



Indigenous Peoples' Legislative Representation Through the Philippine Party-List System

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Received: 11 July 2024 / Accepted: 24 August 2025 / Published: 27 October 2025

Dolo, S. A. (2025). Indigenous peoples' legislative representation through the Philippine party-list system. *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies*, 18(2), E1-E16.

This qualitative study examines whether the Philippine party-list system effectively enables indigenous peoples' legislative representation by reviewing documents from the Philippine Commission on Elections, the Philippine Congress, the Philippine Supreme Court, and the profiles of elected indigenous peoples' party-list groups. Using Hannah Pitkin's dimensions of representation, this study finds that, as a form of formal mechanism, the party-list system provides limited representation opportunities for indigenous peoples' party-list groups. Additionally, although the elected sectoral representatives are members of indigenous communities, their socio-economic status differs from that of most of the indigenous peoples. Finally, the presence of indigenous peoples' sectoral representatives in the legislature did not result in adequate substantive representation of indigenous communities, as most indigenous-related proposals have not passed into legislation. This study concludes that the mainstream electoral mechanism fails to effectively enhance the legislative representation of indigenous peoples.

Keywords: Descriptive Representation; Indigenous Peoples; Party-List System; Philippines; Substantive Representation



INTRODUCTION

Representation is vital in a democracy (Buhlmann et al., 2011; Plotke, 1997; Rozbicka, 2023; Urbanati & Warren, 2008) as it enables citizens to participate indirectly in government processes and decision-making activities. Particularly, legislative representation ensures that the people's needs and interests are thoroughly discussed before any law is enacted. For Indigenous Peoples (IPs), legislative representation is crucial in the advancement of their rights, the protection of their interests, and their inclusion in nation-building. Overall, IPs' legislative representation strengthens democracy, allows for social integration, and prevents conflict (Prot-sky, 2010).

However, IPs are rarely involved in the policy-making processes of the government, making them vulnerable to injustice. For instance, the IPs in Southeast Asia continue to suffer from state-sponsored development aggression, resulting in widespread violation of their rights, forced relocation, and poverty (Torrejas et al., 2023). The struggle for the recognition of their rights over their lands, territories, and resources, as well as the demand for the protection of

their distinct cultural practices by the state, is a shared experience for most IPs worldwide (Luithui-Erni, 2020).

Consequently, some countries have introduced institutional mechanisms to facilitate IPs' representation. In New Zealand, Bolivia, Colombia, Venezuela, and India, there are reserved seats in the legislature for members of the indigenous communities (Hoffay & Rivas, 2016; Morris, 2021), while countries such as Singapore, Ecuador, and Zimbabwe have constitutionally guaranteed indigenous representation in the executive and judicial branches (Morris, 2021).

In the Philippines, there are an estimated 12.5-17.8 million IPs based on the 2017 national population census (See, 2021). They are primarily located in the mountains of Northern Luzon and the Southern islands of Mindanao, with smaller populations scattered in the Visayas and Luzon islands (Arquiza, 2005; See, 2021; UNDP, 2010). According to the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act¹, the IPs are described as those belonging to a community that has continuously lived on communally bounded and defined territories that they have occupied since time immemorial. They share common bonds of history, language, customs, traditions, and other cultural markers, which they have preserved by resisting colonial and mainstream influences. These cultural traits differentiate the IPs from most of the Filipino population, leading to instances of social and economic exclusion. The Philippine indigenous communities and their resources face consistent threats of development aggression in the form of mining activities and dam projects (Tauli-Corpuz, 2010). Meanwhile, government authorities actively red-tag and discredit defenders of IPs rights (Bello, 2020; Cariño, 2021). As a result, Philippine indigenous communities continue to suffer from poverty and food insufficiency, poor access to formal health services and medicine, high incidents of early marriages, school drop-outs, and human trafficking, as well as bullying and discrimination (De Vera, 2007; Hirai, 2015).

The Philippine Party-List Systems Act of 1995 was enacted to remedy the problem of legislative underrepresentation in the Philippine Congress.² The law reserved 20% of the 250 seats in the House of Representatives (HoR) for marginalized sectors through proportional representation (Bernas, 2002; Tangkia & Harabadas, 2001). However, despite being recognized as an essential mechanism for the legislative representation of marginalized sectors, the party-list system is riddled with deficiencies. Contrary to its stated purpose, studies reveal that the party-list system aligns with the elitist features of Philippine politics (Casiple, 2003; Llamas, 2001). Instead of facilitating the representation of marginalized sectors, it has benefited well-established politicians and major political parties (Eaton, 2003; Fermin, 2001), and it has been linked with left-oriented groups (Holden, 2009; Quimpo, 2018; Tuazon, 2016). While sec. 5 of RA 7941 lists the marginalized sectors as the laborers, peasants, fisherfolks, urban poor, indigenous cultural communities, elderly, handicapped, women, youth, veterans, overseas workers, and professionals, questions about who can best represent them and if they are meaningfully represented in the HoR continue to confront the Philippine party-list system (Bionat, 2021; Kimura, 2013).

