7. The Politics of Patronage and Live Fish Trade Regulation

*Kung mayaman ka* [if you are rich] you have all the favours. *Kung mahirap ka* [if you are poor] you have no justice (Resident of Coron town).

*Pag may pera ka, hindi bawal* [When you have money, it isn’t banned] (Fisherman from Coron town).

It should be noted that the enactment of Provincial Ordinance No. 941 was not a straightforward policy process…. This process illustrates that policy making in natural resource management is quite complicated, and is tempered by the interplay of political and business dynamics (Pomeroy et al. 2008: 63-4).

Arguments about regulation of the live fish trade erupted through the last few months of 2006 throughout Palawan Province to an extent that is only hinted at in the quote by Pomeroy and colleagues. This chapter details how the process of regulation was understood, expressed and contested by different stakeholders. It shows how the discourse of the poor moral fisher was an important part of how the regulations were eventually rejected, and illustrates how this discourse is deeply connected to notions about personalised governance and patronage.

On one side of the argument, proponents of regulation such as conservationists and provincial level politicians called for a closed season, saying that such a move was necessary to protect the future of the industry. On the other side, opponents of regulation such as the live fish collectors, traders and municipal governments argued that such a move would have a massive impact on their livelihoods and greatly increase poverty in the region. The process of regulation was understood by local fishers as political and representative of a pattern in fisheries governance, and more broadly, of governance generally in the Philippines, that was understood as unjust and inequitable. I show how the process of implementing a closed season, the fishers’ critique, and the subsequent overturning of the regulations exposed the way personalised politics is understood and practiced within Philippine society.

Firstly, I situate my argument with reference to other perspectives on fisheries governance. Secondly, I provide a background to the way in which the regulations were proposed and developed. Thirdly, I detail the manner in which fishers expressed their resentment at the regulations, and analyse this resentment in terms of local understandings of governance and governments. Finally, I discuss some of the implications of these understandings.
Approaches to Decentralised Fisheries Management and Governance

As I outlined in Chapter 5, decentralised approaches became a key feature of fisheries management in the Philippines in the 1990s. Recent critiques of these decentralised approaches to fisheries management have focused on the problems surrounding corruption, governance and participation, arguing that participation and genuine co-management have been limited by the lack of any honest attempt to devolve power to local communities (Walley 2004; Eder 2005; Lowe 2006; Ratner 2006). In Indonesia, Lowe (2006: 151–2) contends with regard to the management of the live fish trade that

[w]hile poor people were the first to suffer penalties they also assumed the greatest risks, yet were excluded from the highest live fish profits. Laws, as they were written, interpreted, and enforced within the entrepreneurial Indonesian bureaucracy, enriched bureaucrats and their organizations and failed to protect either species or citizens.

Walley (2004: 54) relates how in Tanzania, local fishers stressed the need to crack down on corruption in the Maritime Division instead of the need for modernisation and development among fishers; in Cambodia, Ratner (2006: 84) argues that ‘policy reforms must be complemented by institutional reforms, which are proving more difficult to achieve’. Elsewhere in Palawan, Eder (2005: 166–7) asserts that:

[i]n the absence of more strenuous efforts to channel greater power and authority to the weakest and most poorly represented local groups, the efficacy of community participation will remain limited, and effective co-management regimes will prove difficult to institutionalise.

He shows how the burdens of community-based coastal resource management schemes were dispersed through ethnic, gender and class inequalities. What these arguments have in common is a concern with the ways in which fisheries management initiatives tend to get ‘sucked up’ into pre-existing social and political inequalities related to poor governance. From this perspective, the problems in fisheries management are due not to the poverty or ignorance of the fishers, but primarily to poor governance by local elites. As I shall show, this critique of governance corresponds with the argument made by local fishers in the Calamianes. My argument in this chapter aims to extend these ideas further in relation to the Philippines, showing how the development and subsequent demise of the live fish regulations reflects the distinctive nature of political patronage in the Philippines.
However, instead of simply declaring that poor governance from local elites is the sole or primary issue—as fishers in the Calamianes and some of these analysts suggest—I show in this chapter that fishers’ demands for good governance are located within broader political practices and attitudes. I demonstrate how the practices of politicians at different levels of government, traders and fishers all operate by the same ethos of personalised politics that characterises the Philippines. Poor governance is certainly a valid critique of the fishers. However, through an ethnographic demonstration of how fishers understand and practice politics at multiple levels, I show how they in effect reproduce the very rules of the game of political patronage that they are critiquing.

