



Local Politics in Controlling Commercial Sex in a Philippine Municipality

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ABSTRACT At the most local level, Philippine political structure relies on two institutions. The smallest political unit is the *barangay*, which has its own elected council and a *barangay* Captain. Sabang, the tourist town in focus in this article, constitutes together with twelve other *barangays* the Municipality of Puerto Galera. Sabang has since the early 1980s developed into a thriving international sex tourism town, which has brought the population lucrative business opportunities, but also a reputation of seediness, immorality and a place of illegal and illicit activities. Although prostitution is nationally illegal in the Philippines, it is also controlled and monitored by the municipal and *barangay* authorities. From the mid-1990s and forward, the municipal government of Puerto Galera have made several attempts to control the perceived “lewdness” (as it is formulated in official documents) of Sabang, in particular the behaviors and activities of the go-go bars. These attempts have been highly controversial and led to unprecedented events in municipal politics. I explore these charged issues in Puerto Galera ethnographically: who and which institutions are entitled to a) identify, and b) control “lewdness”? These questions inevitably draw attention to municipal policy-making and the various local responses to particularly controversial municipal policies.
Keywords: tourism anthropology, sex tourism, municipal politics, the Philippines

Introduction

Something hitherto unheard of took place in the Philippine municipality of Puerto Galera on 9 October 2006: an ordinance approved by the municipal council was for the first time as long as anyone could remember, vetoed by the Mayor. The subject of the ordinance was highly controversial as it demanded a complete shutdown of all establishments relating to a lucrative area of business, namely that of commercial sex.

In this article, I highlight issues of local tourism development and its relevance for municipal politics. Tourism and commercial sex tourism have become powerful subjects in municipal politics – including issues of tourism dependency and defining “morality” and “immorality” – a subject which will be explored through one particular political proposition: The Lewd Shows Ordinance. Before that I will establish the issue of municipal authority, and what kinds of powers municipal authorities may have when facing a problematic issue such as international sex tourism.

The article deals with policy formulation and the debates surrounding it and its consequences for local political debates and municipal politics in one specific municipality in the Philippines, and doing so by examining the development of sex tourism and its relation to political power of one particular tourist site, namely the town of Sabang.

The legal concerns of commercial sex is and has long been an issue of debate amongst feminist activist in the various shapes and forms as long as feminists have recognised the

commerciality of sex as a feminist issue. Commercial sex is illegal in the Philippines. The Republic Act No. 10364 (2012) defines prostitution as: “any act, transaction, scheme or design involving the use of a person by another, for sexual intercourse or lascivious conduct in exchange for money, profit or any other consideration”. The illegal status of prostitution also involves trafficking, pimping and child prostitution (of persons under 18 years of age). It is illegal to sell sex and it is illegal to act as a third party by pimping or providing contacts between buyers and sellers of sex. It is not illegal to pay for sex.

The issue of whether or not, or in which ways any forms of commercial sex could, should or should not be legalised and the various consequences of the different ways of formulating the legal frameworks of commercial sex are matters that go beyond the scope of this article (see Jahnsen and Wagenaar 2017; Vuolajärvi 2019; Östergren 2017). Instead the details of how control over commercial sex is debated in the Municipality of Puerto Galera are closely examined.

It should be noted that although selling sex, trafficking and pimping is nationally illegal in the Philippines, commercial sex has a long history of being monitored, controlled and regulated. It is commonly the task of the different municipalities to regulate commercial sex. The nationally illegal status of prostitution and the municipal obligation to control the same might seem paradoxical. It is nonetheless a widespread practice that dates back to the era of Spanish colonialism (Ekoluoma 2017; Eviota 1992; Wiss 2005). The municipality of Puerto Galera has both the possibilities of approving commercial sex by issuing the permits and licenses required in order to work as a sex worker or run establishments offering commercial sex and at the same time to order the police to conduct raids in order to capture offenders of the national law: the sex workers and the owners and managers of places where pimping take place. The inhabitants of Sabang rarely express concern for the illegality of commercial sex but are instead worried of the potential moral consequences of hosting an international sex tourism scene. People in Sabang have developed various strategies to make sense of moral contradictions arising from morally condemning commercial sex while at the same time making it acceptable by emphasizing their dependency on sex tourism. For example, people in Sabang oftentimes rely on notions and practices that primarily delineate and contain what is considered immoral in order to guard themselves from potential moral degradation (see Ekoluoma 2019).

