

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# A Survey of Political Interference Patterns and Modalities in National Roadworks in the Philippines

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**Abstract:** This study surveys and describes the patterns or modalities of political interference in national roadworks in the Philippines based on an examination of the literature and interviews using process-level frameworks, specifically the project management cycle and the budget cycle framework. Political interference here refers to non-legitimate interventions by politicians in government processes and programs. We argue that it is a form of political corruption. Evidence suggests that this type of interference tends to be prominent in national roadworks. Executive interference occurs at various stages of the project management and budget processes. The abuse of executive discretion in national road development is observed from project selection and prioritization to project maintenance and evaluation. Legislator interference appears to occur at various stages of the project management cycle based on collusive and kickback arrangements. In the budget cycle, this is most notable during the budget legislation stage. Given these vulnerabilities, a comprehensive review of existing project and budget management systems is necessary with the view of reducing such abuse. Finally, understanding the historical and institutional (socio, economic, political, and cultural) context under which these systems operate is necessary to identify context-specific solutions.

**Keywords:** political interference, political corruption, corruption, public works, public infrastructure, national roads, Philippines, bureaucratic politics

The Philippines' road density is higher than those of many other countries in Southeast Asia, but the quality and condition of its roads are poor. The number of quality defects per road project (construction or maintenance) in the Philippines remains high mainly due to inadequate manuals, insufficient training, inadequate incentives and sanctions, inadequate equipment and budget for inspection, and "undue external/political influence" in some cases. Changes in the original plan and engineering designs also

frequently lead to cost overruns, especially for foreign-assisted projects (World Bank, 2009b, p. 88–90). Quality problems and road deterioration stem from funding shortages and the misallocation of resources due to "politicization" (p. 23–28).

This phenomenon of "politicization" or undue external/political influence in road infrastructure projects is not unique to the Philippines. Cook, Kirkpatrick, Minogue, and Parker (2004) noted that political intervention in infrastructure industries

occur in various countries. It is identified as a major impediment to investments and a regulatory issue in many developing countries (Kirkpatrick, Parker, & Zhang, 2006). The transport sector is especially vulnerable to political interference given the substantial number of actors that take part in the process, the huge budget, and the asymmetric information involved (Wachs, 1989; Flyvbjerg, 2009; Cantarelli, Flyvbjerg, Molin, & van Wee, 2010).

This paper explores political interference in road infrastructure projects in the Philippines and its patterns and modalities during the 2000s. It answers the central question “What are the patterns and modalities of political interference in Philippine road infrastructure projects?” The study aims to fill the dearth of studies on this issue. It is only Hodder (2009) who directly uses the term and examines “political interference” in the Philippine bureaucracy. In the context of road infrastructure projects, only a few other studies mention interventions by politicians (i.e., Bantay Lansangan, 2008; World Bank 2005, 2009b).

In addition to its potential contribution towards filling an important gap in the literature, the importance of studying political interference in road infrastructure projects in the Philippines could be appreciated in light of its developmental consequences. Due to poor road quality, Philippine intercity freight rates are said to be 50% higher than those in Thailand and Vietnam (World Bank, 2009b, p.12). Its inability to develop a high-quality transport network is a major impediment to national economic development.

The objective of this study is to survey and describe patterns and modalities of political interference in Philippine roadworks using process-level frameworks with the end view of providing an overview of existing practices, systems and procedures, identifying their vulnerabilities, and coming up with the recommendations for reducing such vulnerabilities. It aims to provide evidence-based and practical measures for strengthening the bureaucracy and governmental processes at both national and local levels. The adoption of the term *political interference* and the focus on the interaction between what could be considered as “political” and “bureaucratic” spheres provide functional focus and directs attention toward improvements in public policy and organization as well as systems and procedures.

In this study, politicians, particularly elected officials and political appointees, are distinguished from civil servants who occupy government positions through merit, especially after passing the civil service or the career executive service official’s examinations. From a purely Weberian perspective, the bureaucracy should be divorced from the political world (Heywood, 2007, p. 363). Based on this purview, political interference simply means some external influence from either a politician or an interest group. This is not necessarily true, and thus, the concept of the bureaucracy has been modified since Weber (1922/1978). External influence per se does not constitute political interference since bureaucracy cannot be totally insulated from external interests or politics, as some people would tend to believe (e.g., Lynn, 2001; Rosenbloom, 2008).

Modern public administration recognizes that the bureaucracy interacts with its constituencies in performing certain functions. It provides advice and helps in articulating and aggregating interests. This clientelism benefits the political system “insofar as it helps maintain consensus” (Heywood, 2002, p. 364). However, “clientelism may also interfere with the public responsibilities and duties of civil servants...” (p. 364). Since bureaucracy is primarily concerned with policy implementation, they depend on policy decisions generated through the political process. Bureaucratic functions are based on the laws made by the legislature and the policy decisions of the political executive. Policy implementation relies on the direction provided by duly authorized political leaders.

