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New Religious Movements in the Philippines: Their Development, Political Participation, and Impact

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Abstract: The Philippines' new religious movements (NRMs) emerged in the context of the rise of the religious nationalism movement and gradually flourished during the martial law period in the 1970s. Compared with traditional Catholicism, the theology of NRMs is more realistic and temporal, therefore creating an inherent demand to become politicized. After the People Power Movement, changes in the social environment, media technology, and electoral system in the Philippines created conditions for NRM groups to participate in politics more extensively and directly. They intervened in the political process through various means, such as bloc voting and running for public positions, with characteristics such as opposition to the Catholic Church, proactive and pragmatic political strategies, grassroots appeals, and a transnational mass base. The participation of NRM groups in politics has impacted the Catholic Church's transcendental political status, enriched the political ecology dominated by oligarchic families, improved public welfare, and provided new channels for the voice of the grassroots. Overall, the rise of NRMs has not only changed the religious landscape of the Philippines but also profoundly affected its democratization process as an important factor, especially in the coming 2025 election.

Keywords: Philippines; Christianity; new religious movements; church–state relation; politicized religion



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1. Introduction

The Philippines has a total population of 116 million, of which about 80% are Catholics, the third largest number of Catholics in the world ([Philippine Statistics Authority 2023](#)). A deep religious culture has shaped prevailing attitudes towards faith and religious practices. Under the impact of modernization, Philippine society structure and values have undergone significant changes, providing fertile ground for the emergence and spread of new Christian denominations. By adapting to the needs of modern society and innovating religious rituals and doctrinal interpretations, the new religions have attracted a large number of Filipinos seeking a new faith experience and spiritual support. According to the Philippine Statistics Authority, Christians other than Catholics make up about 11% of the total Filipino population. Among them, the largest and most popular, the Iglesia ni Cristo (Church of Christ), accounts for about 2.6% of the population, while the remaining smaller denominations have congregations ranging in size from hundreds of thousands to millions. Compared to the Catholic Church, new religious groups are often more active and proactive in politics. They exert social and political influence disproportionate to their size, making them important variables in contemporary Philippine politics that cannot be ignored.

New religious movements drew public and academic attention in the 1950s and were initially referred to as “sects” or “cults”. Since the 1970s, the sociology of religion has developed the concept of “New Religious Movements” (NRMs). This term refers to religious groups that emerged through the modernization process and departed from traditional religious norms. They are always a marginal group and have introduced certain new doctrines. NRMs have several distinctive characteristics that differentiate them from traditional ecclesiastical institutions: First, they typically have a clear founding date and founder, who often possesses strong charisma and claims to have special divine revelation or mission. Second, their organizational structure tends to be more flexible and less hierarchical than traditional religions. Third, their doctrines and rituals often incorporate modern elements and local cultural features, reinterpreting traditional teachings. In the Philippine context, these NRMs retain the basic framework of Christianity while developing unique indigenous characteristics, becoming marginalized groups distinct from mainstream religions such as Catholicism.

Philippine NRMs discussed in this paper are mainly the religious groups included in the broader concept of “Christianity”. This includes emerging denominations that are independent from the Catholic Church, while derivatives of other religions, such as Islam, are not included. In this paper, the terms “New Religious Movements” (NRMs), “new religious groups”, and “NRM groups” will be used interchangeably depending on the context, but all refer to religious organizations that have moved away from traditional religious norms and emerged in the modernization process, particularly the four main organizations discussed in this paper: INC, JIL, El Shaddai, and KOJC. It is noteworthy that although El Shaddai is nominally still part of the Catholic Church, this paper categorizes it as an NRM rather than as a traditional Catholic internal organization like the Legion of Mary or Sacred Heart Movement. This is primarily because the organization substantially conforms to the defining features of NRM in terms of its political stance, theological characteristics, organizational structure, and religious practices. When “religions” is mentioned, it refers to broader religious traditions or belief systems, including Catholicism, Protestantism, and other non-Christian religions.

Most research on new religious movements in the Philippines is presented as case studies, typically from either internal or external perspectives. Among them, the former analyzes the differences between NRM and Catholicism in terms of theological stance and organizational form from the perspective of the religion’s doctrines, structure, and system and explores the sources of their indigeneity, independence, and religious identity. The latter, however, pays more attention to examining its historical and social backgrounds and provides detailed analyses of its social functions and political impacts. The Iglesia ni Christ (INC), as one of the earliest, has received the most academic attention. From the 1950s to the present, a number of scholars have thoroughly and systematically analyzed the doctrinal and disciplinary aspects of INC, as well as its composition and daily operation (Harper 2017; Sta. Romana 1955; Reed 2001; Macdonald 2004). Among them, Kavanagh’s study explored its organizational structure and doctrinal system, pointing out the important role of its strict discipline and unique eschatology in upholding cohesion for believers. He also analyzed the text of the official magazine of the INC and criticized its hostile attitude toward Catholicism (Kavanagh 1955, 1961). Dr Zheng, however, points out that the Catholic Church’s longstanding hostility toward the INC has created high levels of antagonism between the two groups. This antagonism, she argues, is precisely what has led to INC’s tight organizational structure and the strong religious identity of its followers (Zheng 2021). The rapid rise of the Jesus is Lord Church (JIL) in the 1990s also attracted some scholarly attention, with several scholars examining the group’s history, global origins, and localization, pointing out that it is a localized form of Pentecostalism in

the Philippines, which has great impact on the Catholic Church's influence (Cornelio 2018). A number of studies have pointed to the success of the group's globalization strategy in attracting a large number of overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) as a key reason for its rapid growth (Tejedo 2018; Kim 2005). El Shaddai, the largest of the Catholic charismatic movements, is significantly heterogeneous from the traditional Catholic church in terms of its doctrines, channels of communication, and political stance. Its religious practices, which are colored by Prosperity Theology, have positively reshaped the believer's perception of his or her own class (Wiegele 2006). In contrast, fewer studies focus on the political participation of NRMs from an external perspective; those that do mainly examine partisanship and endorsement behaviors during elections (Castro 2019; Dionisio 2014). Most of these studies were conducted amid political struggles, with researchers often taking strong positions that reflected political biases in their work. Such studies often use concepts such as "religious nationalism" and "religious populism" to criticize NRMs for supporting certain candidates, with the implicit intention of de-legitimizing popular support for the very candidate (Kessler and Rüländ 2006; Radde-Antweiler 2018; Batalla and Baring 2019; Ragragio 2023; Buckley et al. 2022).

