Landas 24:1 (2010) 105–119

DANCING WITH THE PHILIPPINE ELECTORAL SYSTEM

The Rise and Fall of the Church's Electoral Engagement

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Since 1986, the Philippine Catholic bishops collectively issued a total of 11 pastoral statements regarding elections. This makes elections a top priority concern among the leaders of the Church, along with peace (15 statements) and human life & population (10 statements). While several writers recognize the contributions of the Philippine Church in electoral politics, some question the impact of its interventions.[1] This article is an attempt to review critically the involvement of the Philippine Catholic Church in electoral politics spanning the four presidencies of Corazon Aquino, Fidel Ramos,

[1]"Faith and Fire: The PPCRV Way: A Post Election Report of the Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPCRV) to the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP)," (PPCRV: July 25, 1992); "Report of the Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPCRV) to the Commission on Elections and to the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines on the conduct of the May 11, 1998 National and Local Elections" (PPCRV: 1998); Antonio F. Moreno, *Church, State, and Civil Society in Postauthoritarian Philippines: Narratives of Engaged Citizenship* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2006), 84–98; Frederic Charles Schaffer, *The Hidden Costs of Clean Election Reform* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2009), 125–149; Frederic Charles Schaffer, "How Effective is Voter Education," in *Elections for Sale: The Causes and Consequences of Vote Buying*, ed. Frederic Charles Schaffer (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2007), 161–79.

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Joseph Estrada, and Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. It also seeks to identify the Church's strengths and limitations, issues and opportunities. Finally, this study hopes to gather insights and lessons for future church engagement in the electoral arena.

When I refer to the Roman Catholic Church or simply "the Church" in this study, I do not simply mean the leadership provided by its ordained ministers (e.g., bishops, priests and deacons), although they have inevitably exercised tremendous influence over the community of faith. The Church here supposes the interaction between its ordained ministers and lay people who, by virtue of their baptism, become direct members of the Christian community. I will examine the pronouncements of the Church leaders as well as the interventions and programs of the Church-based electoral movements, and evaluate their desired outcomes. I will also look into how the electoral system and the Church's electoral engagements have been received by society at large.

The Philippine Church in Post-authoritarian Context

As in many cases of churches in most post-authoritarian states in Latin America and post-communist regimes in Eastern Europe, the Philippine Church undoubtedly enjoyed a high trust margin.[2] All the ratings of institutions like the judiciary, Congress, business, military, and the media came below that of the Church.[3] Despite this high level of confidence given to the Church, its involvement in politics was received ambivalently by public opinion. While 40% of the survey respondents were against the Church's involvement

[2]United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2002: Deepening Democracy in a Fragmented World* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 69.

[3]Mahar Mangahas, "Who's Afraid of the Catholic Church?" *Social Weather Bulletin* 91:4 (February 1991), 1–2.

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"in the struggle of the oppressed," the other half were equally for it.[4] With President Marcos gone, the Church struggled as it inserted itself in a democratizing polity and highly pluralistic society with new complexities emerging. The shift from persistent protest to participation required new creative ways of engagement on the part of the Church.

Elections in the 1990s

One can easily discern the shift of the Church's electoral engagement from the national and local elections of 1992 and 1998 to the elections of 2004 and 2010. The elections in the 1990s were part of the democratic transition period, during which typically the democratic institutions (e.g., electoral institution) were at their lowest ebb. In the electoral system, there were very high incidents of violence and massive election-related anomalies, although the reported incidents of violence started to decline considerably. John Linantud[5] reports that thanks to the depoliticization of the military, violence-related electoral issues likewise went down.[6] In the 1986 snap presidential polls, the martial law government used the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP), a politicized institution, as a state apparatus to rig the electoral outcomes. During this period, the Church's involvement in electoral reform was at its peak. Aside from the pronouncements of Church leaders, the birth of Church-based electoral movements increased the bar of Church involvement, even if its impact was uneven.

[4]Mangahas, "Who's Afraid of the Catholic Church?" 3.