Based on his fieldwork, Hodder (2009) attempted to clarify the dimensionality of the concept of political interference in the Philippine context. He argued, “Political interference is as much about doing the right thing as it is about serving one’s own narrow interests. It is about getting around a system in order to help constituents and country; it is about acting to good form and meeting other people’s expectations; it is about survival; and it is about ambition, power, and personal advance” (Hodder, 2009, p. 778).

While accepting Hodder’s proposition, this study uses the term political interference as distinguished from legitimate forms of political intervention by elected and appointed officials that would, from an institutionalist or policy perspective, constitute acts of political or policy entrepreneurship. Political interference here involves non-legitimate interventions

in established government policies and processes in a manner that goes beyond their authority or when they influence bureaucrats to take actions or make decisions that violate or bend established principles, rules, laws, or standards of government. The adoption of the term here provides some functional focus and directs attention toward improvements in policy and organization as well as systems and procedures.

### ***Political Interference in Road Infrastructure***

Roadworks, which include road construction and maintenance activities, belong to the larger category of public works and within that, to the transport infrastructure sector. Public works cover infrastructure provisions like water and irrigation, flood control, power and energy, communication, transport, and so forth. Transport infrastructure includes roads and bridges, railways, airports, seaports, and so forth.

There are two major classes of public roads in the Philippines: national and local. This classification suggests certain differences in road project development systems as well as funding sources. National roads include arterial and secondary roads, which are described “as continuous in extent, form part of the main trunk line system and/or all roads leading to national ports, seaports, parks or coast-to-coast roads” (International Labour Organization, 2006, p. 26). These roads are under the administrative jurisdiction of the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH), the national agency primarily responsible for the planning, construction, and maintenance of roads.

Local roads include provincial, city, municipal, and barangay roads. These are administered by the Local Government Units (LGUs). LGUs are political administrative units, from the provincial to city and municipal governments down to the barangay. LGUs, with the exception of the barangay, the smallest political and administrative subdivision that may be likened to a village, district or ward, have the authority for the construction of local roads within their respective areas of jurisdiction.

This article focuses on national public roadworks (referred to here as roadworks or road projects) to provide a foundation for identifying modalities of political interference. Pork barrel-funded local roadworks will not be the focus of this study. Due to administrative and political particularities and differences in financing as well as project management

requirements and processes, we will cover the political interference in pork barrel-funded and local roadworks in a separate subsequent article.

### **Methods**

This article primarily uses published materials, unpublished reports, Internet sources, and interviews as sources of data. Interviews were conducted to validate published sources and to provide leads on current practices. Investigative reports were a major source of published information and reports about corruption in road projects. Articles and reports in major newspapers and Internet sites were also utilized. This is unavoidable due to the scarcity of detailed book and journal articles on political interference and roadworks in the Philippines. Pertinent studies and reports commissioned or issued by think-tank groups and NGOs were also included. Further, the current study draws evidence and clues from studies and reports issued by international organizations like the World Bank, Asian Development Bank (ADB), and the International Labor Organization, among others.

The data collected from these sources are analyzed using the project management and budget cycles. These are process-level frameworks that could be used to explore how political interference is exhibited in road projects. Process-level analysis, as Almond, Powell, Dalton, and Strom (2008) established, is distinct from system-level and policy-level functional analyses. Although their analytical framework is more specific to the comparative study of the political system and its functions, the distinction between the larger political system and the governmental process (project and budget management) could be made in this study.

The distinction between system and process is applied here in a slightly different context from Almond et al. (2008) wherein “process” is used in the general context of policy-making. The outputs of this process are policies, the nature of which could be classified into extractive, distributive, regulative, and symbolic. In this scoping study, the outputs of the “process” are public roads. System-level functions based on Almond et al. (2008) could be related to process-level issues. System-level functions include political socialization, recruitment, and communication. Process-level analysis provides clues about system-level (and also policy-level) functional issues. The findings at the

process level feed into a more general (or system-level) analytical discussion of the dynamics of political interference in the Philippines.

### ***The Project Management Cycle***

Any project undergoes a certain management process. Sophisticated project management involves initiating, planning, execution, monitoring, controlling, and closing activities (Schwalbe, 2009). The stages of this type of project management cycle may be modified, but all these activities should be present if the project has to be managed efficiently and effectively.

Project initiation activities include identifying or selecting the project, garnering support for the idea, and officially starting the project. Planning activities include “devising and maintaining a workable scheme to ensure that the project meets its scope, time, and cost goals as well as organizational needs” (Schwalbe, 2009, p. 71). They also include identifying the deliverables at each phase of the execution.

Execution involves coordination of people and resources to carry out the project plans and deliverables. Monitoring and controlling activities measure progress during execution, determine deviations from plans, and take corrective action to ensure that plans and objectives are met. Closing activities involve formal acceptance of the project and its deliverables, documentation of lessons learned, closing out contracts, archiving project files, and turning over of the project to the responsible group (Schwalbe, 2009, p. 72).

