

Combating Patronage Politics: Depoliticizing *Ayuda* Using John Rawls' Distributive Justice in the Philippines

Daryl Mark D. Jakosalem., Wilfredo Jr. C. Juntilla, MA Philo., Maria Araceli C. Juliano, EdD

Notre Dame University – Cotabato

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ABSTRACT

This study provides a philosophical investigation of the distribution of *ayuda* in the Philippines within the context of entrenched patronage politics. While government assistance programs such as the SAP, AICS, and AKAP aim to alleviate poverty and aid vulnerable sectors, their actual implementation has often been compromised by political favoritism and electoral manipulation. This study argues that such practices morally undermine the fairness and integrity of social assistance, transforming public entitlement rooted in justice into political indebtedness. Rooted in John Rawls' theory of justice as fairness, highlighting the equal liberty principle and the difference principle, this research assesses whether *ayuda* distribution can be publicly justified to citizens as free and equal members of society. While Rawls provides a strong normative framework focused on impartiality and priority for the least advantaged, his theory presumes a well-ordered society, an assumption challenged by political realities in the Philippines, characterized by weak institutions and relational norms. To address this limitation, the study proposes a hybrid normative framework that integrates Rawlsian principles with the Filipino moral values of *pakikipagkapwa* (shared humanity) and *bayanihan* (communal solidarity). While these values sustain moral motivation, they must be constrained by an institutionalized standard of impartiality to prevent their distortion by patronage. Ultimately, this research contends that neither Rawls nor Filipino values alone are sufficient to depoliticize *ayuda*. A culturally resonant yet institutionally constrained hybrid framework is necessary to completely transform *ayuda* into a genuine instrument of social justice rather than a mechanism of patronage politics.

Keywords: Ayuda, patronage politics, John Rawls, pakikipagkapwa, bayanihan

INTRODUCTION

Poverty continues to persistently challenge contemporary societies as it remains a burden that affects the dignity and well-being of human lives. Governments from developing nations initiated and implemented various large-scale social assistance programs aiming to alleviate the suffering of the most vulnerable members of society (Barrientos, 2016). In the Philippines, poverty remains a central challenge that the government needs to address. The national poverty incidence among families in 2023 was recorded at 10.9%, equivalent to 2.99 million Filipinos (PSA, 2024). Moreover, an increase of this number was observed during crisis situations such as natural calamities and the COVID-19 pandemic. During the onslaught of the pandemic, the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) implemented the Social Amelioration Program (SAP), an emergency subsidy program, which sought to aid Filipinos who were greatly affected during the pandemic.

Even after the pandemic, the government continued to institutionalize various social programs aimed at supporting the impoverished population (Doctolero, 2023; Reliefweb, 2024). Initiatives such as *Ayuda para sa Kapos ang Kita Program* (AKAP) and Assistance to Individuals in Crisis Situations (AICS) rose to the forefront as one of the means the government uses to address the widening poverty in the society (DSWD, 2024). Abad (2025) defined these social welfare projects as services rendered by the government to provide aid, support, or assistance to the disadvantaged, distressed, or vulnerable persons or sectors of society. While these programs have distinct objectives, they share the same noble purpose of helping alleviate the sufferings of the poor population. Collectively, these government initiatives are known as *ayuda*, a Filipino term meaning 'assistance' or 'help'. For this study, *ayuda* is understood as state-distributed financial or material assistance characterized

by administrative discretion, weak institutionalization, and temporary relief, rather than as a rights-based or entitlement-driven welfare program (Abad, 2021; DSWD, 2022; Punongbayan & Suzara, 2025).

