

Upholding the Past and Making Way for the Future:

EROPA in Its Golden Year Anniversary

Fifty years since its foundation, what we all have come to know as the Eastern Regional Organization for Public Administration (EROPA), is still very much alive and active in its mission. Its rich history is evidence of our ability to cooperate towards sustainable growth and development through the promotion of administrative systems that work for the benefit of all.

The Historical Beginning

In February 1958, senior representatives and experts from more than ten countries in the region convened in Saigon, Republic of Vietnam, to attend a preliminary meeting in preparation for the holding of a Regional Conference on Public Administration (RECOA) in the Philippines later in the year. Four months later, the first Regional Conference on Public Administration was held from 7 to 20 June 1958 in the cities of Manila and Baguio. The Philippine Government was host to the conference and the Director of the then Institute of Public Administration of the University of the Philippines, Professor Carlos P. Ramos, served as Chairman.

In attendance were delegates and observers from Australia, the Republic of China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, the Republic of Korea, New Zealand, Pakistan, Philippines, Singapore and the Republic of Vietnam. International organizations including the United Nations and the International Institute of Administrative Sciences were also represented.

Among others, the Conference decided to create a regional organization in order to help advance the economic and social development of the region through the promotion of the study, practice and status of public administration and adoption of good administrative systems. A constitution was drafted and a provisional Executive Council was elected. This Council met in Hong Kong in December 1959 to finalize the details and plans of the Organization.

The Constitution of EROPA took effect on 5 December 1960, when five states in the region—Australia, Taiwan, Japan, Philippines, and Vietnam—became the founding state members of the Organization. Other states later joined: Thailand (1961), Korea (1962), Pakistan (1965), Malaysia (1968), Indonesia (1971), China (1989), Nepal (1983), and India (1985). Aside from these State Members, individual and group membership also grew. This broadened the influence of EROPA not only to its State Members but also to other nations and territories in Asia such as Bangladesh, Hong Kong, Macau, Mongolia, Papua New Guinea, Singapore and Sri Lanka (De Guzman and Reforma, 1993: 133).

At the Right Time

In less than two years, the first regional organization for public administration in Asia was born. In his article, Secretary-General Carlos P. Ramos (1958: 93-97) recalled that EROPA was established in a time when more and more governments were sending public officials abroad for higher education and training in administration. Institutes dedicated to public administration were being established in different parts of Asia. There was a growing atmosphere of cooperation and support between national governments and academic institutions in the region. This was the context in which Ramos' idea of a regional conference and then a regional organization emerged.

After much planning, the difficult task remained: to promote and seek support both at home and abroad. As he put it: *"The difficulties of getting not only acceptance but positive support by way of financial outlay were compounded abroad in that we were organizing a conference that was to be the first of its kind in Asia. The problem seemed to call for the promotion of even the very idea of public administration in several countries in Asia."* It was a daunting task but he proceeded on his mission. And to his delight, without exception, all countries visited responded very favourably to the idea of a regional conference.

Why? At that time, some of the nations visited were still in the process of establishing systems of governance. For instance, South Vietnam was then undertaking drastic changes in the administration of its recovery and reconstruction program. Whole masses of population were being resettled and new villages were being established. In South Korea, new and significant means and methods in the field of public administration have been adopted to place its country along the road to full recovery and development. In India, the government was working on developing government policies and administration systems that could meet the challenges posed by hunger, famine and the tremendous increase in their population. In Japan, overpopulation and a desperate need for foreign markets confronted the government administrators. In the Philippines, there were rice shortages whereas in Indonesia, there were internal disorders.

As Ramos (1958: 96) recounted in his article, the problems most common to all were remnants of the post-colonial era. Governments with a high concentration of authority at the center gave rise to problems of local autonomy, decentralization of services and responsiveness to public needs and desires. Lack of trained and capable executives and technical personnel caused problems of efficiency and economy in administration; and failure or delay in the delivery of government programs. There was an inadequate or nonexistent merit system in the recruitment and development of governmental employees and officials. Outmoded revenue systems, resulted in the failure to meet the financial requirements of necessary service. The absence of adequate equipment caused delay and inaccuracy in performance. And the unsystematic methods of work procedures gave rise to problems of record-keeping, red tape and insufferable conditions at work.

The general trend then was towards enlisting the assistance of foreign specialists for the improvement of government system and practices. There were organized trainings within government and installations of planning and development agencies for carrying out developmental projects. These developments laid the ground for a marked interest in the pooling of ideas and administrative experiences of several governments. The problems in government administration and the desire of public officials to develop responsive governments were the forces that propelled EROPA (Ramos, 1958: 93-97).