The DPWH has its own project management cycle, called the Infrastructure Development Cycle (IDC) (Department of Public Works and Highways, n.d.). This is a four-stage cycle consisting of the following:

1. Project identification, involving a “process of collecting potential projects with expected return on investment.”
2. Project Preparation, involving the preparation of a) a project feasibility study, b) inclusion of the project in the Medium-Term Infrastructure Development Program for a period of six years, c) detailed engineering in preparation for actual implementation, and d) annual programming of prioritized projects that are ready for implementation.
3. Project Implementation involving a) fund releases, b) right-of-way acquisition, c)

bidding and contracting, d) construction, e) completion and acceptance, and f) payment of claims in accordance to government budgeting, accounting, and auditing rules.

4. Project Operation and Evaluation involving 1) operation and maintenance activities by the appropriate administrative entity and 2) impact evaluation.

### ***The Annual Budget Cycle***

Aside from the IDC, political interference could be ascertained using the concept of the Annual Budget Cycle (ABC). The Department of Budget and Management (DBM) observes four major phases in the government’s budget cycle: budget preparation, budget authorization/legislation, budget execution, and budget accountability. In detail,

1. Budget preparation is based on the determination of economic targets, expenditures, revenues, and financing by the Development Budget Coordinating Committee (DBCC). Based on the DBCC’s budget framework, the DBM issues a Budget Call for various government agencies to present their detailed expenditure programs and budgets. The budgets are presented to the President, which reviews, approves, and then submits the annual budget proposal to Congress for legislative approval.
2. The Budget Authorization/Legislation phase starts with the congressional review of the President’s budget proposal. A General Appropriations Bill is filed at the House of Representatives (HOR). Legislation of the bill entails several hearings in both houses, resulting in revisions to the President’s original budget proposal.
3. Following Budget Legislation is Budget Execution. The DBM prepares the Agency Budget Matrix (ABM) and releases this per department and agency. The DBM also releases the Special Allotment Release Order (SARO) and Notice of Cash Allocation (NCA) to departments and agencies for subsequent programmed implementation of their respective programs and projects.
4. Budget Accountability is essentially a review process of agency and department performance.

Each one is required to submit progress reports to the DBM regularly. Likewise, the agency opens its book of accounts for examination by the Commission on Audit (COA). This review process provides feedback pertinent to the budget preparation in the next cycle.

## **Political Interference in National Road Projects**

### *The DPWH and National Road Projects*

The DPWH is the primary government agency in the development and operation of national roads. Its mandate includes: (a) planning of infrastructures, such as roads and bridges, flood control, water resources projects, and other public works; and (b) design, construction, and maintenance of national roads and bridges, and major flood control systems. The DPWH, however, is not the only agency involved. Other line departments and government-owned and controlled corporations are involved in the construction and maintenance of national roads.

### *Political Interference in the Infrastructure Development Cycle*

**Project identification and prioritization.** The executive branch of government is the most potent political actor during project identification and prioritization. In addition to setting the policy guidelines and the formulation of national programs, the final list of priority projects is subject to the approval of the President. While the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) Board is the executive authority that prioritizes infrastructure proposals, it is the President who actually wields power on project prioritization. There is nothing illegal or unethical in this.

Lobbies for projects are typical in democracies. According to an executive official, some legislators attend NEDA deliberations to lobby for particular projects openly. They write requests to relevant executive departments/agencies for road projects. They could even use their relationship with the President or their clout over senior officials to include favored projects in the priority list. It is, however, the exercise of executive prerogative that is subject to scrutiny particularly when it is used to 1) reward political allies and punish political opponents and 2) reap pecuniary gains.

Bantay Lansangan (2008) found that legislators exert significant influence in determining project priorities sometimes to the point that political factors overcome economic and technical considerations. For instance, Mangahas and Ilagan (2009) observed the link between the surge in the value and number of infrastructure contracts during elections and major political events. Their report revealed the sudden spike in public works contracts awarded in 2004 and 2007, which were election years. Moreover, the infrastructure budget steadily climbed since after 2004, following the enactment of the Revised Value-Added Tax Law, and the beginning of a series of impeachment complaints against the Philippine President (Mangahas & Ilagan, 2009).

Valderama (2009) tried to support the observation that party affiliation affects project prioritization and budget allocation under the Arroyo administration. Based on the DPWH online registry of projects, she found large budget allocations to districts identified with several opposition members. The allocations were larger than those for many administration allies. The data do not necessarily mean that political opponents receive large public works allocations, however. Further investigation is needed to establish exactly how such events had happened. As clarified by one politician, in some cases, it is possible that the administration may allocate more money in opposition districts, where the representative is not able to interfere in bidding, to secure bigger kickbacks.

An investigative report by the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) associated the Philippine president's interest in the selection of road projects. Ilagan (2009) wrote about the sale of a 2.9-hectare agricultural property in Barangay Pulo, San Rafael, Bulacan, owned by President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and her husband. The transaction was technically legal but appeared to be questionable because the selling price was several times over the current market value. From 2004 to 2007, the DPWH also undertook five road projects that made travel to and from the Arroyo property easier. Ilagan (2009) showed a possible case of conflict of interest. However, the extent of political interference in this case, if there is such, has yet to be ascertained.