While *ayuda* seeks to address urgent economic and financial needs, it has been criticized by the public for corruption, inefficiency, and questionable sustainability to the recipients (Palatino, 2025; Punongbayan, 2025). Its continued implementation even during the non-crisis period raised economic, political, and social concerns (Belgica, 2024). Political patrons gained access to these government programs, showing upfront the underlying culture of political patronage of the Philippines (Kuker, 2025; Palatino, 2025). These programs were exploited for electoral gain, notably during the pre-election periods (Abad, 2025). Despite government warnings, many officials took credit for the distribution of *ayuda* to secure votes (Palatino, 2025). Hence, the issue of patronage politics undermining the integrity and purpose of *ayuda* distribution must be scrutinized deeply. In this manner, this study launches an in-depth philosophical investigation guided by a core question: How can a just distribution of *ayuda* be effectively carried out in our country marred by the influence of patronage politics? Poverty and vulnerability must be addressed not to be used as tools for political display, but as urgent matters of justice and human dignity.

This study draws on John Rawls' theory of distributive justice as outlined in his book *A Theory of Justice*. Rawls' framework, centered on fairness, impartiality, and equal access to opportunity, provides a normative ethical framework that serves as a lens to critique patronage politics in the Philippines. On the surface, the *ayuda* programs appeared to follow the Rawlsian Difference principle by prioritizing the least advantaged members of the society (Gozum and Aguas, 2022). However, its implementation was compromised by political patronage, enabling the officials to claim the credit and allowing them to consolidate power (Palatino, 2025; Kuker, 2025). As Rawlsian distributive justice was rooted in the Western liberal tradition and assumes the condition of a well-ordered society, a critical adaptation is needed to provide proper contextualization.

Situating Rawls' abstract principles requires integration with moral values deeply rooted in the Filipino culture. While Rawls highlights the importance of fairness and impartiality, Filipino society places equal value on communal and relational ties. Filipino moral values, such as *pakikipagkapwa* (fellowship) and *bayanihan* (communal solidarity), view justice not only as limited to individual entitlements and rights but also encompasses interdependence and mutual care. In this manner, the Rawlsian concept of distributive justice resonates strongly in the Filipino way of extending a helping hand to those in need, not just as a civic duty or moral obligation but rooted in compassion and collective responsibility. Yet, when these values are left unregulated, they may be subject to political manipulation and can be used to justify discretionary distribution of assistance. Unintentionally, they may be used to reinforce and normalize patronage-based practices. Thus, while Filipino moral values are ethically significant, they are likewise insufficient when invoked independently of impartial and institutional principles of justice.

This article examines the distribution of *ayuda* in the Philippines as a philosophical problem of justice within a political environment shaped by entrenched patronage politics. While state assistance programs are intended to respond to poverty and vulnerability, their implementation raises deeper moral questions when access becomes vulnerable to political discretion, favoritism, and electoral manipulation. In this context, the paper asks three interrelated questions: how patronage politics morally compromises the fairness and integrity of *ayuda* distribution; to what extent John Rawls' theory of justice as fairness can provide a normative response to political bias in distributive decisions; and how the Filipino moral values of *pakikipagkapwa* and *bayanihan* may strengthen, complicate, or contextualize Rawlsian justice in the Philippine setting.

This study argues that Rawls' theory of justice as fairness offers a powerful normative standard for evaluating the injustice of politically distorted *ayuda* distribution, particularly through its emphasis on impartiality, public justification, and priority for the least advantaged. However, because Rawls' framework presumes the existence of reasonably just institutions, its practical application in the Philippine context remains constrained by the persistence of patronage politics and weak institutional accountability. To address this limitation, the paper proposes a hybrid normative framework in which Rawlsian principles function as the governing institutional standard, while *pakikipagkapwa* and *bayanihan* serve as complementary ethical resources that can deepen moral motivation and cultural resonance without replacing the demands of fairness, transparency, and impartiality.