The Lewd Shows Ordinance or the long and heated debates on it did not deal with issues of illegality of commercial sex in Sabang, a circumstance that may reflect how taken for granted commercial sex has become *de facto* legal. Instead, the debates regarding Lewd Shows Ordinance centered around two main issues: the potential negative effect of the locals’ sexual morality, and of tourism dependency.

Becoming a Sex Tourism Town

The debate of “lewdness” in Puerto Galera centered on the commercial sex scene in Sabang. Sabang is a *barangay*, which is the smallest unit of the Philippine administrative system, and it is located by the northern coast of the island of Mindoro. Sabang is one of the 13 *barangays* that constitute the municipality of Puerto Galera. In the latest official records, in 2010, the municipality of Puerto Galera had a population of 32 521 (NSO 2013). Though mainly due to poor infrastructure, Mindoro has remained a rather obscure island, at least in terms of contribution to national economy and centralised Manila politics (Schult 1991).

However, through tourism the municipality of Puerto Galera and in particular *barangay* Sabang has become part of the globally spanning tourism sector. Since tourism to *barangay* Sabang has become central for the municipality as a whole and since the debates of the Lewd Shows Ordinance are either explicitly or implicitly centered on this *barangay*, Sabang and its tourism is presented in some detail.

Until the early 1980s, Sabang was a small, poor fishing village, but thirty years later it had become a popular site for primarily Western male tourists, seeking scuba diving during the daytime and commercial sex in the nighttime. The *barangay* now hosts approximately 5,000 inhabitants and has become identified by tourists, international travel guides, and local Filipinos as a sex tourism town. There are no official estimation of the number of tourists that visit Sabang but the municipality as a whole receives some 250,000 tourists yearly, a number which was as indicated by an announcement made public on posters throughout the municipality by the authorities in 2015. A majority of the tourists are Filipino holidaymakers during national holidays and the summer month of April, and they tend to stay at White Beach (*barangay* San Isidro). Sabang, on the other hand, receives tourists throughout the year and is almost exclusively visited by international tourists, mainly from Europe, Australia, USA, and South Korea. Sabang might not be the most visited tourist site in Puerto Galera, but it is considered of central importance in terms of revenues as foreign tourists tend to stay longer and spend more money there. Sabang was in focus of the debates regarding the Lewd Shows Ordinance as it is also identified as a place of dubious morality, commercial sex, binge drinking and general lewd behavior.

Some of the first tourists, who were Western men, married local women and settled in Sabang. Later they opened tourist-related businesses, such as accommodations and dive shops. When the number of tourists increased, inventive local Filipinos saw the opportunities to expand the activities of the nighttime, as diving is primarily a daytime activity. Sabang's commercial sex scene was thus initially a local Filipino endeavor and, on their own initiative (Wiss 2005: 21-24). This aspect was, however, vehemently denied by most of my local Filipino informants, who strongly emphasize that commercial sex is something "from the outside". Indeed, by the mid- to end of the 1990s, the local Filipinos who had owned, run and controlled the local sex scene had largely withdrawn from direct involvement in the go-go bars. The go-go bars are central venues in the organised commercial sex scene as they function as meeting points for sex workers and the clients (Ekoluoma 2017; Wiss 2005). The exact number of go-go bars have varied between three and six throughout the years of my fieldwork and they have been controlled and not been allowed to operate outside a specific area (central Sabang) nor have the number of go-go bars been allowed to increase. By the turn of the millennium Western foreigners had taken over the running of all but one of these bars, and a decade later Korean expats had established themselves as the principal owners of the go-go bars.

This transition from a pattern of local ownership to a situation where mostly foreigners own them is important for the locals today. For local Filipinos, the ones who lived in Sabang before tourism, there is now a clear division of "Us" versus "Them" with regard to the commercial sex industry. The responsibility of the demand and presence of commercial sex is placed on "Them", the outsiders, for the current developments, such as the risk of spread of "immoral" behavior. As many of the locals told me: "We had no prostitution before the tourists came here, so it is a problem of tourism". From a local perspective commercial sex

is something that involves outsiders; foreign tourists and women who do not originate from Sabang, i.e. sex workers (see Wiss 2005). This is not entirely accurate in practice as local men also engage in commercial sex but the perception that “we are the moral and they are the immoral” touches upon many of the sexual and moral boundaries that the locals apply in order to protect their collective moral integrity. This will be further explored with regard to the in-many-ways exceptional discussions on the proposition of the Municipal Ordinance regarding “lewd behavior”.

