

From Grassroots to Government: A Study of Recent Green Party Building in the Philippines

Serhat Ünalı

Abstract: This article explores the history, ideology and political strategy of the Partido Kalikasan (PK, Nature Party), a grassroots-based green party in the Philippines. The PK was established in 2003 but its development is constrained by the lack of resources and strategic differences internal to the party and by the distinct history and setting of civil society and politics in the archipelago. Yet, the mere presence of an emerging green party in a relatively poor country like the Philippines puts into question the postmaterialist thesis of Ronald Inglehart. It seems that the environment is more than a “quality of life” issue, especially in a country where vast sections of the population still struggle to meet their basic needs.

Keywords: Philippines; Green Party; Inglehart; Post-Materialist thesis

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*“First feed the face and then talk right and wrong
for even saintly folk may act like sinners
unless they've had their customary dinners.”*

Bertold Brecht, The Threepenny Opera

With his criticism of bourgeois-capitalist morality and the impoverishment of the lower classes in the 1920s, Brecht touched on an issue that was taken up five decades later by political scientist Ronald Inglehart (1977). Drawing on Abraham Maslow's (1954) “hierarchy of human needs”, Inglehart explained the rise of postmaterialist values at that time by the fact that post-war generations had been socialised under conditions of economic affluence. Both, Brecht and Inglehart implied that people can only concern themselves with higher morals if their basic material needs are satisfied.

Accordingly, it was argued that the first green parties were established in the West because only here old cleavages between workers and industrialists, between the poor and the rich, had given way to new politics that no longer revolved around matters of physical sustenance but focussed on the quality of life, e.g. the environment. But what then about a green party in a country like the Philippines where one fourth of the population still lives below the poverty line (ADB, 2012, 62) and materialism remains the socio-political driving force? Following Inglehart, such a party constitutes an anomaly. And yet people from throughout the Philippines aim to register the first grassroots-based green party of Southeast Asia, the Partido Kalikasan (Nature Party).

Based on personal semi-structured interviews with leaders of the party – selected on the basis of high visibility within, and long-term commitment

to, the Partido Kalikasan – and on the study of party documents, this paper questions Inglehart's thesis because it cannot account for the emergence of green parties in the Global South and does not pay sufficient attention to the possibility of an environmentalism driven by materialism. It seems that other factors are more crucial than postmaterialist values since green parties have struggled to win seats in many Western, supposedly postmaterialist nations as well.

The postmaterialist thesis revisited

An early definition of Inglehart's thesis summarised his reasoning as follows:

“[T]he age cohorts who had experienced the wars and scarcities of the era preceding West European economic miracles would accord a relatively high priority to economic security and to what Maslow terms safety

needs. For the younger cohorts, a set of “post-bourgeois” values, relating to the need for belonging and to aesthetic and intellectual needs, would be more likely to take top priorities (Inglehart, 1971, 991-92).”

Consequently, these postmaterialist values led to the emergence of left-libertarian green parties in Europe. Obviously, green parties in the Global South like the Partido Kalikasan (PK) are formed in a different historical and socio-political context and yet many of their stated aims resemble those of European parties. This puzzle has hitherto remained underexplored because Inglehart's postmaterialist thesis contributed to a general bias against the possibility of green parties in developing countries. If postmaterialism is established as a precondition for green party success then why bother examining respective developments in materialist societies?

