moved to bigger and bigger locations. El Shaddai gatherings are now held in large public spaces, and the group claims a membership of about 8 million. This positioning is significant, according to Abinales and Amoroso: "El Shaddai... although officially part of the Church, holds its prayer rallies outside Church buildings and spiritually outside the hierarchy's control, a representation of 'popular Christianity which has been the bane of the institutional Church throughout most of Philippine history.'" <sup>29</sup> With its numbers, El Shaddai relies on "their strong presence and encouragement of bloc voting among the 'working poor and working class,' groups the Catholic Church is increasingly unable to mobilize."<sup>30</sup>

With a large base and a demographic somewhat removed from the middle- and upper-class hierarchy of the Catholic Church, El Shaddai claims to have delivered the votes for Fidel Ramos in 1992. The El Shaddai demographic is also consistent with popular support for Joseph Estrada in 1998. Although politicians have come to Velarde for his endorsement in the past elections, it was rumoured that Velarde himself planned to run for president in 2010. Those plans have since been scrapped, however.

Velarde's endorsement is still seen as potent, though. Despite this fact, El Shaddai has not made the move toward bloc voting. "While El Shaddai members are more solid and

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Abinales and Amoroso, p. 268.

<sup>30</sup> Abinales and Amoroso, p. 268.

bonded compared to the rest of the Catholic church and its other sub-sects, a political mechanism is needed to consolidate support and deliver votes for Velarde or his chosen candidate.”<sup>31</sup> To date, no official endorsements from Velarde have been made, although conventional wisdom suggests that old friendships will prove their endurance.

## Conclusion

While this study has not exhausted all the complexities involved in bloc voting in the Philippines, a number of observations may be made:

1. While the Catholic Church’s presence has been felt the longest, and influences the majority of Filipinos, it is only able to overtly exert political will in times of crisis, i.e., the 1986 EDSA Revolt. Under normal conditions, the laity expresses aversion towards any political overtures made by the Catholic Church.
2. In this light, the Catholic Church is able to apply political pressure broadly through lobbying, and usually relocates the conflict to the moral setting, where it has the upper ground.
3. In contrast to the hierarchy of the Catholic Church, relatively smaller Catholic groups such as El Shaddai are able to influence elections through their large electoral base. This influence, however, is not made through policy (i.e., bloc voting), but rather through personal endorsement by the group’s leaders.
4. Iglesia ni Cristo, on the other hand, provides a theological basis for bloc voting, which is thus accepted by its members as a matter of policy and administration and as a spiritual concern. This makes Iglesia ni Cristo extremely popular to politicians aiming to garner a large number of votes.

To situate, then, these observations in light of our course on Religion, Politics, and Identity, it seems that the discourse of identity among Filipino Catholics is more generally understood within a framework which separates religion from political affairs. Inasmuch as the Catholic faith remains a moral resource for evaluating candidates, it often appears divorced from the decision-making involved in casting a vote, at least for Catholics. There appears to be a compartmentalization, if not a hierarchy, of sectors in the lives of Catholics

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<sup>31</sup> “Can El Shaddai Deliver Bloc Vote?” in *ABS-CBN News* (19 August 2009) on <http://www.abs-cbnnews.com/nation/08/19/09/can-el-shaddai-deliver-bloc-vote>, accessed 10 April 2010.

(including the hierarchy) which suggests that being Catholic is just one aspect of being a Filipino citizen. Another kind of reasoning is evident among the followers of INC: since their membership in the Church of Christ is paramount, the unity of the Church takes precedence over personal preferences and political choices. In their case, religion becomes the foundational logic, and any involvement in politics becomes a mundane expression of their religious convictions (the unity of the Church of Christ).

This study would not be complete without even a brief mention of another, more direct way in which religion can be involved in politics. In the 2010 elections, a religious leader is campaigning for the second time to become President of the Republic of the Philippines: Bro. Eddie Villanueva of the Jesus Is Lord Movement (JIL, an evangelical Christian group. Due to the more direct participation in politics, we did not include Villanueva and JIL in this study; obviously, the members of JIL will be voting in bloc, but their vote will not be for a candidate endorsed by their leadership but *for their leader himself*. Although Villanueva lost in the 2004 elections, and will most likely lose again this year, the persistence of his vision for a moral (ostensibly Christian) state deserves another study altogether. Here is another mode of negotiation between religion, politics and identity: religion must take charge of the political sphere in order to implement moral order and social change.

