

Hello, and welcome to 2018! As part of our celebrations in the new year, I thought it would be good for us to discuss a topic that is in keeping with the season of new year's resolutions and turning a new leaf, and that is... how does change come about? In our social and political life - how do we bring about transformation?

It's been 18 months since Pres. Duterte was swept into office, on a wave of public sentiment that was in essence hoping for change. Change is coming! That was the mantra of his campaign.

Come to think of it, that was the mantra of Pres. Noy Aquino in 2010, too, and of Gloria Arroyo at EDSA-Dos. In fact, you can go back to EDSA-1, the 1986 people power revolt, and the mantra then was, *Sobra na! Tama na! Palitan na!*

Go back further to the proclamation of Martial Law in 1972 to usher in a New Republic, because the old one was feudal and backward, and led to a communist insurgency.

Go back to Pres. Magsaysay's election in the 1950s at the height of the Huk rebellion, which wanted social and economic rights for peasants. You can even go further back a hundred and twenty years ago to the Katipunan and the Philippine revolution of 1898, and the battlecry back then was for self-rule, after centuries of colonisation by Spain.

But what the French say is true, the more things change, the more they stay the same. People, places, protagonists have changed, but in the end, we seem to end up with the same thing.

Corruption reigns, political families reign, now drugs and criminality, secession and rebellion persist. Much of our society is still mired in poverty. How do we achieve real, lasting change? That's going to be the theme of today's episode. And to frame our discussion, I'm going to pose three arguments or debates on how change comes about. Behind each argument are two opposing theories of change. Let's begin with the argument that change has to be either...**cultural or structural in nature**.

How do you bring about change in society? There are three levels for possible intervention, which are:

1. Organisational - affecting rules, norms, practices, policies that govern individual and group behaviour, both formal and informal in departments, firms and government;
2. Constitutional - re-writing the fundamental rules that set the principles for shaping other institutions, like electoral politics;
3. Cultural - the product of history, colonisation, religion, belief systems, world views, etc.

Where to begin? Do you start at the top? Daang Matuwid under Pres. Aquino tried that by adopting organisational practices, such as performance based budgeting, zero based, then bottom up budgeting, and the like. Creating a commission for public corporations to monitor the performance of state owned and controlled corporations. That sort of thing.

After witnessing the limits of Daang Matuwid, Pres. Duterte and PDP-Laban led by Senate Pres. Koko Pimentel have embarked on a re-write of the 1987 constitution with a plan to move to a semi-presidential form and federal structure of government with fiscal equalisation of various autonomous regional governments. Part of the package includes the strengthening of political parties, making them public institutions, that receive state subsidies and making them subject to public audits.

This year Congress will be deliberating and possibly voting on these proposed amendments to the current constitution. I've started a series on this question, and if you want a more substantive discussion on that, please view episodes 10, 12, and 14 coming soon.

Embedded in these proposals is a re-jigging of the rules that govern political succession in the country, limiting of political dynasties within jurisdictions, and the way we nominate and elect our public officials, such as the president who will need to be nominated by a political party that controls at least 20% of the legislature. Proportional representation will be used to augment district representatives in the lower house would allow smaller parties to go mainstream. Rules governing party-switching, and the impact of money in politics, with reforms aimed at campaign finance and political party funding.

There are also structural reforms in there. Removal of absolute caps to foreign ownership hardcoded in the constitution, assigning the responsibility to the legislature to set the limits on this. Regionalising the court of appeals to de-clog the courts system and make it more accessible to the regions.

The biggest one, the mandating of a regional and local government code to supercede the current local government code. The rules on revenue-sharing of the central and regional governments, fiscal equalisation through redistribution of revenues to regions, and sharing of governance between central and regional governments. That sort of thing.

This is a more fundamental shift. Will it bring about true and lasting change?

Systems vs People

“Unless we change people running the system, the system won’t change.”

“Change will only happen if individuals change.”

“No amount of tinkering with the system will change the outcome, unless we change the culture.”

“Moral awakening” “Individual agency” “Education of the youth, the hope of the motherland - Jose Rizal”

In 18th century America Tocqueville observed civic mindedness, volunteerism, and civil society in the “American experiment”. Building a civil society? His argument that this culture of civility emerged, as a result of the US adopting its unique set of institutions after gaining independence from the British crown.

This was undone somewhat in the 19th century with the emergence of populism, after universal male suffrage was introduced, and led to the decay of institutions. Andrew Jackson, the first popularly elected president, after the electoral college system was modified, introduced patronage and clientelism, a weak state, corrected only after reform movements headed by the middle class got new legislation enacted by congress limiting political appointments, but it took 60-80 years to create a truly professional bureaucracy.

As opposed to Great Britain where this process was compressed because under their parliamentary system there are less checks and balances. Therefore, it was easier to get a consensus for reforms, once popular sentiment shifted, change was much more swift and decisive. This comparison kind of supports the view that systems matter, not just people.