Method

The ones identifying themselves as “locals” are generally Filipinos with pre-tourism ties to Sabang. However, a significant number of Filipinos living in Sabang are domestic migrants who often come from poorer areas of the Philippines and seek work within the tourism sector (as babysitters, hotel maids, beach vendors, or sex workers). The tourists are mainly from Europe, Australia, USA, and, more recently from South Korea, who come to Sabang for vacations. Another significant group is the ‘expats’ (short for expatriates) of Western origin who form a community of their own. These men – over the last 15 years I have met less than a handful of female expats – run various tourism related enterprises in Sabang. They may also rely on pensions or other forms of social benefits from their home countries. Typically, the expat is often married or in long-term relationships with a Filipina.

It was with these individuals – local Filipinos, domestic migrants, foreign tourists and Western expats – that I worked while conducting ethnographic field studies in Sabang for a total of a year and a half, between the years 2003 and 2015. My stays ranged from 8 months to weekend visits. Over these years, I gradually learned more about the delicacies of municipal politics. I interviewed mayors and other elected politicians and talked to people involved in various interest groups and the different categories of people living in Sabang.

Municipal politics was often a topic of discussion, mainly with local Filipinos and expats. Many expressed disappointment with how the municipality and Sabang were governed. While foreign expats often would often publicly comment derogatively on Filipino national and local politics, locals tended to express their thoughts and opinions to me in confidence, in subtle terms and in hushed voices. This is certainly a simplified depiction of a general difference between what I saw as foreigners’ sense of entitlement to openly criticize local rule, and Filipinos’ fears of retributions if one’s opinions did not please the men in power.

By getting to know people in Sabang, being able to follow political initiatives such as various development projects and the Lewd Shows Ordinance from start to end, by talking to politically active individuals and to people who did not say a word of critique directed at *barangay* or municipal politics or politicians. I also learned about which families are often said to be indisputable leaders of the *barangay* and the municipality and which families are rarely engaged in local politics I have gained a long-term view of *barangay* and municipal political discourse.

With the evolution of politics over time, the families have emerged in a pattern of division; namely those who are in politics against those who are not. However, as the debate of the Lewd Shows Ordinance will show, the people in Puerto Galera do not abide by a simplistic and stagnated gap between “the rulers and politicians” and “the people”. The Lewd Shows Ordinance was widely discussed and the whole process of debating, voting and finally setting aside such a controversial ordinance that suggested closing down commercial

sex in the municipality, is a fitting example of how a community handled pressing concerns of intersecting interests: that of concerns of tourism dependency and sexual morality.

Barangay Sabang in Puerto Galera's Municipal Politics

There are a few extended families in the central part of the municipality of Puerto Galera, which are generally regarded as the “native inhabitants” of Puerto Galera. They tend to trace their ancestry back to Spanish colonial time and they have their Spanish last names to prove their historical claims to the area (effectively dismissing pre-colonial populations). These families constitute a municipal affluent elite, continuing the structure of colonial organisation, and have managed to develop prominent businesses, gaining wealth, reaching high-ranking positions not only in municipal politics, but in other areas as well, such as in church organisation, heading various committees, occupying high-profile positions such as municipal Chief of Medicine or Chief of Police.

The municipality of Puerto Galera is a comparatively thriving one due to its ever-growing tourism industry. One survey of local demography defined six of the totally 13 *barangays* as tourism *barangays* (Cola and Hapitan 2004: 5). Aside from direct involvement in the tourism sector, common occupations throughout the municipality are farming, fishing, transportation, administration and clerical jobs, and running businesses such grocery and *sari-sari*-stores (small convenience stores), eateries, or mechanical shops.

Nowadays Sabang is generally considered a well-off *barangay* by most people I have met in the municipality, although statistical information to corroborate this perception has proven to be hard to obtain. A survey published in 2004 did indeed find that the mean income is significantly higher in tourism *barangays* (Cola and Hapitan 2004: 13). It is not only through a new economy of tourism that the people of Sabang are considered to be wealthy but also through the close association with foreigners (mainly Westerners) and there is a “rub off effect” – if the foreigners are identified as wealthy so also are the people associated with them. The success stories of Sabang and White Beach are not uncontroversial.