Figure 1: Pineapples near Bukidnon. Source of all pictures: Serhat Ünalı

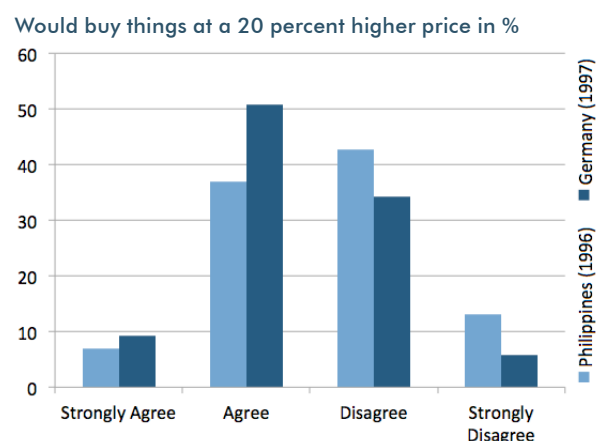
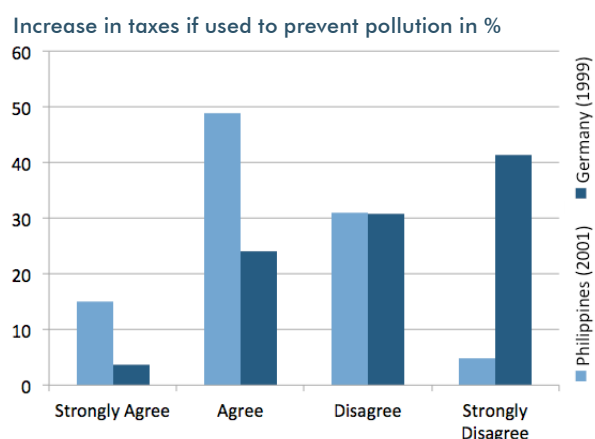
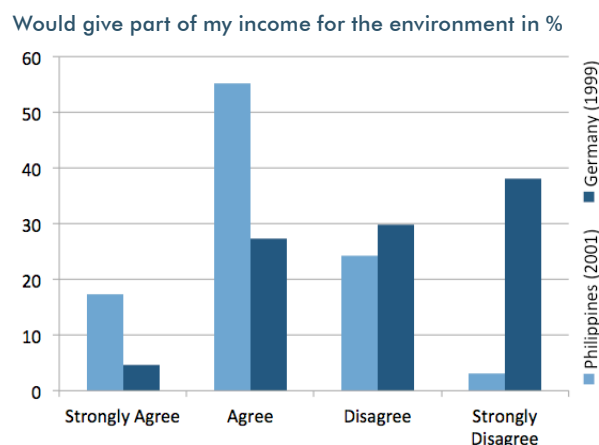
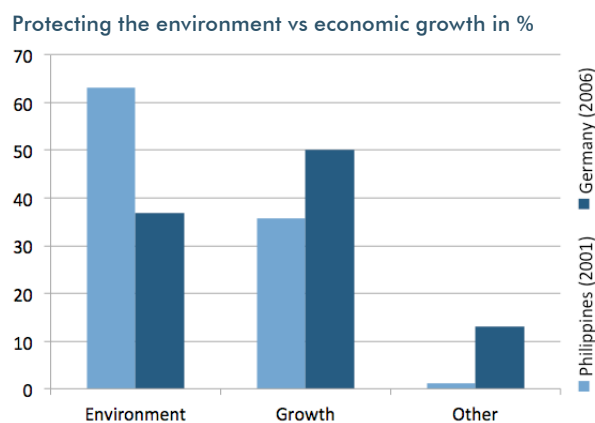


Table 1: Comparison of environmental values between the Philippines and Germany

But Inglehart's assumptions did not go unchallenged. Brechin and Kempton (1994, 245-46) criticised that they play

"(...) nicely into the strategies of developing-country leaders, who use "We can't afford to worry about the environment" as one pillar to support their case for increased aid as a precondition for environmental protection. [...] Paradoxically, the assumption of lower developing-country environmental concern has simultaneously served conservative and pecuniary arguments that industry should be developed without concern for its environmental impacts in poor countries."

In fact, statistical data have shown that environmental concern is a global phenomenon (Brechin & Kempton, 1994; Dunlap & Mertig, 1997, 25). If the attitudes towards environmental protection of, for example, German and Philippine publics are compared, the latter show even more support in most cases (see Table 1). The data presented in table 1 are taken from the World Values Survey, initiated

by Inglehart. The greater willingness of Filipinos to pay higher taxes compared to Germans casts doubt on Inglehart's (1995, 57) assumption that "countries that have relatively postmaterialist publics, rank relatively high in their readiness to make financial sacrifices for the sake of environmental protection". The disposition of many Filipinos to green activism was confirmed by others (eg. Broad, 1994, 811). In this context Lee and So (1999, 9) offer a useful distinction between an "environmentalism rooted in affluence versus one rooted in misery or dislocation".

