



## Breathing Life and Meaning to Democracy

Interview with Cebu City Councilor Alvin Dizon of the Philippines

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Editor's Note: Alvin Dizon is a three-term councilor from Cebu City, the oldest and fifth most populous city in the Philippines. In this interview with PRAKSIS, Councilor Dizon discusses his experience and the challenges he faced as a progressive politician.

**How does your position as a progressive politician within the Cebu City Council square with the reality that Philippine politics is still largely dominated by political dynasties? How significant was your journey and foray into electoral politics in bringing progressive politics and social democratic governance?**

Prior to my election as Cebu City Councilor, I had a long involvement in social development advocacies as NGO worker for almost 20 years, and our engagement extensively focused on key development and sectoral issues involving urban poor and housing rights, trade union rights, gender equality, active citizenship and participatory local governance. Essentially, we engaged both local and national governments in the arena of policy advocacy to push for measures that would recognize and protect the basic human rights of marginalized sectors.

Because of our development work with the poor, in 2009, around 500 urban poor groups and homeowners' associations in Cebu City were represented in a General Assembly convened for the purpose of arriving at an electoral agenda for the 2010 elections; and one of the decision points was to field local candidates to represent the interests of the urban poor to the Cebu City Council. I was one of the two candidates endorsed to run (the other one was a woman urban poor leader) to represent the city's civil society organizations (CSOs). We had coalesced with a local party, the *Bando Osmeña-Pundok Kauswagan* (BOPK, Team Osmeña-Progress Party), a local political movement that was formed in 1987 when former Mayor Tomas Osmeña first ran for mayor of Cebu City.

Guided by our profound appreciation for the ideals of

program-based politics, our campaign in 2010 was anchored on a clear and people-centered platform such as security of land tenure and decent housing for informal settlers, delivery of basic social services for the urban poor, citizens' participation in policymaking, right to livelihood of the informal sectors, environmental protection and youth access to education, among others.

Given the indispensability of financial resources in electoral campaigns, my candidacy was largely driven by funds raised by urban poor and civil society groups for us to be perceived as a serious candidate who was able to amplify the message to reach voters and to motivate them to take interest and vote for us given our track record and platform challenging a political culture and tradition dominated by personality, patronage and money.

For us, the elections of 2010 and 2013 were victories of the mass movement and civil society groups who backed our candidacy and made it as a political project in order to push for reforms in local governance in the City of Cebu. As City Councilor, we have remained steadfast in our ideals and committed to work even harder for a much broader constituency and with a greater sense of public accountability. At first glance, progressive or program-based politics may seem illogical within the traditional political economic framework, but our experience shows that people are receptive to our platforms when we actively engage with various sectors, keeping relevant our political alliances through the concrete results of our advocacies and programs.

**As City Councilor, what kind of policies and programs did you focus on and how did they serve to empower the city's poor and marginalized sectors? Did you encounter challenges or opposition in pushing for these policies? How were you able to eventually overcome them?**

We have passed progressive legislative measures that serve and empower the city's poor and marginalized sectors. Through collaborative legislation, we were able to craft these policies through the active participation of the various sectors such as the urban poor, elderly, women, youth, persons with disabilities (PWDs), LGBTQ, and environmental advocates, among others, depending on the theme and whose sector our proposed ordinance will stand to benefit or address a specific concern or issue.

It has been my core belief as a local legislator that I cannot arrogate upon myself any task unless I have fully understood the complexities, needs and concerns of my



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constituents. Thus, the ethics which I have always adhered to in my eight years as City Councilor (and I attributed this to my discipline as a social development worker for almost two decades) is the fidelity to the ideals of people's participation in democratic processes especially in public policy formulation.

Our legislative office has institutionalized the practice of involving various stakeholders in policymaking on the premise that active citizens' participation and engagement in local legislative processes is an important

framework that breathes life and meaning to democracy and concretizes the cooperation between the government and the people. We also strongly believe that when policies and programs have been discussed, formulated and implemented with active participation of our constituents, the rate of compliance and success is high. And when it comes to local policy making, it is fundamental to engage the people down to the *sitio* (grassroots) level to properly ground us with their issues so that the policy that we will formulate will not exist in a vacuum.

The crux of participatory democracy will always be active citizens' participation in shaping and implementing public policies and local lawmaking. Our legislations are focused on the following themes:

1. Housing and Sustainable Livelihood for the Poor
2. Women, Elderly, Youth, PWDs, LGBTQ Rights and Welfare
3. Citizen's Participation in Local Governance
4. Access to Education and Health Care
5. Climate Action

In our first and second term (2010-2016), we have passed some of the following ordinances:

- Adopting the Cebu City Shelter Plan Framework that will serve as Guidelines for all Housing Programs and Projects
- Providing Transfer Tax Exemption to all Socialized Housing Beneficiaries
- Prohibiting Discrimination in Cebu City on the bases of Disability, Age, Health Status, Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Ethnicity, and Religion
- Granting Free Parking Privilege for PWDs and Senior Citizens
- Adopting the Cebu City Barrier Free Tourism
- Creating the Cebu City College for Poor but Deserving Students
- Creating the Cebu City College Scholarship Program
- Providing Financial Assistance to all Cebu City Senior Citizens