While the deficiencies and issues regarding the party-list system apply to all marginalized sectors, a study focused on IPs legislative representation is necessary because of their unique features and circumstances, which might not be compatible with the representative selection

¹ Also known as Republic Act 8371. The law was enacted by the Philippine legislature in 1997 and signed into law by then-President Fidel Valdez Ramos. A copy of the law is available at <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/1997/10/29/republic-act-no-8371>

² Also known as Republic Act 7941. A copy of the law is available at https://lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra1995/ra_7941_1995.html

process of the party-list system. For instance, the indigenous communities possess traditional political structures and practices concerning authority appointment and decision-making (Arquiza, 2005; Buendia et al., 2006; Solang, 2017; Wessendorf, 2001). Moreover, most indigenous community members are statistically unaccounted for, resulting in their lack of documents necessary for political participation (Perez-Brito, 2021; See, 2021).

The literature on ethnic political representation enumerates various ways to ensure effective and meaningful representation. For instance, the works of Mansbridge (1999), Phillips (2019), and Arnesen and Peters (2018) attach value to descriptive representation, or the idea that representatives must mirror the demographic features and experiences of those being represented. In particular, descriptive representation is significant in plural societies (Arnesen & Peters, 2018) and in cases where there is a history of political exclusion, marginalization, and mistrust between the ethnic communities and the government (Mansbridge, 1999; Phillips, 2019). In these situations, descriptive representation can enhance legitimacy and foster inclusivity. Additionally, seeing someone like them engage in decision-making empowers the members of the marginalized community to participate in government activities and make their concerns visible in the political arena. Conversely, Meier and Severs (2018) point out that there is a danger in elevating political representatives as role models, particularly for ethnic communities. They argue that the role model function of descriptive representation disregards the existence of various, distinct ethnic groups, which can result in their exclusion.

Meanwhile, substantive representation occurs when the representative acts on behalf of the represented, resulting in the enactment of meaningful laws. While acknowledging that descriptive representation can lead to substantive representation, scholars point out that this is not inherent (Mansbridge, 1999; Pitkin, 1967). Factors influencing the link between descriptive and substantive representation include diversity within groups (Celis et al., 2008; Meier & Severs, 2018). This is particularly true for ethnic communities that comprise numerous, distinct subgroups and ethnolinguistic groups. In addition, institutional norms and rules, as well as representation processes (Allen, 2022; Childs & Celis, 2018), limit the attainment of meaningful legislation despite the shared experiences between the representatives and those they represent.

Another type of representation is symbolic representation, where individuals can represent others without necessarily mirroring their features and experiences (Pitkin, 1967). While pointing out that symbolic representation has often been discussed as an effect of descriptive and substantive representation, Lombardo and Meier (2019) and Meier and Severs (2018) argue that it should be treated as a separate dimension. According to them, symbolic representation demonstrates how a constituency and a representative's identity can be constructed and modified. In addition, while it can enhance the recognition and inclusion of marginalized sectors, symbolic representation without meaningful policies addressing the concerns of the marginalized sectors is mere tokenism (Lombardo & Meier, 2019; Phillips, 2019; Pitkin, 1967).

In general, the literature on the representation of marginalized sectors, particularly women and ethnic minorities, reveals that they may benefit from or be disadvantaged by any form of representation. This study uses all the dimensions of representation to capture a comprehensive picture of IPs' representation through the Philippine party-list system. Through this multi-faceted approach, the study can simultaneously identify which dimension of representation is fulfilled and which remains lacking.

Hence, in examining whether the party-list system adequately provides IPs with legislative representation, this study first determines the number of IPs groups that have succeeded in gaining legislative positions via the party-list system. Next, it examines whether the sectoral

representatives of IPs mirror the features of most indigenous community members. Lastly, it discusses whether these sectoral representatives have successfully enacted laws relevant to the indigenous communities.

FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

This study uses Hanna Pitkin's (1967) conceptualization of political representation as a framework to present a detailed discussion of indigenous legislative representation through the Philippine party-list system. Pitkin's classic work on representation remains a valuable analytical tool for understanding democratic representation, particularly in the field of women and ethnic representation in the legislature (Campbell et al., 2010; Celis & Manzur, 2012; Garboni, 2015; Minta, 2012; Wängnerud, 2009).

