Beyond Personalistic Politics: A Progressive Congresswoman’s Challenge to a Political Dynasty in Dinagat Islands, Philippines

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Abstract

Political dynasties remain powerful in Philippine politics to this day. However, in recent years, the Philippines has experienced some significant transformations in the realm of traditional politics. Some politicians have emerged at the local level willing to confront those supported by dynastic politics. Since most literature on Philippine politics have emphasized the durability of elite domination, such changes have not yet been fully studied. This article addresses how progressive politics evolves in contention with a political dynasty based on a qualitative, exploratory case study approach by highlighting the case of Dinagat Islands where a progressive congresswoman who ran for Congress defeated a candidate from an entrenched political dynasty by practicing programmatic governance. It explores how government capacity to respond to demands of the people can be improved. As a result of this, the article clarifies a new, though not common, dynamic of Philippine politics in the 2010s and provides important implications for the possibility of future political development and theorizing in the country.

Keywords

political dynasty – progressive politics – programmatic politics – local politics – the Benigno Aquino III administration – Akbayan – Dinagat Islands
1 Introduction

The 2019 midterm elections in the Philippines were the games of political dynasties, as usual. In President Rodrigo Duterte’s home city of Davao, for instance, his three children now hold the posts of mayor, vice-mayor, and first district House representative. The majority of the members of both Houses of Congress and sixty of the eighty-one governors are from political families (Bueza and Castro 2019). This has been a prominent characteristic of Philippine politics, in comparison with other countries. According to Albert et al.’s survey, the incidence of parliamentarians from political dynasties in the Philippines is far and away the highest, 75%, among major developing countries, while the second-highest country, Thailand, shows only 42% (2015, Figure 2).

One of the major topics in the literature on Philippine politics has been to explain why political dynasties continue to be so dominant. While highlighting the historical evolution of the Philippine oligarchy from the Spanish colonial era, Simbulan (2005) showed various methods and techniques employed by elite politicians to reproduce themselves. Among them, seminal literature has underlined the significant role the family plays in social life. According to McCoy, the Filipino family “provides employment and capital, educates and socializes the young, assures medical care, shelters its handicapped and aged, and strives, above all else, to transmit its name, honor, lands, capital, and values to the next generation” (1994, 7). This makes Philippine politics highly personalistic. “Consequently, the maintenance of good personal relations with those in power is critical” (Timberman 1991, 22). Political families rather than institutions or ideologies have been key in sustaining Filipino lives.

Apart from these sociocultural explanations, recent studies now focus more on historical institutional factors. Hutchcroft and Rocamora (2003) and Coronel (2004) emphasize that elite domination in the country was institutionally consolidated during the American colonial era. The United States (U.S.) authority allowed Filipinos the right to set-up an electoral system to strengthen the political grip of wealthy families, who were collaborators with the colonial regime, rather than represent the people. This historical legacy deeply defined the political structure even after independence.

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1 In general, the term “political dynasties” is defined as “traditional political families or the practices by these political families of monopolizing political power and public offices from generation to generation and treating the public elective officers almost as their personal property” (Park 2008, 120).
Scholars such as Rocamora and Coronel who criticize personalistic or dynastic politics have been aware of the importance of programmatic politics, which have coherent platforms for policymaking. This is based on their shared observation that the strength of political families and the weakness of programmatic political forces are two sides of the same coin. Family ties play far less of a role in politics wherever platform-based politics are well-institutionalized (such as in most developed countries). In the Philippines, by contrast, familial networks have substituted for political programs and ideologies.

There have been several attempts to overcome personalistic politics by institutionalizing programmatic parties. In the post-1986 period after the overthrow of the Marcos dictatorship, the biggest possible reform was the introduction of the party-list system, which aimed to represent marginalized sectors in Congress and to develop cause-oriented political organizations through a system of proportional representation to complement district-based representation. Many new political parties have been established and some reformist politicians have even been elected through this system after its inception in 1998. However, many scholars agree that it has failed to foster substantive political parties because “the party-list system has been plagued by fragmentation, controversies and now, even the traditional politicians are winning party-list seats” (Aceron 2009, 9). Another attempt was the political party development bill. This bill, which was first drafted as the political party reform bill in 2002, intended to change patronage-driven politics by strengthening political parties to uphold party loyalty and develop political platforms and encourage party organizing and citizen-voter education. These were supposed to be achieved by advancing transparency and accountability especially through institutionalizing campaign financing (Casiple 2019, 118). Although this bill was filed in several Congresses since 2004, it has not yet been legislated.² Similarly, despite President Benigno Aquino’s assurance, in the State of the Nation Address (SONA) of 2015, of supporting the passage of the anti-dynasty bill, which sought to transform personalistic politics by regulating family monopoly of elective office, this was shelved as well. Legislators did not have

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² Even the Aquino administration, which had recognized the necessity to change patronage-dominated and family-based politics in some way, did not support the bill. Casiple revealed its background as follows:

“In interview with key legislators, it turned out that the ruling Liberal Party and President Aquino himself prevent its passage as this would interfere with the LP plans and strategies for the 2013 and 2016 elections. This may be a plausible explanation given that the bill would have curtailed a certain electoral practice enjoyed by the Liberal Party. This was the so-called “equity of the incumbent,” a longstanding convention whereby national parties favor incumbents over other co-partisans who are seeking to win election to a post. (2019, 123)”. 
any incentive to prevent themselves from maintaining political power. In 1997, charter change proposals to introduce a parliamentary system of government came up for discussion. While the original sponsors desired to amend the constitutional provision banning reelection of the president, some progressive forces also supported it because the parliamentary system was thought to contain a stronger executive power (especially in regard to pork barrel funds) and then to encourage programmatic parties to form. Yet, this challenge was denied by the Supreme Court because the proposal based on the people’s initiative was beyond the scope of constitutional amendments (Tomacruz 2018).