Project prioritization in the annual program is not only based on technical readiness but on certain political developments. There are indications that

events, such as the failed opposition-led impeachment of President Arroyo, influenced the prioritization of projects in favor of loyal administration allies in Congress. The disbursement records of pork barrel funds in the HOR and interviews suggest that projects identified with or that may benefit known bailiwicks of opposition legislators that participated in the failed impeachment were set aside.

**Project preparation.** The extent of political interference in project preparation is uncertain even as explicit and implicit references to it were made in a number of studies. Nevertheless, Bantay Lansangan (2008) noted the problem of politicization of the DPWH roadworks system. Like the World Bank (2009b), it maintains that political interventions sometimes supersede economic and technical considerations (Bantay Lansangan, 2008, p.4). Accordingly, DPWH decisions are often influenced by politics and politicians, especially at the local level. Unclear delineation, overlapping or duplicative jurisdictions, and responsibilities among different infrastructure agencies exacerbate the problems of a “highly politicized” infrastructure system (Bantay Lansangan, 2008, p.4). Brief references to political interference were made in two of the three cases contained in the Bantay Lansangan study.

In its own assessment of Philippine’s transport infrastructure, the World Bank (2009b, p. 53) maintained that “cost-benefit and technical analyses of projects are not undertaken on a routine basis” and are not required during project selection in the multiyear planning and the annual budget process. Thus, the quality of project preparation and project proposal submissions in the comprehensive infrastructure programs can vary significantly. The DPWH is, however, singled out as a “possible exception” given its adoption of modern IT-based road planning system tools.

Detailed engineering is mostly technical work but is still susceptible to political interference. Politicians may influence the drafting or alteration of technical specifications. Interviews conducted by the World Bank Department of Institutional Integrity (INT) regarding the National Roads Improvement Project (NRIMP) 1 revealed that government officials have a vested interest in getting big projects sliced into smaller packages (PCIJ, n.d.). The subdivision of a large project into smaller packages is referred to as “re-sectioning” or in slang, “chop-chop.”

Since DPWH rules allow district offices to supervise projects worth P50 million or less, one possible motive for e-sectioning” is to shift project supervision down to the District Engineer’s level where local legislators would have more influence. As suggested above, requests for re-sectioning could also be done to provide economic windfall benefits to politicians. Re-sectioned road projects quickly provide windfall benefits in terms of raising the value of a politician’s real property or entitling him to the right of way acquisition (ROWA) payments (e.g., Cabacungan, 2008).

Another case relates to the recent scandal involving a former Senate President, who was accused of intervening in a DPWH project for his “pecuniary benefit.” Accordingly, the Senate President was the proponent of two road projects, which were made to pass through the properties of his corporations “following a curved instead of a straight alignment” (Avendaño, 2010, par. 11).

**Project implementation.** Political interference occurs especially during the ROWA, procurement, and construction phases. The larger setting for political interference is political corruption. Bidding and contracting activities have been long identified as a major target for corruption. Cases have been cited revealing collusion with government agencies to jack up the ROWA prices in affected properties. The Bantay Lansangan (2008) report also mentions unverified reports of politicians purchasing properties where infrastructure projects are to be built as well as reports that informal settlers, some allegedly in connivance with public officials, occupy sites where such projects are expected. Padding the list of right of way beneficiaries is also allegedly being done.

The World Bank Integrity Vice-Presidency Annual Report 2009 confirmed the existence of a cartel of contractors and DPWH officials involved in the National Road Improvement and Management Project (NRMIP)-1. On top of the WB-INT’s bid analysis, investigators received information that “a well-organized cartel was improperly influencing the implementing agency’s contract award decisions and setting inflated bid prices.” In addition, it said that a witness was able to accurately predict in advance the results of a bidding based on meetings of bidders to rig parts of the bidding process (World Bank, 2009a, p.25).

Mangahas (2009), citing the World Bank Department of Institutional Integrity investigation,

notes that the cartel enjoys political support from “the highest levels of the Philippine government” (par. 1). Accordingly, the *modus operandi* includes the disqualification of uncooperative bidders, the anointment of contract winners, and losing bidders in advance of bid submission, dictating the exact bid amount of participating contractors and inflating this by 20-30% above estimates (Mangahas, 2009).

The World Bank (2009b, pp. 101–102) identified several corruption arrangements for road projects. These include:

- The inflation of the Approved Budget of Contract (ABC) using bloated quantity estimates and manipulated survey and design data;
- During the pre-qualification stage, the use of the BAC of its discretion to pre-disqualify non-cartel members for irrelevant infractions, while ignoring similar or worse infractions in order to pre-qualify cartel members;
- Falsification and misrepresentation of documents such as financial records, work history, and so forth;
- Another arrangement involved the manipulation of bid evaluation, substitution of bid documents, and misreading of bids;
- The payment of bribes to officials involved in contract award and processing of payments such as those in legal, executive, construction, Project Management Office (PMO), and so forth; and
- The introduction of “variation orders” that contain inflated prices for items or activities that are difficult to audit such as landslide removal, excavation, repairs, and so forth..

