

Philippines: What is wrong with technocrats?

Tuesday 27 September 2022, by [TADEM Eduardo C.](#) (Date first published: 2 June 2022).

“President-elect Ferdinand Marcos Jr.’s designation of known technocrats to manage the Philippine economy raises the issue of whether continuing to rely on this particular group of experts can actually do good for the Filipino people and the country. (...) The opposing view sees the surge of technical and scientific modes as a new means of social control that goes hand in hand with autocratic and elite political governance.”

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The rise of technocratic management of the world’s economies over the last 70 years has spawned studies and debates on the implications of this phenomenon. On one hand, it is lauded for having replaced political choices based on kinship, patronage and socioeconomic status with one that is acquired through merit, scientific education, and techno-managerial skills. The opposing view, however, sees the surge of technical and scientific modes as a new means of social control that goes hand in hand with autocratic and elite political governance.

Scientific and technological development is important to advance human society, increase labor productivity, and reduce the labor time of the working class to enable them to engage in other meaningful pursuits. Technology, therefore, is internal to the aims and aspirations of people and gives rise to a superstructure of social, economic, political, and ideological interactions.

But a major concern is that technocrats often succumb to the realities imposed by existing socioeconomic and political configurations and end up buttressing the hegemony of oligarchs to whom they owe their positions of power. Technocratic decision-making is often exclusively based on technical and mechanistic considerations and the result of an absolute reformatting of social mechanisms according to a single and one-size-fits-all development and policy framework.

Technocracy thesis

Technological development can also become part of the essential logic of control that violates moral, ethical, and social principles. A society based on the “technocracy thesis” of efficiency and productivity reduces human beings and nature to mere cogs and raw materials to be exploited along the most productive and efficient forms of organization. Science and technology then cease to be neutral and become tools in the reproduction of political domination that “favors hegemonic interests.”

The global record sees technocrats as a conservative “power bloc” and a unique class attuned to the requirements of the economic system from which they have emerged and which they are obligated to defend. This effectively cancels the supposedly inherent advantage of a technocratic regime with its avowed emphasis on merit, professional qualifications, and technical skills rather than birth or political connections.

Their conservatism, however, is not innate. As British sociologist Ralph Miliband pointed out, it is because “they are, within their allotted sphere, the conscious or unconscious allies of existing economic and social elites.” Government technocrats generally come from the same educational and/or social background as corporate leaders and managers and therefore share the latter’s views, outlook, and prejudices. Furthermore, recruitment and promotion processes are geared towards ferreting out individuals who do not conform to the requirements of preserving the conservative directions of the status quo.

Disjuncture

The political implications of technocratic control arise from the same conditions that breed antidemocratic and authoritarian rule. Economic growth and development, therefore, do not necessarily lead to the expansion of the democratic space. The disjuncture between technocracy and democracy puts at risk ideals of popular participation, transparency, and accountability. French political scientist Jean Meynaud argues that aspects of technocratic behavior “are foreign to what one might legitimately expect from democratic leaders,” as in adhering to the right of the public to information and obtaining consent from the governed.

The common emphasis on productive efficiency explains the close ties between technocrats and the corporate world and produces a mindset that equates the interests of the latter with the national interest. Corporate executives who join government as administrators and bureaucrats stay clear of policies and programs that run counter to business interests. As the head of General Motors famously remarked upon being appointed US defense secretary in 1953, “what was good for General Motors was good for the country.”

The conjuncture between business and technocrats raises issues of ethics and propriety, but public safety and people’s well-being are sometimes seriously compromised. This was the case of the 2011 nuclear power plant tragedy in Fukushima, Japan, that was attributed to lax government regulations due to the common “revolving door” practice of interchanging officers and personnel between private firms and government regulatory agencies.

The hallmark of technocratic economic management is a development paradigm that is market-driven and fixated on growth. The results have been escalating social inequalities and a widening gap between rich and poor, increasing poverty and unemployment, amplified job insecurities and the rise of precarity among working peoples, continued deterioration of social services, more regressive taxation, decline of the middle class, greater gender disparities, and mindless ecological destruction.

Authoritarian modernization

Ferdinand Marcos Sr.’s regime was bannered as a modernizing project led by technocratic expertise but, combined with a repressive state apparatus, it resulted in what Walden Bello billed as “authoritarian modernization.” This unholy alliance propped up the regime and provided the justification for dictatorial rule. In the end, it also became ultimately responsible for the country’s

economic collapse and the social unrest that eventually brought down the Marcos dictatorship in 1986. Technocrats, however, have been resilient and never left the scene while continuing to manage the Philippine economy along an unreformed path of anti-people development.

The announcement of an economic team of recycled technocrats in the incoming administration of Marcos Jr. marks an unbroken historical continuity from present and past economic managers of the country. This signifies more of the same policies and programs that pamper corporate interests and privilege uncontrolled profits over people's welfare and the public good. No wonder the corporate world is delirious with joy over the assurance that it will be "business as usual" for the next six years.

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P.S.

• CoverStory. JUNE 2, 2022:

<https://coverstory.ph/what-is-wrong-with-technocrats/>

• This piece is mainly extracted with revisions and updates from E.C. Tadem. 2015. "Technocracy and the Peasantry: Martial Law Development Paradigms and Philippine Agrarian Reform." *Journal of Contemporary Asia*. 45:3. 394-418.—Ed