[5]John L. Linantud, "Whither Guns, Goons, and Gold? The Decline of Factional Election Violence in the Philippines," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 20:3 (1998): 298–318.

[6]A. B. Villanueva, "Parties and Elections in Philippine Politics," *Contemporary South Asia* 18:2 (1996): 175–92; Patrick Patino and Tintin S. Roperez, *2010 National and Local Elections: Breakthrough* (Quezon City: All Ways, 2010).

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The 1992 Elections

Although the Church has been involved in electoral politics since the 1950s, it was only in the 1984 polls that the Church became systematically a critical force in electoral reform.[7] In the run up to the 1986 presidential snap polls, various Church leaders became involved in NAMFREL (National Citizens' Movement for Free Elections), a crucial electoral watchdog which formed the core of the People Power in February 1986.

The creation of the Pastoral Parish Council for Responsible Voting (PPCRV) and the Voters' Organization, Training and Education toward Clear, Authentic, Responsible Elections (VOTE-CARE) in 1991 signaled a critical moment in Church involvement in electoral reform. For the first time in Philippine Church history, these electoral movements were Church-based. They became the Church's frontline actors in strengthening the electoral institution which was often plagued with "guns, goons and gold." These electoral movements established partnerships with different civil society actors who were outside the loop of the Church. They collaborated with the Integrated Bar of the Philippines (IBP), NAMFREL, and other non-religious groups. They were aided by small Church-based groups such as the *Simbahang Lingkod ng Bayan* (SLB), Seminarians' National Network for Free Elections (SEM-NET) and the Catholic Radio Broadcasters. SLB provided political education, logistics support and volunteers; SEM-NET, a network of seminarians, lent warm bodies; and the Catholic Radio Broadcasters had at least 40 diocesan radio stations throughout the country.[8] The Philippine bishops, whether as individuals or as a collective, supported PPCRV and VOTE-CARE. The Commission on Elections (COMELEC) accredited both PPCRV and VOTE-CARE,

[7]Eva-Lotta E. Hedman, "Whose Business is It Anyway? Free and Fair Elections in the Philippines," *Public Policy* 2:3 (1998): 145–70.

[8]Francisco F. Claver, "Church: Non-Partisan but Active," *Intersect* 6:6 (1992): 8–9.

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a telling sign of the government's official recognition of these groups as partners of the state in strengthening the electoral system.

PPCRV was initiated by the Archdiocese of Manila. It enjoyed the full backing of Jaime Cardinal Sin. It became a national electoral movement led by Henrietta de Villa, then chairperson of the Council of the Laity of the Philippines (CLP). PPCRV conducted political education, recruited and trained volunteers who, on election day, poll watched, assisted voters, guarded the ballot boxes, monitored the electoral exercise and helped NAMFREL's operation quick count (OQC). Considering the slow pace of canvassing and counting of votes in those days, NAMFREL's OQC was innovative.

PPCRV recruited 346,688 volunteers in the 1992 elections. The volunteers (including those from VOTE-CARE) guarded ballots and reduced electoral cheating. PPCRV got a 69% level of awareness in September 1992 and a net satisfaction margin (% satisfied minus % dissatisfied) of +45.[9]

VOTE-CARE was backed by the National Secretariat for Social Action, Justice and Peace (NASSA), the social arm of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP). VOTE-CARE handled political education and provided materials for information campaigns. VOTE-CARE and PPCRV were lay-led and principally organized by lay people with support from the leadership of the Church hierarchy. Nonetheless, conflicts and tensions between the two Church-based electoral movements persisted through the decades despite attempts to harmonize their operations and iron out their differences.

The 1992 presidential polls were the first free presidential elections after the Marcos period. It was a crucial democratic transition. The CBCP issued four pastoral statements pertaining to the 1992 elections to stress the significance of strengthening democracy. While the Church was not much organized as an electoral movement in the

[9]"Social Weather Report Survey: Performance Rating of Institutions," Social Weather Stations Data Base (unpublished, n.d.).