Note that in these arrangements, politicians are recipients of bribes. However, the World Bank (2009b, p. 101) went further to describe the role of politicians in road projects. Accordingly, they act as the “arranger” or “patron” of international and large national projects. For smaller projects, the patron is typically a local politician or elite operating at the regional or district level. Top-level government officials interfere and influence the bidding process toward favored contractors in exchange for kickbacks.

Manasan and Mercado (2001) noted the instances when the design of road projects had to be altered in terms of project scope or location during project implementation. Intervention usually comes from legislators in case of Congressional projects under the “various infrastructure” budget category (Manasan & Mercado, 2001, p.45). The alleged amounts of kickbacks involved in such projects are substantial, ranging from 20% to 60% of the total project budget (Parreño, 1998; Batalla, 2001; Chua & Cruz, 2004).

Politicians can also serve either as agents or principals (owners) of construction firms. Ilagan (2009) provided data for this in the case of the legislature. From the 9th up to the 14th Congress, representatives with business interests/assets in construction ranged from 5% to 13% of the total number of representatives. In Congress, the Public Works and Highways Committee is next only to the Appropriations Committee in terms of the size of membership. During the 12th Congress (2001–2004), 140 legislators were members of this committee comprising 61% of the total 228 representatives. The number has since dropped to 95 (or 40% out of 238 members) in the 14<sup>th</sup> Congress (Ilagan, 2009).

**Operation, maintenance, and evaluation.** The objective behind the creation of the Road Fund and the Road Board is “to insulate public expenditures for maintenance from potential political interference, as the funding of routine maintenance had become a favored instrument for congressional discretion” (World Bank, 2009b, p. 98). Chaired by the DPWH Secretary, it allocates the Motor Vehicle User’s Charge (MVUC) funds and plays a key role in identifying roads to be maintained. However, in the few years since its formation, the agency has been caught in serious controversy. The weak coordination between the DPWH and the Road Board affects the funds allocation process (Bantay Lansangan, 2008, p. 16). Moreover, it is susceptible to political interference and mismanagement, given the absence of oversight (or check and balance).

The World Bank (2009b) noted the politicization of this agency and the usage of the MVUC funds for purposes other than which it has been designed at the behest of the executive branch. It noted that the Road Board has funded non-maintenance activities requested by the executive branch for political reasons. There are indications that political appointments to the board

have exacerbated these problems. Several members of Congress have advocated for the dissolution of the Road Board following allegations of mismanagement of funds, improper or non-reporting of expenditures, excessive bonuses, and inequitable distribution and favoritism (e.g., Sisante, 2008; “Palace welcomes probe,” 2009).

### ***Political Interference in the Annual Budget Cycle***

The national budgeting process is often perceived as a major source of political corruption in road construction projects. Political corruption and politicking appear to be the rules of the game in the politics of the budget, particularly in the early stages of the cycle (e.g., Parreño, 1998). Yet, the literature is missing as far as political interference in the budget cycle is concerned. The occurrence of political interference has yet to be identified precisely.

**Budget preparation.** No evidence of political interference has surfaced with respect to the budget preparation stage. Budget preparation activities are highlighted by executive preference and control over budget priorities. Particularly, presidential preferences as reflected in the State of the National Address (SONA), Medium-Term Philippine Development Plan (MTPDP), and Ten Point Agenda shape agency budgets. Presidential prerogative could also be exercised after submission of the DPWH budget to the DBM for review and presidential approval.

**Budget legislation/authorization.** Political interference in budget legislation/authorization typically occurs through the Congressional Initiative Allocation (CIA), otherwise called as “congressional insertions.” These are allocations for various agencies which legislators have the power to direct the disbursement (Parreño, 1998). These are “inserted” in the budgets of executive line departments, and the allocation per representative varies according to his or her stature or influence (e.g., committee chair or member, party affiliation). These funds are often lumped together with other “pork barrel” funds. The latter, however, are distinct because they are national allocations specifically intended for projects in areas and constituencies that legislators represent (Nograla & Lagman, 2008).

Legislators holding top positions in powerful committees (e.g., Senate Committee on Finance and

House Committee on Appropriations) and influential members of the majority also receive substantial shares since they hold the numbers to guarantee either swift approval or delay of agency budgets. It is possible for opposition legislators to receive an allotment, for instance, to quiet them down when they raise sensitive issues such as lack of quorum during deliberations. Releases of funds to projects funded through Congressional initiatives are still subject to Presidential approval.

Congressional insertions reflect distortions of the budget process because “they give wide discretion over public money to legislators rather than the national economic and development planners” (Gutierrez, 1998, p. 60). Gutierrez (1998, p. 61) recounted the frustration of Department of Finance officials who had projected a P1-billion budget surplus but instead faced a P24.5 million deficit because of such insertions. These represented a 189% increase over the previous year’s allocation.

With their budgets on the line, agency officials are highly susceptible to the influence of legislators during budget hearings. Hodder (2009, p. 772) noted that: “The meetings which take place around the budget and oversight hearings, as well as the hearings themselves, provide legislators with opportunities to extract what they can through bluff and force of personality. With the hope that the official will prefer to capitulate rather than suffer, legislators will intimate that the official’s career is on the line, and that she will have to bear the blame for cuts to the department.”