While these results provide rich insights into NRMs in the Philippines, significant gaps remain. First, most existing research takes an internal perspective, with only a few studies examining their interactions with the contemporary political development of the Philippines. Second, studies using an external perspective limit their focus to either the religion–politics alliance in one single election or the political practices of specific religious groups. On the whole, research on NRMs in the Philippines has been fruitful, but there is still a lack of generalizations and theoretical reflections on the phenomenon of NRM's participation in politics, which provides space for further research.

Since the start of the 21st century, the Philippines has had five presidents and eight national elections, in which NRM groups have participated extensively and consistently, playing an important role on many occasions, and being one of the important factors in the political arena. In light of this, this paper focuses on four new religious groups, namely, the INC, the Kingdom of Jesus Christ (KOJC), JIL, and El Shaddai, which are actively involved in politics and have greater influence. Based on the existing literature and recent materials, this paper systematically investigates the background, pathway, characteristics, and impacts of these groups' participation in contemporary Philippine politics. This paper aims to provide an overview of the church–state relationship and, thus, a new perspective and references for analyzing the political landscape of the contemporary Philippines.

2. Catholicism and the Evolution of Church–State Relations in the Philippines

Catholicism was introduced to the Philippines by the Spanish upon their arrival in the Philippine Islands in the mid-16th century and then widely spread across the archipelago, providing the cultural soil for the emergence and rise of NRMs. Over the following centuries, Catholicism took root in Philippine society. It gradually became the dominant religion in the northern and central parts of the archipelago. During the Spanish colonization, theocracy was installed where the Catholic Church wielded strong cultural, political, and economic influence in the Philippine archipelago. The Church not only carried out religious functions such as holding mass but also intervened deeply in secular affairs such as township elections, appointment of officials, and collection of taxes in the colonies, thus becoming an important pillar of colonial rule.

In the mid-19th century, nationalism emerged globally and was reinterpreted by local Filipino clergy. This led to significant changes in the colony's religious landscape and had important political implications. Religious nationalism emerged in the Philippines

and developed into a vanguard of nationalism. In this process, nationalism served as a resource and a tool for religious claims, while religious equality became one of the goals of nationalist claims (Shi 2007). Religious nationalism was the impetus for the outbreak of the Secularization Movement, in which a Filipino clergyman demanded greater rights and directly challenged the rule of the Spanish friars. The movement ultimately became the trigger for the Philippine Revolution. During the Philippine War of Independence, the Catholic Church suffered a severe shock. A large number of Spanish missionaries were killed or fled the Philippines. This not only weakened the power of the Catholic Church but also created space for the development of new religions; 1899 saw the founding of the Iglesia Filipina Independiente (Filipino Independent Church), the first church to be led entirely by Filipinos. It gained more than 3 million followers in a short period of time, further undermining the religious dictatorship of the Catholic Church (de Achútegui and Bernad 1957).

Overall, the Philippine anti-church movement of the late 19th century was echoed by a wave of nationalist revolution, which had far-reaching effects. The movement not only promoted the localization of the Catholic Church but also led to a series of social changes in the Philippines, which provided favorable social conditions for the establishment and spread of other denominations and laid the foundation for religious pluralism in the Philippines.

After establishing colonial rule in the Philippines in the early 20th century, the United States exported its social system to the Philippines in the name of “benevolent assimilation”. In contrast to Spain, the United States pursued a more secularist religious policy in the Philippines, characterized by the separation of church and state. This was both a result of the U.S.’s own historical experience and an attempt to replace Spain for its own interest in colonization (Reuter 1982). In the early 18th century, the U.S. established the principles of freedom of religion and separation of church and state, based on the abandonment of European religious traditions. During the colonization of the Philippines, the U.S. emphasized the differences between itself and the Spanish “empire” through the implementation of a secularist religious policy in order to improve the construction of its colonial narrative (Xiao and Wang 2024; Calacday 2021). As a result, the principle of separation of church and state was enshrined in the Philippine Independence Act of 1933, which became an important institutional foundation for Philippine society. After Philippine independence in 1946, successive governments maintained this principle of separation of church as a guideline for church–government relationship, which was later enshrined in the 1973 Constitution. Following the EDSA People Power Movement (EDSA) in 1986, the principle of separation of Church and State was further strengthened with the enactment of the new Constitution. According to Article 2 Section 6 and Article 3 Section 5, “separation of Church and State shall be inviolable”, and “no law shall be made respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof”. It can be said that this principle not only reflects the continuity of the colonial legacy but also lays the foundation for the substantive interaction between religion and politics in the Philippines, making it an important prerequisite for analyzing the political participation of religious groups.