Pitkin's taxonomy is appropriate for this study since it is comprehensive enough to include the subtleties of indigenous peoples' legislative representation. This study first looks into the existence and effectiveness of institutional mechanisms that enable the participation of indigenous communities in mainstream politics. Second, it determines the identity of the representative in relation to the indigenous community he/she claims to represent. Finally, it evaluates the legislative output of the IPs representative in line with the needs of the indigenous communities. In general, Pitkin's framework allows for a detailed understanding of the connection between the different types of representation as well as the relationship between the representative and those represented.

Hannah Pitkin (1967) has identified four types of representation, namely formalistic, descriptive, symbolic, and substantive representations. Formalistic representation focuses on the activities that occur before the actual representation (Pitkin, 1967, p. 38). These institutional processes authorize a person to act on behalf of others and hold him or her accountable to them (Dovi, 2015). People mostly grant representative status through elections, with new elections signifying the end of a representative's term of office (Pitkin, 1967). This study determines the number of party-list groups successfully elected following RA 7941 and relevant Philippine Supreme Court decisions.

Both descriptive and symbolic representations focus on the features of the representative. Descriptive representation refers to the likeness between the representative and those represented (Dovi, 2015; Pitkin, 1967, p. 60). It emphasizes the closeness of social and functional characteristics between the constituents and the representative (Minta, 2012), such as female legislators representing women's issues in Congress. This study determines descriptive representation by examining whether the elected sectoral representatives are members of indigenous communities and whether they mirror the same socio-economic difficulties experienced by most IPs. Given the heterogeneous nature of indigenous communities in the Philippines, membership and shared socio-economic difficulties brought about by historical and institutional marginalization are descriptive features that cut across the diverse indigenous communities. On the other hand, symbolic representation implies that someone can stand for others without necessarily mirroring their features. Instead, the representative acts as an advocate for those they represent and ensures that their concerns and preferences are reflected in the law-making body (Pitkin, 1967, p. 92).

Lastly, substantive representation occurs when the representative acts in the interest of the represented (Pitkin, 1967, p. 115). This includes proposing and enacting laws, engaging in advocacy activities, and delivering community services. However, the representatives' ability to act on behalf of their constituents is limited by factors outside their control, such as the legislative procedures, bureaucratic processes, the availability of government resources, and the

level of support from fellow legislators (Wängnerud, 2009). In this study, substantive representation is seen through the lens of proposed and enacted laws by the elected IPs representatives. While recognizing that meaningful representation can extend beyond legislation, this study asserts that lawmaking is the fundamental task assigned to an elected legislator. As mentioned in the party-list system's law, it accommodates candidates who could contribute to the formulation and enactment of appropriate legislation for the marginalized and underrepresented. Considering the arduous and complex legislative process, the legislative output is a culmination of the representative's diligence and perseverance in crafting arguments for the IPs, as well as a demonstration of their political influence and capacity to advocate for IPs' interests.

In this qualitative study, primary data such as the list of participating and elected IPs party-list groups during 1998, 2001, 2004, 2007, 2010, 2013, 2016, and 2019 Philippine elections were derived from the Commission on Election (COMELEC) official reports, while enacted and proposed bills authored by the elected IPs representative were sourced out from the official website of the Philippine HoR. Also, details regarding the profile and background of the elected IPs party-list group representatives were sourced from the party-list group's official website, newspaper articles, and press releases. The succeeding sections describe and discuss the formalistic, descriptive, symbolic, and substantive dimensions of IPs' legislative representation.

INDIGENOUS PEOPLES' LEGISLATIVE REPRESENTATION

Indigenous Peoples' Formalistic Representation

RA 7941 provides the institutional procedures facilitating the entry of marginalized and underrepresented sectors in the Philippine HoR. The process begins with the creation and registration of the party-list group with the COMELEC. These party-list organizations are required to provide a list of nominees who will serve as sectoral representatives once they receive the required number of votes in the elections (RA 7941, sec. 5 and sec. 8). The threshold to qualify for a seat was set at 2% of all votes cast, and failing to secure the required votes for two successive elections will lead to the cancellation of the party-list group's registration (RA 7941, sec. 6).

The initial implementation of RA 7941 revealed a major flaw: It was mathematically impossible to fulfill the 20% quota for sectoral representative seat allocation in the HoR using the 2% threshold. The fulfillment of the 20% constitutional mandate is done by ranking party-list groups that received at least 2% of the votes from highest to lowest. The remaining sectoral representative seats would be allocated to those in the top tier.³

Since the start of the party-list system in 1998 until the recent 2022 elections, COMELEC has accredited more than 1,100 party-list organizations. 26 of these accredited groups claim to represent the IPs sector, but only three have managed to win a seat in the Philippine HoR in the past nine elections. This study limits its analysis to the representatives of the elected party-list groups. By focusing on those who have acquired the formal designation as IPs representatives in the Philippine legislature, the study can evaluate the accessibility of the party-list system to the members of indigenous communities seeking to join mainstream politics, as well as their actual policy impact once they are seated in the HoR.