**Background and the Case for Regulation**

**Regulatory Framework for the Live Fish Trade in the Calamianes**

Attempts to regulate the live fish trade in Palawan have a long history (Fabinyi and Dalabajan 2011). This is in large part because of the significance of the fishery. International attention has focused on the live fish trade since at least the 1990s, mostly attempting to stop the problem of cyanide fishing and the perceived ‘boom and bust’ nature of the trade (see Scales et al. 2006). The live fish trade in Palawan has expanded rapidly since the 1990s to become an important livelihood for many coastal communities across the province, and there has been a great deal of effort spent by policymakers on trying to regulate the fishery. The live fish trade has been particularly important in the Calamianes Islands (Fabinyi forthcoming); as such, attempts to reform the live fish trade are, together with the creation of MPAs, another major form of marine resource regulation in the region.

In his article on the problem of cyanide fishing in the Calamianes, Dalabajan (2005) lists various legal mechanisms dealing with a range of aspects of live fish trade management that have been developed since the late-1980s. These include the banning of compressors that were used in cyanide fishing, prohibitions on the use of noxious substances, and the empowerment of multiple agencies to enforce these laws. As indicated by the persistence of cyanide fishing, these laws appear to have had little efficacy. They are contradictory, highly confusing and are not enforced. As I showed in Chapters 4 and 6, the capacity for law enforcement is extremely low in the Calamianes. Dalabajan (2005: 4) points out that, because of the weakness of the law enforcement structures in the Calamianes,
it is not surprising that in the last four years there have been no cases filed by law enforcement agencies in the Calamianes for violation of these provincial ordinances. Furthermore, the law is so confusing that some believe it was not intended to be enforced in the first place.

Since the attempts at regulation described in this chapter, efforts have focused on developing a quota system for the province (Fabinyi and Dalabajan 2011). At the time of writing implementation was ongoing and the outcomes were uncertain. Thus, despite their number and numerous aims, it can only be said that the laws have so far failed to capably regulate the live fish trade in Palawan.

 Calls for Further Regulation

Much of the intellectual reasoning behind the calls for further and more tangible regulations were based on clear indicators that the Calamianes were essentially chronically overfished by 2006. A report by WWF stated in 2003 that:

> [t]he biological and ecological indicators suggest that the industry is ‘mining’ and degrading its resource base, greatly compromising its current and future regenerative capacity. Catch has lately been declining and any short-term increase in catch comes from fishing grounds outside the Calamianes…. The mean size of fish collected is getting smaller and exploitation rates indicate serious overfishing (Padilla et al. 2003: 8).

The report emphasised that by various measures—using ecological, economic and social indicators—the trade was extremely unsustainable. Another report from Conservation International (CI 2003) also highlighted the problems of cyanide and overfishing, calling for a stronger enforcement regime and networks of marine protected areas tied to the creation of alternative livelihoods for community members. Another report analysed the incapacity of the law enforcement structure to deal with the problem of cyanide fishing (Mayo-Anda et al. 2003). A policy brief commissioned by the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development (PCSD) in 2005 had also restated ongoing concerns over destructive fishing methods, overfishing and the targeting of spawning aggregations and immature fish (Pomeroy et al. 2005).

All these reports emphasised social factors as prime concerns for the sustainability of the live fish trade and any potential regulation of it. The WWF report for example acknowledged that

> [u]sing the environmental impact assessment framework, the logical recommendation would be to impose a moratorium to allow the fish stocks to recover. But from the sustainability assessment framework, which gives due consideration to economic and social impacts,
rationalization of the industry is recommended to address the problems of overfishing, cyanide fishing, and intrusion of migrant fishermen in to Palawan waters, among others (Padilla et al. 2003: 11).

Throughout this report, the authors emphasised the inequalities inherent in the industry, stressing the absence of empowering mechanisms for live fish collectors, the inequitable distribution of benefits and the growing sense of dependence (ibid.: 90–1). Similarly, the CI report cautioned against knee-jerk blanket bans of the trade, noting that:

without alternative income earning opportunities, the short-term opportunity costs of MPA establishment in the Calamianes Region are likely to be higher than many fisher folk in these communities, particularly recent poor migrants, can initially afford. Suggestions on banning LRFT [live reef fish trade] without viable alternative income sources and effective enforcement only encourage more illegal activities and make them [the illegal activities] even harder to track down (CI 2003: 15).

The policy brief itself stated that ‘[t]he policy goal is for a sustainable fishing industry in Palawan Province that ensures viable fish stocks, ecosystems and livelihoods for present and future generations’ (Pomeroy et al. 2005: 33). As I showed in Chapter 3, it too was concerned with the social impact of the live fish trade, arguing that the benefits of the trade were short-term only and were accompanied by many long-term costs. The writers of the report subsequently observed that ‘[s]uggestions to ban the trade or to regulate the fishery, which will impact upon the income of the fishers, will not be effective without viable alternative livelihoods’ (ibid.: 36).

Thus, the calls for regulation of the trade can be seen as trying to address concerns not only over environmental degradation resulting from the trade, but also over the poverty of communities of the Calamianes. The writers of the reports were united in their views of the trade in its current form as something that was degrading the environment and increasing the risks of long-term poverty. Regulations as a response to this situation aimed to address both issues. The nature of these regulations, being grounded in social as well as environmental concerns, reflect the way conservation is often discussed in the Philippines.