According to a legislative staff interviewed for this study, in addition to budget-related arrangements, some legislators also request other favors such as the transfer or assignment of particular personnel in their districts. The susceptibility of agency officials to such requests is understandable. Some uncooperative agency officials have hearings on their budgets deferred, face public threats of major budget cuts or agency dissolution, put up with intense grilling, and in some cases, suffer personal attacks and humiliation. Agency officials can easily succumb to pressure and accommodate the requests of legislators.

Hodder (2009, p. 771) provided supporting accounts noting that: “pressure is sometimes applied directly: undersecretaries, assistant secretaries, commissioners, assistant commissioners, and more junior officials, whose duties bring them into contact with legislators,



are approached (within and outside committee meetings) by politicians with the intention of shaping decisions either on disciplinary cases, promotions, appointments, and other personnel matters, or on the direction of spending and programs.”

**Budget execution.** Budget execution rests exclusively on the executive branch. The Office of the President and the DBM exercise great authority over the release of funds to implementing agencies like the DPWH. Irregularities in the budget execution process have been noted in the Road Board’s management of road maintenance funds. The COA 2007 Consolidated Audit Report on the Road Board MVUC Funds reported a “breach of the budget process in the authorization of expenditures from the MVUC Special Funds resulting in the irregular incurrence of obligations and disbursements without covering allotments” (COA, 2007, p.29).

In practice, the President also exercises discretion over the release of CIAs to concerned legislators for two reasons. First, discretion is exercised for fiscal reasons, particularly in controlling the budget deficit. Second, discretion is exercised to influence policy decisions of Congress (Parreño, 1998, p. 37).

**Budget accountability.** The COA is a constitutional commission mandated to audit the operations of all government agencies. However, members of the executive and legislative branches of government are also involved in budget accountability processes. In the executive, the DPWH and the DBM undertake internal audits. The Philippine Congress also conducts investigations as part of its oversight functions. These functions can be neglected due to political considerations.

Politicians have been known to influence COA investigations. Cruz and Chua (2004) provided anecdotal evidence of COA personnel involved in clearing politicians, particularly those involved in pork barrel projects. Another case in point is the rejection by Congress of findings in a confidential World Bank Department of Institutional Integrity (INT) report on the NRIMP 1, a loan that funded major infrastructure project between 2003 and 2006. The WB INT findings indicated possible collusion involving high-ranking government officials that implicated legislators and even the President’s husband in alleged collusion.

The government, instead of pursuing thorough investigations based on the WB INT report, virtually

ignored it. Lawmakers in Congress challenged the World Bank to substantiate its charges that some politicians and government officials conspired to rig the bidding of World Bank-funded projects (Castillo, 2009). On January 30, 2009, Congress decided to clear contractors banned by the World Bank. Senator Aquilino Pimentel found this decision to be hasty (Echeminada, 2009). Administration lawmakers later blamed IFIs like the World Bank, ADB, and Japan Bank for International Cooperation for rejecting the government’s proposed cap on the cost of foreign-assisted projects. The absence of a cap allegedly spawned corruption in such projects (e.g., Diaz & Porcalla, 2009).

### *Politics and Political Interference*

Political interference in this study refers to actions by politicians, particularly elected and appointed public officials, to influence or impose their will in violation of duly established administrative and project processes as well as notions of propriety. These generally take the form of direct or indirect interventions in policy and bureaucratic processes (e.g., general administration and project management) that goes beyond the duly established authority of such officials.

Examples of political interference in the context of this study include top-level officials influencing officials of the DPWH to modify plans in accordance with political rather than rational-technical considerations (project cycle); politicians working with contractors to directly or indirectly influence members of the bids and awards committee to favor or reject particular suppliers or contractors in the awarding of government contracts (project cycle); top-level officials influencing officials of the DPWH to change road project specifications or locations for the roads to pass their housing projects (project cycle); and legislators asking favors from officials of DPWH during budget hearing, such as the transfer or assignment of particular personnel in their districts (budget cycle).

### *Political Interference as Political Corruption*

Political interference, as referred to in this paper, is a form of political corruption. Corruption is broadly defined as the use of public office for private gain (Palmier 1983: 207). Political corruption involves politicians abusing authority; deviating from the rational-legal values; or ignoring, side-stepping, or

even tailoring laws and regulations to suit their interests (Amundsen, 1999). Such acts may be shrouded in projects and decisions ostensibly intended for the public purpose as Cariño (1985, p. 15) pointed out: "Though the outward purpose of projects might be endowed with some plausible economic or social justification, a more urgent reason for pursuing them was the opportunity to use government activity for private gain, whether pecuniary or political... to secure a political constituency, to get a commission or to corner a contract."