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1987 elections, it was systematically involved in the 1992 elections. Although the CBCP did not endorse any candidate, Cardinal Sin was perceived to have made a "whispering campaign" for Ramon Mitra. Public perception of partisan inclinations of some Church leaders cast some doubts about the impartiality of PPCRV and other Church-based electoral groups. In the end, Fidel Ramos, a martial law enforcer and a Protestant, who did not augur well for some Church leaders, won the elections by 23.58% of votes cast in a six-way contest.

The 1998 Elections

The 1998 elections was another critical moment in the life of Philippine society and the history of the Philippine Church. The CBCP issued a lengthy document entitled "Pastoral Exhortation on Philippine Politics." The Church leaders were apprehensive that popular action movie star Joseph "Erap" Estrada would win the elections. Short of mentioning his name, many pastoral statements of individual bishops and the CBCP campaigned negatively against Estrada based on his known lifestyle and personal life.[10] In their homilies at Mass, priests exhorted the people to vote for morally upright candidates.

PPCRV assisted in purging the voters' registration list, campaigned for political education, recruited volunteers, conducted poll watching activities and largely repeated their programs and activities as in the 1992 elections. PPCRV continued to assist NAMFREL's OQC. The volunteers were extra vigilant of *dagdag-bawas* (vote-padding and vote-shaving) which characterized the elections in the 1990s. PPCRV also partnered with the Integrated Bar of the Philippines (IBP) for legal electoral issues. VOTE-CARE had financial resources and better educational materials for political education. PPCRV covered 72% of the 79 local churches. VOTE-CARE supported 42 out of 79 (i.e., 53%) social action centers of the (arch)dioceses.

[10]Belinda A Aquino, "Filipino elections and 'illiberal' democracy," *Public Policy* 2(3), (1998): 8.

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As in the 1992 elections, the volunteers risked their lives during the poll watching, monitoring and guarding of the ballot boxes. Once again, there were some tensions between PPCRV and VOTE-CARE due to turf battles, personality conflicts and misunderstandings between the two Church-based electoral movements.[11] Despite these internal dynamics, PPCRV got a relatively high trust rating of +49 while less known and organized VOTE-CARE received a +26 trust margin.[12] This shows that there was some public recognition of the positive contributions of both electoral movements.

Estrada won nearly 40% of votes cast coming largely from the poor (*masa*)—despite the negative campaign launched by the Church through the pastoral statements and voters' education of PPCRV and VOTE-CARE. Political education disdained elective public officials on the basis of their popularity and not on the programs and principles they championed. Yet, many celebrities and popular personalities got elected to office. Evidently, political education did not make any substantial impact on voters' electoral outcomes. It would appear that electoral education was received negatively and critically by the urban poor.[13] Further, the Church's influence through its pronouncements and statements also hardly made any change in behavioral preferences of the voting public. Still, the presence of PPCRV and VOTE-CARE volunteers, many of whom served as NAMFREL volunteers during the operation quick count, was a positive factor in poll watching and monitoring on election day. In many cases, electoral anomalies were prevented or reduced under the watchful eyes of these volunteers. For one, they accompanied ballot boxes which were being transported to the municipal centers for canvassing.

[11]Moreno, *Church, State, and Civil Society in Postauthoritarian Philippines*, 94–96.

[12]"Social Weather Report Survey: Performance Rating of Institutions."

[13]Schaffer, *The Hidden Costs of Clean Election Reform;* Schaffer, "How Effective is Voter Education."

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It can be argued that in the 1992 and 1998 presidential polls, the CBCP, PPCRV, VOTE-CARE and Church leaders experienced a high point in Church involvement in electoral politics. Due to weak democratic institutions and a frail electoral system, these electoral groups attracted the people (not only Catholics) to a sense of citizenship. There was something to be done to restore public confidence in elections. PPCRV and VOTE-CARE, along with NAMFREL and other electoral groups, provided the vehicle for electoral reform, although their impacts were uneven. Political education was limited, but the actual monitoring and vigilance on election day itself and beyond contributed positively to the conduct of the polls. The government support and backing from the leadership of the Church hierarchy made a lot of difference in the work of the electoral movements.