The reason why these attempts failed so poorly lies simply in the fact that reformist forces confronting personalistic politics were not able to generate enough support in the real political struggles. Those who advocate reforms to institutionalize programmatic parties have little to suggest where those new institutions would come from. They dismiss the idea that the intuitions themselves are in the arena of social and political conflicts (Rodan 2018, 21). Thus, advocacy for better institutions, without a substantial power struggle, would have no potential to be realized. The development of political forces able to challenge personalistic politics must take precedence.

Some notable research has studied the emergence of progressive forces in the Philippines. Bevis (2006) examined how programmatic parties can form in a patronage-dominated country. Tracing the historical evolution of the Liberal Party and Akbayan, she concludes that institutional crisis and agents play a crucial role in developing program-oriented political parties. Quimpo (2008) also focused on Akbayan and clarified its remarkable (especially local) practices to challenge elite politics. These researches demonstrated the importance of the new political dimension in the post-1986 period. However, neither directly treated any real conflict between the programmatic forces and traditional politicians, although they did detail internal contention and discussion regarding the political strategies of the parties. Franco (2001) pointed out cases where progressive forces defeated dynastic politicians immediately after the 1986 People Power, yet she does not elaborate on how such change could happen and what programs the anti-dynasty forces promoted.

In this context, this article addresses how programmatic politics evolve in real contention with a political dynasty. It takes the case of Dinagat Islands where a progressive Congresswoman, Arlene “Kaka” Bag-ao, beat an entrenched political dynasty, the Ecleo family, during the Benigno Aquino III administration (2010–2016).3 Through this exploratory case study, the paper

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3 Although Bag-ao was elected to governor of Dinagat Islands in the 2019 elections and it was remarkable progress in the political history of the province, it is not covered by this paper.
clarifies some factors that lead up to overcoming personalistic politics in the Philippines.

The paper consists of four sections. The first section gives an overview of the profile of Dinagat Islands and the history of the Ecleo family. The second section discusses Arlene Bag-ao’s political background and her task as caretaker. The third section analyzes how she won the congressional elections and penetrated Ecleo’s bailiwick. The final section summarizes the main findings of the paper and argues some implications in a broader context.

This study uses a qualitative, exploratory case study approach. The research data in this paper are drawn from 1) interviews with politicians, campaign staff, and members of various organizations; 2) administrative documents; and 3) secondary materials such as newspaper articles and websites.

The reader should bear in mind that the study does not represent an overall political change in the Philippines because it just treats a single case. It is unknown whether similar changes with Dinagat Islands will happen in other areas. The direction of political development is not predetermined. Besides, it may stagnate or decay. This study only shows a possible way. The data gathering for the case study were also limited. No member of the Ecleo family was interviewed because time for actual field work was limited for this researcher; however, secondary materials were used to compensate for this limitation.

The theoretical implication of this case study is to highlight the necessity of paying attention to government capacity for responding to demands of the people. Although many scholars studying the developing world have focused on its regime types to explain socio-economic outcomes, this framework is becoming less persuasive. Contrary to the general assumption, recent cases show that democratic regimes do not necessarily lead to good socio-economic performance. To understand diversified consequences among developing countries, we need to examine more specifically how government treats its people. Political transformation, this article argues, is related to this point.

2 Overview of Dinagat Islands and History of the Ecleo Family

Dinagat Islands is a province in the Caraga region, located northeast of Surigao del Norte and southeast of Leyte Island. It used to be a part of Surigao del Norte Province but became an independent province in 2007. The newly approved province consists of Dinagat Island and other surrounding islets. Its total land area is 1,036.34 square kilometers. This small province is made up of seven municipalities, Loreto, Tubajon, Libjo, Basilisa, Cagdianao, San Jose (capital), and Dinagat. As of 2015, its population was 127,152 (Philippine Statistics Authority 2016).
The economy of Dinagat Islands is primarily characterized by harsh poverty. In 2013, about 70% of people in the province lived below the poverty level. Dinagat Islands has been categorized as one of the lowest income provinces in the country (Tupaz 2013a). Because it is rich in mineral resources such as chromite and gold, its economy has relied on the mining industry. As of 2016, 88% of the total land area was covered under mining contracts by 19 mining concessions leased to domestic and foreign (mainly Chinese) concerns (Gonzales 2016). However, the industry has neither created sufficient jobs nor brought economic growth to the province. The mining companies have exploited the resources and failed to contribute to the islands’ substantive development. Consequently, the province has remained underdeveloped for decades. Most roads are unpaved, water, and electricity supply systems are incomplete, and medical care services are scarce. In fact, those basic human needs of people in Dinagat Islands have woefully been ignored.

The province has been politically dominated by the Ecleo family for three decades through their religious organization, the Philippine Benevolent Missionaries Association (PBMA). Making use of their followers as a solid electoral base, the Ecleo family has formed a very entrenched political dynasty since the 1980s.

The founder of the PBMA, Ruben Ecleo, Sr., was born in 1933. When he was in high school, he was accused of rape, then fled from Dinagat Island, and worked as a Barker for a roving carnival group in Mindanao and the Visayas. One day on the journey, he allegedly discovered he had faith healing powers. The PBMA was initially established in the town of Aloran of Misamis Occidental to practice the powers (Vitug 1995, 41). As his followers began to grow, he returned to Dinagat Island and opened a healing clinic in San Jose. The reputation of his healing ability quickly grew by word of mouth, and patients came to consult him one after another even from the outside the island. More and more people seeking Ruben’s spiritual power migrated to San Jose and became fervent followers of the PBMA. In the 1980s, Ruben claimed that the organization had more than 20,000 members (Vitug 1995, 41).