Most importantly, explanations based on postmaterialist values do not account for the fact that green parties have not been successful in many wealthy countries. As Walden Bello, member of the House of Representatives for the social democratic party Akbayan and one of the Philippines' most well-known activists, (personal interview, 22.6.2009) puts it:

"The reason I don't think it's a developed versus a developing country thing is because of the United States

and a whole lot of advanced capitalist countries where green parties have not been notable successes [...]. It's probably partly the structure of the political system. There might be something in the structure of certain countries like Germany that allows for better electoral success of an independent green party rather than in others."

This paper follows Bello's reasoning. It seems that it is the political system and the specific historical trajectory of the Philippines which challenges the PK the most.

In any case, the more pressing the threat of climate change becomes, the less valid the postmaterialist thesis will become. The consequences of natural disasters, their economic impact and the potential for green jobs will lead voters to cast their votes for parties espousing green values out of immediate materialist self-interest. Inglehart himself later qualified his postmaterialist thesis by arguing that – when a healthy environment becomes a matter of survival – environmentalism may be supported by both, materialists and postmaterialists (Inglehart, 1997, 242).

Partido Kalikasan and its beginnings

The PK will be defined here as the first grassroots-based green party of Southeast Asia as it is made up of environmentalists who are linked to local constituencies throughout the country and pursue a long-term bottom-up strategy. This contrasts with earlier attempts in the region, for instance in Thailand where, in 2001, a green party was rather hastily created by “progressive bureaucrats and politicians” whose “focus was not at the local level but more on the national one by appealing to middle-class voters who had access to the media” (Narut, 2005, 49). In this sense, the PK definitely blurs “the boundary between institutionalized and noninstitutionalized politics” (Goldstone, 2003, 11) and fosters a rethinking of the binary opposition between parties and social movements. It also challenges the definition of “movement parties” by Gunther and Diamond (2001, 29) who, echoing Inglehart, limit their discussion of such groups that straddle “the conceptual space between ‘party’ and ‘movement’” to the postmaterialist orientations of their (European) members.

The PK was founded on 6 December 2003 as *Ang Partido Kalikasan, Inc.* (APKI) when it held its first National Assembly which was composed

of more than fifty NGO-activists and academics. The preamble of the Draft Constitution did not expressly state the aim of participating in elections and the assembly’s proceedings suggest that this was a controversial issue (APKI, 2003). Although organising committees were established in 24 localities throughout the Philippines it remained unclear whether APKI would become a full-blown national party or a party list group. Party list groups are supposed to make up 20 per cent of the membership of the Lower House and are elected under a proportional representation (PR) voting system to enable the election of underrepresented sectors to Congress while the five biggest parties are banned from running for these seats.

APKI’s draft constitution only mentions the group’s aim to support green candidates in elections but not the objective of party members to run themselves. Moreover, early concerns about the lack of staffing and funding have haunted the party ever since. Discussions that led to the replacement of “Almighty God” with “Creator” in the preamble indicate that the role of the Christian Faith was not settled. The seeds for future debates were sown.

Shortly thereafter the assembly leadership disintegrated due to conflicts of interest. Although the party was beheaded, its heart continued bea-

ting. Under pressure from local chapters the party was revived as *Partido Kalikasan*. Simultaneously the *Partido Kalikasan Institute* (PKI) was set up and registered as an NGO, giving the grouping legal recognition. The party itself was not yet registered with the Commission on Elections (COMELEC).

The PK today

Today, the PK has an estimated membership of about 3000. The party chapter in Cagayan de Oro/Northern Mindanao is the largest with a projected membership of 2000 as the anti-logging coalition, Task Force Macajalar (TFM), joined the PK party. However, it is not clear if all members of the TFM are actually aware of their membership in the PK. According to environmental lawyer Maning Ravanera (personal interview, 2.7.2009), PK chairman in Northern Mindanao who not only co-founded TFM but also promotes the rights of disadvantaged pineapple farmers in Bukidnon, the main reason for the lack of a party identity are previous uncertainties: “*Partido Kalikasan* was formed, not formed, not registered...”.