Theoretical Framework

This study utilizes a hybrid normative framework grounded in John Rawls' distributive justice, integrated with Filipino moral values of *pakikipagkapwa* and *bayanihan*, to critique the fairness of *ayuda* distribution in the Philippines. The Rawlsian Equal Liberty Principle clearly demands that all citizens are equally entitled to receive aid, while the Difference Principle allows certain inequalities only if they serve to benefit the least advantaged—two principles that clearly contradict the distribution of aid in exchange for political favors and loyalty. However, the Rawlsian framework is grounded in Western liberalism and assumes the condition of a well-ordered society. Its adaptation in the Philippine setting requires critical contextualization to deal with the realities of deeply embedded patronage politics.

While Filipino moral values such as *pakikipagkapwa* and *bayanihan* serve to broaden the ethical limitations Rawlsian justice as fairness encounters within the Filipino moral life, this study contends that they should not serve as the basis for assessing qualification to receive government assistance. In relation to distributive authority, these relational values may be co-opted by political manipulation, running the risk of justifying and legitimizing patronage politics under the pretense of care and solidarity. Instead, they must be limited by the institutionalized rules of impartiality and fairness, acting as moral reinforcements for fair institutions rather than replacing them. This distinction rightfully prioritizes justice as fairness while safeguarding Filipino moral values from being co-opted into systems of political favoritism.

In this manner, the Filipino moral values of *pakikipagkapwa* and *bayanihan* enrich it with cultural depth. On one hand, *pakikipagkapwa* reframes the marginalized sector not just as disadvantaged members of the society, but as equals in dignity and humanity. On the other hand, *bayanihan* calls for communal participation and responsibility, allowing Rawls' difference principle to be embodied and translated into action. Together, these values infuse the Rawlsian framework's emphasis on fairness and impartiality with a relational aspect, creating a hybrid framework that is both philosophically grounded and culturally resonant. This hybrid framework guides the analysis of this study by critiquing patronage politics, identifying its moral implications, and proposing ethically sound reforms that ensure *ayuda* distribution becomes a genuine instrument of social justice to alleviate poverty rather than being a political tool.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This article employs a normative philosophical method to examine the distribution of *ayuda* in the Philippines within a political context shaped by patronage politics. It analyzes the moral implications of politically mediated assistance through John Rawls' theory of justice as fairness, while also engaging the Filipino moral values of *pakikipagkapwa* and *bayanihan* to assess how culturally rooted ethical concepts may complement, complicate, or reinforce distributive justice in the local context. The argument is developed through critical analysis and synthesis of philosophical texts, relevant social science literature, and selected policy and public-discourse materials on *ayuda* distribution in the Philippines.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The discussion evaluates the moral legitimacy of *ayuda* distribution in the Philippines under conditions shaped by patronage politics. It argues that the problem is not merely one of administrative inefficiency, but of distributive injustice, weakened institutional credibility, and the distortion of moral language within public welfare practices. To develop this claim, the discussion first examines how patronage compromises *ayuda* at the administrative, institutional, and ethical levels; second, it assesses the normative strengths and limits of Rawls' theory of justice as fairness in this context; and third, it considers how *pakikipagkapwa* and *bayanihan* may serve as complementary ethical resources when constrained by principles of fairness, impartiality, and public justification.

Patronage Politics and the Moral Compromise of Ayuda Distribution

Programs that are created to assist the public, such as the distribution of *ayuda*, should be grounded in impartiality, fairness, and a publicly justifiable standard of need. When state resources are distributed through

personal or political discretion rather than being governed by institutional rules, the ethical foundation of welfare policy becomes questionable. In the Philippine context, *ayuda* distribution has consistently been plagued by patronage politics, where access to government assistance is influenced by political affiliation or proximity to elected officials (Abad, 2021; Punongbayan & Suzara, 2025). In this section, the discussion will be focused on how patronage politics morally compromises *ayuda* distribution in three progressively deeper ways: administrative failure, violating the tenets of distributive justice, and the erosion of institutional moral credibility.