The PBMA defines members as “a non-sectarian, non-profit, humanitarian, and a brotherhood organization” (PBMA website). Although it has no specific doctrine, members’ faith is based on spiritual guide Ruben allegedly learned from ancient mysteries. The organization titled Ruben as “Divine Master,” and his followers treated him as a Christ-like figure.4 Importantly, their faith was primarily created and strengthened not by spiritual guidance but by recognition of Ruben’s healing power that allegedly actually cures people’s diseases.

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4 Paying attention to Ruben’s unique and untouchable position as the Divine Master, Vitug assesses the PBMA as a “religious cult” in spite of their denial of it (1995, 47).
Because ordinary hospitals were far from Dinagat Island and their fees were expensive, poor people had little choice but to go to Ruben’s clinic when they got sick (Tupaz 2013a). Through this free medical (faith healing) service, the PBMA successfully organized marginalized people. As Vitug put it:

In the case of the PBMA, the reason for joining includes the promise of salvation, the cure for ailments and the expectation that the PBMA can help alleviate poverty. Lack of education, limited wealth and low status in society were not considered deterrents in seeking a better life. The PBMA gave people hope. Furthermore, “belongingness” and acceptance by the group were highly regarded as benefits by its members.

Vitug 1995, 43

As politicians in Surigao del Norte tried to exploit Ruben’s organization for their own political ends, Ruben realized the importance of holding political power to protect and consolidate his dominant position in Dinagat Island. He started his political career in 1963 by becoming the town mayor of Dinagat (one of the seven towns in Dinagat Island) and kept the position for 24 consecutive years until his death. Under management by the ‘Divine Master’ with local political power over the “holy land” of the PBMA, in terms of the number of followers, their influence peaked in the 1970s.5

After Ruben died in 1987, the Ecleo family began their transformation into a political dynasty. While Ruben’s son, Ruben Ecleo Jr., inherited the position of Divine Master, the substantial management of the PBMA came under the control of Ruben’s wife, Glenda Ecleo. In 1987, Glenda was elected Congresswoman for the first district of Surigao del Norte Province, which covered Dinagat island. Other family members were also placed in various local elective posts. Glenda said, “I want my sons to run so that I will have good relationships with provincial officials. I even spoon-feed my son [Ruben Jr.]. I want teamwork” (Vitug 1995, 38). Under Glenda’s supervision, the Ecleo family formed a typical political dynasty.

However, the Ecleos family’s domination was still not secure. They found themselves confronted with intervention from political rivals in other areas of the province. In addition to Dinagat island, the first district of Surigao del Norte included Siargao Island, the second largest island in the district. Siargao-based

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5 While it was proclaimed that the PBMA had 500,000 followers in the 1970s, some observers regarded the number as exaggeration and estimated the real number at 100,000 to 200,000. Even though they had followers all over the country, its geographical influence was limited in Surigao del Norte, especially San Jose (Vitug 1995, 33).
politicians were watching eagerly for a chance to defeat the Ecleo clan to win the district congressional seat. As it turned out, Glenda did not always win the elections (she lost twice to candidates from Siargao in congressional races in the 1990s). The Ecleos also had to confront hostility from the provincial government. Without control of the provincial political power, the Ecleos’ dominance remained unstable. Even though the block vote of the PBMA was effective, it was not large enough to win gubernatorial elections. In this context, separation of Dinagat from Surigao del Norte came up as a serious strategy to maintain their bailiwick.

Starting in 2001, Glenda worked vigorously to pass a bill to make Dinagat an independent province in Congress. That was not to be easy, however. The first hurdle was the legal population requirement. An area needs to have a minimum population of 250,000 to become a province; Dinagat only had around 100,000 at that time. Glenda managed to overcome this requirement by allegedly manipulating the number of residents with the help of her political allies and then succeeded in moving the bill forward in 2003 (Vitug 2012, 137). The second hurdle appeared in 2005 in the Senate. The National Statistics Office (NSO) officials claimed that Dinagat did not meet the population requirement. The bishop of the archdiocese of Surigao del Norte also raised the same issue in a letter written to the Senate President. These attempts to protest did not change the majority of Senators’ minds. Enticed by the rich block vote of the PBMA, the majority of Senators voted for the bill (Vitug 2012, 138). According to the approved bill, a plebiscite was held in December 2006 as the final step leading to independent province status. While politicians and bishops in Surigao del Norte resisted to the very end, the plebiscite was favorable to separation (69,943 in favor, 63,502 against) since most Dinagatnons agreed with the Ecleos family that Dinagat had been marginalized in the province of Surigao del Norte. Dinagat Islands formally became a new province in January 2007 and Jade Ecleo, Glenda’s daughter, and Glenda were elected as Governor and House Representative respectively for the new province (Vitug 2012, 137–139).

However, the Ecleos’ struggle did not end with getting independent province status for Dinagat islands. Even as they found success excluding external threats, interfamilial conflicts arose. The first issue that developed into a feud was about the payment of the lawyers’ fees for winning the trial over the matter of independence from Surigao del Norte. The agreed amount was 2.5 million pesos; however, after winning the Ecleo family tried to pay 10 million

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6 Some politicians of Surigao del Norte appealed to the Supreme Court to nullify the independence of Dinagat Islands. Before the plebiscite, they pleaded for an order to stop the plebiscite. After this was dismissed and the independence was realized, they again asked...
pesos. Jade was upset, because as Governor, she was desperately dealing with the scarcity of financial resources of the brand-new province immediately after its creation, she couldn't abide her family's tendency to squander funds. Jade also criticized the PBMA for its excessive collection of donations from followers. This dissatisfaction evolved into a dispute over political posts. Jade was supposed to step aside after serving as Governor for only one term to be replaced by her mother in 2010. Nevertheless, Jade ran for vice governor as an independent candidate against Glenda's running mate, Elvis dela Merced. Although the Ecleo family campaigned for dela Merced, Jade won because she was popular among PBMA followers as a young icon. She had her vision for the way to develop Dinagat Islands. She wanted to make her home province a Singapore-like city (Tupaz 2013b).