Jun is a local man in his 50s, who holds multiple positions in Sabang. He is involved in *barangay* politics, runs a small grocery store and is employed by a Korean expat as a general manager in one of the go-go bars. Jun phrased the shift in the general social status of Sabang:

These people in town [*barangay* Poblacion], they were the rich people in the 1970s. They were dealing with people from the other *barangays* like they were the kings of Puerto Galera. That was during the time that Puerto Galera didn't have any tourists yet. The people from Sabang were fisher folks and in White Beach, I don't know what they were doing, they were just quarrying sand and sent it to Manila for aquariums.

Jun continues to explain what happened next: “And then the tourists came [to Sabang] and now the rich people come from Sabang and White Beach. So, these people in town, they are jealous”.

What Jun refers to is the fact that as a whole, Sabang has become a comparatively well-off *barangay*. However, Puerto Galera is still considered “provincial” by many locals. Even though some families have been able tap into the lucrative tourism industry, the fortunes of these families can't be compared to the affluent elites of the major cities. Associating oneself with the upper class or even the middle-class of Manila is not a viable option, not even for the more well-off inhabitants of Sabang (see Pinches 1999). Locally, they may be considered

newly rich and influential, but rarely has this resulted in influence outside the *barangay* or even in municipal politics. Sabang and its inhabitants thus continue to have limited political influence, although their social status within the municipality has been elevated.

Sabang had until the mid-2000s, only one single member in the highest circles of municipal politics: Rafael. After having served as a *barangay* Captain for many years, he was elected to become a municipal councilor. His political success, it was argued by people I talked to, was a result of him having managed to turn the wealth he had acquired from the sex industry into political power. He told me that he wasn't very happy about his choice to enter municipal politics though. He planned to only serve one term, because "it was too much politics, just talk" while as a *barangay* Captain he had "more power", that he wanted to be more involved in decision making in a more practical sense, which he felt he could do as a *barangay* Captain. He was nevertheless an active member of the Municipal council during the time of the controversies surrounding The Lewd Shows Ordinance, and I will return to his role in this historical event shortly.

Tourism and New Sources of Influence

For tourists the allure of Sabang as an untroubled paradise-like site in the tropics is considered to be under threat. The locals are well aware of the significance of Sabang's appeal and ability to continue attracting foreign tourists but managing control over tourism development is not an easy feat. Tourism is a highly charged matter since controlling tourism also means controlling the industry upon which the people of Sabang, as well as the municipality as a whole, are dependent. There are underlying conflicts which go beyond the conventional local versus foreigner-divide, between different groups of local Filipinos, as well as the broader categories of Filipinos and foreigners; these surface when attempting to identify responsibility, problems and solutions to the issues of deterioration of a sense of home, continuity, and physical environment.

Power, economics, and politics in relation to tourism development and sex tourism might be the most researched areas in tourism studies across the disciplines, including tourism anthropology (Gregory 2014; Hall 1994; Macleod and Carrier 2010; Richter 1989; Smith & Robinson 2006; Williams 2013). This is not surprising given that tourism development has the potential to disrupt established forms of power and influence. Tourism and the economy it brings can incite substantial changes in the countries or communities where it develops. In the municipality of Puerto Galera and Sabang tourism has indeed ignited new political debates and opened up new platforms for change.

At a first glance Puerto Galera offers no exception from any schematic depiction of Philippine local and national politics, where representation in, and control of political local leadership has largely remained in the hands of a small number of elite families (Roces 2001; Sidel 1990, 1997). As noted previously, the municipality of Puerto Galera as a whole has since long been governed by a limited number of powerful families, originating predominantly from central *barangays*. Their control stems both from a typical "patron-client pattern", where the mayors and the *barangay* captains describe themselves as "benevolent fathers" and "authority figures". Political leaders as well as the general population tend to express an ideal of a peaceful and harmonious patron-client-like relationship between political leaders and their constituents. However, in practice, these informal agreements of patterns of responsibility and loyalty may be unstable, for example popular support

for particular political representatives may lessen if unpopular ordinances are supported. Although a municipal councilor is elected to represent the whole of the municipality, they are often closely associated with the *barangay* from which they originate which also is the *barangay* from which they gained electoral support. Rafael was seen by members of the whole municipality, and certainly by the people of Sabang, as a representative of Sabang and was expected to identify and support ordinances and other political issues in terms of what would benefit that particular *barangay*. This proved to be more complicated than he had initially thought, he told me in one of our talks, since people in Sabang do not have uniform experiences or ideas of how to maintain and develop the community.