Fulfilling its Mandate

The contributions of EROPA to its membership are anchored on its set objectives and functions: (1) the adoption of effective and adequate administrative systems to promote economic and social development; (2) appreciation of the relevance and value of public administration; (3) advancing the frontiers of the science and art of governmental administration; (4) development of managerial talent; (5) fostering of professionalization of public administration; and (6) enhancing affiliation and linkages with other institutions in public administration. These objectives are set on the assumption that technical expertise is the way to improving governance towards social and economic development.

Five centers were established for implementing EROPA activities, namely: the Research, Documentation and Diffusion Center in Saigon located at the Vietnamese National Institute of Administration; the Center for Land Reform and Rural Development in Taipei, Taiwan; the Development Management Center located in the Central Officials Training Institute in South Korea; the Local Government Center located in the Local Autonomy College in Japan; and the Training Center located in the Indian Institute of Public Administration in India. Unfortunately, the first two centers mentioned are no longer operating due to the change in governments in the two countries involved. The EROPA Secretariat General was also established at the National College of Public Administration and Governance (then known as the Institute of Public Administration) in the Philippines.

Through the three remaining centers and the Secretariat General, EROPA has been continuously holding annual regional conferences and undertaking local and international training programs, special studies, surveys, research studies and publications. EROPA's resources have always been from the support of its membership and the cooperation and linkages it has established with funding organizations and other institutions focused on public administration in the Asia-Pacific region.

Fifty years is a long time, and there have been numerous conferences, books, publications, researches and training programs conducted by EROPA. Just like its birth, the conference themes and the projects initiated and implemented in the region has always been a reflection of the identified development needs of the Asian region.

Experiencing Both Prominence and Challenges

After half a century, EROPA is still being recognized not just as a regional organization but as an institution that paved the way for making public administration a vital component of governance and national development. As former Secretary-General Raul de Guzman and Professor Mila Reforma said (1993: 131–132), “*EROPA, to some extent, has acquired some widespread and transcendent value, over and above the immediate advantages it gives those who maintain it. It has become more of an institution than just an organization.*” But just like any other organization as old as EROPA, it has also gone through its moments of prominence and despondency. The three Secretaries-Generals of EROPA have all experienced their own challenges as they came into the organization.

In the beginning, EROPA blazed new trails and opened up new horizons in development administration. Through the Development Administration Group (DAG) established by then Secretary-General Ramos, the organization brought together distinguished Asian scholars and practitioners to deal with the problems of development administration. This then led to the formulation and implementation of substantive programs. And all throughout, EROPA members have always been there to help secure the cooperation and commitment of various governments.

A cooperative relationship between the United Nations and EROPA also flourished at this time. In July 1966, EROPA was given Consultative Status, Category B by the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) at its meeting in Geneva. Three years later, it was changed to Category II at its meeting for the review of consultative status of Non-Government Organizations (Fourteenth Executive Council Meeting, Records of Proceedings and Documentation in De Guzman and Reforma, 1993: 133). The organization was also accredited by the UN Economic and Social Commission (ESCAP) based in Bangkok, Thailand.

But as many variables changed through the years, EROPA has also faced its own challenges. With changes in state priorities, political climates and leadership in the home countries of members, the support for the organization also dwindled. EROPA lost the support of Saigon and Taipei while Australia withdrew its membership in 1981. Scheduled in December 1978, the general assembly was not held for lack of financial support.

Despite these setbacks, former Secretary-General de Guzman knew that EROPA had to move forward. He invited the Governments of the People’s Republic of China, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the Islamic Republic of Iran to take over the membership of their predecessor governments. In the years that followed, EROPA won back the membership of the three states. In 1994, Australia resumed its membership and took responsibility for the hosting of the 41st Executive Council Meeting in Canberra.

Still under his leadership, a regular publication of the EROPA Bulletin and a journal called the *Asian Review of Public Administration* (ARPA) was established. Fresh initiatives were put forth to foster better management of government and bureaucracies through advocacies such as: indigenization of public administration;

networking, social change and administrative reform; re-democratization, political accountability and administration of elections; from public administration to administration of the public; maximization of human resources and their adaptation to newer technologies and others. EROPA sought to foster the professionalization of public administration in the region and it continuously worked to foster affiliation and maintain liaison with universally recognized international bodies for public administration in the region (De Guzman and Reforma, 1993: 131-137).