Another significant, more general factor behind the push for regulation was Palawan’s reputation as the ‘last frontier’ of the Philippines (Eder and Fernandez 1996), which I outlined in Chapter Two. The emphasis on Palawan as a green, clean place to live has ultimately meant that the discourse of sustainable development has gained considerable traction: many politicians have built their careers on being seen to adopt this discourse.
Thus, the various reports by NGOs and government agencies, the power of the green discourse in Palawan, and clearly the simple reality on the ground that there were many fewer fish than before were the prime factors behind the push for regulation. This push had a long history behind it, and Pomeroy et al. (2008: 63–4) detail some of the difficulties:

It should be noted that the enactment of Provincial Ordinance No. 941 was not a straightforward policy process. Although a consensus was reached to adopt a regulated live reef food fish trade in June 2005, it was not readily accepted by all the provincial legislators. In fact, the development of the ordinance underwent several revisions, including a version which involved banning the LRFF (live reef fish for food) trade. The Provincial Ordinance No. 941 was finally enacted on 21 March 2006 and duly approved on 18 April 2006. This process illustrates that policy making in natural resource management is quite complicated, and is tempered by the interplay of political and business dynamics.

Pomeroy and his colleague’s analysis of the policy process provides a good background to the events that took place, but the last sentence in the quote above is the only one which indicates some of the political dynamics that were vitally important to the ways the live fish regulations were received in the latter part of 2006. The rest of my analysis concentrates on how some of these ‘political and business dynamics’ affected the policy process after the regulations were approved at the provincial level.

**Provincial Ordinance 941**

In March 2006, Provincial Ordinance 941 (PO 941) was passed by the Provincial Council (Sangguniang Panlalawigan), entitled ‘An ordinance providing sustainable and integrated regulation of the live reef fish industry, imposing certain conditions for the catching, trading and shipment of live reef fish out in the province, providing for violations hereof and for other purposes’. Provincial Ordinance 941 had many varied goals, including the creation of marine protected areas in specific spawning sites of groupers and overfished areas. However by far the most revolutionary part of the document, and the part that was subsequently highlighted by live fish collectors was Section Seven, which declared a closed season for the months of November–December and May–July. Unlike other previous regulations, this aspect of PO 941 would be relatively easy to enforce, as all commercial shipments of fish in the Calamianes have to be weighed and checked at the municipal BFAR office before transport. While the PO was passed in March 2006, the political system of the Philippines requires that provincial ordinances have to be approved by specific municipal ordinances before they are actually implemented in those specific municipalities.
Thus, for most of 2006, the provincial council and the various municipal councils that supported live fishing were locked in a stalemate, arguing the merits or otherwise of Provincial Ordinance 941.

At different points through 2006, the provincial council and the Palawan Council for Sustainable Development (PCSD) threatened the municipalities involved in live reef fishing with a moratorium on the renewal of all live reef fishing accreditations if these regulations were not adopted. Dinners and various meetings were held where the provincial council restated its aims of reforming the industry. At one meeting, the then vice-governor (and chairman of the provincial council) declared to a cluster of live fish traders: ‘We are not killing the industry! If anyone will kill the industry it is the industry itself!’. He went on to argue that the municipalities were not ‘respecting’ the provincial ordinance by failing to create their own municipal ordinances.

Politicians at the provincial level framed their argument in terms of the environmental sustainability of the industry and Palawan more generally. At a meeting of the PCSD held in Coron, Congressman Mitra referred to the prominent fisheries researcher Daniel Pauly in his opening ‘inspirational remarks’. Focusing on the live fish trade in these remarks, he went on to declare that:

[w]e have always been guided by our mandate and commitment to ensure environmental sustainability by integrating sustainable development principles in all our programs and policies in Palawan. Let us put additional attention and effort to radically reverse the loss of our marine and coastal resources while time is still in our hands (132nd PCSD Regular Meeting, 25 August 2006, Coron, Palawan).

At one meeting between the Calamianes Live Fish Operators Association (CLOA) and various politicians, another prominent provincial politician implored the live fish traders to think about the province as a whole. He pointed out that many live fish catchers now had to go to the Palawan mainland to find their fish, and that Palawan as a whole only had room for 200 licensed live fish traders. He argued that ‘[t]he marine resources of Palawan can become infinite if we only care for them’.