Elections in the 2000s

PPCRV and VOTE-CARE in the elections of the 2000s were not as systematically and deeply involved as in the 1990s. The education of voters in the 2004 elections was not as extensive as in the past. The electoral preparations for voter education and recruitment of volunteers were delayed. Many volunteers became inactive. Others supported political candidates or parties. The leaders of the movements became politically partisan, although this already happened in the 1990s.

Vice President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo was thrust into office in 2001 through People Power II during the Senate trial of President Estrada. His leadership was undermined due to perceived massive corruption that eroded his political capital. President Macapagal-Arroyo assured the public that she would not run for public office, despite encouragements from US President George Bush, Cardinal Sin and other Southeast Asian leaders. She earned support and praise from Church and civil society organizations, and from political groups connected to the administration as well as the opposition. However, she later changed her mind and thus caused political divisions to re-emerge.

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The 2004 Elections

The May 2004 elections were contested closely between President Macapagal-Arroyo and Fernando Poe Jr., although it was a five-way fight. PPCRV and VOTE-CARE did not do much in the presidential polls. Certainly this was the weakest Church involvement since the 1984 polls. The education of the voting public was left to the initiative of each local Church. PPCRV was reactivated late. There was no systematic political education, no poll watching, no linkage with NAMFREL and other electoral groups. The CBCP issued two statements: one on 26 January 2004 and the other on 21 April 2004, but the bishops said nothing new which their previous statements had not mentioned. With COMELEC, PPCRV tried to organize a political debate among the presidential candidates but Poe refused to participate. Arroyo made it a condition that Poe should be in the debate for her to participate.

These signs of the Church's declining appetite for involvement in elections may be an indication of electoral reform fatigue or perhaps a growing dissatisfaction with the electoral process as the main vehicle for social transformation. Or it could have been a knee-jerk reaction to the decreasing incidents of electoral violence, fraud and growing efficiency of the electoral process.

Manila Archbishop Gaudencio Rosales issued a pastoral letter in his Easter 2004 message rejecting "popularity" and "winnability" as criteria for choosing candidates.[14] This was in reference to Poe and other like-minded candidates who clearly had popularity.

Arroyo won over Poe by a small margin of 3% (40% vs 37%) or roughly a million votes.[15] Poe's camp accused the administration

[14]Jose Aravilla and Ann Montemar-Oriondo, "Sin Steps Down, Rosales Succeeds." http://www.newsflash.org/2003/05/h1/h1019384.htm (accessed April 16, 2004).

[15]Moreno, *Church, State, and Civil Society in Postauthoritarian Philippines*, 270.

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of cheating. Poe filed a case challenging the electoral results, but he succumbed to a fatal stroke on 14 December 2004. A legitimation crisis loomed when on 27 June 2005, after persistent pressure, President Arroyo admitted to making a phone call to a COMELEC commissioner during the election period in May 2004 allegedly to rig the elections. Her action was prohibited in electoral regulations. The resulting electoral crisis, known as the "Hello Garci" scandal (in reference to Election Commissioner Virgilio Garcillano) hounded the presidency of Arroyo and raised questions about the legitimacy of her authority. The CBCP, short of calling for her resignation, pressed for accountability and "the search for truth," and challenged the government not to brush aside the legitimacy issue.[16]

The 2010 Elections

The Church-based electoral movements' involvement in the May 2010 elections was similarly much reduced as in the 2004 polls, unlike their participation in the elections of the 1990s. This was the first time in history that the Philippine polls were using the Automated Election System (AES). The AES virtually eliminated the operation quick count of NAMFREL since counting on precinct and municipal levels could be done within hours after the closure of casting of votes, if not within a day or so. Cheating was minimized, snatching of ballot boxes was no longer relevant, although vote buying still continued. The CBCP issued two statements: on 24 January 2010 and on 04 May 2010.[17] Much of Church involvement in varying degrees came from the local Churches, although for the most part, preparations for such involvement were delayed. Owing to the resurgence of hope for a new type of leadership in the face of the people's dissatisfaction with the Arroyo administration

[16]Angel N. Lagdameo, "Renewing our Public Life through Moral Values" (January 29, 2006).