Heidenheimer (1989) presented three of the most enduring definitions of political corruption: *public-office-centered*, *market-centered*, and *public-interest-centered* definitions. Public office-centered definitions are based on conceptions of the public office. Corrupt behavior, motivated by private pecuniary, or status gains is a deviation from formal duties, laws, regulations, and standards attached to the public office. Market-centered definitions treat public positions as a business. The authority attached to these positions enable officeholders to maximize personal gain by dispensing public benefits. Public interest-centered definitions stress the damaging consequences to the public of actions that favor special or narrow interests. Corrupt behavior is judged not merely by deviant acts, but by the harm inflicted to the public through the actions of the office holder. These categories reflect a long-standing debate on corruption definitions, which is far from settled.

By definition, interference connotes a negative intervention that is synonymous to meddling, intrusion, impediment, and hindrance. In this study, political interference happens when an elected or appointed official directly or indirectly influences members of the bureaucracy to make decisions or take actions that deviate from or violate prescribed rules and procedures. Typically, elected or appointed officials leverage on their positions to influence the actions of those in the bureaucracy to suit their interests.

This fits well into Heidenheimer's (1989) public-office centered definition of political corruption that involves deviation from formal duties, laws, regulations, and standards attached to the public office motivated by private gains. This is also similar to the legalistic view of corruption as the commission of acts prohibited by laws established by the government (Gardiner 1993, p.115). For example, an official that

influences members of the DPWH bids and awards committee to award a road project to a preferred contractor causes those members to violate the principles and rules of open and competitive bidding.

In Heidenheimer's (1989) market-centered definition of corruption, office holders regard their public office as a private business and use it to gain profit. Political interference touches into this definition. These interventions do not happen in a vacuum; they often have underlying motives for material, political, or status gain for the office holder. In this regard, politicians leverage on their position for gains. For example, collusion between contractors, politicians, and DPWH officials in the awarding of contracts is clearly a business arrangement that revolves around or leverage on officials holding public office.

As well, political interference touches on Heidenheimer's (1989) public-interest centered definition of corruption. Politicians who influence the bureaucracy to bend or violate rules and standards to favor narrow interests inevitably causes harm to the public interest. For example, a politician who influences the DPWH to redesign a major road project to pass through his real estate projects increase costs and divert the road from areas where it is most needed. Such acts also potentially cause long-term damage to institutions by shifting the basis of project planning from rational-technical and public-interest considerations to serving a narrow political interest.

Political interference thus cuts across all three definitions of political corruption. At the first instance, political interference is clearly a deviation from prescribed rules and procedures. However, if the rules and procedures are not clear, notions of political interference or impropriety are provided by the two other definitions. A public-interest perspective focuses less on the motivations of political interference. Thus, even if the public office is not regarded as a business that maximizes personal gain, interference that favor narrow or special interests still causes some harm or loss to the public.

## Conclusions

Political interference in road construction and maintenance reflect politicians' pursuit of narrow interests, which could be pecuniary, or political, or both. The problem of interference falls under the

discourse of corruption and political interference could be understood as a form of political corruption that involve politicians interfering in bureaucratic processes or the actions of those in the bureaucracy.

This paper tried to ascertain the occurrence of political interference in national road projects using the process-level frameworks. We also explored interference using the Infrastructure Development Cycle and the Annual Budget Cycle. The adoption of the said frameworks in the study yields some tentative but interesting results. The modalities of political interference derived are summarized in Tables 1 and 2.

As Tables 1 and 2 show, political interference comes from a wide array of political actors ranging from the lowest to the highest levels of government, depending on the type of road projects. Using the IDC for national road projects, interference by top-level politicians has been observed in 1) project selection and identification, 2) project preparation, 3) project implementation, and

4) project operation, maintenance, and evaluation. Published investigative reports, especially by the PCIJ, implicate members of the executive and legislative branches of government.

The use of the ABC framework reveals pronounced legislator interference in budget legislation. Basically, interference is demonstrated through congressional insertions and leveraging with executive agencies on certain exchange transactions. Congressional insertions result in budgets and work programs higher and beyond those originally planned by the DPWH and other similar agencies. Unaccommodated, legislator interference could cause problems for government agency budgets or agency officials. Thus, this can and appears to have been used as leverage.

The occurrence of political interference could be inferred based on the existing literature on road projects. Apparently, it occurs in all types of national road projects. The data from the literature do not

**Table 1**  
*Political Interference Based on the IDC Framework*

Stage	National Roads
Project Identification and Selection	Abuse of executive prerogative in project selection, disregarding technical, and economic analyses of projects Executive approval of projects as political rewards and personal gain
Project Preparation	Re-sectioning of projects Priority projects in Annual Investment Plan based on political considerations
Project Implementation	Delays in implementation Involvement in procurement processes Changed work order Support of corrupt bureaucrats
Project Operation, Maintenance, & Evaluation	Politically-motivated decisions of Road Board on funds use and maintenance projects Political appointments

**Table 2**  
*Political Interference Based on the ABC Framework*

Stage	National Roads
Budget Preparation	Executive and legislator interference based on project identification and selection
Budget Authorization/ Legislation	Congressional insertions Legislators leveraging budget hearings to facilitate requests from heads or senior officials of agencies
Budget Review (For local government units only)	
Budget Execution	Political interference based on executive control over the release of funds
Budget Accountability	None observed but is likely involving auditing processes

provide concrete evidence that it occurs in all stages of road and budget management processes. However, interviews point to possibilities in all stages.