The *Ang Laban ng Indiginong Filipino* (The Fight of the Indigenous Filipinos) or ALIF was the first IPs party-list group to gain a seat in the Philippine HoR in 2004, garnering more than

³ This was decided by the Philippine Supreme Court on April 21, 2009, in the case of *Barangay Association for National Advancement and Transparency (BANAT) vs. COMELEC*. A copy of the decision can be retrieved from https://lawphil.net/judjuris/juri2009/apr2009/gr_179271_2009.html

2% of the registered voters (COMELEC, 2008). ALIF was founded by Acmad Maruhom Tomawis in Marawi City on February 10, 2003 (Castañeda-Tomawis, 2019). Initially, he ran under the *Laban ng Demokratikong Pilipino* (LDP) in 2001 but was disqualified as a party-list group by the COMELEC since LDP was a traditional political party (Rimban, 2008). LDP founder Edgardo Angara encouraged him to create a party-list group representing the Maranao tribe in Mindanao. According to news reports, ALIF was one of the party-list groups publicly endorsed by then-President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo in 2004 (Rimban, 2008). Gaining the highest number of votes in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) during its first try, ALIF went on to become an IPs sectoral representative for three straight terms, serving from 2004 until 2013.

Meanwhile, *Ang National Coalition of Indigenous Peoples' Action* (The National Coalition of Indigenous Peoples' Action) or ANAC-IP, won a congressional seat in the elections of 2013 (COMELEC, 2021) and 2016 (Adel, 2016) for its nominee, Jose T. Panganiban Jr. According to its official website, ANAC-IP was formed in 1993 by former members of the Cordillera Bodong Administration (CBA) and the Cordillera Executive Board (CEB). Briefly, these Cordillera bodies were formed through Executive Order No. 220, signed by former President Cory Aquino on July 15, 1987, which created the Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR). The same Cordillera bodies were dissolved during the term of President Joseph Estrada due to their alleged ineffectiveness and the failed ratification of the Cordillera Autonomous Organic Act (Bahatan, 2009).

Lastly, *Kusug-Tausug* (Strength of the Tausugs) was formed in 2016 and won a seat on its first try. It has garnered enough votes to secure a single seat in the elections of 2019 (Patinio, 2019) and 2022 (COMELEC, 2022). Its nominee, Shernee Tan-Tambut, is currently the only IPs sectoral representative in the 19th Congress.

These findings suggest that, as a form of formalistic representation, the Philippine party-list system has provided limited opportunities for IPs' legislative representation. The rules and dynamics of the party-list system have failed to consider the unique situation of the indigenous population, assuming that all marginalized and underrepresented sectors are the same and require similar mechanisms for legislative representation.

One relevant distinction between the IPs and the other identified marginalized sectors is that each of the indigenous communities has its own existing traditional political structures and processes. For instance, community elders and collective discussions play a relevant role in the indigenous community's decision-making process (Arquiza, 2005; Wessendorf, 2001). Examples of these collective bodies include the *amam-a* of Mankayan, the *ator* of Bontok, the *dap-ay* or *abong* of the Kankanaey, the *tongtong* of the Ibaloy, the *lallakay* of the Tingguians, or the *pangats* among the Lubuagan (Buendia et al., 2006; Prill-Brett, 1987). Similarly, ethnic groups such as the *Tagbanwa*, *Hanunoo Mangyan*, *Tiruray*, *Gaddang*, *Bago*, *Ikalahan*, *Mangyan*, *Mamanua*, *Bagobo*, *Manuvu*, *Mandaya*, *Tigabao Subanen*, *Kalibugan*, and *Maranao* highly acknowledge the authority of community elders, who have gained wisdom through the years (Arquiza, 2005; Buendia et al., 2006).

In these indigenous political structures, communities make decisions through community consultations and deliberations rather than relying on majority or plurality votes. The IPs participate by attending and engaging directly in assemblies and gatherings, rather than selecting someone to represent them. While these political structures may exhibit exclusivity and coercion, they endure because they promote the common good (Solang, 2017). Although some practices may have changed or deteriorated, they continue to thrive alongside mainstream political processes.