In short, compared with the Ecleos' traditional mode of governance, which depended on the support of the mining industry and took up semi-compulsory donations from followers to maintain the family's dominance in the island, Jade aimed at more modernized and reformist style. As the following sections argue, this cleavage within the family would bring about a more serious crisis later.

In addition to Jade's opposition, another incident challenged the family's dominance. Although the position of Divine Master of the PBMA fell to Ruben Jr. after his father's death in 1987, he showed little concern about politics and religious activities. He "does not have flamboyance, charisma, flair for public speaking and leadership skills of his late father," writes Vitug. "A reluctant Divine Master, the son merely goes through the motions of holding the association together" (Vitug 1995, 34). He failed to even maintain the status quo. While he had been a Congressman (reluctantly) elected from the lone district of Dinagat Islands since 2010, the House of Representatives decided to exclude him from its members in May 2012. He was convicted on charges of corruption the Supreme Court to review the law that acknowledged the independence. However, this attempt was also in vain (Vitug 2012, 139–140).
and of killing his wife in 2002, but he went into hiding after the court canceled his bail and ordered his arrest in April 2011 (Fonbuena 2012). This disqualified him from the congressional seat. This blunder also triggered the decay of the Ecleo family. To fill the vacant congressional seat of Ruben Jr., the House of Representatives appointed a party-list Congresswoman, Arlene “Kaka” Bag-ao, as caretaker of Dinagat Islands.

3 Bag-ao’s Background and Task of Caretaker

Bag-ao was raised in Loreto, the northern part of Dinagat island. Although her family was no less poor than their neighbors, she got an opportunity to study in two universities in Manila, the De La Salle University and Ateneo de Manila University Law School, through scholarships. After passing the Bar Examinations in 1994, she had an opportunity to study at the University of Minnesota in the U.S. for one year as a Law and Human Rights Humphrey Fellow.

After engaging in various social activities during her university days, her experiences shaped her aspiration to work to help the marginalized sectors of society. She first worked as a community organizer helping urban poor communities in Metro Manila and jointly claimed the rights of housing. During her time as a student in De La Salle, she volunteered for leadership training for fisher folk and had the experience of living with them. During her days in Ateneo, she also volunteered to practice legal research for farmers (Cupin 2018). Recalling those days, Bag-ao said:

[A]ll my experiences as a student led me to engage with the basic sectors. I understood why they needed proper housing, why farmers needed land because they were the tillers. That influenced me – on what kind of lawyer I wanted to be after.

CUPIN 2018

Her experience supporting the Sumilao farmers movement especially had a decisive impact on her ability to articulate a progressive standpoint. The Sumilao farmers movement was an outstanding struggle by farmers of Sumilao town to successfully regain their ancestral lands from powerful landlords and big companies. Although Higaonons, indigenous people of the Southern Philippines, had long lived in the valleys of Sayawan and Palaopao mountains in Bukidnon Province, they did not hold legal ownership of their land. In 1988, they were declared beneficiaries of 137 hectares under the land distribution of
the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law. However, the titular landowner of
the designated land, Norberto Quisumbing, Sr., resisted the mandate by pur-
suing legal actions. This was the beginning of the struggle. Sumilao farmers
fought back hard in various ways such as petitions, hunger strikes, marches,
and trials. Lobbying presidents and central government offices, after many
twists and turns over two decades, the farmers eventually succeeded in regaining
the land (Pakisama 2007). This attracted the attention of the whole coun-
try, as a case where agrarian reform was materialized through local farmers’
persistent efforts. Bag-ao provided the farmers with legal support for more
than 10 years. Through this movement, she learned how marginalized the poor
are in Philippine society and yet how persistent the same poor people can fight
against injustice. Her integration with the peasants’ and indigenous struggle
for justice in Bukidnon served as foundations of her advocacy for program-
matic politics.

Bag-ao’s engagement with the Sumilao farmers’ movement was also one
reason why she went into politics. Appreciating her work as a lawyer in
Sumilao, the democratic socialist party Akbayan asked her to be a nominee for
the party-list elections. The party also valued the fact that she was a woman
and from the Mindanao region (Cupin 2018). Akbayan, as a party hoping to
represent the various marginalized sectors of society such as farmers, fisher
folk, workers, women, and LGBT, thought a person like Bag-ao was an ideal
candidate to consolidate the party’s identity. She accepted the offer and ran
for the party-list election in 2010. As Akbayan obtained more than one mil-
lion votes, Bag-ao started her new career as a politician. In her first term in
Congress, she vigorously promoted numerous progressive legislations, such as
the Anti-Discrimination Bill and the Comprehensive HIV and AIDS Bill. Above
all, she became the principal author of the Reproductive Health Law, which
had been blocked mainly by the Catholic Church’s obstinate opposition. This
was one of the most controversial and progressive pieces of legislation in the

Bag-ao’s first term as a Congresswoman did not end with her work in
Manila. A chance to engage with her home province suddenly came up when
she was appointed caretaker of the lone district of Dinagat Islands after
Ruben Jr. was ousted from the House roster. This gave her a timely opportunity
to address Dinagatnons’ plight under the Ecleos.