New Platforms for Political Influence

Tourism has opened up alternative channels through which one can reach powerful positions without entering the conventional political arena, and there are new actors now who have the power to dictate local developments. Through tourism new platforms for organisation has been created and this has caused some concern among the traditionally powerful families. Several organisations have cropped up on the political arena, in the form of local interest groups, NGOs, and international aid foundations; these organisations have become increasingly involved in local discussions and development projects, primarily directed at environmental preservation (PEMSEA 2008, 2009; WWF 2005). Sabang has been in focus of this emerging environmental discourse in a manner none of the other 12 *barangays* in the municipality has.

The discussions of the future development of the municipality were increasingly intertwined with tourism development, especially in case of the *barangay* of Sabang. The discussions of two kinds of environments were of particular concern; those of the natural environment and issues of ecological sustainability, and those of the moral environment which directly points at issues relating to commercial sex, namely the Lewd Shows Ordinance. I will now turn to the latter.

Many divergent ideas of future development are manifested in the case of the Lewd Shows Ordinance. In short, the main idea of the ordinance was to close all establishments associated with what was viewed as commercial sex and replace them with what considered more morally appropriate alternatives. The public debates surrounding it mainly took place between the years 1996-2006. Several attempts had been made prior to the Lewd Ordinance from 2006 which have been mentioned in this article; for instance, several proposed ordinances to ban commercial sex and at the least regulate behaviors and degrees of clothing/nudity in the go-go bars between 1996 and 1999 (Wiss 2005: 15-24, 151-158). Some of these were adopted but unsuccessfully implemented or only implemented for a short period of time. A local journalist reported that while one of these new regulations were in place, the women working at the go-go bars were dancing on stages with full-lengths shirts and jeans and long dresses, in order to comply with one of these initiatives to curb “lewdness” (PGF 1997 2: 1). These attempts were reportedly rarely long lived. Yet, there seem to be continuing efforts to control and regulate commercial sex and how people behave and dress within the municipality.

From what I have learned since I last visited Sabang in 2015, the issues of exercising control over “lewdness” have still not been completely laid to rest, and a vast majority of my informants are convinced that this is a discussion that will continue as long as *barangay*

Sabang remains a sex tourist site. This signals that people in Sabang are deeply divided on the issue of maintaining or closing down the sex scene. In particular, the municipal authorities were held accountable for this failure. However, attempts to regulate commercial sex are very controversial since the people of the whole municipality fear any form of regulation leading to a drastic decline in tourism. Everyone in Puerto Galera is aware of the financial significance of sex tourism to Sabang, but sex tourism also represents something many see as highly immoral. Debates on the Lewd Shows Ordinance show how attempts were made by people in the municipality to take control over the tourism development and demand changes. The ordinance created partitions between the elected leaders of the municipality and led to political twists and turns that were previously unheard of.

The Proponents: Protecting the Morality of the People

In 2006, voices of protest were raised against the existence of go-go bars; never before had the protests against the local sex scene been so clamorous. A municipal ordinance authored by a member of the municipal council was proposed, titled “An Ordinance Prohibiting Lewd, Bold and Indecent Shows in Establishments for Entertainment and Providing Penalties for Violations thereof” (M.O. 2006. No. 06-09). The Lewd Shows Ordinance, as it became known, was the most comprehensive, detailed and well-defined local municipal ordinance I have come across. It soon became highly controversial and widely debated. In the ordinance it was stated that:

It shall be the policy of the Municipal Government of Puerto Galera, Oriental Mindoro to adopt and implement measures designed to protect and promote public morals. [...] The Municipal Government will prohibit all forms of entertainment, activities and business that contribute to the deterioration of the moral character of the people, particularly the youth. The Municipality [...] will undertake measures to prevent [...] activities that adversely affect the moral well-being of the people. (M.O. 2006. No. 06-09)