Finally, on 12 December 2006, after a distinct lack of activity exhibited by the live fish traders associations and the municipal governments in creating a specific municipal ordinance, the provincial BFAR office enforced a ban on all live fish exports from Palawan. Immediately after this, furious lobbying and negotiations occurred. Fishers went to the traders that supported and financed their activities, asking for help. Many of the traders (numbers of whom were also municipal councillors) went to the provincial capital Puerto Princesa to lobby the provincial council to overturn the ban. In Coron, the mayor publicly
declared at a Christmas party for live fish traders that the municipal government was totally committed to the live fish trade. He told the assembled traders that he had personally visited the governor of Palawan to try and persuade him to change the regulations. Throughout this period, rallying speeches were held outside the municipal hall, and municipal council members and traders left together for the capital as the fishers waited anxiously back in the municipalities and barangays. One of the most dramatic instances of this attracted the interest of national newspaper the *Manila Times*. It reported that:

[s]ome 500 live fish gatherers and traders last week trooped to the capitol’s legislative building in this city [Puerto Princesa], asking the provincial board to suspend the implementation of Provincial Ordinance 941, also known as the Palawan Live Reef Fish Ordinance. They claimed the ordinance … has made their lives difficult, especially this Christmas season (*Manila Times* 2006).

Dalabajan (2009: 57) later wrote of one meeting during this process that in ‘a show of force, the traders’ posse of lobbyists, largely composed of municipal legislators, descended to the capitol building’. Their arguments about the negative effect the ordinance would have on local fishers ‘came with a veiled threat that this cruelty will be well remembered come election time, which was due in six months’ (ibid.).

The provincial council ‘melted’ (ibid.), the ban was overturned at the start of the new year, and shipments were allowed to go through again.

**The Case against Regulation**

As described by fishers, the case against regulation of the live reef fish trade was similar to arguments against other regulations such as MPAs. Here, I focus more on broader concerns about corruption and inequality in fisheries governance. Fishers declared that regulations such as these punished all fishers for the activities of only a few, namely those who used illegal fishing methods. These regulations impoverished them, and ignored what they viewed as the real problem—the lack of enforcement against illegal fishing. The imposition of the regulations was seen to be ignorant of the needs and dignity of the poor and was viewed as an example of unjust governance. Here I detail the substance of these claims, firstly by looking at what people said about the live reef fish regulations, then by examining how fisheries governance more generally was perceived. Following this, I analyse these arguments with reference to broader conceptions of governance.
Attitudes towards Live Fish Regulation

At a dinner with representatives of the provincial council in August 2006, CLOA issued an appeal against the provincial ordinance on live fishing. The arguments it mustered in defence of the live fish industry were primarily grounded in how it had provided a strong injection of socio-economic benefits into the communities of the Calamianes. In a manifesto presented to members at the dinner, CLOA emphasised the increase in financial capacity that directly derived from live fishing. Live fish collectors were now ‘able to start sending their children all the way to college and provide their families with a modicum of modern comfort like televisions, stereo and the like’ (CLOA 2006: 1). If the live fish trade were to be banned or regulated, CLOA stressed, these poor fishermen would return to the life of even more extreme poverty that had marked their lives before the introduction of the trade. As one trader told me: ‘Many people will go hungry with these new regulations’. These complaints were reiterated throughout all the interviews I conducted with the live fish traders, a Christmas dinner in which they restated their appeal for help to the municipal officials, and submitted through numerous representations to the provincial capital.

While the appeals of CLOA could easily be dismissed as a blatant attempt at using the vulnerability of live fish collectors to conceal their own motives of avoiding any regulations and maximising their own profits at any cost (one provincial council member identified their plea as such in his reply to their request), live fish collectors themselves also talked passionately about these issues. When discussing the ban during December, the same common responses could be heard repeatedly: the live fish trade had been a great help to the people of the Calamianes, there was no other alternative to live fishing during the windy season of amihan, and many people would go hungry because of the ban. People pronounced that there was no alternative livelihood. Also, the proposed ban for May to July would fall squarely in the middle of the most profitable season for live fishing with good weather conditions (habagat). The other proposed ban, from November to December, fell at a time where fishing was greatly decreased, and when fishers found it very hard to get by anyway because of the high winds and poor catch associated with this time of year. Many non-fishers registered their opposition as well, saying that the decreased income of live fish collectors would adversely affect other community income sources such as general stores.

A key issue that upset many live fish collectors was the way in which the regulations were broadcast. While these issues were being negotiated throughout 2006 at least, many fishermen were continuing to make investments in live grouper fishing, believing that this was the most prosperous fishery, and had a solid future. Fishers complained of a lack of a public hearing concerning the regulations, and while they were nominally represented in meetings such as that between CLOA and the provincial politicians, all the meetings I attended
were numerically and substantively dominated by traders and politicians. Padilla et al. (2003: 87) have already drawn attention to this issue, noting that ‘[c]ommunities are essentially marginalized from the decision-making process, which is perceived to be controlled by local political and financial elites’.