The question still remains how do we build social movements or coalitions to put pressure on political institutions? If we wait for a middle class to form, it might take too long, and they will still be outnumbered.

The question then becomes, well how do we get individuals at the bottom rung to change? How do we cultivate political maturity, so that people don't sell their votes, become prey to political patronage and clientelism, or too much populism?

How do you undo centuries of breeding, conditioning and programming?

Some would say, well you can't. You need to impose it. In other words you need a strong man or a vanguard party to radically alter settings, to force people to adopt new customs, norms, practices, and over a period of time, they will accept these, and they become embedded in the culture and structure of society.

That's how the Spanish and the Moors did it. Convert or face the sword!

New Republic, Matatag na Republika, Daang Matuwid, and Tapang at Malasakit had shades of these. We'll prosecute you, throw you in jail. Repress anything or anyone who does not tow the party line, adhere to the tenets of the movement. Us vs. Them. You're either for us or against, nothing in between. Idealistic, missionary zeal for the cause. Repent of your original sin, or we'll hang you!

Purge the system of evil. Moral rectitude will build a just society. Only who determines who's virtuous enough? Some Committee of Public Order as in the French revolution, with Robespierre's reign of terror.? The revolution will begin to eat its own children, then.

Another approach was Bayani Fernando's. This is a kind of lite version of authoritarian rule.

As MMDA chair, he said you first need to create guides, barriers that forced traffic, people to stick to the prescribed paths. Clear the sidewalk, put concrete or steel barriers on the road. Put public lavatories on every street corner. After a period of time, then you can remove the guides, and people will adhere to the rules. It's the sort of Lee Kwan Yew approach.

Restrict choice in other words, don't give absolute freedom, or people will abuse it. Set limits, boundaries for what can and can't be done. It's a more paternalistic rather than libertarian approach to governance. But seldom does it gain popular support.

There's a third way that behavioural economists call libertarian paternalism, where you don't limit the range of choices people have, but nudge them to make better, more informed choices. Rig the system in a way that the irrational person behaves more rationally, in other words, or more in keeping with the common good, through better signals and cues derived from incentives and information to frame choices in a certain way. I can't get into this now, it's beyond the scope of the topic. But some other time, perhaps.

Evolutionary vs Revolutionary

Coup d'états, military adventurism, secession, rebellion, and revolutionary governments vs Learning the lessons of past experiments.

Political instability, continuity and succession are adjunct issues to this. Do we upend the system in one go. Go back to Year 0, Day 1. Start from scratch. Or do we not throw the baby out with the bathwater? Keep what was good, throw away what is no longer useful. Try to be more practical and pragmatic. Go for incremental changes, given political realities, rather than take an all-or-nothing approach.

The distinction is sometimes hard to make. For instance, the move to federalism. Some say it's a radical shakeup of the system. Once we go there, there's no turning back. It's too alien or revolutionary. On the other hand, if you think about it, we've been moving gradually to more local autonomy over the past several decades. This would be the next logical step.

Pres. Marcos introduced the system of regional development councils to assist planning in the 1970s, but RDCs were merely recommendatory. This was maintained under the 1987 constitution and pushed further with the enactment of the Local Government Code of 1991. Some would say the Internal Revenue Allotments is the beginnings of fiscal federalism, which the current proposed amendments seek to expand.

Lessons were learned along the way. The disruption to health services when these were devolved to LGUs, the uneven fiscal capacity of LGUs despite sharing of IRA are cases in point.

The proposed shift to federalism seeks to build on the lessons learned from all this. Introducing a regional and local government code to supercede the local government code, delineating the specific roles of central and regional governments, creating regional commissions based on the existing RDCs as transitory entities before passing individual organic acts per regions and establishing regular regional governments over a 5-10 year period. Devolving national agencies into regional offices. Creating fiscal transfers to ensure they are properly and equitably funded across jurisdictions. This is a way of smoothing the transition, and giving systems and people time to adjust.

Keeping a popularly elected president, but moving to a hybrid semi-parliamentary set up to split the heavy workload of the executive. Reverting back to regionally elected senators to improve regional representation in the senate, keeping the senate but reshaping its role, building on the lessons of party-list experiment by mainstreaming proportional representation. When set against the historical changes made over the past century, these could be seen as evolutionary changes, that add up to one big revolutionary change.

Continuity vs discontinuity

The philosopher Thomas Kuhn says that's how change happens. In science, we look to great discoveries, big leaps forward, great inventions, but in fact, these are all built on minor evolutionary changes and improvements learned or made over time.

Incrementalism or gradualism vs. The big leap forward. I think the Federal Institute Study Group concluded that it's better to do as little revision as needed. It just so happens, that a lot of minor tinkering is needed, when you put it all together, it looks like one big change.

So I guess we'll leave it there. Let's continue the discussion online. Send your questions, comments and feedback by following our social media handles and visiting our website. Many thanks to my supporters in 2017. Here's to a brand, new year of political observation and commentary, as we continue our journey here on...The Cusp!