In 1996, Patricia Sto. Tomas was elected by the Executive Council as the new Secretary-General of EROPA. Through her leadership and expertise, EROPA continued with its publications, awards and annual regional conferences. Through partnerships and linkages, EROPA was able to conduct projects such as the UN Regional Conference on Public Administration for Promoting Economic Development; and Seminars on Ethics in Public Governance for the Philippine Civil Service Commission.

Many other projects involving research and training were implemented under the leadership of Secretary-General Sto. Tomas. One of the highlights in EROPA history was the World Conference on Governance in Manila (1999) attended by 780 participants from 85 different countries around the world. With the theme "From Government to Governance," the conference indicated that governance in the new century needed more hearts, minds and hands other than that of the government. EROPA was able to organize this event in collaboration with the National College of Public Administration and Governance and the Philippine Civil Service Commission. Partner institutions were the Asian Development Bank, Canadian International Development Agency/Institute on Governance, International Personnel Management Association, United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Department of Economics and Social Affairs and the World Bank-Economic Development Institute.

As the world started to feel the effects of the globalizing world, EROPA conferences (2000-2004) started to dwell on globalization and its impact on public administration, governance and development. Five years into the implementation of the millennium development goals (2005), EROPA and its state members convened in a conference to share their country experiences and what they have accomplished so far. The conference themes were always kept relevant to the current issues in development and public administration. Alongside these projects and programs, the EROPA centers in Japan, Korea and India have always been active in its international training programs and publications.

Revitalization

Despite the accomplishments of EROPA, there were times when the organization came to a crossroad. Just recently in 2008, EROPA began to reflect on the loss of two state members, Australia in 2006 and Malaysia in 2007. Years before that Pakistan already resigned in 1998. These turns of events were alarming to the members of the Executive Council, especially those who have been with EROPA for a very long time.

At that time, it was decided that there was a need to re-examine EROPA and its vision. For the longest time, EROPA has been surviving through the spirit of friendship, goodwill and mutual respect. It was and still is a venue for individuals, groups and states to convene and propagate the science and values of public administration. But admittedly, it has declined and the value of membership was being questioned. To turn things around, a Revitalization Committee was created.

The Revitalization Committee, headed by Dr. Akira Nakamura, identified three major problems that EROPA is facing: (1) the emergence of similar organizations with which EROPA has to compete with; (2) financial weakness; and (3) failure to meet the members' original expectations or respective financial contributions. To meet these problems, the committee proposed to raise membership fees; improve the quality of the Secretariat General; to implement the Asian Leadership Forum and the Raul De Guzman award; and to improve EROPA outputs such as the journal. (EROPA Secretariat General, 2009)

Today, the Executive Council has failed to agree on the rate of increase of fees because there was difficulty getting the support of their governments. And since there has been no increase in membership fees, the proposal to provide additional resources to the Secretariat General was also not implemented.

The first Asian Leadership Forum (ALF) with the theme "The Need for Leadership Development" was held in Nepal in 2010. Policy leaders from China, Japan, Philippines and Nepal shared each of their knowledge and experiences in leadership development. The ALF is meant to set aside a specific session for policy leaders in the region to discuss significant topics in public administration. The second ALF with the theme "Dealing with Fiscal Retrenchment: Strategies, Innovations and Ways Forward" was scheduled in Bangkok, Thailand.

The *Asian Review for Public Administration* (ARPA), the flagship publication of EROPA, has been improved through the help of Dr. Pan Suk Kim of the International Institute of Administrative Sciences. As the editor-in-chief, he and the other members of the editorial board instituted reforms that would make ARPA internationally recognized as a premier publication. Under his leadership, two of the new and improved ARPA volumes have been published. It has recently been made available online for members.

There were other suggestions such as a journal for practitioners and EROPA books on different topics in public administration. It was also suggested that a Membership Committee be created to expand EROPA's network to universities, organizations and governments. These endeavours are yet to be implemented.

Fresh Initiatives

In my first Executive Council Meeting and Conference, I met the leading lights of EROPA. They are the people who have developed a deep and lasting relationship with the organization. The contribution and support of these past and present EROPA leaders keeps the organization alive. Undoubtedly, leadership is critical in sustaining the organization. It is in this sense that we must invest in the future leaders—the younger generation—so we can pass on the values of the organization.