The focus of the Lewd Shows Ordinance was threefold: to identify and prohibit places of lewdness, to regulate nudity/clothing of the women working in various establishments which may be deemed of dubious morality, and to control particular movements of their bodies. The main proponents of the earlier ordinances were the Parish Pastoral Council of the Catholic Church, and members of other church-affiliated organisations, such as the Catholic Women’s League. Their primary concern was the protection of the morality of the public, and, in particular, the effects the immorality of the bars could have on the local youth. The goal was to compel businesses to provide, as stated in the ordinance: “wholesome family entertainment such as restaurants, music lounge and sing-along bars, coffee-shops and other decent forms of activities”. At a hearing at the Municipal council one of the pro-ordinance speakers said: “Morality issues are more important than monetary issues”. The speaker acknowledged that the passing of the ordinance might be a setback for the tourism industry, but the resultant benefit would be a more moral community.

In the ordinance, activities in the establishments are defined in detail. For example, bold, lewd and indecent shows are identified as “any exhibition featuring women and/or men either totally nude, wearing transparent clothes, showing private parts of both sexes and provocative sexy dances. It also includes sex acts performed by women with the same or opposite sex”. Provocative dancing is defined as:

...any exhibition of dance intended to sexually stimulate any member of the public and conducted in an entertainment facility. [...] Performances or dances commonly referred to as table dancing, couch dancing, taxi dancing, lap dancing, private dancing or straddle dancing.¹

It should be noted that rather than being concerned for the welfare of the sex workers or their customers, it is actually the effects commercial sex may have on the host community, particularly youth, which inspire the proponents' arguments. The main motivating factor lies in protecting the morality of the people outside of the go-go bars, not protecting the ones working inside them. The bars, and the behaviors inside them, are identified as sources of risk of immorality for the general population. It is explicitly stated that commercial sex as such is seen as something immoral and that the youth should be shielded from these kinds of establishments as allowing places such as the go-go bars in Sabang to operate would mean one accepting and naturalising it, and the Lewd Shows Ordinance is thus, foremost a way for the youth to flourish and develop into morally intact individuals.

The Opponents: Protecting the Tourism Industry

Not surprisingly, the opponents of the Lewd Shows Ordinance were predominantly owners of go-go bars and other business owners in *barangay* Sabang, who feared that a ban or restrictions of the bars would have a profoundly negative effect on the tourism sector. In response to the proposed Lewd Shows Ordinance, a "Petition of the People of Sabang" was composed, an open letter to the Mayor signed by the six go-go bars and 32 establishments and 154 residents of Sabang, requesting *barangay* Sabang to be exempted from the suggested regulations (Anonymous 2006). The opponents' arguments center around their conviction of Sabang's tourism being dependent on the go-go bars.

In the petition, readers are reminded of the already established rules and regulations in place to control the sex industry, and that if these were followed the sex scene would not be as offensive to other locals. People involved in commercial sex argue that it is in fact the municipal government's failure to implement existing rules and regulations, and not reluctance on the part of the bars to comply with them. It was pointed out to me that mandatory bi-weekly gynecological check-ups for sex workers had not been enforced properly by the municipality, and that if such regulations had been implemented then those testing positive for STDs would have been dealt with accordingly; sex workers would not have been allowed to work unless and until testing negative for an STD. The opponents to the ordinance also argued that in Sabang, the go-go bars adhered strictly to the rules prohibiting local women to work as sex workers and local men from entering the go-go bars as customers. These informal regulations had long been in place – but not always implemented – in order to protect the *barangay* from the perceived negative physical and immoral influences of the go-go bar.

In the petition of Sabang's opponents of the ordinance, fears are expressed in rather dramatic terms that the people of Sabang will again suffer from poverty if the go-go bars are closed, since the go-go bars provide entertainment, thus providing "something for the tourists to do". It is also argued that if Sabang is to retain its image as a popular tourist site

¹ Even though I have spent some four months in Sabang's go-go bars and equally many months in go-go bars in other parts of the Philippines, many of these detailed forms of performances were not something I've ever witnessed – the dancing that takes place in the go-go bars are generally on a stage, with no physical contact with the audience

(which includes commercial sex), then new investors will be attracted to open up businesses in Sabang (PGF 2006 4: 4, Sept. 16-30: 5).

The petition centers around the right to conduct businesses and the anticipated adverse effect such a ban would have on the tourism industry, and it is written in a frustrated tone:

What you are going to do is directly defeating our rights as people of Puerto Galera to have a business, to work and to live [and it is pointed out that] there already are rules and regulations in place, which allow for such businesses. [...] Because what you are going to do is directly killing the tourism industry, which you know is the main source of income of most people in tourism, in our *barangay* and even the people of every *barangay* in your area.