However, the principle of “separation of church and state” is broadly defined, and its implementation often varies from place to place. Even in the United States, this principle has been interpreted in numerous ways. The Philippine Constitution established only a basic framework for church–state interaction. Its practical implementation depends largely on judicial interpretation. While there are different views on the involvement of religious groups in politics, there is consensus on the substance of this principle. It is commonly recognized that the Philippine judicial system interprets the separation of church and state in a more “benevolent neutral” manner. In judicial practice, courts tend to protect religions from government influence. They rarely prohibit religious groups from interfering

in politics, thus providing institutional space for these groups to participate in national politics. At the same time, the government is required to give religious groups maximum freedom within the limits of the Constitution, adopt a policy of religious inclusiveness without jeopardizing the national interest, and allow religious forces to exert influence in the public sphere (Batalla and Baring 2019; Castro 2019; Dionisio 2014). The principle of “benevolent neutrality” has been firmly established in Philippine jurisprudence. In the landmark case of *Estrada vs. Escritor*, the Supreme Court affirmed this principle as the guiding framework for church–state relations, emphasizing that while the government must pursue secular objectives, it should also maximize religious freedom within constitutional limits, provided it does not conflict with compelling state interests, thus creating a permissive legal environment for religious groups’ political participation (Supreme Court E-Library 2003). The “benevolent neutral” interpretation of the Philippine judicial system is, in effect, a tacit endorsement of the participation of NRMs in politics. This has not only provided a favorable environment for the development of NRMs but has also allowed these groups to gradually become one of the major forces shaping the political landscape and the relationship between church and state in the Philippines.

3. History of NRMs in the Philippines and Background of Their Political Participation

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the political situation in the Philippines has undergone several changes. In the midst of this turmoil, some new religious groups, thanks to their distinctive theological characteristics and organizational modalities, emerged and grew rapidly in terms of size and influence. The most noteworthy among them are the INC, the JIL, the El Shaddai Movement, and the KOJC. This section details the history, theological characteristics, and demand for political participation as a result. The social conditions that have enabled them to participate more directly and extensively in politics will also be analyzed.

3.1. History, Theological Characteristics, and the Need for Political Participation of the NRM

Established in 1914, the INC is one of the earliest NRM in the Philippines. It is worth noting that although INC claims to be the “one true church”, its doctrines and practices are clearly influenced by both Philippine Catholicism and American Protestant traditions. Felix Manalo was initially baptized in the Catholic Church and later joined Protestant denominations such as the Methodist Church. When he founded INC, he drew on these religious traditions while introducing distinctive elements, such as the emphasis on his identity as “the last messenger of God”. This connection to and break from existing religious traditions reflect the cultural and religious changes in Philippine society during the colonial period. The INC began in Manila and the surrounding provinces, spreading to Cebu in 1937 and Mindanao in 1946. Between the two World Wars, INC grew steadily, reaching about 200,000 members by 1954. In the mid-1950s, as the condition of peasants in Central Luzon deteriorated, INC enjoyed rapid growth, making it “the most striking social phenomenon” in the post-independence Philippines (Ando 1969; Kavanagh 1955). From the 1960s to the present, Felix’s son Eraño and his grandson Eduardo have taken over leadership in consecutive order, expanding the church’s influence and making INC the third-largest church in the Philippines. In addition, INC has actively promoted its internationalization strategy and has so far developed 2.8 million members in 156 countries and regions. During election season, INC always adopts a “bloc voting” strategy, whereby believers follow the guidance of their religious leaders to vote, which further expands the organization’s political influence.

Compared to INC, the other three NRMs, namely, JIL, the El Shaddai Movement, and KOJC, were all founded in the mid-to-late years of the Marcos dictatorship and have a relatively short history.

Founded in 1978, JIL is the largest evangelical church in the Philippines, possessing 1 million members in 60 countries and its own media, foundations, and schools. JIL began as a Bible study group at the Polytechnic University of the Philippines, where its founder Eddie Villanueva was a college teacher. This NRM group originated from the influence of the global Pentecostal movement but developed localized characteristics. Its founder Eddie Villanueva had an evangelical Christian background before establishing JIL, and he combined the theological concepts of the global Pentecostal movement with indigenous Philippine cultural elements to create a religious form more suitable to the needs of Philippine society. This indigenization process allowed JIL to maintain connections with the global evangelical movement while developing its unique Philippine characteristics. After establishing JIL, Eddie served two terms as a congressman and as vice speaker. His eldest son Eduardo Villanueva Jr. is now the mayor of Bocaue, Bulacan, and his second son Joel Villanueva has served as a senator since 2016 and is now the Senate Majority Leader.

The El Shaddai Movement was founded in 1984 and grew out of rallies called by the religious radio station DWXI. The movement's founder Mike Velarde was involved in real estate before he became the leader of the largest charismatic movement in the Philippines. It is claimed that the church has attracted 8 million believers through radio and television. Although the El Shaddai movement still maintains a nominal connection with Catholicism, in practice, it has significantly deviated from traditional Catholicism. It has absorbed elements of Protestant prosperity theology and combined them with Filipino folk religious practices to form a unique religious expression. This hybrid nature makes it an innovative force within the Catholic tradition, while also reflecting the changing expectations of modern Filipinos toward religion. While still nominally part of the Catholic Church, the movement has often made independent political moves. For example, during the EDSA Dos, Velarde had rejected Manila Archbishop Cardinal Jaime Sin's call for the faithful to participate in rallies urging Estrada's resignation. Therefore, this paper includes the El Shaddai movement as an NRM for its political independence from the Catholic Church.

Established in 1985, the KOJC, which claimed to have six million believers, has been one of the most controversial religious groups in recent years. KOJC founder Apollo Quiboloy was originally a leader of the youth organization of the United Pentecostal Church International, and his religious thought was clearly influenced by the Pentecostal movement. However, KOJC developed more extreme elements of personal worship, with Quiboloy claiming to be the "Appointed Son", a claim that differs significantly from traditional Christian doctrine. This evolution demonstrates how NRMs can start from existing traditions but ultimately develop unique doctrines and organizational forms. Since 2004, the church has been active in politics, supporting Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and Teodoro. Since 2004, the church has been active in politics, supporting the presidential campaigns of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and Gilbert Teodoro. Headquartered in Davao City, the church's founder, Quiboloy, has been closely associated with Rodrigo Duterte, who has been described as his "spiritual mentor" (Peña 2024). Quiboloy called on his congregation to vote for Duterte in the 2016 elections and lent his private jet for campaigning purposes, making him a staunch supporter of Duterte.