What Bag-ao did as caretaker was to implement projects meeting people’s
basic human needs. She points out:
I submitted projects based on my analysis of what the problems in Dinagat were, which is actually a no-brainer because if you go to Dinagat, it's simple: there's no water, no power, no roads, no hospital, no school. You don't even need to talk about theories of human rights.

CUPIN 2018

She was lucky to be able to implement these projects because her predecessor, Ruben Jr., left 177 million pesos of the Priority Development Assistance Fund (PDAF) unspent. With these funds, she carried out infrastructure projects (120 million pesos), scholarship programs (8 million pesos), free medical assistance (3 million pesos), and so on (Gonzales 2016).

The Ecleo family had been indifferent to developing the island and improving welfare service until Bag-ao came in. The economy of the island was not working well. Because roads were left unpaved, fisher folk of Loreto had to sell fish to markets in Surigao City (in the mainland) by boat and people of San Jose went to Surigao to buy those fish by boat. As of 2012, the national highway of the island was cemented only for 40 of its 105 kilometers (Gonzales 2016). As of 2013, the island had only three small district hospitals, which served a population of more than 100,000 (Tupaz 2013a). The mining industry was a hotbed of corruption. The Ecleos always solicited bribes from mining companies (Lagroma 2016). The major reason why the Ecleos called for the independence of Dinagat Islands was about the allotment of development funds. The Ecleos claimed and people believed that Dinagat was poor because it has been treated badly in budget allocation within the province. So, Dinagatnons expected that independence would lead to development. However, projects hardly ever proceeded to fruition, although there were many ghost projects to benefit the Ecleos’ purse (Lagroma 2016).

People were therefore surprised at the success of Bag-ao’s projects and began to change their minds about politics. Although the Ecleos had exploited the Countrywide Development Fund (CDF), the predecessor of PDAF, since the 1990s, the fund was spent mainly on livelihood projects of the PBMA-related cooperatives. Consequently, beneficiaries were geographically concentrated in San Jose. Historically in Dinagat, the national government funds only profited a narrow range of PBMA followers and the Ecleo family themselves (Vitug 1995, 38–39). According to a staff member of the Bag-ao camp, most people in Dinagat didn’t even recognise the name “CDF” or “PDAF” because they had never seen tangible things funded by them (Gonzales 2016). When Bag-ao started projects, a clear contrast to the past was evident. Merly Lagroma, who ran for vice governor in Dinagat Islands in the 2013 elections from the Bag-ao camp, recalled:
That was the first money used for our highway, for the bridges, multi-purpose buildings, barangay halls. That was also the first time that people realized 10% of SOP [Standard Operating Procedure] is not legal because Kaka did not take any money and pointed out it’s corruption. People were really surprised. Businessmen working as suppliers for government projects from Surigao del Norte often said we don’t want to deliver goods and services to Dinagat because we have to pay 10%.

LAGROMA 2016

Witnessing an alternative way of politics for the first time, some Dinagatnons, including members of PBMA, started to change their views on the role of government. This led to turmoil in subsequent elections.

4 Election Fights and Progressive Governance

As the term of caretaker had almost expired, Bag-ao decided to run in the congressional race of the lone district of Dinagat Islands in 2013 and directly challenge the Ecleo dynasty. She felt that there were still lots of things she should and could do for her home island. She had a twofold election strategy. The first was to consolidate the votes of the northern municipalities such as Loreto, Tubajon, and Libjo where Lumads (indigenous people) had dwelt since before PBMA followers migrated to the island. The PBMA still had almost no influence in the areas. Yet, Lumads had allowed the Ecleos to occupy elective offices of the island because they didn’t have any effective political organizations. Bag-ao was the first substantive opposition against the Ecleos. Therefore, she was a highly anticipated candidate among Lumads. However, as Table 1 shows, the three northern municipalities only accounted for less than 30% of the total population of the province. This was not enough for Bag-ao to confront the Ecleos. Hence, her victory depended on a second strategy, which was to penetrate the PBMA votes of the southern municipalities. Since some followers were tired of paying forcible donations to the Ecleos and disappointed with the incompetence of their governance, this strategy had some chance of success.7

7 Recently, Ecleos asked each family of the PBMA followers to donate 2,000 pesos for their election campaigns. Then, Ecleos distributed 500 pesos to those families for vote-buying. The Bag-ao camp jokingly called it “patronage refund” (Gonzales 2016).
Beyond Personalistic Politics

To attract PBMA votes, Bag-ao could take advantage of the Ecleos’ continuous family feud. While Jade worked as vice governor after her victory in the 2010 elections against her family’s former arrangements, the friction between Jade and Glenda was still unresolved, and rather escalated. In the 2013 elections, Jade decided to run for governor to directly challenge her mother’s position. To stand up to her family’s block votes, she took a surprising turn, and allied herself with Bag-ao. That was because Jade had some sympathy with Bag-ao’s reformist agenda and, above all, the Bag-ao camp was backed by the then ruling party, the Liberal Party. Jade expected support from the national government. For Bag-ao, it was also useful to have Jade as an ally. Jade was able to win the 2010 vice gubernatorial election as an independent candidate because she successfully gained non-PBMA votes in both the northern and southern parts of the island as well as some PBMA votes critical of Glenda’s leadership. Thus, Jade’s voting constituencies were just what Bag-ao hoped to capture. Besides, by shaking hands with Jade, Bag-ao could avoid direct confrontation with the authority of the PBMA. This was important if she was to penetrate the PBMA voting bloc.