Another relevant distinction is the lack of definitive figures and reliable data about the different ethnic communities, which means that most of their members are statistically unaccounted for (Perez-Brito, 2021; See, 2021). As such, they often lack the necessary documents or identification cards to register as voters, let alone create a party-list group to represent them. While COMELEC has made the registration of IPs voters accessible, some indigenous communities have become victims of opportunistic politicians. The case of the Mangyans of Mindoro during the 2004 elections, where they were rounded up days before the elections and forcibly trained to write the names of certain candidates (De Guzman, 2016; Virola, 2016), demonstrates the exploitation of indigenous voters for personal political gains.

While the party-list system offers the IPs a means to achieve legislative representation, it threatens their traditions regarding authority, participation, and representation. It has also forced them to participate in unfamiliar processes without resolving their documentary limitations and integration issues. Hence, only a few IPs party-list groups have successfully participated in the process, with a small number of these groups managing to win a seat in the HoR.

Indigenous Peoples' Descriptive and Symbolic Representation

Of the numerous indigenous identity markers listed by the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act, this study considers self-ascription and socio-economic difficulties as the primary descriptive features that need to be mirrored by the IPs legislative representative. Descriptive representation is fulfilled when the IPs representative considers himself/herself to be a member of any of the indigenous communities in the Philippines. At the same time, he/she experiences similar socio-economic challenges brought about by the community's marginalized status.

On the other hand, symbolic representation is fulfilled when either both or only one of these two conditions is present. For symbolic representation, it is sufficient that a representative advocates for the rights, benefits, and concerns of the IPs, without necessarily being a member of the indigenous community or experiencing the socio-economic difficulties of the community firsthand. The Philippine Supreme Court decision supporting the symbolic representation of marginalized sectors declares that party-list nominees do not need to be members of the sectors they represent. Accordingly, it is enough that they fight for the rights and interests of those they claim to represent.⁴

A brief review of the ethnic and political background of the elected indigenous sectoral representatives is conducted to determine whether descriptive or symbolic representation is fulfilled.

First, ALIF founder and nominee Acmad Maruhom Tomawis belongs to the Moro ethnic group, known as *Iranun* (Arcala-Hall, 2015; Unsan, 2017). The *Iranun*, also known as *Iranon*, *Iraynon*, *Uranen*, *Illanun*, *Ilanom*, and *Illanus*, have a historical reputation as legendary seafarers, with the Spaniards labeling them as pirates (Jimenez-David, 2015). They currently reside in the municipalities of Nulingi, Parang, Matanog, and Barira in Maguindanao Province, with a small group also present in Sabah, Malaysia. Acmad Maruhom Tomawis has had a lengthy political career, starting as a councilor of Marawi City in 1976. He then served as an assembly member from 1982 to 1996 and was appointed by the Estrada administration as Executive Director of

⁴ In 2013, the Philippine Supreme Court decided in the case of *Atong Paglaum vs. COMELEC* that while it is preferred that nominees of the party-list groups are themselves members of the marginalized sector, this is not the constitutional requirement. A copy of the decision can be retrieved from https://lawphil.net/judjuris/juri2013/apr2013/gr_203766_2013.html

the Office of Muslim Affairs from 1998 to 2001 (Castañeda-Tomawis, 2019; Gavilan, 2019; Velez, 2007). Believed to be one of the most influential leaders in Mindanao, he was listed as one of the party-list representatives considered a millionaire with a declared net worth of P 18.56 million in 2012 (Cabacungan, 2012; Gavilan, 2019; Padilla, 2013).

Meanwhile, ANAC-IP nominee Jose T. Panganiban Jr. is a member of the *Gaddang* and *Itawes* tribes of Isabela. The *Gaddang* are declared as a protected ethnic group by the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) due to their continuously decreasing population and disappearing practices brought about by acculturation and intermarriages with non-members of the *Gaddang* community (Manzolim & Quilang, 2016). Jose T. Panganiban Jr. is also a well-known politician of Isabela, who served as the mayor of Angadanan, a third-class municipality of Isabela, from 2004 until 2010. His wife, Lourdes S. Panganiban, replaced him from 2010 until 2019, and their daughter is the current mayor of Angadanan.

Lastly, *Kusug-Tausug* nominee Shernee Tan-Tambut is a *Tausug*. Her family has consistently occupied several government positions in Sulu. Her father, Governor Abdusakur Tan, is the incumbent governor of Sulu, while her mother, Hadja Nurunisah Abubakar-Tan, formerly served as Vice Governor. Her brothers, Samier Tan and Abdusakur Tan II, are incumbent Congressperson and Vice Governor, respectively (Flores & Pintang, 2022). Translated as “people of the current”, the *Tausug* tribe is the dominant ethnic group in the Sulu archipelago. Many of the *Tausug* live below the poverty line, with Sulu included in the cluster of provinces with relatively high poverty incidence (PSA, 2021).

