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# *Barangay*

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*Barangay* is the lowest political administrative unit of the Philippine government. Together with the municipal and provincial government, the *barangay* is considered the fundamental base of the Philippine national government.

## PRECOLONIAL PERIOD: *BALANGAI*

The term *barangay* dates back to precolonial times. Most scholars assert that it originated from the word *balangai*, the boat used by Malay ancestors to reach the Philippine islands (Scott 1997). Groups of boats, containing chieftains and their families, kin, and slaves, were said to have arrived in the islands and the people settled in coastal areas. These areas were their sources of livelihood, with access to trade and economic activity with neighboring lands. Earlier communities were governed by a *datu*, the highest-ranked leader, of royal blood and a member of the nobility. With a group of elders, the *datu* functioned as "lawmaker, judge and executive" (Zamora 1967, 79).

## SPANISH PERIOD (1521–1898): *BARANGAY* TO *BARRIO*

When the Spanish arrived in 1521, the *barangays* were already highly organized large communities which possessed a form of political organization and were flourishing in trade. The growing population in the *barangays* led the Spaniards to introduce *Reduccion*, a resettlement policy that regrouped small *barangays* into compact *pueblos* (towns). Before the Spanish came, a *barangay* consisted of immediate families and kin; after the *Reduccion*, *barangays* were reorganized according to geographical location and administrative convenience. The Spanish eventually created a centralized system of government with four major territorial divisions: the provinces as the largest administrative territorial division; municipal towns or *pueblos*; cities; and *barangays*, which were renamed *barrio*, a Spanish term that means "neighborhood."

Although the Spanish government retained the leadership position of the *datu*s, their main function was reduced to collecting tributes. Under Spanish rule, they were called *cabeza de barangay* (head of the *barangay*), who governed 50 to 100 families for the efficient collection of taxes. The *cabezas* were later renamed *barrio* lieutenants. With this type of structure, the ruling government formally established its connection with the *barrio*, albeit only through the collection of taxes for the Spanish crown.

Basic community services were provided by *cofradias* (religious fraternities) but primarily by the local residents of the *barrio*. Reciprocal exchange of labor was present between families or neighbors, and at times entire communities would assist residents who needed help. This voluntary labor was determined through taking turns in assistance, called *turnuhan* (a turn), a Tagalog word originating from the Spanish term *turno* (Bankoff 2004). This informal labor exchange arrangement persisted until after the Philippines gained its independence (Hollnsteiner 1968).

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## AMERICAN PERIOD (1898–1946): CREATION OF THE RURAL COUNCIL

With the aim of introducing democracy from below, the Americans laid the foundations for local governments to be self-governing by concentrating authority in the municipalities. Initially, the Americans wanted to grant local autonomy; however, they decided that the "best method of teaching Filipinos self-government was by American supervision" (Zamora 1967, 82). This supervision was the result of inefficiency and corruption caused by Filipino elites who held positions in local government, and was a means of preventing "the evils of unrestricted and still untutored Filipino rule" (Atienza 2006, 421). As such, decisions were subject to the approval of the central government in Manila (Zamora 1967); therefore political life continued to be centralized.

At the *barangay* level, the rural council was created. Its task included representing *barrios*, submitting suggestions for *barrio* improvements, informing the *barrio* of the creation of new laws, and generally cooperating in local activities with the American government. The *barrio* lieutenant served as its head, with four councilmen appointed by the municipal council. His function was to assist the municipal councilor in the performance of his duties to the *barrio*. Such dependence rendered the council ineffective. When the Philippines gained its independence in 1946, the state of local government was "neither sound, active, nor particularly democratic" (Bundgaard 1957, 262).

## PHILIPPINE INDEPENDENCE (1946–1971): POLITICAL BEGINNINGS OF THE *BARRIO*

In the postwar years, the conditions that beset the *barrio* were highly problematic. With no legal entity to mobilize funds for local improvement, residents were incapable of collecting taxes for public infrastructure. Services were provided solely by the municipal government and were limited. While government and nongovernment entities were present in the *barrios* to help out, they inadvertently confused residents with duplication of services and credit-grabbing.

The *barrio* then became the center of attention. With postwar conditions paving the way for communities to become more self-dependent, communist influence began to spread. In an effort to thwart this, the national government changed its efforts at rural development to start "policies aimed at decentralizing government and promoting grassroots cooperative organizations" (Bankoff 2004, 275).

In 1955 the *barangay* was on its way to self-governance, with the creation of the Barrio Council Law (RA 1408) and the Barrio Charter (RA 2370). While the Barrio Council Law laid the legal foundations, it also reflected the increased legal dependency of the *barrio* on the municipalities. As a result of criticism from the public, the Barrio Charter of 1960 was introduced as an amendment to the law, which gave *barrios* greater independence and autonomy as local government bodies. *Barrios* can now hold elections and vote for their own officials. The charter also enabled *barrios* to organize the *barrio* assembly, collect taxes and contributions for community development, and exercise legislative powers. It also amended and clarified the rights of *barrio* officials, their tenure of office, compensation, and nonmonetary work benefits (Zamora 1967). A major landmark was the *barrio* assembly, which was likened to the congress version of the *barrio*. It was seen as "a truly representative government … with opportunity to discuss the barrio problems and their solutions" (Zamora 1967, 90).