To foster a common identity the party’s internal rules stipulate that seminars should be part of the membership application process but practice lags behind intent. Member-



Figure 2: PK focusses on local knowledge: A shamanistic ritual entailing the slaughtering of a pig in an Ifugao village, Banaue.



Figure 3: The Banaue rice terraces: Ancient wisdom or historical baggage?

ship fees too are not consistently collected which adds to the party's financial difficulties. State funding, which has contributed to the success of the green party in Germany, is not available. Hence, the PKI was established as a support organisation for the party. As a registered NGO, funds could in future be channelled through the institute. Only if and when resources become available can the PK focus on elections.

The internal party structure is divided into national, bio-regional and district levels as well as small operating units, the cells and caucuses. The local party chapters are internally organised along bio-regions to reflect traditional communities based on geographical rather than political boundaries, e.g. rivers, lakes and islands. The autonomous nature of local PK chapters allows for the adoption of platforms of governance which reflect locally specific positions on particular issues. However, as soon as PK participates in elections it will have to organise along established electoral district boundaries. At the national level, the Council of Local PK Leaders is supposed to be the most important decision making body and meets once a month online. The lack of resources and the geography of the archipelago set hurdles to frequent face-to-face meetings.

The party programme

Programmatically, the party's unifying principles are 1) ecological integrity; 2) social justice; 3) national solidarity and active non-violence; 4) participatory democracy; and 5) personal integrity. When asked where the party ranks itself on the political spectrum, PK-Secretary General Roy Cabonegro (personal interview, 18.6.2009) answers: "Neither left nor right but for the community", echoing the green slogan "neither left nor right but in front". The community is at the core of PK ideology.

According to this line of thought, the historical roots of environmental problems are to be found in Spanish colonisation. Pre-colonial times are regarded as a golden age when communities were ruled sustainably by benevolent chieftains who were elected by a council of elders who represented the families within the communities. With the advent of colonialism, the local chieftain was no longer accountable to those below but to those above him. The community-focus was lost and "whatever we create now simply does not fall within our socio-cultural frame that has worked for us before" (Cabonegro, personal interview, 18.6.2009). Hence, local knowledge needs to be reactivated (see Figure 2).

Considering the leftist roots of

Philippine green activists (see below) – and given that the state has often disappointed Filipinos – their retreat to the local is understandable. Yet it is not clear how the 15% and 50% of Filipinos working in the globally-oriented industrial and service sectors, respectively, can be convinced to vote for the PK. Utopian visions of society – whether cosmopolitan or communitarian – often "jump too far into a projected future to be likely to carry most [...] peoples", as Eckersley (2004, 200) notes.

Even if indigenous knowledge may often be an asset, there is no reason to uncritically call for a "back to the roots" approach. If PK-members point to the ancient rice-terraces of Northern Luzon (see Figure 3) as an example of sustainable agriculture they also have to acknowledge what biologist Heaney noted:

"[T]he Cordillera tradition of burning the forest adjacent to the rice terraces in order to control the rat population was one of the worst things they could do. In natural forests, the native species are competitively dominant and they don't go into the rice terraces (in Lichauco de Leon, 2009)."

De Leon considers the Philippines' dramatic population growth one of

the main threats to the country's biodiversity. Poverty has contributed to overfishing (DA-BFAR, 2004, 348). These are not problems that can be solved exclusively at the community level. They are national in scale.

Most parties are set up with utopian aims and tend to become more realistic as the party matures. Yet, in the case of the PK the pace of party building is hampered by practical and ideological obstacles. Without sufficient financial resources and a substantial membership base an early involvement in elections may indeed prove unsuccessful, particularly in a political environment dominated by landed elites and oligarchs, cronyism, strong presidents, political fragmentation, party switching and lack of party funding. However, after years of delay, other PK followers are getting impatient and believe that there are reasons enough to finally field candidates in elections. PK member Albert Banico (personal interview, 18.6.2009, see Figure 4) is worried that other groups and parties will capture the green label while the PK is hesitant to act. Especially KALIKAS, the party's youth arm, is losing patience with the older generation of party leaders who seem to carry historical baggage.