One live grouper fisherman, Geronimo,¹ who had only recently changed from net-fishing to live fishing in the hope of accessing the ‘jackpot’ that live fishing could often bring, complained bitterly about the regulations:

I’ve experienced two storms this week: Seniang [the name of a strong typhoon that hit the Calamianes just as the ban was enforced] and now this problem. I don’t understand, I haven’t been able to pay back any of my debt [his live fish operations were financed by a buyer], not even one cent. My livelihood is finished now.

As I bought some washing powder at the local sari-sari store later that day, he joked that I should bring my clothes back to him and he would do my washing, as he didn’t have a job anymore.

What was striking about many of these discussions was how closely they were linked with a distrust of the motives behind the regulations. Almost universally, the fishers I spoke to during this period argued that the problem was solely about enforcement, not about the lack of regulations. As one angry fusilier fisherman put it: ‘The problem is illegal fishing. This is the job of the police … the provincial government shouldn’t be trying to stop live fishing completely … it is only some who are illegal fishers’. These fishers argued that the motivations behind the regulations were fundamentally part of political manoeuvrings that had little to do with any genuine conservation or management objectives. Many fishers suspiciously queried the timing of the implementation of the ban. One stated: ‘They are introducing this now because it is just before Christmas. Now is the time they need to spend, to give money out to their voters. They [the provincial council] are just doing this to get money out of CLOA … Mga politicos [these politicians]—I know their style!’ he told me, shaking his head. Many other fishers agreed with this interpretation.

A more complex hypothesis that gained a considerable amount of traction was that the ban was part of an elaborate scheme by the president to install an alternative governor of Palawan. According to this theory, the president had recently switched her support to the opposing candidate who was preparing to run for governor in the elections of 2007. The opposing candidate was hostile to the live fish trade continuing in the Calamianes because he was representing the allegedly jealous southern municipalities of Palawan, where the trade was

¹ Geronimo was a fusilier-fishing captain during habagat but changed from net fishing to live grouper fishing during amihan over the time I lived in Esperanza.
not nearly as prominent (and in some instances banned). Although this may well have been the case, my point here is not to speculate about whether such assessments held any truth to them. Instead, I want to show how the deeply-felt cynicism about government behaviour informed understandings of live fish regulation.

From these descriptions of what many fishers saw as the motives behind regulation, it can be seen that some felt that the provincial government was going to be actively gaining through these regulations—either through extortion of money from CLOA or through political support from the southern municipalities. More importantly however, was that they were going to seriously damage the interests of the poor live fish collectors. In this way, live fish regulations were understood by many as something that would hurt the poor, and enrich the elites implementing them. In the next section, I explore in greater detail how broader patterns of fisheries governance were also viewed in this way.

**Fisheries Governance**

When I asked one older net fisherman about his thoughts on a new MPA being planned in the sitio next to the one in which he lived (San Andres), he gave a long sigh before launching into what he considered its impacts would be. He felt that the authorities should be concentrating on catching the illegal fishers and tightening up on corruption instead of increasing the restrictions on the ‘small people’ (*mga maliit*). He pointed out the negative impact that another MPA had already had on some of the fishers from his sitio (Esperanza), who had been required to find new fishing grounds. He didn’t understand what the purpose was of punishing the small-scale fisher, while ignoring the real problem of illegal fishing. He described the ‘style’ of fisheries governance in the Philippines, where it was easy for illegal fishers to get away with their activities through simple bribery. If you get caught illegally fishing, he explained, you just pay a fee to the enforcing agents and they let you go on your way. For the poorer, small-time, legal fishers though, this was not an option.

A striking anecdote from fieldwork indicates how strongly some of the legal fishers felt about the problem of illegal fishing and the links to corruption. After several drinks at the local videoke house, Manuel, the fusilier-fishing captain whom I described in Chapter 6, started to talk about how punishment for illegal activities could easily be avoided with a bribe to the relevant authorities. After he became a fishing captain, Manuel was a captain for a liveaboard diving boat. The owner was an Englishman who was addicted to an illegal type of methamphetamine (*shabu*) commonly used in the Philippines. Eventually the local policemen caught him with the substance and arrested him. After a quick
negotiation, he paid them a bribe and avoided going to jail, being deported instead. Resentfully, Manuel mentioned that as I was rich in the Philippines, I would never have any problem if I ever got in trouble with the police.

Getting more worked up, he described what had happened on his last fishing trip. Travelling between his fishing grounds east of Palawan, he was suddenly rammed in the side by a Philippine National Police boat based in Coron, damaging the hull. Boarding immediately with shotguns at the ready and large aviator glasses on to cover their faces, they demanded to see the captain. They confronted Manuel and asked him whether he was using dynamite. After searching the boat and finding nothing, they unloaded two drums of fuel onto their boat. At ₱40 per litre, this added up to ₱24 000 worth of diesel—about US$480—a considerable expense for the owners of the boat. The police then helped themselves to a meal and took off with the fuel, leaving Manuel’s battered boat behind.