Generally speaking, the strong charismatic character of NRMs in the Philippines is the main feature that distinguishes them from the Catholic Church. In terms of theology, NRMs tend to emphasize the direct connection between the individual and God, rather than through the mediation of the church hierarchy. For example, the Church of Christ emphasized that its founder, Felix Manalo, was "God's last messenger" through whom

believers could communicate directly with God. This is contrary to the Catholic concept of the pope and clergy as a bridge between God and man. In terms of the redemption view, NRMs tend to favor the idea of “present redemption”, that is, believers can obtain God’s blessings and grace in the present life. For example, both JIL and the El Shaddai movement emphasize that faith can bring success and prosperity in the present life. This is in stark contrast to the Catholic notion that focuses more on salvation in the afterlife. The NRM’s rituals often adopt more flexible and modernized forms, with many groups holding large gatherings that incorporate music, dance, and other elements to create a relaxing and contagious atmosphere, whereas mass in a Catholic church tends to be more serious and solemn.

The theological features of Philippine NRMs emphasize realistic, present-day concerns. These features have shaped their unique religious identities and serve as powerful tools for mobilizing followers directly and effectively. The emphasis on a direct personal connection with God gives ordinary believers a greater sense of initiative and participation, breaking down the hierarchical barriers of traditional religions and making them feel valued and empowered. The concept of “present redemption” closely links faith with real life, directly responding to the urgent need of believers to improve their current living conditions. Flexible and contemporary worship rituals not only strengthen the community identity of the faithful but also provide an effective platform for the dissemination of religious and political messages. The above characteristics enable new religious groups to attract and coalesce more quickly with believers who have strong practical demands. With the expansion and consolidation of their believers’ base, NRM groups’ demand for political participation has been stimulated. This demand stems both from their theological character’s concern for realistic issues and their followers’ aspiration for a better living standard. Together, these two forces have internally pushed these groups to become more actively involved in the political process and to realize their religious and social ambition.

In short, the theological concepts of NRMs in the Philippines are rooted in the real world and the context of their time. Their doctrines and practices display a strong concern for the present, which, while attracting and rallying believers with realistic aspirations, creates an endogenous impetus for such groups to participate in social affairs and influence political decision-making, which is an important internal factor in their active participation in politics.

3.2. External Social Conditions for the Wide Participation of NRMs in Politics

After the EDSA in 1986, the Philippine social environment underwent dramatic changes and entered a new phase of political development. The new Constitution in 1987 included several provisions, particularly Article II, Section 23, that encouraged participation of diverse social groups in national governance. Although the oligarchic families are still the main actors in national and local politics, the Philippine politics has shown a diversified development trend. Various social groups, such as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), mass media, and NRMs, have begun to participate in politics in a more independent and proactive manner. Since the 1990s, the Philippine social environment has undergone three major changes. This has created the necessary external conditions for NRM groups to play a greater role in national politics.

Firstly, the new social environment gave rise to the demand for NRMs. Since the late 1970s, the Philippine economy has gradually fallen into recession. Social inequality increased due to both global economic conditions and domestic economic policies. After the EDSA, President Cory Aquino and the Catholic Church quickly dominated political and cultural discourse. Despite being driven by many factors, the successful overthrow of Marcos was primarily credited to the Aquino family and the Catholic Church by the so-called

“People Power narrative” (Claudio 2013). Such a narrative overshadowed the long-term resistance of other political factions and the broader Filipino populace against the Marcos dictatorship. However, the political and economic structure of the Philippines did not undergo significant changes after the People Power Revolution, a situation more akin to what Benedict Anderson termed as “the caciques claim their own” (Anderson 1998). Politically, congressional elections reverted to the pre-Marcos pattern, with numerous local political families occupying parliamentary seats. President Cory’s promise of land reform remained unfulfilled as well. Economically, the government’s privatization policies further exacerbated the gap between the rich and the poor, making social inequality more pronounced. In other words, the living standards of the Filipino people did not improve as a result of this revolution, which to this day is being claimed by the Catholic Church as “The Rosary Miracle of the Philippines” (Escalona 2024). However, the state of the Philippine economy did not improve significantly after the movement. The government’s privatization policies further exacerbated the inequality between the rich and the poor, while the problem of social inequality became more pronounced. Against this backdrop, the faithful’s trust and reliance on traditional religious institutions were gradually shaken, and they began to look for new religious support in order to gain more spiritual comfort and social support. Disappointment with the EDSA and dissatisfaction with the social reality were projected onto the religious sphere, pushing the general public’s urgent need for conversion in order to adjust their spiritual and material needs. Unlike Catholicism, which emphasizes suffering and endurance, the NRMs in the Philippines generally place more emphasis on personal spiritual growth, social participation, and material enjoyment. With their unique religious rituals, intuitive personal experiences, and responses to the problems of modern society, these religious groups have attracted a large number of Filipinos in search of spiritual solace and social support and thus expanded rapidly in size.

Secondly, new media technology facilitated the rapid spread of NRMs. In the late 1980s, radio and television technology became widespread in the Philippines. Television coverage rose rapidly from 48% in 1989 to 73.6% in 2008, surpassing radio as the medium with the highest penetration rate. New religious groups quickly adapted to the shift in media form and began to utilize television for preaching and rallying, attracting believers in the Philippines and globally. The El Shaddai movement and the JIL both began as Bible reading clubs on radio programs and gradually shifted to a combination of online and offline modes as their audience grew in size. The INC and the KOJC also emphasized the use of media technology, respectively, establishing INC Media and Sonshine Media Network International to carry out religious activities using multimedia. Traditional religious activities require believers to be physically present in specific religious spaces. Television technology, however, has broken down the barriers between religious and secular spaces. It allowed religious leaders to reach the audience across time and geography. Believers could now participate in religious activities from home by watching programs and interacting with religious leaders virtually. This ease of access not only connected believers to religious groups more efficiently but also facilitated communication among believers themselves, further accelerating the NRMs’ growth.