The sense of dependency of commercial sex is evident in the quote, for example in formulating a ban of commercial sex as a way of “killing tourism”. It is also suggested that the need for enforcing existing formal and informal regulations rather than banning the activities of the bars is seen as superfluous as there already are ordinances in place, and the letter states: “in accordance with this is the strict prohibition of the said lewd shows which is better than starving most of the people and giving them a chance to do crimes and take bad jobs just to earn a living”. All in all, the opponents do not directly go into a discussion of whether commercial sex should exist or not, only that it already does – and that it can be regulated in a manner that would make it less offensive to locals. This was, nonetheless, not what the proponents sought, instead they called for a complete ban of all forms of commercial sex, regulated or not.

Political Turbulence

On the day of the vote of passing or rejecting the proposed Lewd Shows Ordinance, nine out of ten councilors of the municipal council were present at the voting session. Eight were in favor of passing the ordinance, while one opposed. Rafael, the only one of the council’s representative originating from *barangay* Sabang was not present, and it was generally assumed that he was acting strategically by being absent. According to the people I talked to in Sabang as well as in other *barangays* this was expected but it was also interpreted as a sign of weakness, and some claimed that he had made up an excuse about being on travel for official business in order to avoid having to take a stance. Had Rafael been present at the voting he would have had to take a side and publicly declare his view on the issue of banning or consenting to commercial sex, something he had to that point efficiently refused to do. Rafael had few options, either vote for, which would go against his *barangay*’s economic interests, or against, which would risk branding him as supporting immorality.

The Lewd Shows Ordinance was passed by the municipal council on 27 September 2006. However, for an ordinance to take effect the Mayor has to sign it. But for the first time in living memory, the then Mayor Teo Atienza refused to sign a proposed ordinance, thus vetoing the ruling of the municipal council regarding the Lewd Shows Ordinance. This was a political option and maneuvering of power that wasn’t questioned: it was within his right to veto the Lewd Shows Ordinance, but it was an unexpected move. On 9 October 2006 the Mayor made the decision official through a letter to the public. In this letter he expresses a fear of the potentially negative effects on tourism a close-down of the bars would entail. The Mayor argues that he would not go into a discussion of morality and immorality:

Lewdness and obscenity may well be a state of mind in a specific situation. But for the business in Sabang, for instance, this situation is not lewdness and obscenity but entertainment. [...] My veto of this ordinance is not a question of what is morally right and morally wrong. Rather, it is based on the pragmatic assessment of the conditions of the business industry and the influx of tourism, without disregard to the mandate to safeguard the moral fabric of the community. There must be a balance between absolute restriction and enlightened entertainment acceptable to our visitors.

By calling it “enlightened entertainment” rather than commercial sex, the Mayor effectively evaded the issue of the existence of commercial sex. In the letter, he did not define the difference between the enlightened entertainment or what he would consider lewd. He also specified Sabang, out of 12 other *barangays*, which would suffer the consequences. He noted that this form of entertainment would be directed at tourists, making a distinction between local immorality and a foreign one. The Mayor turned to notions of dependency of commercial sex and called for a stricter adherence to existing regulations. The Mayor continued:

If the concern of the council is to nurture moral values and prevent early moral degradation among the youth and the member of the community, then perhaps it can be simply work along the line of limiting access to these establishments and/or imposing guidelines on the hiring of entertainers and artists.

He thus referred to the practice of not allowing local men to enter the bar or local women to be hired as sex workers, rules that, at least according to my experience, were being enforced already.

The municipal council considered the possibility to override a Mayor’s veto, but in the end the ordinance was laid to rest. When asking people why the Lewd Shows Ordinance was not pushed through people shrugged and said that election time was coming up and because of that no politician would want to take on this very charged subject. Amihan, an elderly local Filipina was not surprised of the outcome, that in the end nothing really happened, despite all the discussions. She suspected greed and corruption to be at the root of the problem: “Nothing, you know, this [showing her fingers with a money sign] prevails, and you know our government. [...] Those high leaders should decide on things, but I think they can’t, you know what I mean”.