Of course, these frameworks of religion, politics and identity can also be mobilized by politicians and religious leaders for their own benefit. One striking example of this is the current president, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. Following the fall of Joseph Estrada in 2001, Macapagal-Arroyo had the support of the Catholic Church and a number of other religions. However, in the intervening years, many of her decisions have been criticized by the Catholic hierarchy; her reaction was to find support elsewhere. According to one report, she has had seven “spiritual advisers,” one for every year she has been in office.<sup>32</sup> These “spiritual advisers” have included the Archbishop of the Roman Catholic Church, the Executive Minister of Iglesia ni Cristo, Velarde and Villanueva. Such pragmatism can only be evidence of political opportunism, at least on the part of Arroyo, and more disturbingly, on the part of these religious leaders.

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<sup>32</sup> Romero, Purple. “1 President, 7 Spiritual Advisers” on *Newsbreak Online* at [http://newsbreak.com.ph/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id](http://newsbreak.com.ph/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id), accessed on 16 April 2010.



To return then, to Robert Hefner's observations at the beginning of this essay, it seems that "religious solidarity" is indeed a tenuous concept, referring not simply to the unity of religious groups but more to an intricate involvement in a social world. Inasmuch as the Catholic Church has the sheer numbers in order to influence electoral outcomes, the diversity within the Church serves as a healthy (at least in my view) counterweight to that tendency. On the other hand, while the Iglesia ni Cristo stipulates theological groundings for its unity and by extension its power as a voting bloc, it also cannot dissociate itself from the more worldly aspects of such involvement: namely, political favour and advantage in the judiciary. The religious bloc vote, then, is never merely a moral or theological issue; it remains inextricably tied to questions of power and influence, economics and culture.

Being a Catholic myself, I find these observations helpful in understanding the political landscape of the Philippines at present. Some of my Jesuit friends are actively working in the campaign of one of the presidential candidates; they cannot, however, appear on media or in public with an endorsement of this candidate. It makes for a tricky situation, since many know that they support one candidate over others, but they have to maintain a certain neutrality (at least in terms of outright endorsement). With elections just a few weeks away, it will be interesting to observe how the so-called religious vote will play out. I expect that in the coming weeks, we will find the discourse oscillating to fever pitch, and we will see if blessing the ballots will be at all effective.

### **Postscript – 12 June 2010, Philippine Independence Day**

Two weeks after this paper was written, the Philippines underwent its first elections using an automated counting system. Before the elections on 10 May 2010, however, the Roman Catholic Church maintained its stance of refusing to publicly endorse any candidate. Velarde's El Shaddai group refrained from officially endorsing any candidate, although Velarde was quoted as saying that he knew one of the candidates (Manuel Villar) better than the others. As expected, there was no obvious Catholic vote.

The Iglesia ni Cristo, on the other hand, announced their endorsement of Benigno Simeon Aquino III and Manuel Roxas II, frontrunners in the surveys up until the week before the elections. Aquino would go on to win the presidency by an overwhelming margin over reelectionist Joseph Estrada, while Roxas would lose by a few hundred thousand votes

to dark horse Jejomar Binay. Aquino's lopsided victory and Roxas' defeat would suggest that while the INC endorsement certainly bolstered numbers for both candidates, it was not the critical factor in the 2010 elections. Aquino's victory has been attributed to a palpable desire for change in the country, while Roxas's loss has been written off as poor political strategy in the homestretch.

While the nation prepares for the inauguration of the new administration on 30 June 2010, the political map is still being reconfigured, and we have yet to see what new alliances will be formed in the early days of the Aquino administration. Certainly, the INC and the Roman Catholic Church will be part of the landscape, given Aquino's affiliation with the Catholic Church and his political debt to the INC.

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