Third, the new electoral system facilitated the direct participation of NRMs in politics. In 1995, President Ramos signed Republic of the Philippines Act 7941, which created the Party-list System. The Act provides small political parties and marginalized groups with access to the national legislature and aims to promote pluralism in the Philippine political system. The bill earmarked 20% of House of Representatives seats for the party-list system. Smaller political parties could secure one House seat by obtaining just 2% of the national vote. For each additional 2% of the vote, another seat will be awarded, but only up to a maximum of three seats per party. The establishment of this system has significantly low-

ered the barriers to entry for small political parties into the political arena and increased the inclusiveness of political participation. Although the election law explicitly prohibits religious groups from running for public office, many religious groups have been able to circumvent the restriction by forming new parties and nominating members of their own groups to run for office. Also, religious groups are not prohibited from forging alliances with existing political parties, thereby influencing the formulation of legislation and policy. Meanwhile, some NRMs have been “captured” by secular political forces and used as tools for galvanizing their members and agenda to participate in the public discourse. Whether actively or passively, after the introduction of the “Party-list System”, NRM groups gained legitimate channels to enter the legislature, becoming an important component of the Philippines’ pluralistic political landscape.

In summary, the political participation of NRMs in the Philippines is the result of a combination of internal and external factors. Internally, their theology is rooted in the real world, emphasizing worldly concern and a direct personal connection with God, which not only attracts a large number of believers with realistic demands but also creates an impetus to participate in social affairs and influence political decisions. Externally, rising social inequality has created a demand for new religious beliefs, while emerging media technologies facilitate the wide spread of religious information and the mobilization of believers. In addition, the proportional representation system of political parties in the Philippines has provided an institutional channel for religious groups to enter the political arena directly. As a result of the above factors, NRMs in the Philippines began to enter the political arena on a broad scale at the turn of the century, becoming one of the major forces shaping the contemporary political landscape of the Philippines.

4. Paths and Characteristics of NRM’s Participation in Politics in the Philippines

Since the end of the 20th century, NRMs in the Philippines have gradually entered the political arena. Leveraging on their unique organizational structure and mobilizing capacity, they have participated in the country’s political process through a variety of pathways, becoming one of the major forces shaping the contemporary political landscape of the Philippines. This section will explore in detail the main paths of political participation of new religious groups and analyze the characteristics that these groups have demonstrated in their political practices.

4.1. Pathways to Political Participation

Changes in the electoral system have collectively contributed to the diversification of the political landscape in the Philippines in the 21st century. The number of seats won by small political parties in elections through the party-list system has increased from 16 in 2001 to 63 in the 19th House of Representatives in 2022. A number of candidates from new religious groups and NGOs have succeeded in entering politics and have been elected to the House of Representatives or the Senate. Some senior leaders from these groups were appointed to public office. Previously marginalized social and religious groups have entered the political arena and are actively involved in governance and policymaking. Their participation has enriched the Philippine political organization, which was previously dominated by political dynasties and their patronage networks. Most of these religious groups have followed established institutional paths, while some have utilized conflictual paths.

Religious leaders publicly support candidates to form political coalitions. The Philippines has adopted a Western democratic political system in which elections are an important event in the country’s political process. Unlike the Catholic Church, which often claims to be “neutral” and only asks its followers to vote “according to their conscience”,

the NRMs that are tightly organized have a strong influence on their followers. Therefore, they are able to carry out “bloc voting” in elections. In order to maximize the number of votes, many politicians seek public support from NRM leaders during the election season. Though no institutional safeguards ensure followers vote as instructed, religious leaders use their personal charisma to rally the faithful and support the “endorsement” of secular politicians by quoting verses from the Bible (Ando 1969). The INC, for example, has published a list of candidates it has endorsed before every election since 1946 to guide the faithful to vote. In the 2016 elections, KOJC founder Quiboloy not only publicly declared his support for Duterte but also lent his airplanes and vehicles to help with the latter’s campaigning activities. NRMs have formed close political alliances with specific politicians, gained more support from the executive and legislative branches, and in some cases have even been appointed by the President as public officials, creating favorable conditions to increase their influence and counter the Catholic Church.

Mediatized religious gatherings provide a stage for politicians to promote their campaigns. Since the 1980s, NRM groups have fully applied media technology to their religious activities, using mass media such as radio and television to expand their religious space. The mediatization of NRMs breaks through the spatial limitations of Catholicism, which is centered on churches, and innovates the way of religious experience to expand its influence. Taking the El Shaddai Movement as an example, the organization holds Gawain outdoors at the El Shaddai International House of Prayer on Saturdays, which not only attracts a large number of believers to go there offline but also millions of believers who listen to and watch it through radios and televisions in the vicinity of the meeting place or at home. With the development of online media technology, many new religious groups are recording their weekly gatherings and posting them on social media platforms so that they can be viewed at any time by overseas believers in foreign countries. Many politicians take their participation in NRMs’ gatherings as an opportunity to convey their political ideas and demonstrate their support for religious values. In this way, politicians hope to gain recognition and support from believers and use the organizational strength and believer base of religious groups to promote their political agenda and gain more votes in the election (Wiegele 2004). New religious groups, on the other hand, use these activities to demonstrate to politicians their ability to mobilize followers and to increase their bargaining power in their cooperation.

Forming political parties to run directly for office. After the implementation of the party-list system, a number of NRMs formed new political parties, which are nominally independent. These parties are often directly led by their high-level clergyman to secure a sound base of believers, raise votes, and campaign funds for their candidates. For example, the INC formed the Alagad Party in 1997, and El Shaddai formed the Buhay Hayaan Yumabong Party in 1999, both of which won multiple congressional seats. In 2004, Jesus of God founder Eddie Villanueva founded the Bangon Pilipinas Party (BPP) and ran for president twice as a member. During this time, his son Joel Villanueva was elected to the House of Representatives several times as a member of the Citizens’ Battle Against Corruption (CBC) party. In 2019, Eddie joined the CBC and served as the party’s representative to the House when Joel was elected to the Senate and later became the majority leader of the Senate and was reelected in 2022. The Villanuevas are representative of the NRMs in the Philippines who directly ran for office and participated in the governance of the country.