To understand how deep the PBMA followers’ internal discontent was, the history of Merly Lagroma is worth referencing. She was born in Bacolod City, Negros Occidental. Her father worked as a civil servant in charge of cockfighting in farmlands. When he got intestinal cancer at the age of 43, the Mayor of Bacolod City introduced him to Ruben Ecleo, Sr. Ruben visited the hospital in which he was hospitalized and brought him to Dinagat island to cure. When he came back to the hospital of Bacolod, his cancer had miraculously been cured. After this experience, he became devoted to Ruben and decided to move to

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**TABLE 1** The population of municipalities of Dinagat Islands in 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Municipalities</th>
<th>Population (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Basilisa</td>
<td>33,880 (26.7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cagdianao</td>
<td>15,047 (11.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dinagat</td>
<td>12,786 (10.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Libjo</td>
<td>17,567 (13.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loreto</td>
<td>8,920 (7.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Jose</td>
<td>31,035 (24.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tubajon</td>
<td>7,568 (6.0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

_SOURCE: NATIONAL STATISTICS OFFICE (2013)_
Dinagat with his family in 1981. He lived until 2015. Lagroma herself became a politician to serve the PBMA. She first worked as a municipal councilor of San Jose and later as a provincial board member of Surigao del Norte. During her term as a provincial board member, she felt acutely the necessity of financial support for health care service and funeral parlors in Dinagat. Receiving a serious petition from a Dinagatnon, one day she consulted Glenda, “Will you please deposit a part of your CDF, two million or three million, for the Caraga Regional Hospital for Dinagatnons so that we can provide them medical assistance and medicines?” Glenda answered, “No, Merly. That’s not my priority.” Lagroma realized that the Ecleos really had no interest in social welfare (Lagroma 2016). Although she felt guilty about leaving the Ecleos because they gave her a start as a politician, she couldn't bear to see Dinagatnons remain poor and without dignity. That was why she moved to the Bag-ao camp.

The election results of 2013 were a little bit complex. Although the outcomes depended on how serious the internal cleavage of the PBMA was, the election results did not directly reflect this point. As Table 2 shows, while Bag-ao defeated a candidate from the Ecleo family by 2,401 votes, Jade lost to Glenda by a narrow margin of 1,321 votes. Considering that the Ecleos gained steady votes of a little over 33,000 for each post in 2010, about 10,000 votes moved to the Bag-ao camp. This was a surprising change in the political history of Dinagat Islands. The media praised Bag-ao as a “dragon slayer.” However, Bag-ao obtained 2,729 more votes than Jade did. This may be attributed to the solid support for Bag-ao from the northern municipalities and Glenda’s religious authority as a substantive leader of the PBMA.

### Table 2: Election results in 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Congressmen (lone district)</th>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Votes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arlene Kaka Bag-ao</td>
<td>LP</td>
<td>24,206</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gwendolyn Ecleo</td>
<td>NP</td>
<td>21,805</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provincial governor</th>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Votes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Glenda Ecleo</td>
<td>NP</td>
<td>22,798</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geraldine (Jade) Ecleo</td>
<td>LP</td>
<td>21,477</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: NAFREL (2013)
As the new term started, Bag-ao continued and expanded what she did as caretaker. She focused on meeting the basic needs of the people and providing effective administrative services, specifically 1) roads, 2) hospitals, 3) scholarship programs, 4) water supply, and 5) electricity supply. Above all, more than 20 billion pesos were made available for constructing roads and bridges from 2013 to 2015 (Table 3). This amount largely exceeded what a congressman could raise under the PDAF system (70 million pesos per year). After the PDAF was abolished by President Aquino and declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court because of the revelation of a big scandal led by Janet Napoles, the budget allocation system became a more suggestion-based one. Bag-ao made use of this new system and vigorously negotiated with many agencies to materialize projects. Since there were few demands to construct roads and bridges in urban areas such as Metro Manila, funds allocated for those ends came to be distributed to relatively underdeveloped provinces under the new system (Gonzales 2016). What differentiated Bag-ao from the Ecleos in implementing projects was that she did not treat her supporters with more favor, she delivered various projects equally to San Jose, the stronghold of the Ecleo family. Another change was that she did not label projects with her name as is usually done in patronage politics. Directly reflecting people’s voices and making projects participatory were also important elements in Bag-ao’s governance.

She said:

If there are still funds available, I ask them [local people] what’s next, so they are aware that we decide based on needs, not political accommodation, and make sure if it is appropriate in terms of population of a barangay. A barangay without water should be provided a water facility as a priority. Sometimes a barangay with a bigger population needs double the assistance as compared to smaller barangays. We debate on this so people would understand. Sometimes they forget that I am Congresswoman and get angry with me about decisions that have been arrived at. I would

---

8 Mendoza and Timberman explain it in more detail:

“Post-PDAF, members of Congress now focus principally on “Congressional insertion” – earmarks included in agency budgets for projects and programs requested by members of Congress. In keeping with the Supreme Court ruling, these insertions must be made prior to passage of the budget. They may reduce the opportunity for the corruption that took place under PDAF by reducing the role members of Congress have in selecting the contractors and implementers in their districts. However, the insertions may be less transparent than the line items used under PDAF. Members of Congress who are particularly effective lobbyists may also be able to secure larger budget insertions than was possible under PDAF. (2019, 241)”.

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sleep in the community and talk to them at night because they are shy to talk in broad daylight.

Rappler 2019

In the 2016 elections, Bag-ao ran for reelection. Her strategy was the same as previous one; however, Jade was no longer her ally. Although Jade assessed the election result of 2013 positively by saying “the slim margin says it all, the people of Dinagat are slowly rejecting abuse, corruption, and manipulation as a form of governance” (Adorador 2013), she did not challenge her family in 2016. This may have been due to her mother’s illness. Yet, Jade's analysis of Dinagatnons' discontent was appropriate, and this could be even more of an advantage for the Bag-ao camp than in the last election. According to a staff of the camp, internal surveys indicated that around 40% of the PBMA followers supported Bag-ao (Gonzales 2016). Lagroma also observed that 62% of the people of San Jose secretly supported Bag-ao (Lagroma 2016). Given that she got only 35% of voters in the municipality in the 2013 elections, this was a big change.

