

Final Report: Scott Kloeck-Jenson Internship 2007
Teresa Melgar
Phd Candidate, Department of Sociology

As a Scott Kloeck-Jenson International Internship awardee, I spent some four months in the Philippines (May-August 2007) working with the Institute for Popular Democracy (IPD), a key civil society organization seeking to build more democratic institutions and advance citizenship rights, and undertaking follow-up research for my dissertation in Naga City, in the province of Camarines Sur.

I had previously worked with the IPD prior to my graduate studies in Madison, so in many ways, this was like a homecoming for me. In IPD planning workshops and various fora sponsored by its partner organizations, I gave presentations of my current dissertation research: a comparative study of efforts by state actors and activists to reconstruct historically clientelist local political institutions and deepen democratic participation in the Philippines and Brazil. As I expected, Philippine activists were keen to know more about the prospects of sustaining local democratic reforms in the city of Porto Alegre, Brazil, where I had conducted fieldwork. In this context, my internship with IPD gave me a chance to share with a Philippine audience, experiences emanating from another part of the world, and open up discussions on what insights they may hold for similar democratization efforts in the country.

The timing of my trip to the Philippines could not have also been more propitious. Elections for governors, mayors and other local officials were scheduled in May 2007. In recent years, local elections have become a nodal point for reform efforts in the Philippines: grassroots activists, often linked to reform-oriented political parties, have been challenging local political elites and contesting elective positions in order to reform governance. Through IPD, I was also able to join an International Observer Team that monitored the conduct of electoral processes in Camarines Sur, a province to the south of Manila. This gave me the opportunity to observe first hand how people mobilized to secure and protect their votes, amid the constant threat of violence and fraud; the tremendous role played by media, the churches and citizens groups – often employing new forms of technology like text messaging – to ensure that electoral results were

upheld; and the highly pitched electoral battles between the “old” and “new,” more reform-oriented ways of doing politics.

Finally, the Scott Kloeck-Jenson internship award also enabled me to conduct follow-up research in Naga City, one of the sites relevant to my comparative study of local democratization processes in the Philippines and Brazil. The city of Naga, in recent years, has gained considerable attention in the Philippines due to the apparent success of its local democratic reforms in improving the delivery of public services; reducing corruption in government; enhancing transparency in policy-making and increasing people’s participation in governance processes.

Through interviews with key informants in the Naga City local government, including the mayor, vice-mayor, some local legislators and mid-level civil servants, I examined further some of the key dynamics that accompanied reform processes in the city. These interviews brought to light the tension that local state officials often felt between adopting policies that responded broadly to citizens’ long-term developmental needs, and those that were more politically expedient for the short-term, and the challenges they often had to face in navigating these two competing imperatives. In addition, these interviews gave me considerable insight into some of the problems which have arisen among Naga’s so-called landmark reform programs on housing for the urban poor and people’s participation in governance.

The internship likewise enabled me to observe the local elections in Naga itself in May 2007. Elections provide important windows into the character of democratization processes in the Philippines. In many localities, the election season brings to the fore some of the most undemocratic features of Philippine politics: vote buying; the manipulation of clientelistic ties to poor communities to secure votes; fraud and violence. Through interviews with some of the local candidates and their campaign organizers, I learned about the electoral strategies that were used to gain support especially among urban poor communities. I also interviewed key grassroots leaders and collected newspaper accounts of the electoral campaign and political debates among candidates. These activities have helped me assess the extent to which political culture has indeed changed – or remained the same -- in a city that has gained broad recognition for political reforms.

The Scott Kloeck-Jenson internship provided an important learning opportunity and a wonderful chance to touch base again with political developments in my native country. For a brief but significant period, it also enabled me to share much of what I had learned from my field research elsewhere with various civil society groups seeking to further democratize Philippine society. For giving me a chance to do all this, I am deeply grateful to the people behind the Scott Kloeck Jenson award: Scott's parents and the UW Global Studies Program.