Organizing street movements to create political pressure. In addition to the above institutional paths, some NRMs also resorted to demonstrations to protest and march to express their political demands and exert influence in policymaking. In January 2001, President Estrada was forced to resign following the outbreak of EDSA II in the Philippines. In April, the Arroyo administration issued an arrest warrant for Joseph Estrada, which trig-

gered discontent among the latter's supporters. On May 1st, supporters of Estrada gathered near Malacañang to protest and demand his return to the presidency. Throughout this political turmoil, INC and El Shaddai remained steadfast in their support for Estrada, actively participating in the organization of the demonstrations. Eraño Manalo, then leader of the INC, mobilized a large number of believers to take to the streets and to Malacañang. Mike Velarde publicly declared on several occasions that he did not support the Catholic Church's political position calling for Estrada's resignation. In addition, both churches used affiliated religious radio and television stations to cover the demonstrations, further publicizing the protests (Lim 2009).

4.2. Characteristics of Political Practice

After 1986, pluralism in Philippine politics was advanced. The NRMs, as important participants, have demonstrated a number of characteristics in their political participation.

First, divergence of political positions from the Catholic Church. Most of the new religious groups in the Philippines originated from criticisms of Catholic doctrine and practice, which often results in great divergence in theology. As the dominant denomination, the Catholic Church has historically been critical of NRMs, not only refuting their doctrinal innovations from a theological perspective but also in some cases refusing to open its religious facilities. In response to the Catholic Church's suppression, NRM groups generally tend to actively participate in the formulation of relevant policies in order to obtain a better environment and more favorable space for their religious activities. As a result, the conflict between the two sides extended from the religious to the political arena. In EDSA II, for example, Jaime Sin used his position as a religious leader to call for mass demonstrations in the streets and the resignation of President Estrada, which was in opposition to the positions of several NRMs, namely, the INC and El Shaddai.

Second, more proactive and pragmatic political strategies. Unlike the Catholic Church, which advocates the separation of religious and secular life in most cases, NRMs in the Philippines have generally taken a more proactive approach to real politics, attempting to integrate their own religious agendas into national governance policies. However, in practice, it is difficult for NRMs to achieve political goals and practice political ideas on their own. They need to cooperate with secularized political forces, during which process, the NRMs usually maintain a pragmatic and cooperative attitude. When facing specific religious issues, these groups are not likely to be constrained by doctrinal rules or spiritual beliefs, refusing to cooperate with political forces whose beliefs may conflict with theirs. On the contrary, they often demonstrate a willingness to compromise in order to gain the support of secular forces and political families for their religious causes.

Third, political aspirations in favor of the common people and the grassroots. Some scholars have criticized certain new religious groups, accusing them of merging with populist forces in Philippine politics, becoming a tool for populist infiltration into the religious sphere, and displaying "anti-democratic" qualities (Kessler and Rüländ 2006; Ragragio 2023). While the above research has a certain ideological and political preference, it also provides an intuitive description of the political mobilization of the NRMs. In their doctrine, NRMs generally place greater emphasis on a closer connection with the poor (*mga mahirap*) and the common man (*mga tao*) (Goh and Chong 2022). This theological stance is projected into their political participation, reflecting the close attention and responsiveness of religious leaders to the needs of the underprivileged. In making specific political demands, NRMs often position themselves as representatives and defenders of the interests of the grassroots, committing to speak out for the interests and needs of the people, and thus, gaining a broad mass base.

Fourth, transnational networking in mobilization. Under pressure from the Catholic Church, NRM groups have shifted their preaching targets beyond national boundaries to the large number of diaspora and overseas Filipino workers (OFWs). The Philippines is one of the world's major migrant and labor-exporting countries, with a total number of more than 10 million overseas Filipinos accounting for around 10% of its population ([Commission of Filipinos Overseas n.d.](#)). In 2023, remittances from overseas Filipinos to the Philippines reached USD 37.2 billion, accounting for 8.4% of the gross domestic product (GDP). These funds significantly impact the Philippines' economic growth, balance of payments, and its foreign exchange reserves ([Philippine Statistics Authority 2024](#)). NRMs have established churches across Europe, North America, Singapore, and Hong Kong, building transnational networks of believers. These churches provide a sense of belonging to overseas Filipinos, who are most likely major contributors to their families back home and often influence their families' decisions. As a result, their spiritual beliefs are more likely to influence their family members to collectively convert to new religious groups, which further accelerates their domestic spread ([Wiegele 2004](#)). As a result, NRM groups have built up a transnational mass base within and beyond the Philippines.

Fifth, uncertainties of the continuity of political positions. Most NRM groups lack a sound organizational system and norms. Their political participation often depends heavily on the decisions and personal will of their leaders. This dependency creates instability in their political strategies and actions. Meanwhile, when other senior leaders within the group do not accept the leader's decisions, it may trigger splits within the group, affecting the group's cohesion and direction of action. Moreover, a change in leadership in NRM groups may also add to the instability of their political stance. Among the four groups examined in this paper, only the INC has experienced two changes in religious leadership within the Manalo family. The smooth transition between the three generations of religious leaders is one of the major reasons for its survival to date.

5. Impact of NRMs on Political Development of the Philippines

Since the late 1980s, new religious groups in the Philippines have gradually become one of the major forces shaping the contemporary political landscape through their active participation in the political process. This section will analyze the impact of NRMs on political development in the Philippines from several perspectives, exploring how they have transformed traditional church–state relations, political balance, social welfare, and political agendas.