The Bag-ao camp did not field a candidate for the gubernatorial race this time. As they did previously, they wanted to avoid a direct challenge to the icon of the PBMA to attract as many PBMA votes as possible. Second, the substantive power of the provincial government was held by the vice governor because Glenda was suffering a serious disease. Hence, the Bag-ao camp fielded a candidate only for the vice gubernatorial race.

The Ecleos’ 2016 election campaign was the most aggressive they had ever done. Their tactics were twofold; one was the massive vote-buying. The Ecleos distributed 200 pesos per head. The other was outright intimidation. Appealing to their followers' faith, the Ecleos told them, “If you do not choose the right choice by which you follow the teachings of Divine Master, you could not go to heaven” (Bag-ao 2016). Jade, who allied with Bag-ao in 2013, ran for the congressional race to defeat Bag-ao this time. For the Ecleo family, this young reformist icon of the PBMA was the most hopeful candidate to halt Bag-ao's penetration. According to Bag-ao, although Jade had a reformist bent, her fundamental aims were to maintain the Ecleos’ political domination and to loyally follow her father's teachings. From this point of view, she thought the traditional style of governance was no longer an effective way to pursue these ends. Jade had allied herself with Bag-ao just because it was a useful tactic in her family feud. If Bag-ao had not belonged to the ruling party, Jade would never have joined her (Bag-ao 2016). In 2016, the Ecleo family was reunited to beat Bag-ao.
The election results of 2016 were once again complex (Table 4). Bag-ao defeated Jade by obtaining more votes than last time. This meant that Bag-ao’s strategy and her governance style proved to be effective in confronting dynastic politics. Glenda was reelected without opposition. The problem was the vice gubernatorial race. Babie Lagada, from the Bag-ao camp, was defeated by the Ecleos with far fewer votes than Bag-ao. It seemed that the political platform of the camp did not fully penetrate constituencies even though Bag-ao’s leadership was highly esteemed. Some staff and supporters of the camp were disappointed with the result. Acknowledging that the Ecleos’ election campaign was very effective, they wondered why the majority of voters still supported the Ecleos despite the fact that the Bag-ao camp’s projects benefited all Dinagatnons. Yet, Bag-ao had a different perspective:

It is natural that my projects of three years did not lead to consolidating our electoral base because I did not attach my name to those projects. I just did what the government should do. I just provided basic administrative services that Ecleos had not done so far. But I feel people are getting conscious about what the government should do and what good governance is. Their political awareness is growing little by little.

Bag-ao’s governance demonstrated how progressive forces in today’s Philippines can change traditional politics. Certainly, the Ecleo dynasty will not fall apart overnight since it has deep roots in various aspects of Dinagatnons’ social life. However, it proved to be neither stable nor changeless. Once strategically well-organized alternatives and competent leadership emerge, the entrenched domination was undermined sooner than expected. This exemplifies how real struggles evolve and how traditional governance can be transformed.

**Table 3** Projects directed by Arlene Bag-ao (2012–2016)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Amount of fund (peso)</th>
<th>Note</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National roads and</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Concreting of 11 km of national road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bridges</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>304,000,000</td>
<td>32 bridges along the national road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>757,600,000</td>
<td>18 bridges along the national road and concreting of 21.7 km of national road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project</td>
<td>Year</td>
<td>Amount of fund (peso)</td>
<td>Note</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roro ports</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>1,100,000,000</td>
<td>6 bridges along the national road and concreting of 35.29 km of national road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>691,549,000</td>
<td>Concreting of 20.956 km of national road</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistance to municipal and barangay local government units</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>51,800,000</td>
<td>Expansion of Port of San Jose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2012–13</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Multicabs units to 77 different barangays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Generators to 7 islands and remote barangays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scholarship and educational assistance</td>
<td>2012–13</td>
<td>6,000,000</td>
<td>1,025 beneficiaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2013–14</td>
<td>14,000,000</td>
<td>1,924 beneficiaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2014–15</td>
<td>22,000,000</td>
<td>2,346 beneficiaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2015–16</td>
<td>24,300,000</td>
<td>1,821 beneficiaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2016–17</td>
<td>8,000,000</td>
<td>935 beneficiaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medical assistance</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>5,000,000</td>
<td>Caraga Regional Hospital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>3,000,000</td>
<td>Caraga Regional Hospital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>7,000,000</td>
<td>Caraga Regional Hospital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>500,000</td>
<td>Davao Medical Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>500,000</td>
<td>Albor District Hospital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>500,000</td>
<td>Loreto District Hospital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>400,000</td>
<td>Dinagat District Hospital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>5,000,000</td>
<td>Caraga Regional Hospital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>500,000</td>
<td>Davao Medical Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>2,500,000</td>
<td>Caraga Regional Hospital</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>700,000</td>
<td>Davao Medical Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>500,000</td>
<td>Philippine Heart Center</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>300,000</td>
<td>National Kidney and Transplant Institute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistance for individuals in crisis (AICS)</td>
<td>2013–15</td>
<td>3,300,000</td>
<td>Burial, educational, financial, medical, food subsidy, and transportation assistance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>2,000,000</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Materials provided by Arlene Bag-ao
5 Conclusion

This paper demonstrates how programmatic politics evolve in real contention with a political dynasty. The basic method of Bag-ao’s programmatic politics was to provide basic administrative services and to meet people’s demands equally based on their voice by mobilizing resources of the national government. Since the Ecleos family had not done that for decades, Bag-ao’s style looked fresh to Dinagatnons. As Bag-ao herself expressed, “We showed the contrast of participation versus patron”9 (Rappler 2019). This led to a new emerging political awareness in the constituencies of Dinagat Islands and gave Bag-ao consecutive wins in the congressional elections of 2013 and 2016.