Based on their ethnic profile, the elected sectoral representatives are members of an indigenous group in their territory, fulfilling the description of an indigenous identity. The descriptive representation of indigenous identities in the HoR implies that the IPs are equally included as state members. Moreover, seeing members of the indigenous community taking part in the crafting of laws could potentially increase their interest and participation in politics. Furthermore, having IPs in the country's law-making body allows their unique circumstances, narratives, and experiences to be shared and understood. This, in turn, could lead to the other lawmakers becoming familiar with and supportive of IPs' rights and concerns.

However, based on their political and economic background, the IPs sectoral representatives belong to the indigenous elite, unlike most indigenous community members. These influential families have gained access to mainstream politics, thus establishing their political presence. The Philippine Supreme Court decision in the case of Atong Paglaum allowed them to strengthen their political influence by using indigenous identity and culture as political resources. Conversely, non-elite indigenous individuals struggle to participate in the Philippine election process and organize party-list groups due to unfamiliarity with its procedures and lack of economic and political resources. The indigenous elite's symbolic representation of the IPs' socio-economic conditions raises several issues.

First, the socio-economic disparity between sectoral representatives and indigenous communities can lead to the misrepresentation of IPs' concerns. The lived experiences of IPs range from displacement due to dam construction and mining activities, neglect in the provision of essential services, and instances of social discrimination and negative cultural labeling. An indigenous representative whose experiences differ significantly from those of the indigenous communities may struggle to present clear arguments for resolving these issues. Instead, they may interpret them as national concerns, such as when the construction of dams is seen as a factor for development rather than as a threat to ancestral domains and IPs' culture. For instance, the construction of the Ambuklao dam in Bokod, Benguet, led to the displacement of *Kankana-ey* and *Ibaloi* communities, some of whom were relocated to as far as Palawan, an

island more than 1000 km away from the Cordillera region (De Vera, 2023). While the dam continues to generate electricity for the Luzon grid, many of those displaced have yet to receive proper compensation (Allad-iw, 2008).

Secondly, being a member of an indigenous community without sharing its defining socio-economic experiences allows a representative to use this identity as political leverage to win seats in the HoR. For a sector that has endured systemic political marginalization, the visibility and recognition brought about by having an IPs representative – even someone belonging to the elite – can be seen as an achievement. With a candidate highlighting the struggle of indigenous communities to be recognized, while offering himself/herself as a means for IPs' recognition in the lawmaking body, the mobilization of indigenous communities as voters becomes possible.

Finally, the indigenous community becomes polarized around legislative agendas determined by elites. For context, indigenous communities are at varying stages of development and face local challenges. For instance, according to a report from Rappler (2024), while politicians and government employees in the Cordillera region are mostly members of the different ethnolinguistic groups, the Visayas regions have a significantly lower number of IPs in the government. Hence, while Cordillera IPs appeal for regional autonomy, indigenous communities in other areas struggle for basic recognition. In the party-list system, indigenous groups must compete for limited votes by offering various appealing, and at times, contradicting promises. Ultimately, indigenous community members become divided supporters of the privileged few whose promises resonate with them.

Overall, the party-list system acknowledges the difficulty of accurately mirroring the exact features of the marginalized sectors. As such, it has recognized the validity of symbolic or advocacy representation. In the case of IPs, while there is a descriptive representation of indigenous community membership, the more significant representation of the community's social and economic difficulties remains symbolic. The succeeding section looks into whether the elite capture of the IPs' representation has resulted in substantive efforts to address their concerns or has merely become an instance of tokenism.

Indigenous Peoples' Substantive Representation

Representation becomes meaningful when laws are enacted in response to the needs of those being represented. Laws directly impact everyone's lives as they determine people's rights and duties. For the IPs, laws empower them to protect their cultural heritage, tackle issues of discrimination, prevent exploitation of their territorial resources, and have access to economic and political resources.

The party-list system allows the IPs to become part of the HoR, providing them with the opportunity for representation. This ensures that indigenous representatives, whether descriptive or symbolic, are present in the law-making process. Nonetheless, the accurate measure of IPs' representation lies in crafting legislation to improve their quality of life and preserve their distinct cultural practices. The succeeding paragraphs examine if the IPs are meaningfully represented through the bills and legislation filed by their sectoral representatives from 1998 until 2022.

ALIF party-list representative Acmad Tomawis has proposed nine bills during his three-term stay in Congress, none of which became a law. Only two of these proposals pertain to IPs concerns. The first one, filed during the 13th Congress, sought to make quality education accessible to qualified students belonging to the IPs communities by granting tuition fee discounts

(HB# 4868, 2005).⁵ Another bill filed during the 15th Congress sought to prohibit the use of the words “Muslim” or “Islam” to describe suspected or convicted perpetrators of crimes or offenses. The proposed law pointed out the biased association of these words by the media, both print and broadcast, with criminal and unlawful acts (HB# 2832, 2010).