First, the emergence of NRMs has impacted the Catholic Church's supremacy in politics. After the establishment of the principle of separation of church and state during the colonial period in the United States, the Catholic Church's political attributes were stripped away at the institutional level. However, it continued to influence secular political practices using its spiritual appeal. After the independence of the Philippines, the Catholic Church was less involved in daily political struggles, but its stance in the major political crisis was able to influence the course of events. In the early 1970s, the Catholic Church's critical and cooperative attitude toward the Marcos government and its tacit approval of its implementation of martial law were the important factors that enabled Marcos to stay in power for a long time ([Feng 2000](#)). In EDSA and EDSA II, the Catholic Church, led by Bishop Jaime Sin, stood out against Marcos and Estrada, calling on the faithful to rally on the streets, which ultimately led to regime change. Despite claiming its separation from politics, the Catholic Church maintained a supreme political position for decades. It was the only institution from which secular political forces sought religious and moral approval. Moreover, it was uniquely positioned to unite, organize, and lead people during periods of low political trust ([Wu 2005](#)).

The rise of NRMs has seriously challenged the Catholic Church both theologically and politically. These groups have demonstrated significant power to deconstruct the Church's political supremacy. NRM groups often emphasize a more direct connection between the believer and God, reducing reliance on church hierarchy and indirectly providing alternative perspectives on political issues. This undermines the Catholic Church's supremacy on political issues. For example, the INC emphasizes that its founder, Felix Manalo, was "the last messenger of God", a doctrine that directly challenges the Catholic Church. The JIL, on the other hand, emphasizes that believers have direct access to divine revelation, a view that similarly undermines the intermediary role of the traditional church between believers and God.

As the influence of NRMs expands, the endorsement of the Catholic Church is no longer the only channel through which secular political forces can obtain religious recognition. Its supremacy has collapsed with the exposure of corruption and other misconduct within the Catholic Church in the 21st century. In contemporary Philippine politics, obtaining the Catholic Church's endorsement is no longer a requirement for a politician to win an election and hold office, and secular political forces are free to choose and shape their relationships with different religious groups according to the needs of elections or governance. In the case of Duterte, for example, despite being in a tense, antagonistic relationship with the Catholic Church in the 2016 election and throughout his term, he still won the presidency with a high number of votes, successfully completing his term in office with severe criticism from the Church. This suggests that the rise of NRMs has substantially altered the landscape of church–state relations in the Philippines, impacting the Catholic Church's supreme political position.

Secondly, further diversification of a political landscape dominated by oligarchic families. Influenced by the colonial policies of Spain and the United States, Philippine politics has long been dominated by a handful of "oligarchic families". These families control national and local political life through their political influence and social resources passed down from one generation to the next, a political landscape that scholars have called "family anarchy"¹. Informal relationships such as family politics dominate Philippine politics, creating a hierarchical patronage network. This has led to the fragmentation of institutional political organizations, such as political parties, and their degradation to tools of specific families or politicians, which prevents them from functioning as they should. Meanwhile, other social forces, including the middle class and grassroots organizations, remain confined to the lower and middle levels of the political hierarchy, making it difficult for them to participate effectively in the national political process. This has stalled the expansion of political participation and limited the development of Philippine politics.

The emergence of NRMs has brought new variables and enriched the political landscape. These groups have gained considerable political influence based on their large followers' base. Leaders and representatives of NRMs can directly challenge the oligarchic families at the center of power, or they can choose to form alliances with political forces that match their own demands, providing vote support to politicians far from the traditional centers of power, thus changing the political balance. Taking the 2016 election as an example, Duterte was endorsed by the INC, JIL, and KOJC. KOJC also provided him with a lot of manpower, resources, and votes during his election campaign, which, combined with his own solid voter base, resulted in his increasing support rate. In the end, he became the first president from the south of the Philippines since independence, defeating a number of candidates from oligarchic families in Luzon or backed by former presidents.

It should be pointed out that NRM groups do not reject cooperation with traditional oligarchic families. In the 2022 elections, Marcos Jr., who comes from a traditional political family, was also nominated by three groups: the INC, KOJC, and El Shaddai. This

phenomenon suggests that NRMs are more inclined to adopt flexible and pragmatic cooperation strategies, as mentioned before. They can either become a force to challenge vested interests or turn into supporters of the existing order. Their choice of political positions depends more on practical considerations of interest than on purely ideological or religious concern. This flexibility creates risks. Religious leaders' political strategies may deviate from their followers' actual needs. Worse, they may be politically exploited by oligarchic families—an outcome contrary to their original intentions for political participation. This also reflects the complexity of the Philippine political landscape, where NRMs still find it difficult to break away from the traditional political structure and provide real “checks and balances” on the mainstream political forces, even though they rely primarily on religious ties to mobilize their supporters instead of a political tie.

Thirdly, providing public welfare services and promoting civil society. New religious groups have played an important role in building civil society in the Philippines by actively participating in public welfare services. The INC, for example, has conducted a series of large-scale relief operations and charitable activities for the poor through the Felix Manalo Foundation. After Typhoon Yolanda hit the Philippines in 2013, INC immediately organized a relief operation called *Lingap sa Mamamayan* (Caring for Citizens) and distributed medical equipment, food, and other relief materials to the affected areas. In 2014, the INC organized charity walks in 54 countries with more than 500,000 participants to raise funds to support the reconstruction efforts. These actions not only provide much-needed material assistance but also demonstrate the organization's strong sense of social responsibility (Cornelio 2017).

In addition, new religious groups are actively involved in long-term social development programs. For example, the JIL Colleges Foundation was founded in 1983 to provide education at all levels and has established 25 branches nationwide, exhibiting its longstanding focus on education. The INC also funds and operates New Era University, which provides education for members of the community while also admitting students from outside. These NRM activities fill gaps in government services. They assume some governmental responsibilities and contribute significantly to improving public welfare. NRMs regard civic engagement as part of the practice of their faith and encourage their followers to actively participate in these services, which not only enhances their sense of social responsibility but also injects new vitality into the development of civil society. Through these activities, NRMs are playing an increasingly important role in Philippine society and have become a significant force for the development of civil society. Nevertheless, it should also be acknowledged that NRM's contribution is not distinctive, as traditional religious institutions have long made substantial contributions to social welfare and education in the Philippines. Therefore, the social contributions of NRM groups should not be seen as competition with traditional religious institutions, but as an important component of the Philippines' diversified social welfare system. Together, they constitute a significant force in Philippine civil society, playing a crucial role in supplementing inadequate government public services.