Manuel became increasingly agitated as he talked about this, repeating over and over ‘Kami [we], legal…. I am a legal fisherman’. Generalising from this experience, Manuel went on to talk about how that if you get rich through illegal fishing, it was easy to obtain protection (protektahan) from the police. He cited the example of one nearby island, where residents allegedly paid the police ₱20 000 (about US$400) every month to look the other way. If you were not rich and used legal methods however, you suffered. Manuel felt tremendously angry and hard-done by, because despite seeing the activities of dynamite fishermen all the time in his fishing grounds, he was the one who was targeted because he had no money (walang pera) to bribe the enforcement officials. ‘Write that in your book—that is fishing in the Philippines!’ he angrily commanded me.

As I have illustrated throughout this book, most fishers I worked with feel deeply disillusioned about the system of fisheries governance generally in the Philippines; they feel it empowers a few richer, illegal fishers who degrade the environment while penalising the legal, smaller fishers who are harmless to the environment. I now move on to a discussion of how these perceptions nest within perceptions about governance and corruption more generally in Philippine society.

Idealised Patrons and Corrupt Politics

I wish to focus here on what I understand as a significant disjuncture between poor Filipinos’ conceptions of the ideal leader and their understandings of the more grubby reality of ‘politics’. This will lead to my discussion of what I see as important links and continuities between these two forms of political leadership.
7. The Politics of Patronage and Live Fish Trade Regulation

In its investigation of poor Filipinos’ views of leadership, the Institute of Philippine Culture (IPC 2005: 19–42) emphasised what poor people consider to be the most important qualities and characteristic of a good leader and election candidate. These include being morally upright, dedicated to improving the lives of the poor, and impartiality. These characteristics were usually cited as belonging to local leaders. Conversely, participants in the study stressed corruption as the single most important factor in determining a bad leader (ibid.: 42–3). National officials were frequently cited as examples of bad leaders, and it was suggested by the IPC (Institute of Philippine Culture) that ‘the perceived badness of national figures overshadows that of local leaders … the participants find it hard to mention national figures as exemplars of good leadership’ (ibid.: 47). Thus, pro-poor and impartial leaders at the local level are contrasted with corrupt and self-serving leaders at higher levels of politics.

I now develop these ideas with reference to my fieldwork experiences, by contrasting fishers’ images of local leaders with their descriptions of politics more generally. From the local level, where politicians are usually conceived of as benevolent patrons, to the national level, whereby they are predominantly viewed as parasitic and corrupt, perceptions of politicians tend to be either of an idealised leader, or a crooked cheat. The behaviour and attitudes of poorer people correspond accordingly with these perceptions.

The captain of the barangay I lived in was held in what I saw as extremely high esteem by the citizens of my sitio, Esperanza. Regarded as a genuine ‘man of the people’, he was seen as someone who devoted his office to the care of his predominantly very poor barangay citizens. ‘If you ever have any problems or need anything, go to him’ I was advised when I first settled into the barangay. In particular, he was regarded highly by these citizens because of his role in supporting them in their protracted land dispute with the wealthy family that claimed to own the land they lived on. This consolidated his reputation for being pro-poor. As a prominent live fish trader himself, he was also viewed as someone who could represent the villagers and shared their concerns in the issue of live fish regulation.

The barangay captain’s reputation for being pro-poor was an important factor behind his popularity. The need to look after the poor is commonly cited by members of Esperanza as the primary responsibility of governments, and, like elsewhere in the Philippines, the idea that well-off richer people should care for and accommodate the wishes of poorer members of society is well-ingrained. The ‘right to survive’ (Blanc-Szanton 1972) is a value that politicians in particular needed to be seen as respecting, and the live fish moratorium was seen as trespassing on this right.
An example of how local residents appreciated this concern for the poor could be seen when a petition of the barangay captain was brought around for people to sign. The petition asked for the support of the people in opposing new elections in 2007, arguing that the local government had not had enough time to fully implement their policies effectively. What was notable about this exercise, as the petition promoters moved from house to house, was the lack of any meaningful discussions about the implications of the proposal. Instead, once the people found out that it was a project of the barangay captain, they signed immediately. ‘As long as the barangay captain helps us against that man [referring to their opponent in the land dispute], I will sign whatever he wants’ one man declared. The assumption was that as long as they were receiving support from the captain in their land dispute, their loyalty to him and any of his projects would be guaranteed—no matter what the implications were. The enactment of the patron-client relationship between the barangay captain and the residents here illustrates the flipside of corruption—the provision of services to kin and loyal clients.

The barangay captain’s popularity at the local level in Esperanza was virtually uncontested. While I didn’t have sufficient data from other sitios to make a judgment on the extent to which his popularity was contested in other regions, the fact that he had been barangay captain for over a decade was an indication of his success. However, in other localities in the region, such political power at the local level was contested.