Meanwhile, ANAC-IP representative Jose T. Panganiban served two terms in the HoR and has enacted 12 laws of national significance, both as a principal and co-author. He has proposed 15 pieces of legislation directly of IPs interests, none of which became a law. Of these proposals, two focused on the protection of IPs ancestral domains (HB# 00391, 2016; HB# 05350, 2017), one urged the declaration of October 29 as a special national non-working holiday in recognition of the country's indigenous population (HB# 00392, 2016), and another one called for the prohibition of racial, religious, and ethnic discrimination (HB# 00576, 2016). Meanwhile, one proposal sought to create a department for IPs (HB# 00577, 2016), while another proposed the creation of IPs *barangays* (HB# 4401, 2016). One bill specifically targeted the creation of a training center for IPs in the city of Kidapawan, North Cotabato (HB# 06605, 2017).

In matters of education, ANAC-IP representative Panganiban proposed the provision of scholarship programs for IPs (HB# 00578, 2016) and suggested the inclusion of indigenous culture education in the country's school curricula (HB# 02717, 2016). Addressing the census of the IPs population, he filed a bill seeking to make the prevailing system of civil registration sensitive and responsive to the unique culture and traditional practices of the IPs (HB# 00575, 2016) and a bill asking the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) to include ethnicity as part of its demographic profiling of the country's population (HB# 00579, 2016). He also filed a bill proposing the institutionalization of the Indigenous Peoples Mandatory Representation (IPMR) (HB# 00394, 2016) and the inclusion of the IPMR representatives in the Union of Local Authorities of the Philippines (ULAP) (HB# 00114, 2016). Additionally, one proposal suggested that Local Government Units (LGUs) allocate a portion of their funds for IPs development projects (HB# 00393, 2016).

Lastly, *Kusug-Tausug* party-list representative Shernee Tan-Tambut is the only IPs representative in the current 19th Congress. While campaigning for the 2022 elections, she pointed out that she has filed 66 house bills and resolutions during her first two terms (Rosario, 2021). Some of these have become laws, such as the installation of weighing scales centers in all markets nationwide (RA 11706)⁶, the upgrading of public-school teachers' and non-teaching personnel's salary grades, the increase of special hardship allowances for public-school teachers assigned in conflict areas (RA 11466), and a law modifying the contractors' license renewal process (RA 11711). Recently, she filed a bill for the establishment and construction of a permanent official residence for the Vice President of the Philippines (HB# 2698, 2022).

While most of her proposals are of national concern, Tan-Tambut, in her interviews, highlights her proposals and projects for Muslim Mindanao, such as the conversion of the Maimbung port of Sulu province into a port authority (HB# 7792, 2023) and the conversion of its National High School into a Technical Vocational High School (HB# 7789, 2023). Additionally, she has

⁵ Copies of all the house bills mentioned in this discussion are available, by their number and the year they were filed, at the official website of the Philippine Congress, <https://www.congress.gov.ph/legislative-documents>

⁶ All the Republic Acts authored and co-authored by representative Shernee Tan-Tambut are available at <https://www.congress.gov.ph/house-members/view/?member=1093&name=Tan-Tambut%2C+Shernee+A>

implemented infrastructure improvements, medical assistance, skills training, and livelihood assistance for the Muslim communities in Mindanao (Rosario, 2021).

For context, the Philippine lawmaking process requires a proposal to go through three readings in both the HoR and the Senate. The first reading is when the title of the bill, number, and authors are read during the plenary session of Congress. It is then referred to the appropriate committee for examination, public hearings, and consultation meetings. If approved, the bill is scheduled for a second reading. If disapproved, the bill is considered dead. As for the second reading, this stage includes the sponsorship speech of the author, interpolation, and debates. Changes to the bill are also introduced during the second reading. Once done, it proceeds to the third reading, where the HoR votes on the bill, generally requiring a majority vote. The bill is then transmitted to the Senate, where it will undergo the same three reading procedures. When approved by both chambers, it is sent to the President for his or her signature (De Leon, 2005). Based on the examined legislative records, most of the bills filed by indigenous sectoral representatives were shelved either in the first reading stage or in the committee hearings.

Substantive representation involves representatives solving the problems of those they represent through the enactment of laws. Similarly, the party-list system aimed to place IPs representatives in the lawmaking body to ensure laws that address IPs' concerns. Unfortunately, the goal remains unrealized as most legislative proposals filed by the elected indigenous sectoral representatives were of national significance, rather than addressing specific IPs' concerns.