The party has been trapped in an identity crisis reflective of the wider movement's history. Disillusioned with the radicalisation and centralising tendencies within the communist party many Philippine activists found a new home in the environmental movement in the early 1990s. This older generation of environmentalists now finds it difficult to shift the focus from issue-based civil society campaigns back to party politics. However, in theory the PK realises that such campaigns are not sufficient. As Cabonegro (personal interview, 18.6.2009) explains: "These are not the buttons that make things work. We have so many laws, we have so many advocacy groups, but the problem remains."

This perception fits Bevis' (2006, 61) argument that a programmatic party is formed when its founders believe that "other vehicles, like civil society groups, are likely to be less effective means of achieving reform goals". According to Bevis (2006, 52), the time for party building has come when "structural factors provide enabling conditions". The PK seems to consider structural conditions such as the rise of an envi-

ronmental consciousness and institutional changes like the introduction and recent strengthening of the party list system as sufficient for the establishment of a green party. Ahead of the 2010 national elections some within the party therefore argued (unsuccessfully) in favour of running nationally for the party list, reasoning that the PK would finally get national recognition.

But even if the PK decides to run for the party list in future it faces a dilemma. Because some members feel that the party should represent underprivileged sectors they want to field fishermen and farmers as candidates. "We simply don't want to make that compromise [of speaking for the sector we represent]", says Cabonegro (personal interview, 18.6.2009). However, cooperation with organised farmers and fishermen proved difficult in the past due to already existing loyalties within these groups.

Another strategy involves the endorsement of green candidates. In 2010, the decision of well-known environmentalist Nicanor Perlas to run for the presidency was met with enthusiasm by many PK members. Building connections with distinguished green personalities may pay off in the long run.

Alliances could also be forged with some of the many civil society organisations in the Philippines, especially with the omnipresent Catholic Church. However, many party leaders are critical of church-based activism (Cabo-

negro, personal interview, 22.6.2009). Particularly the pressing issue of population control presents the greatest potential for conflict between the clerics and environmentalists. Yet, open opposition to the Church could alienate the religiously motivated factions within the PK as some influential members were educated at elite universities which have long been in the hands of Jesuits (Hedman, 2006, 30). Ravanera (personal interview, 2.7.2009), PK leader in Cagayan de Oro, recounts:

"I entered the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits, at Ateneo [de Cagayan University]. My brothers were also schooled there. The Jesuits here – and the Jesuits also in Latin America – were into fighting against oppressive governments. And so a lot of ideas came out how to take care of the oppressed. And after a while we thought: Why don't we try protecting the environment?"

Yet, apart from the Jesuit influence Ravanera refers to Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed, communist ideology and Hegel as having had an influence on him. "Jesus Christ, his principles are right. But you have to separate it [...]. Theocracy has never proven to be good", says Ravanera. It seems that Catholic education does not necessarily translate into uncritical acceptance of church positions.