These kinds of reactions were the common among Filipinos and foreigners alike: that such a controversial subject as banning all forms of commercial sex was simply too risky a move to take within the municipality as the generally held view was that Sabang’s sex tourism was of central importance for the municipality as a whole.

However, this particular attempt to close down or regulate commercial sex in Puerto Galera went further than previous attempts. Out of ten municipal councilors, eight had in fact voted in favor of the Lewd Shows Ordinance. This time the question of a ban reached the second highest echelon in the municipal political power structure.

In the transcript of the voting session it is noted that Rafael was “On Official Business” and as his absence was classified as such he could not vote either “In-favor”, “Not in-favor” or as “Abstain”, which were the three options councilors had, and his position on the issue was thus not recorded (Minutes of the Regular Session of Sangguiniang Bayan 2006). I tried to contact Rafael to ask him about his absence from the voting session, but I was unsuccessful. He was well aware of my fieldwork in Sabang. I had recorded one interview

with him, and we had talked on countless occasions since he was the owner of a karaoke bar that I often frequented as it was a popular pick-up spot for sex workers who worked outside the controlled go-go bars (see Ekoluoma 2017). But every time I thought I saw Rafael he soon disappeared from my view. I could not help but wondering if he was actively avoiding me because he knew what I would like to talk to him about and that he wasn't comfortable doing so. When doing fieldwork in Sabang I mostly felt that being candid with my staying in Sabang and with my research interest as an anthropologist working as a way of getting to talk to people, that people wanted me to hear about their thoughts, knowledge and opinions of tourism. But I was not able to talk to Rafael again after this particular voting session. Partly because he might have initially avoided me and later because he fell fatally ill. I never learned about his thoughts of the Lewd Shows Ordinance.

One of the immediate effects of the discussions of the ordinance was that a karaoke-bar in the central part of Puerto Galera, which was known to be a front for commercial sex for Filipino men, was closed down. However, in the years that have passed since the days of the stormy debates regarding the Lewd Shows Ordinance nothing much has changed in Sabang. Or, at least, there was no decrease in commercial sex. On the contrary, more go-go bars have opened since 2006. The previous ambition of keeping commercial sex what is locally considered as discreet, for example by having non-descript and rather innocuous signs and covering the entrances to the go-go bars with thick curtains in order to prevent passers-by from being "exposed" to the activities inside have increasingly been abandoned. During my last visit, in 2015, blinking lights, loud music and more bold signs had become more commonplace, making the commercial sex scene more noticeable than ever. People outside *barangay* Sabang tended to emphasize the importance of "containing" the immorality to Sabang specifically, but discussions of lewdness and morality and what kinds of behaviors could potentially be banned and which ones can be deemed acceptable have continued, in particular in relation to Filipino tourists behaviors and forms of entertainment in White Beach (Virola 2012).

Conclusion

Although the Lewd Shows Ordinance in the end was abandoned, the debates on the ordinance showed that Puerto Galera in general and *barangay* Sabang in particular hosts a politically active environment and people do not silently embrace or reject the go-go bars, but discussions are continuously undertaken. The ordinance itself, the petition written by people involved in Sabang's go-go bars, the Mayor's historical veto of the ordinance, the public hearings, newspaper articles and general talk of the town all revealed how sensitive and at times also infected the issue of living in a sex tourism town may be.

The ordinance was an attempt to take control over what some considered being an undesirable feature of the municipality, and this ordinance also highlighted issues of which actors held the upper hand in struggle over tourism, morality and political power. The conventional political elites and proponents of conventional Catholic morality did not have the ability to push through the Lewd Shows Ordinance. Although prominent politicians such as a vast majority of the members of the municipal council and members of several church-affiliated organisations strongly supported the proposed ordinance, in the end this form of political power was not sufficient. The municipal Mayor based his decision to veto the ordinance by referring to the risk such the proposed restrictions regarding lewdness

would pose to the tourism industry. The Mayor argued along the same lines as many others did in Sabang: that any kind of prohibition or further regulation of “lewd, bold and indecent shows” and commercial sex would result in a financial catastrophe for Puerto Galera as a whole. Ordinary and official seats of power were forced to give way for economic interests, and in these struggles between “old power” and a strong sense of dependency of sex tourism, the latter was given priority.

The Lewd Shows Ordinance illuminates issues of tourism and its potential political effects, how tourism may lead to changing sources of status, significance and influence and may alter political power structures leading to new events in municipal politics.

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