In order to do this, EROPA is embarking in new and fresh activities to update the organization through the use of new technologies available. Today, EROPA has established an improved website. These include: public administration news, events and announcements; public administration schools and research centers; a forum for members; and a venue for blogging. EROPA is also in new media: Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. This provides the organization an online platform for quickly delivering the latest news and updates on EROPA and in public administration to individuals interested.

Through the internet, organizations and individuals in need of the expertise of scholars and practitioners are also available through the EROPA Experts and Practitioners (EROPA ExP) website. The EROPA ExP is an online database of Public Administration Experts and Practitioners from among its present and future members. But aside from being a human resource tool, EROPA ExP is also a motivating tool for the younger generation as they seek to become a part of the roster through their work in public service or in the academe.

EROPA is also conducting a photo contest entitled "OMG! Oh, My Government!" aiming to promote consciousness in public administration and governance. It aims to capture the interest of both the government and the public in pushing for reforms, improvement and innovations in government administration through photographs that show "unbelievably hare-brained" practices that don't work or practices that are innovative and inspiring.

Other activities for attracting young professionals and the youth to the organization are also being placed. Plans are being made to set up awards for outstanding young practitioners and student organizations whose activities promote the goals of the organization. These new leaders will be the future of EROPA.

A Vision for EROPA

Over the years, EROPA still remains as the only academic and professional organization with a membership of states, groups and individuals devoted to the study and improvement of public administration in the Asia-Pacific region. Its unique character as a regional organization is not only defined by its outputs. The dynamic interaction and cooperation of academics and practitioners as well as individuals, groups, government agencies and states is the spirit that sets EROPA apart. As Secretary-General, I got to know the EROPA "family" which continues to support the organization because it provides them rare opportunities to meet leaders and experts in the region. They exude a sense of belongingness to the organization.

The organization was always meant to be a hub for creating and sharing knowledge, for providing inspiration to leaders in bureaucracies and for the development of technical expertise. EROPA gathers leaders of both experts and practitioners to provide them new perspectives and show them the value of effective governance. I believe that it has succeeded in bridging the gap between the academics and the practitioners, between disciplines and professions and even between the public and the private sector.

The value of EROPA is in the way it enables the academics and the practitioners to communicate and develop from each other's expertise. The facilitative intervention of authoritative scholars in the region may pave the way for the institutionalization of new trends in public administration that may be unorthodox given prevailing conditions (Reyes, 1989). The organization does not impose, scold or sanction states or individuals for bad behaviour; it provides them with a space to learn what can be done instead. EROPA is hopeful that through communication and openness, leaders who partake in EROPA activities will translate what they have learned in their own countries.

If we are to continue pushing forward, EROPA and its members have to be consistently involved in promoting and developing public administration as a science and as a practice. It is in the conferences, publications, researches and trainings that we become a valuable resource to our membership. It is through its leaders that EROPA is sustained. And as technology continues to develop before our eyes, there are endless opportunities for the practitioner and the academician, the young and the experienced, to communicate and influence one another. It is through technology that we seek to transform EROPA to be of more value to the region despite the challenges it faces.

EROPA has endured 50 years and it will keep moving on. It will be an institution providing professional standards in administration; not through coercion but through leadership and professionalism; and through open venues for communication and information sharing. In an age where communication is key and information is currency, EROPA can look forward to the future if it steps up to the challenge.

Orlando S. Mercado

Secretary General

Easter Regional Organization for Public Administration (EROPA)

Former Ambassador of the Philippines to ASEAN

Former Senator and Secretary Defense of the Philippines

References

- De Guzman, R and Reforma, M., (1993) "In the Realm of EROPA: Close Encounters in a Regional Village. *Institutional Building for the Study and Practice of Public Administration*. College of Public Administration, University of the Philippines.
- EROPA Secretariat General, (1965) EROPA Brochure.
- EROPA Secretariat General, (2009) Record of Proceedings and Documentation. Twenty-second General Assembly, Conference on Public Governance in Challenging Economic Times: Human Resource Development at the Battlefield, Fifty-fifth Executive Council Meeting, Seoul, Republic of Korea.
- Ramos, C., (1958) "The Conference Idea and Its Promotion". *Philippine Journal of Public Administration*. Institute of Public Administration. University of the Philippines
- Reyes, D., (1989) "Functionalist Integration Theory Revisited: The Eastern Regional Organization for Public Administration as an International Organization". *Asian Review of Public Administration*. Eastern Regional Organization for Public Administration: Manila