A church-based group, called KAA-

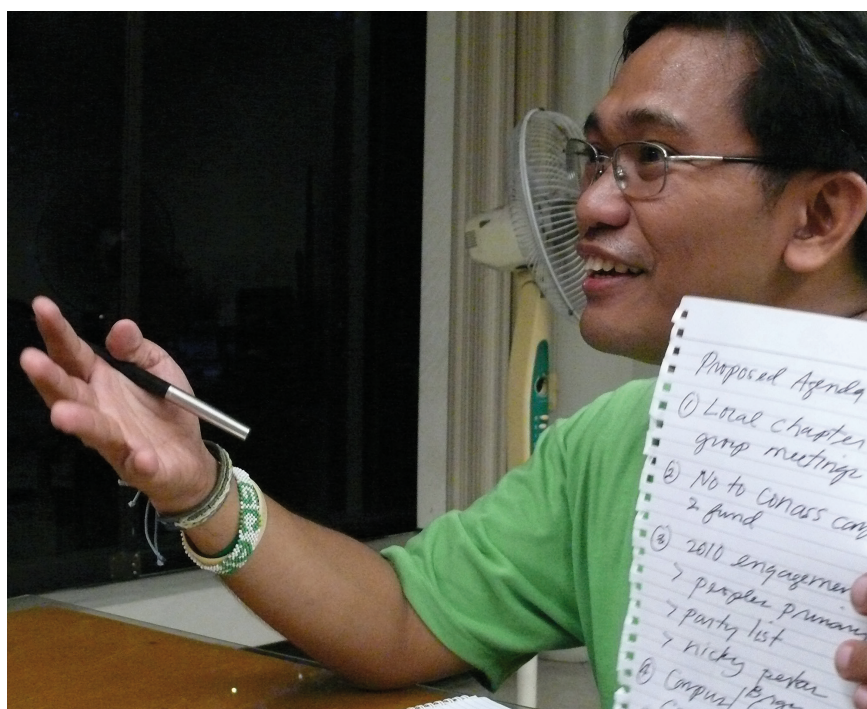


Figure 4: PK Secretary General Roy Cabonegro.

LAGAD (Kaalagad Katipunang Kristiyano), was behind an unsuccessful attempt in 2008 to unite several environmental groups – including the PK – in one unified green political body. Already in 2007 a group of local donors had tried to facilitate cooperation between the PK and the Philippine Greens, an NGO that follows an eco-socialist approach. However, these plans failed due to different perceptions of political opportunities: PK is pro, the leftist Philippine Greens are against party building. As Cabonegro (personal interview, 18.6.2009) explains:

“We have basically the same positions on issues as the Philippine Greens. But they are purists, they believe we are not yet ready to form a party. We told them we need to offer an alternative, not hide behind movement building.”

Apart from domestic religious and environmental groups, the PK is also not immune to international influences. For example, membership in the Asia Pacific Greens Network connects the party with groups elsewhere. Still, PK leaders tend to stress the distinctiveness of Philippine environmentalism and focus on the local. Conversely, the Heinrich-Böll-Foundation – a German political foundation which is affiliated with the German green party, Bündnis90/Die Grünen, and is present in Southeast Asia with a regional office in Thailand – has not reached out to the PK as it currently has no focus on the Philippines.

The disinterest is mutual. Some PK members are disenchanted with the performance of European green parties in government. As PK member Albert Banico (personal interview, 18.6.2009) notes: “What I understand, the Green party in Germany – particularly the agenda and some personalities – were absorbed in the mainstream parliament and it led to a natural process of decay or decline.”

PK members seem to be uncomfortable with the compromises that parliamentary politics demand from parties. This fear of having to relinquish an ideal vision of community-based poli-

tics has surely contributed to the PK's reluctance to speed up party building.

Conclusion

As the first country in Southeast Asia, the Philippines produced a green party born out of civil society activism but not out of economic affluence. After its establishment in 2003, the Partido Kalikasan went through a phase of death and resurrection mainly due to pressure from environmental groups in the provinces which gave the PK a distinct grassroots-imprint. Yet the timing and nature of political involvement remains a controversial issue among party members. Reasons for their hesitance are the presidential system which weakens party coherence, the historical baggage of the Philippine environmental movement, lack of funding, competition with established parties on the political left and a limited and defective party list system. Attempts to unite with other green groups to build a stronger political force were unsuccessful due to differing assessments of political opportunities. Acknowledging these concerns, many PK members concluded however that the time has come for a green party.

As was shown, in the Philippines it is the political environment and the country's historical trajectory rather than the dominance of materialist values that set limits to green party success. That the first grassroots-based green party in Southeast-Asia has emerged in the Philippines and not in one of the economically stronger neighbouring countries puts Inglehart's postmaterialist thesis into question. Surveys have shown that Filipinos express consistently more concern for the environment than, for example, people in Germany. It seems that environmentalism can potentially be rooted as much in affluence as in deprivation. The environmental consciousness of local communities has been realised by the PK and constitutes its main ideological and strategic base. However, the more urgent climate change becomes, the less it makes sense to maintain the division between materialist and postmaterialist reasons for green party formation anyway.

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