[17]Nereo P. Odchimar, "A Call for Vigilance and Involvement" (January 24, 2010); Nereo P. Odchimar, "Statement on the Coming National and Local Elections: Transforming Election through a Solidarity of Consciences" (May 4, 2010).

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which was saddled with charges of corruption, there was a renewed sense of engagement on the part of the electoral groups.

PPCRV remained active and continued to enjoy accreditation from the COMELEC. VOTE-CARE no longer saw action in the 2010 elections. NAMFREL was not accredited by COMELEC in the 2010 elections. Since NAMFREL's OQC was made redundant by COMELEC's AES, NAMFREL volunteers resorted to election monitoring and documentation during the 2010 elections. PPCRV conducted limited and much delayed political education.

Initially, Senator Benigno "Noynoy" Aquino III was a hesitant presidential candidate. When support for him poured out in the wake of the death of his mother, former President Corazon Aquino, it was an indication of popular clamor for new politics. Using anti-corruption as an electoral issue, Senator Aquino won by collecting 15.2 million votes or 42.08% of total votes cast. Joseph Estrada came second with 9.4 million votes or 26.25% of overall number of votes. After being convicted and imprisoned for plunder and getting released from prison, Estrada surprisingly came first in Mindanao.

In the May 2010 elections, the AFP struck partnerships with local civil society electoral groups through operation Honest, Orderly Peaceful Elections (HOPE). Such partnerships would have been unthinkable in the elections of 1992 and 1998. Although election irregularities (e.g., vote buying, cheating) were still happening, these were reduced considerably because counting was automated and therefore there was less time to cheat. There were glitches with the Precinct Count Optical Scan (PCOS) machines and electronic transmission of data, but on the whole the first automated elections were a success.[18]

[18]Steven Rood, "Citizens and poll workers declare first automated elections in Philippines a success, but flaws remain," http://asiafoundation.org/in-asia/2010/08/04citizens-and-poll-workers-declare-first-automated-elections-in-philippines-a-success-but-flaws-remain/ (accessed August 4, 2010).

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Growing Confidence in the Electoral System

The data below show declining incidents of electoral violence over the years as established by the Philippine National Police (PNP).[19]

Table 1: Incidents of electoral violence in 1998, 2001, 2004 and 2007

Year	Incidents	Fatalities	Wounded
1998	267	67	167
2001	269	111	293
2004	249	189	279
2007*	229	69	116

*Source: PNP Task Force HOPE in Patiño and Roperez 2010, 4

The figures above indicate a decreasing pattern of electoral violence over the years. Pre-election-related incidents of violence in the May 2010 polls were 41 counts with 94 fatalities and 43 wounded.[20] During the election day itself, there were only 56 incidents with 36 fatalities and 54 wounded.[21] The massacre in Maguindanao province which claimed the lives of 57 journalists, media staff, lawyers and others was possibly the worst electoral violence in the history of the Philippines. It drew public attention and condemnation.

Social Weather Stations (SWS) data below support the observation that the last two elections saw a decline of electoral violence in the 2007 and 2010 polls. This can be gleaned from the way COMELEC handled the peace and order situation.

[19]Rood, "Citizens and poll workers declare first automated elections in Philippines a success, but flaws remain," 4.

[20]Rood, "Citizens and poll workers declare first automated elections in Philippines a success, but flaws remain," 19.

[21]Rood, "Citizens and poll workers declare first automated elections in Philippines a success, but flaws remain," 20.

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Table 2: Voters' satisfaction with COMELEC on peace and order

Year	Satisfied	Undecided	Dissatisfied	Net Satisfaction*
2007	60%	14%	25%	+35
2010	74	11	14	+60

Source: SWS Media Release 2010, 4
*Note: Net satisfaction is % satisfied minus % dissatisfied.