Fourth, expanding voicing channels for the grassroots and shaping the political agenda. Family politics and patronage systems have allowed a few oligarchic families to monopolize political power for generations. This monopoly makes it nearly impossible for grassroots political demands to be expressed effectively outside the patronage network. New religious groups, as a channel for aggregating the voices of the grassroots, are integrated by their political spokespersons to form a strong political voice and participate in the shaping of the political agenda. They often pay full attention to the spiritual needs of the common people in the spiritual realm and stress their grassroots identity in political practices, thus becoming the spokespersons for the interests of the underclass. For exam-

ple, during his tenure as a member of the House, Joel Villanueva, the son of the founder of the JIL, was the main sponsor of the successful passage of the 2007 Anti-Red-Tape Law, reflecting the group's continued interest in improving public services. Nevertheless, the political agendas of NRMs do not always align with the interests of all marginalized groups. Heated clashes between the two have also erupted when the demands of other groups run counter to their doctrinal ethics. For nearly a decade, several NRMs including the JIL have long and staunchly opposed bills related to the legalization of homosexuality. Eddie Villanueva has called the bill "foreign" and unrepresentative of Filipino values, while Joel Villanueva has accused it of being a "prelude" to same-sex marriage (de Guzman 2023). This phenomenon highlights the complexity of the Philippine political landscape and the potential for conflicting values in the process of political pluralism.

In general, NRMs have influenced the political development of the Philippines in many ways. On the one hand, they challenge the traditional church–state relation, diversify the political landscape, promote the improvement of public welfare, and provide new channels for the grassroots to express their voices and participate in politics. On the other hand, the political participation of NRMs has also brought some negative impacts, such as the politicization of religious conflicts and the excessive intervention of religious groups in specific issues, which, to a certain extent, has aggravated the confusion and complexity of the Philippine political landscape.

6. Conclusions

Since their emergence, NRMs in the Philippines have become increasingly involved in the political process. The rise of religious nationalism in the late 19th century provided the socio-ideological ground for the emergence of NRMs. After independence, NRM groups started to expand but mainly focused on religious affairs at the beginning of their establishment. However, these groups' theological characteristics, with their focus on realistic and worldly concerns, created an inherent demand for political participation. After the EDSA, Philippine society saw changes in the social environment, media technology, and electoral system, which provided an institutional space for more marginal organizations and groups to participate in governance and policy-making. NRMs seized this opportunity and took advantage of their broad mass base to exert their influence by political allying, media campaigns, and street rallies. In the 21st century, NRMs have further expanded their political participation, relying on their religious influence to form political parties and to promote members of their groups for congressional and government positions, thus consolidating their position in the Philippine political arena. NRMs have become a unique political force by bringing together the voices of the grassroots. Their emergence undermined the Catholic Church's political position while providing local politicians alternatives to making an alliance with another political family and their patronage network in their pursuit of power. The emergence of NRMs has broken the Catholic Church's long-standing spiritual monopoly over the Filipino people. It has also promoted expanded political participation, innovative political cooperation, and a more diverse political landscape. These changes significantly impact contemporary Philippine political development in multiple ways.

However, NRM groups face obvious limitations and challenges in their political participation. First, their institutional structure is generally weak and vulnerable to leadership changes. In 2015, conflict erupted within the Manalo family over the leadership of the INC, exposing the fragility of the group's internal administration and leading to the erosion of its political and social influence. Secondly, new religious groups may become involved in political struggles through their political participation. Quiboloy, the founder of the KOJC, has been the target of political attacks in both the U.S. and the Philippines for his staunch support of Duterte. In 2021, the U.S. Attorney for the State of California charged Quiboloy

with human trafficking and issued a warrant for his arrest, confiscation of all property, and deletion of social media accounts. Since February 2024, the Marcos Jr. government has conducted a judicial investigation into Quiboloy. The District Court issued a warrant for his arrest in April. From June onwards, the Philippine National Police repeatedly surrounded and searched the KOJC headquarters in Davao City, resulting in several standoffs with the organization's followers. Ultimately, Quiboloy voluntarily turned himself in to Philippine military intelligence on 8 September (Gavilan 2024). The political attacks have directly undermined the religious influence of the KOJC and Quiboloy, highlighting the challenges that religious leaders may face when involved in political turmoil.

Nonetheless, most of the new religious groups continue to grow in size and are likely to play a more important role in Philippine politics in the future. Compared to the Catholic Church, these groups will remain a minority in the Philippine religious landscape in the short term and will not be able to influence Philippine politics on their own for the time being. Currently, as political conflict between Marcos and the Duterte family intensifies, all parties in the Philippine political arena are either actively or forcibly choosing sides. In this context, NRM groups may become key factors influencing the current political balance. Quiboloy's case could create a "chilling effect" on the political engagement of other religious groups. It may accelerate the decision-making of other NRM leaders and further exacerbate power imbalances between competing political factions. As the 2025 midterm election approaches, the political positions of new religious groups may have an unintended impact on the outcome of the election and thus, the future direction of the political situation. This will require sustained attention from the academic community.

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Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used in this manuscript:

EDSA	EDSA People Power Movement
JIL	Jesus is Lord Church Worldwide
KOJC	Kingdom of Jesus Christ
INC	Iglesia ni Cristo
NRM	New Religious Movement

Note

¹ For a detailed study of family politics in the Philippines, see (McCoy 1993; Hutchcroft 1991; Quimpo 2005).

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