What the literature provides is some knowledge about the existence of corruption because there are corrupt actors and vulnerable systems. Some data on political corruption and political interference have surfaced in the course of reporting scandals and evaluating policies and projects. However, as far as published information is concerned, little is known about the dynamics of political corruption and interference. There are no decided court cases establishing political interference and shedding light on its dynamics. There is a large gap with evidence provided only by investigative reports and interviews.

Acts of political interference have been observed to affect project and budget management processes as well as personnel appointments at both national and local levels of government. Opportunities for interference generally thrive in light of weaknesses in the bureaucracy's system and organization. Collusive arrangements involving politicians, bureaucrats, and private sector actors tend to be encouraged by vulnerabilities in project and budget management processes. Interference also thrives in the failure to check the abuse of executive authority and discretion.

It is also worth noting that political interference is likely facilitated by the ability of politicians to secure positions for their people within the bureaucracy. Indeed, this study has shown that political interference by some legislators may be facilitated by their ability to influence the appointments of DPWH District Engineers in their respective districts. In the case of the executive branch, the ability of the Office of the President to appoint more than 6,000 positions in the upper tier of the bureaucracy gives it plenty of opportunities to influence bureaucratic processes both legitimately and non-legitimately (Hodder, 2009).

The data from existing studies and reports suggest the pervasiveness of political interference in national road projects in the country. This pervasiveness may reflect the constant and uninhibited intentions of political actors to use their positions to serve narrow interests. There is a propensity among certain political actors to circumvent existing management systems and to maintain existing organizational vulnerabilities. The pervasiveness of political interference in the country may also reflect larger issues from the political

system. Despite reforms in the procurement law and the adoption of sophisticated management tools, the pervasiveness of political interference and bureaucratic corruption for generations has not been effectively controlled.

In view of its findings and analysis, the study recommends certain directions for future investigation and policy regarding political interference. First, future studies should be able to firmly establish, rather than to merely infer, the occurrence of political interference in road projects. This may require a deeper probe in road projects where interference is suspected. The investigation could examine interference based on project management and budget management process frameworks.

Gathering hard evidence on political interference in road projects, however, is difficult and costly. An alternative method is to establish patterns of political interference based on a proliferation of cases. This requires documentation of project and budget management processes in several national and local levels sites. The existence of a multi-sectoral network could greatly aid data collection on political interference and similar problems in road projects.

Second, the existing policies and procedures relating to road management should be reviewed to strengthen bureaucratic autonomy. Specifically, reviews should be conducted in the appointment process of bodies like the Road Board with the end of preventing its politicization by the Executive branch. An independent review process for appointments should be considered.

Third, the institutionalization of civil society participation in the project and budget management processes should be considered. This potentially strengthens the check-and-balance mechanisms in national and local road project management systems. Systematizing and expanding voluntary participation by NGOs in monitoring various phases of road project management and the budget cycle may contribute to this end. Directly observing and documenting meetings/hearings held by government agencies (including LGUs) at various stages of the project and budget management cycles might be one such mechanism.

The monitoring of road projects by a multi-stakeholder partnership between the government and civil society in the *Bantay Lansangan* (Road Watch)

Project that include road users, governance advocates, road service providers, national road asset managers, government partners, regulators and enforcers, centers of expertise, development partners, and media partners is one such initiative that could be further enhanced in the future.

Fourth, the DPWH should be continually engaged for sectoral, organizational, and project management reforms in the road sector. It could take the lead in developing the plan and supporting its legislation. A comprehensive and long-range road network plan allows predictability and discourages the abuse of discretion in road sector management. Likewise, internal reforms targeted at getting the right system and people are needed to foster the agency's integrity and enhance its image.

Previous studies point to particularities in the evolution of the road sector in developing and transitional countries (e.g., Robinson, 2006). Thus, an examination of the Philippine road sector from a comparative perspective in light of similar experiences should be seriously considered. Future studies should also put emphasis on understanding the particular historical and institutional (social, economic, political, and cultural) Philippine context under which these systems operate in order to identify context-specific solutions. As noted by Haque (2013), there are particularities in Asian societies and bureaucratic systems that should be seriously considered before adopting generic Western public administration and management approaches and prescriptions.

While this study has shown political interference as a form of political corruption and described the patterns and modalities of political interference in Philippine roadworks as a scoping work, it has not fully examined its causes. For this, further studies examining the nature of corruption in the context of elected executives, legislators, and appointed officials are worth exploring. The work of Balla, Lawrence, Maltzman, and Sigelman (2002) and Carroll and Kim (2010) provided promising leads for investigating political interference in the context of distributive or pork barrel politics.

In general, future studies and policy recommendations should be directed at reducing opportunities for the abuse of discretion by government executives and legislators. Widespread improvements in the design of project and budget management processes could

discourage the pervasiveness of political interference in Philippine roadworks. The findings of this article suggest that further studies are needed in support of said reforms.

Ethical clearance:

This study was approved by the institution.

Conflict of interest:

None.

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