In 1963, with the Revised Barrio Charter (RA 3590), *barrio* lieutenants were

renamed *barrio* captains, and were now elected officials.

## MARCOS PERIOD (1972–1986): MARTIAL LAW IMPOSED THROUGH *BARANGAY*

During the period of martial law, the *barangay* was used as the fundamental unit through which the dictatorship exercised power. In 1972 Marcos created citizen assemblies at the *barangay* levels to "broaden the base of citizen participation in the democratic process" (Presidential Decree No. 86, 1972). While Marcos called the *barangay* a part of the Philippine participatory democracy, he used it to ensure control "down to the neighborhood and *sitio* level, by *tuta* [puppets], *alalays* [supporters] and control squads" belonging to the ruling political party (De Guzman 2010). He even used citizen assemblies to "justify the extension of martial law." Marcos also changed the name *barrio* to *barangay*, as the former was "of foreign origin" (Presidential Decree No. 557, 1974). The *barrio* captain became known as *barangay* captain, who were instruments of power situated at community level for the re-election of Marcos's allies to national government positions.

## DECENTRALIZATION–DEMOCRATIZATION MOVEMENT IN THE 1990s

The centralization of authority during martial law paved the way for decentralization to be taken seriously. While the 1987 Philippine Constitution granted autonomy to local government units, it was the 1992 Local Government Code (LGC) that defined their powers. The LGC gave local government units control over social services and the enforcement of laws and regulations, an increased share of funding, and the ability to form of partnerships with private sector (Atienza 2006). The Urban Development and Housing Act, passed by the Philippine Congress in the same year, reinforced the powers of the local government and civil society engagements in governance (Porio 2009). It also enabled democratic decentralization, as it allowed citizen participation through the creation of councils composed of civil society and nongovernmental entities (Atienza 2006). As an example, the Barangay Development Council (BDC) sets the *barangay*'s direction in economic and social development and is composed of the Barangay Council, representatives of people's organizations and nongovernmental organizations, and a representative of the congressman.

The Ramos Administration (1992–1998) further institutionalized this movement with the Social Reform Agenda (SRA), which enabled "consultation and participation of marginalized groups and sectors in local national governance processes" (Porio 2009, 11). The Aquino administration (2010–2016) highlighted themes of transparency and accountability, emphasizing citizen participation especially in budgeting and the provision of government services. Despite opening avenues for increased collaboration between civil society and the government, the decentralization–democratization framework continued to allow predatory politics and clientelism to exist (Porio 2017).

## CONTEMPORARY *BARANGAY*

The modern *barangay* is headed by the *barangay* captain, aided by the *barangay* council, composed of seven councilors and the chairman of the youth council. These officials are elected every three years. *Barangays* also have a *barangay* justice system, where community leaders and elders provide alternative dispute resolution through mediating between community members in conflict.

This allows for a quicker and less expensive judicial process at the *barangay* level.

The *barangay* continues to be embedded in the decentralization–democratization framework. Currently, *barangays* serve as the basic unit for governance and leadership, delivery of services, planning and budgeting, and aggregating community-based information systems (Villarin 2004).

*Barangays* also play an important role in disaster preparedness as set out in the Disaster Risk Reduction Management (DRRM) guidelines. The Barangay Risk Reduction Management Plan, for example, is contextually driven, appropriate, responsive, and effective for local needs (Porio 2014). *Barangay* officials develop early warning signals, monitor floods in vulnerable areas, help in the evacuation of residents when necessary, among other tasks (Porio 2011).

*Barangays*, through the Community-Based Monitoring System (CBMS), contribute to the integration of local data on poverty, gender, and development; DRRM; and other development indicators to inform local planning and monitor program implementation. Through this, health, education, and social services delivery programs such as KALAHI-CIDSS (community-based livelihood), and the Conditional Cash Transfer Program or 4Ps are more focused on poverty reduction. *Barangays* are also now able to do "Barangay Bottom-Up Budgeting," where they engage in local planning and budgeting and can identify projects for their communities.

## CONCLUSION

Dating back to the precolonial period, the *barangay* has persisted and evolved into what it is now: from being a unit that physically grouped people to an autonomous entity that is increasingly addressing, representing, and articulating people's sociopolitical and economic needs before municipal or city councils through *barangay* planning and development activities and programs. Examples of these are gender budgeting (as defined by law, 5 percent of the *barangay* budget is allocated to gender-sensitive programs) and disaster risk reduction and management. The *barangay* has a history of a long struggle in shifting centralized power to a local democratic level where autonomy, control over resources, and citizen engagement continue to improve. In its current state, the *barangay* truly is the key frontline of local governance.

SEE ALSO: *Barrio*; Urban Governance

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