For instance, seven out of the nine bills filed by ALIF party-list representative Acmad Tomawis during his tenure were national in scope. These include measures such as granting fare discount privileges for students on land, sea, and air transport utilities (HB# 04351, 2005) and tax exemption for Overseas Filipino Workers (HB# 05731, 2006). Both bills were originally filed in the 13th Congress and refiled during the 15th Congress. Tomawis also filed House Resolutions (HR) requesting an investigation into the Civil Aviation Authority and the issuing of commemorative plates by the Land Transportation Franchising and Regulatory Board (LTFRB), neither of which was a direct concern of the IPs.

In contrast, most of the bills filed by ANAC-IP representative Jose T. Panganiban were directly aligned with indigenous concerns. However, none of these proposals has been enacted into law. On the other hand, *Kusug Tausug* party-list representative Shernee Tan-Tambut holds the distinction of having the most enacted laws among the elected IPs representatives. However, all her legislative measures are more of national significance. Aside from legislation, Tan-Tambut has also facilitated the delivery of basic infrastructure, medical, and livelihood services. Though it can be argued that these services constitute meaningful representation, within the definition of this study, such services do not qualify as substantive representation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

These data illustrate several challenges encountered by the elected indigenous party-list representatives. For one, the party-list system, as discussed previously, is a limited institutional mechanism for representation. It only allows a few, the indigenous elite, to qualify, resulting in the indigenous sectoral representatives comprising a negligible portion of the HoR. Having only three sectoral representatives in a more than two-hundred-member HoR mirrors the real-life situation of the IPs, as they comprise a minority of the population. Consequently, this underrepresented status in the HoR poses a challenge in obtaining the necessary votes for bills representing IPs' interests.

Additionally, while symbolic representation is not inherently problematic, the interests of the advocates may differ from those they represent. In this study, the few seated IPs representatives are members of the indigenous elite, advocating for the resolution of social and economic predicaments that they have not experienced, or are not experiencing, firsthand. The difference in the lived experiences can influence the representatives' intent for immediate action. The lack of sense of urgency on the part of the elected indigenous elite may also imply that meaningful changes in the socio-economic status of IPs may threaten their existing political status and privileges.

Ultimately, a review of the proposed laws reveals an intention to protect indigenous culture, provide access to mainstream education, and remove discriminatory labels. These initiatives are important since they provide the IPs with the opportunity for socio-economic development while safeguarding their unique cultural identity. Unfortunately, such proposals were not enacted. In contrast, as demonstrated by the approved proposals of Tan-Tambut, suggestions involving mainstream concerns have successfully progressed into legislation. The inability to advance their proposals to the debate stage of the lawmaking process implies that either the indigenous elites do not have enough influence in the HoR or that non-indigenous lawmakers are not supportive of the efforts to provide solutions to the problems of indigenous communities.

Taking everything into account, the meaningful representation of IPs through the enactment of laws remains lacking. While the elected IPs representatives have succeeded in bringing the IPs' issues into the legislative agenda through their various proposals, they have failed to convert these initiatives into tangible laws.

This study analyzed how the Philippine party-list system, also known as RA 7941, affects IPs' legislative representation. The findings of this study revealed that while the party-list system provides formalistic representation for all marginalized sectors, it fails to consider the unique circumstances of the indigenous communities, leading to limited legislative representation for IPs. Only the members of the indigenous elite have been able to secure seats in the HoR, resulting in symbolic rather than substantial representation. In conclusion, mainstream representation processes do not effectively enhance IPs' legislative representation.

This study joins the clamor to review and modify the party-list system act, with a focus on creating a better mechanism for indigenous legislative representation. This study proposes that there should be recognition of the fact that not all marginalized and underrepresented sectors are the same. Therefore, they should not be lumped into a generic category. In the case of indigenous communities, their traditional political systems and practices should be taken into consideration. This can be accomplished by creating a more culturally accommodating representation mechanism, leading to a higher degree of descriptive representation for the IPs. For instance, the Philippine government might want to consider designating reserved seats for IPs in the HoR, particularly for territories occupied mainly by indigenous communities. The IPs representatives will be validated by the community as bonafide members of their ethnolinguistic group, and will be selected in accordance with their customary laws. These seats would ensure direct representation of indigenous communities at the national level. While descriptive representation does not guarantee substantive representation, it could improve the presence of IPs in the HoR. Finally, lawmakers must recognize that the concerns of the marginalized sectors are not the sole responsibility of the elected sectoral representatives. All members of Congress should actively advocate for the interests of indigenous communities to ensure that bills related to IPs have a better chance of being considered.



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank the reviewers for their valuable feedback and the editors of *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies* for patiently and efficiently editing the paper.

DISCLOSURE

The author declares no conflict of interest.