The metaphor of the parent is a common phenomenon when referring to ‘good’ local leaders. Dumont (1995) has documented the extensive use of kinship metaphors in political life in Siquijor Island in the Visayas. The metaphor of family was extensively used by politicians at various levels as a symbol of unification and togetherness:

The kinship ideology stressed the natural character of kinship links, which entailed social solidarity, which in turn assured that smoothness prevailed in interpersonal relations. Such an ideology was so powerful and so pervasive that most political relations, whether, local, provincial, or national, were expressed through that idiom. Whenever the mayor spoke to his constituents, often with rhetorical flair and genuine eloquence, he emphasized the kinship links that bound them all (ibid.: 18).
Plate 7-1: Infrastructure promotion like this is a common feature throughout the Philippines.
Similarly, the IPC report quoted earlier stated that ‘participants agree that a leader’s position is comparable to that of a parent who acts as a guide and provider’ (IPC 2005: 98). Local leaders in the Calamianes are often referred to by the metaphor of fictive kinship. ‘I always refer to him as my father’ stated one barangay citizen, as he described how he consulted the captain before making any major decisions. Both the local sitio chairman and the sitio representative in the Barangay Council were also referred to numerous times as father (‘tay) or older brother (kuya) by residents who did not have actual familial relationships. Additionally, local politicians are often called upon to become godparents of the children of poorer families. Politicians thus become drawn into fictive kin networks of poorer families. These relations of kin may be fictive but they have real resource implications. Politicians are expected to provide support at occasions such as weddings, and help those members of the fictive kin network when needed. One councillor related to me how an elderly woman from his barangay approached him shortly before the municipal elections, asking for his help in acquiring a new set of false teeth: ‘I would like a new set of dentures so I can smile when I vote for you’, she told him. Another politician recounted his frustration at his inability to govern in an impartial way, because of the perception among his constituents that the responsibility of government was to look after them ‘from womb to tomb’. In this way, the state becomes personalised as a patron to whom one can appeal to for pity.

Comments about politicians at the municipal level usually depended on whether the person I was talking to had personal ties to the politician. One member of the municipal council whose father used to employ most of the fishers in Esperanza, for example, was extremely well regarded. The majority of the other councillors were frequently simply labelled as ‘corrupt’. Instead of allegations against specific municipal politicians, however, complaints about corrupt politics were more general. Thus, when people complained about the behaviour of politicians, their complaints were usually not directed against politicians that they knew, but against politicians at more remote levels whom they did not necessarily know.

Like the authors of the IPC report, I found that most common were complaints relating to politicians at the national level. Informants frequently told me how the system of politics was deeply corrupt in the Philippines, some concluding that things were better under the Marcos years because then at least there was ‘discipline’. This system of politics is understood as enriching the lives of the politicians while taking advantage of and living off the hard work of poor people like themselves. Corruption is a wearily unloved and assumed characteristic of government generally in the Philippines: ‘this doesn’t happen in your country, Mike’ (wala sa inyo Mike) my informants would frequently tell me after every such conversation. As one fisher put it when talking about the alleged links
between the traders and municipal councillors: ‘they are very opportunistic (*mapagsamantala*). The IPC (2005: 46–7) report states that being corrupt was unanimously nominated by the participants as a distinctive quality of being a bad leader; ‘corruption is clearly detested….’ The ways in which people hear about issues of corruption, primarily through sensationalist media reports and the everpresent gossip (*chismis*), reinforces this perception of politics. The perceived links between corruption and poverty are highlighted by 2010 Presidential candidate Benigno Aquino’s successful use of the campaign slogan ‘*Kung walang* corrupt, *walang mahirap* [If there are no corrupt people, there are no poor people].’

My point here is that the live fish trade regulations fitted in with a pattern of fisheries governance and general governance that is understood as essentially anti-poor and corrupt. The regulations were established at a level where corruption was understood to be the mode of operation generally among politicians to whom people had no personal connections; how the regulations were broadcast so suddenly and with minimal public consultation suggested a lack of transparency and self-serving elitism; and the massive impact they threatened to have on the livelihoods of local fishers indicated a severe deficiency in caring about the poor. The regulations therefore became consigned in peoples’ minds to the domain of ‘bad politics’ or ‘corruption’. Responses among poor fishers reflected this cynicism. Rightly or wrongly, PO 941 became linked in fishers’ minds with a system of governance that fed on the misery of the poor.

**Patronage and Corruption**

From these accounts it can be seen that there is a wide gap between the idealised portraits of ‘good leaders’, typified by some local politicians, and ‘politics’ more generally, viewed through the lens of corruption. At the local scale, where poorer people may have links of fictive kin with certain politicians, the expectation is that the politicians will provide goods and services to these poorer people. At higher scales, where local people may not have links and therefore will not be receiving any benefits, the same practices are simply viewed as corruption. Local politicians such as the barangay captain who distributed benefits and resources are not understood as corrupt by local people, whereas the same activities of politicians at a higher scale are condemned as corrupt because they are not seen as looking after the interests of the poor. For the local people I worked with, the same sorts of activities are therefore understood in very different ways, depending on whether the patronage is directed towards them or not, and at what scale it occurs.