The net satisfaction of +35 in 2007 went up to +60 in 2010. In the 2007 elections, 60% of the respondents were satisfied whereas in 2010, 74% were satisfied. The shift was a positive increase of 14%. Comparing the 2004, 2007 and 2010 presidential elections, there is a general indication of a sharp increase of satisfaction level as far as the general conduct of the polls is concerned.

Table 3: Voters' satisfaction with the general conduct of the May 2004, 2007 and 2010 elections

Responses	2004	2007	2010
Satisfied	53%	51%	75%
Undecided	11	15	8
Dissatisfied	35	32	15
Net Satisfaction*	+18	+19	+60

Source: Adapted from SWS Media Release 2010, 4

The net satisfaction shows an increase from +18 (2004), +19 (2007) to +60% (2010).

While it is true that PPCRV was engaged in poll watching, it was the electronic and quick counting which reduced much of the electoral irregularities. PPCRV also assisted voters in polling places, but its operation was lesser than in the elections of the 1990s where there were higher incidents of cheating.

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Table 4: Voters' Satisfaction with PPCRV in the honest reporting of the vote count of the 2007 and 2010 elections

Year	Satisfied	Undecided	Dissatisfied	Net
2007	64	19	14	+50
2010	75	13	9	+66

Source: SWS Media Release 2010, 9

The net satisfaction with regard to PPCRV's handling of vote count report increased from +50 (2007) to +66 (2010). A big factor of this is the automated system in vote counting. It reduced counting time and lessened electoral counting irregularities, although some PCOS machines had problems.

Looking at voters' satisfaction with the COMELEC in the elections of 2007 and 2010, there is an increasing public confidence in the way it handled the two elections. On the matter of information given to voters about registration and voting, COMELEC got a net satisfaction of +33 in 2007 and it increased to +56 in 2010. On the system of voter registration, it received +29 (2007) and +53 (2010). On the consolidation of vote counts at the city/municipal and provincial levels, it was given +19 (2007) and +52 (2010). On the counting of votes at the precinct level, it garnered +26 (2007) and +51 (2010).[22] These positive figures show growing levels of trust with regard to the image of COMELEC.

Concluding Observations

The Church involvement in the elections in the 2000s can be classified as relatively low compared to its participation in the 1990s. A possible reason for this—apart from electoral reform fatigue, realization of the limits of electoral reform campaigns (e.g., weakness of

[22]SWS Media Release, "Second Quarter 2010 Social Weather Survey: 75% of Filipinos satisfied with the conduct of the May 2010 elections" (July 28, 2010), 4.

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political education), and switching of volunteers to partisan politics—is the improvement of the electoral system. During the period between the 1990s and the 2000s, electoral violence incidents declined, cheating was reduced, and although electoral anomalies continued, the level of satisfaction of the voting public went up. Arguably there is a growing restoration of public trust in the electoral institution. The 2010 elections have in all probability been the most trustworthy of all in post-authoritarian Philippines.

It is no accident that the Church (hierarchical leadership and electoral movements) had the least involvement in the elections in the 2000s. If the electoral institution gets more strengthened, if its system becomes more efficient, and election-related incidents of violence get reduced significantly, then, in all likelihood, the Church-based electoral movements will have less and less role to play in future elections. Perhaps it is about time to reinvent the roles of these electoral movements. The electoral landscape in the 1990s has shifted in the 2000s. While there are still constant problems, the new electoral landscape, with its new electoral system and maturing institutions and citizenry, is gradually reshaping the lines of electoral engagements. Church-based electoral movements can take the opportunities offered by this changing landscape to reinvent themselves or fade into redundancy.

In this study of Church involvement in electoral politics, I did not look into local cases or into the case of the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) where church engagement is much reduced. It would be worthy to study these cases because the knowledge they have to offer could enrich, nuance or challenge the observations I have made.

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