- Providing Incentives to Cebu City Scholars Who Graduate with Honors

And in our third term (2019-present), we have authored some of the following ordinances:

- Creating a Dementia Screening and Intervention Program for Senior Citizens of the City of Cebu
- Prohibiting Foam Food Containers and Single-Use Plastics In all Public Events in the City of Cebu
- Providing Discounts and other Incentives to Solo Parents Pursuant to Republic Act No. 8972 also known as the “Solo Parents Welfare Act of 2000”
- Establishing the Cebu City Food Bank in Times of Public Health Emergencies and Disasters
- Reducing Food Waste Through Food Donation and Recycling
- Establishing the Cebu City United Nations Sustainable Goals (SDGs) Monitoring Council
- Defining Gender-Based Sexual Harassment and the Prohibited Acts in the Streets and Public Spaces of the City of Cebu as well as Adopting Penalties Pursuant to Republic Act No. 11313 or Safe Space Act
- Amending City Ordinance No. 2343 entitled “An Ordinance Regulating the Use of Plastic Shopping Bags within the Territorial Jurisdiction of the City of Cebu” (co-author)
- Establishing the Human Milk Bank in the Cebu City Medical Center and the Cebu City Health Department for the Support of Women and

Children in Need of Breast Milk, Providing Incentives to Milk Donors

- Establishing a Wellness and Healthy Lifestyle Program in All Barangays of the City of Cebu
- Institutionalizing the Cebu City Urban Food Gardening Program
- Establishing the Cebu City Air Quality Monitoring Council
- Prohibiting the Improper Disposal of Used Facemasks and other related COVID-19 Protective Gears and Products

Passing all these measures is only half of the victory that we have won since laws only become alive and relevant when fully and faithfully implemented by the executive department. Our ordinances on transfer tax exemption, college scholarship to public high school graduates, financial assistance to senior citizens, barrier-free tourism, and anti-discrimination were some of the policies that were able to bring concrete relief and help empower the sector they intend to benefit.

We were able to successfully pass these measures without encountering serious challenges or opposition from our colleagues in the City Council. This is mainly because of our participatory or collaborative approach in local legislation in which the sectors who initiated or helped us formulate the measures would themselves help in the lobbying for their passage. Also, we were never hostile nor confrontational in pushing for our agenda in the Cebu City Council, but we always conduct ourselves in a manner that is level-headed and welcoming of a healthy and principled debate and engagement from our colleagues.

### **What are the prospects for further progressive change in the City Council?**

Since 2010, we have established allies within the City Council from both the minority and majority bloc. This is primarily because of our good legislative track record and solid support from mass organizations and civil society groups. These allies are important elements who can help achieve our progressive legislative agenda in the City Council.

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Secondly, we have organized CSOs that are actively engaging the local government in public policymaking processes. It is also noteworthy that the Cebu City government was chosen as a best practice case on government-NGO partnership for poverty alleviation by the United Nations. In Cebu City, citizens' participation (via NGOs and peoples' organizations) in local governance is a combined result of two streams—one is the ordinance from the local government, and the other is Republic Act No. 7160 or

the Local Government Code of 1991 which provides various institutionalized bodies for citizens' participation.

Lastly, we have supportive mass media allies who help us amplify our legislative and good governance agenda. We remain strategic in our dealings with them especially in giving updates of our accomplishments and presenting our stand on important issues. Apart from going directly to the communities, this is also where we anchor our accountability since the media is one of the most powerful agents of democratic accountability.

### **What necessary policies or changes can be created to promote greater citizens' participation in governance?**

We had authored an ordinance entitled “An Ordinance Institutionalizing the Conduct of Offsite Sessions of the Cebu City Council” with the intent of making the Council more accessible to its constituents, thus promoting greater transparency and accountability and strengthening people's participation in local governance. In passing this measure, it is my belief that when we go to the communities, we continue to be more grounded and our constituents could better understand the intricacies of our work. One of the features of the ordinance is the conduct of the “Citizen's Hour” to provide a venue for our constituents to articulate their concerns and issues to the Council so they can be acted upon.

Another important path is to elect more progressive leaders to local government positions who can create more spaces for citizen's participation. The presence of progressives in mainstream politics is fundamental to push for reforms and make government more efficient and responsive to citizens.

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**How can they elect more social democrats and progressives to local government office?**

An important electoral project is to train local mass leaders for the electoral arena and to start engaging in *barangay* (village) elections to secure public office and push for progressive and reform-

oriented policies. The *barangay*, as the smallest political unit would be a good training ground for those who want to hone themselves in public service, pursue a career in electoral politics or challenge well-entrenched political dynasties.

The coronavirus pandemic has put the spotlight on local government officials, particularly at the

*barangay* level, in bringing much-needed public welfare goods and vital services to the people. And if we want to push for reforms in our political system, we should start in our *barangays* and the challenge is to train, support and make progressives win seats in *barangay* elections as an important foundation for deepening grassroots democracy. 📍

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