These understandings of political behaviour correspond with the argument made by Russell (1997: 91), who argues that ‘many Filipinos expect state officials
to use their resources to support their particular economic interests in return for voter support’. Citing Olive (1996), she asserts that ‘many people hope or expect their local officials will favour their resource practices rather than neutrally enforce an abstract set of state regulations’ (Russell 1997: 91).

In his analysis of public life in the Philippines, Mulder (1997) claims that social life exists in three arenas—family, community and impersonal society. Family life is the moral core of life, symbolised by the mother and concerned with intra-group relations (Mulder 1997: 17–28). Local politicians with whom fishers have personal connections are brought into this arena. At the other end of the spectrum however—the end where the idea of ‘politics’ is consigned by my fishing informants—is the public space of wider society, ‘an area of opportunity where amoral power reigns supreme’ (ibid.: 133). It is in this space where it is understood that crooked politicians make their shady deals, buy their votes with their ‘goons, guns and gold’, and siphon off public funds for personal wellbeing. As Mulder argues, ‘[t]he best thing little people can do is to attach themselves to such bosses who seemingly know their way around in that vast world, to seek their patronage, so personalizing access to “public” space without it becoming any of their business’ (ibid.: 132). ‘Politics is less about good governance and more about benefits’ (Mulder 2000: 186). This analysis concurs with that of Pertierra, who agrees that ‘in the absence of trust in appropriate public institutions, strangers can only be assimilated by their conversion into consociates…. Filipinos personalize the public sphere and where possible use its resources to pursue private gain….’ (Pertierra 2002: 88–9).

Fishers characterised the relationship between themselves and the politicians at a higher scale trying to implement the live reef fish regulations as a form of ‘negative reciprocity’ (Sahlins 1972). The assumption was never that the state was going to manage the resources in a sensible and responsible manner; instead, fishers believed that the politicians would simply mine the resources for their own purposes or those of their clients.

Some of Mulder’s argument can be criticised for demarcating too clearly or crudely the differences between family, community and public life, and patently not ‘all’ politicians and politics are consigned to the amoral public sphere, as Kerkvliet, among others, has pointed out (Kerkvliet and Mojares 1991). But it does illustrate important aspects of how politics is understood in the worldview of many Filipinos.

**Conclusion**

The failed process of regulation highlights several significant social realities in the Philippines. Corruption—or at the least poor governance—is certainly
present to varying degrees in fisheries management in the Calamianes, and in this respect my paper agrees with the arguments made by Eder (2005), Ratner (2006) and others who assert that few inroads will be made in sustainable fisheries management until underlying social and political problems of governance are addressed. The opposition of fishers sprang primarily not from ignorance, but from cynicism about the political process of regulation itself. Other attempts at regulation had typically been applied unfairly, disadvantaging fishers. However, I have argued that the situation was about more than just poor governance. I have shown how these views of poor governance were embedded within particular understandings and expectations of political behaviour and patronage. The regulations were opposed and failed not only because of the poor record of other attempts at fisheries governance, but because they did not conform to peoples’ expectations about political behaviour. The ways in which fishers conceptualised the regulations as a form of negative reciprocity is reflective of the way politics is understood and frequently conducted in the Philippines—it is about supporting particular groups of loyal supporters. Fishers used the discourse of corruption as a way of condemning a piece of legislation that did not provide any foreseeable benefits to them. United with their patrons, the fish traders and their municipal political allies, they used this discourse to force the provincial politicians to drop the moratorium. While their critique of corruption was certainly a valid one, fishers failed to recognise that their political expectations and behaviour exemplified the classic games of patron-client ties and political patronage that were being critiqued.

This chapter has shown how a piece of legislation that was driven by social and ecological imperatives could be turned on its head and labelled as corrupt, because it was not seen as delivering the benefits expected from a good patron in a moral economy. I am not arguing here that this is the way politics is always understood or turns out in the Philippines; Kerkvliet, among others, (Kerkvliet 1990, 1995, 1996; Kerkvliet and Mojares 1991) has demonstrated that this is often not the case, showing that elections, for example, are sites of multiple meanings. Indeed, the fact that the legislation managed to get as far as it did, and the ways in which corruption was used as a discourse, could also be used as evidence of this ambiguity. Dualistic frameworks that stress the ‘traditional’ understandings of poor Filipinos, as opposed to ‘modern’ (for example Alejo et al. 1996), are unable to account for this. But the chronicle of the live fish regulations does demonstrate how deeply entrenched these understandings of political processes remain among many Filipinos, and the diverse ways in which they are represented at different levels of government.