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9 In more detail, Bag-ao sums up characteristics of her leadership as follows:

“(1) participatory governance rooted in the principles of popular inclusion, empowerment, and democratic processes; (2) equity and development for the people with preferential option for the poor and vulnerable; and (3) human rights and dignity as the basis for development. (Bag-ao 2019)”.

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**Table 4** Election results in 2016

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Congressman (lone district)</th>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Votes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arlene Kaka Bag-ao</td>
<td>LP</td>
<td></td>
<td>26,803</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geraldine (Jade) Ecleo</td>
<td>UNA</td>
<td></td>
<td>24,667</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provincial governor</th>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Votes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Glenda Ecleo</td>
<td>UNA</td>
<td></td>
<td>29,202</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provincial vice-governor</th>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Party</th>
<th>Votes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Benglen Ecleo</td>
<td>UNA</td>
<td></td>
<td>23,520</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Babie Lagada</td>
<td>LP</td>
<td></td>
<td>18,091</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Materials provided by Arlene Bag-ao*
This evolution of Bag-ao’s programmatic politics was made possible for the following two reasons. First, Bag-ao was able to access resources of the national government, such as PDAF. It was due to her smooth relationship with the national government as well as being part of the ruling political coalition at that time that she could deliver various projects to the province. The Ecleos’ domination was also historically based on a close relationship with the national government. They were always on the side of presidents and ruling parties since the Marcos period (Vitug 1995, 40). The independence of Dinagat was approved, in part, because of their strong ties with President Arroyo (Vitug 2012, 140). The Benigno Aquino administration was perhaps the first time they failed to build a relationship with the ruling party. Bag-ao was in a position to make use of this against the Ecleos. She was a member of Akbayan, which was a part of the ruling coalition of the Aquino administration, and her candidacy for elections was endorsed and supported by the Liberal Party. In this sense, political hegemony in local politics of the Philippines still depends on ties with the national government. Second, the Ecleos’ family feud opened an opportunity for Bag-ao to penetrate local politics. The contradictions embedded in dynastic governance not only undermine their power base but also allow counterforces to penetrate. If Ruben Ecleo, Jr. had not been an incompetent leader and killed his wife, Bag-ao would never have had the chance to engage in Dinagat Islands politics. If the Ecleos had taken care of constituencies more considerately, even Bag-ao’s programmatic governance could not have produced such remarkable results.

It is important to figure out these objective conditions beyond personalities of political actors. Previous literature studying progressive politics in the Philippines tend to focus on personal political styles. However, this progressive orientation does not always succeed in gaining power. If so, we need to pay more attention to external conditions that make progressive forces possible to thrive. By describing the context of political contention between a progressive politician and a political dynasty, this paper showed that available resources and opportunities are crucial for political transformation.

In a broader sense, Bag-ao’s programmatic politics showed a way to enhance the quality of Philippine democracy. Bag-ao herself is conscious of this. She said:

My fight in Dinagat is not simply against the Ecleos. The main reason I ran for Congress was to confront the entrenched political dynasty which is an obstacle in building democratic institutions. This is my political platform. I explain to the people of Dinagat that I am not simply fighting
against Ecleo. It is a fight to make people aware that poverty is not normal. I made people understand that I entered politics not simply because I want to make enemies with their masters but because I want to be of help to the people. Because of this, they saw me as a viable alternative. 

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Despite the longest history of having an electoral system in Asia, the Philippines is a country where the democratic system has not been seen to be working well. This is not a matter of election, but rather a matter of the government’s capacity to respond to the voices of the people and the absence of more mainstream programmatic politics and parties. Kuhonta points out:

> [I]n a political system where political parties are simply vehicles or elite access to power and where they show little interest in building programs, in responding directly to the interests of citizens, and in incorporating the masses into the polity, by the criteria of performance or responsiveness, the Philippine democratic regime fundamentally lacks legitimacy. (2016, 82)

Personalistic politics has sustained this characteristic. In contrast, Bag-ao’s programmatic politics in Dinagat Islands was an attempt to establish the legitimacy of the democratic regime by responding to the interests and needs of citizens while also using links with national leaders and the ruling political party or coalition. In other words, it was also an attempt to make the government an organization to pursue and work for public interest in a country where the boundary between public and private is ambiguous. Fortunately,

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10 The Philippine government, especially the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG), has engaged in various capacity building activities to materialize programmatic governance at the local level since the late 1990s. They have been carried out for newly elected national and local government leaders to be familiar with all the laws, administrative issuances, and programs as well as services based on development plans of the country. In a broad context, Bag-ao’s governance is situated in a long-term orientation of Philippine politics toward programmatic governance in the post-EDSA period.

11 As Kawanaka (2002) explored, Jesse Robredo, then Mayor of Naga City, practiced progressive governance by effectively responding to demands of constituencies. Kawanaka also noted that a dynamic of local politics is created by linking with the national government. In this sense, Bag-ao’s governance style is similar with Robredo’s. One of the historical roots of Philippine progressive politics seems to lie in Robredo’s mode of governance.
people responded to this. This indicates a possible way to achieve future political development in the Philippines.

Finally, this study was unable to interview members of the Ecleo family and ordinary people in the province. This seems to make the article somewhat one-sided and incomplete though secondary documents on the Ecleos’ perspectives were used as well to validate the primary data gathered by this researcher. I recommend future researchers on local politics to conduct interviews with various actors from different sides as much as possible to describe political struggles vividly and enrich analyses. In addition, future studies should include comparative theoretical analyses toward local politics and more attention to the roles of female politicians in the Philippines.

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