On the surface, patronage politics creates administrative inefficiencies and legal challenges. Several studies on *ayuda* distribution during and after the COVID-19 pandemic report delayed distribution, favoritism, and inconsistent selection, resulting in the exclusion of beneficiaries, caused by discretionary identification at the local level (Apostol, 2020; Talabong & Gavilan, 2020; Abad, 2021). These failures prompted disciplinary and legal actions against identified barangay officials (DILG, 2020). From a moral viewpoint, a distribution mechanism that deliberately excludes rightful beneficiaries due to non-relevant considerations such as political affiliation or personal discretion by local officials already constitutes injustice (Barrientos, 2016).

However, viewing patronage politics as merely an administrative failure undermines the depth of the moral issue. One may argue that administrative failures are merely technical problems that can be resolved through better safeguards, stricter guidelines, or updated data systems. Indeed, institutional safeguards such as centralized and updated national databases and registries are meant to address this concern by minimizing administrative inefficiencies (Naher et al, 2020; Eadie & Yacub, 2023). While these technical reforms are necessary, they do not fully address the underlying ethical issue. If administrative incompetence were the main issue, then these technical reforms alone are enough to restore the moral legitimacy of *ayuda* programs.

At a deeper level, patronage politics compromises *ayuda* distribution by violating the core moral principles of distributive justice itself. Based on Rawlsian theory, distributive decisions must be justifiable to all citizens as free and equal participants in social cooperation (Rawls, 1993; Rawls, 2001; Freeman, 2007). In this manner, *ayuda* distribution based on political affiliation clearly fails this test of public justification. Rightful beneficiaries are treated not as rights-bearing citizens but as clients subject to receiving aid conditionally, implicitly, or explicitly, in exchange for political loyalty or gratitude (Berenschot & Aspinall, 2020). This transformation of citizens into dependents upon political favor erodes their moral standing and contradicts Rawls' emphasis on social cooperation resting on reciprocity and fairness (Freeman, 2007). Moreover, patronage politics encroaches on impartiality as the foundational reasoning of welfare distribution.

Berenschot and Aspinall (2020) describe this practice as the conversion of public goods into selective rewards, where access to government resources depends upon demonstration of political support. In the Philippine political landscape, where weak party systems and personality-centric politics dominate, politicians often manipulate welfare programs as tools of electoral power rather than instruments of social justice (Hutchcroft, 2019; Kreuzer, 2020). When assistance is provided on the basis of allegiance rather than actual need, inequalities no longer serve the least advantaged, thereby a clear violation of Rawls' difference principle (Rawls, 1993). The moral issue here is not just unequal results but unequal civic standing.

A consequentialist argument can be invoked to defend patronage, claiming that political intervention is necessary to accelerate aid delivery or ensure that aid reaches the most vulnerable communities efficiently. Anastacio & Morandarte (2023) showed that deprived voters may be willing participants in patronage in exchange for immediate material benefits. Toral (2024) further argues that political connections eliminate the hurdle of bureaucracy. While such arguments emphasize the practical appeal of patronage, they inappropriately merge positive results with moral legitimacy. Rawls clearly refutes outcome-based justifications that cannot be publicly justified to all citizens, particularly those excluded from the benefits of such arrangements (Rawls, 1993). Consequently, even when patronage-based distribution produces short-term welfare gains, it remains morally illegitimate.

At the institutional level, patronage politics effectively erodes the moral credibility of public institutions. Rawls' conception of a well-ordered society presupposes institutions governed by publicly known and accepted principles of justice (Rawls, 1993). When public institutions become instruments of selective distribution, it ceases to be impartial guarantors of social cooperation. Empirical studies on Philippine governance repeatedly

associate patronage with declining public trust and the normalization of corruption (Wilkin, 2011; Hutchcroft, 2019). In this prevailing condition, injustice is no longer seen as an exception but the norm of political life.

When public institutions lose their moral credibility, the consequences spill over beyond mere administrative inefficiencies and formal injustice. The role of public institutions is not only to distribute *ayuda*, but they also form the public's ethical ideals about what is just and fair. In a well-ordered society, social assistance is an entitlement rooted in publicly justified principles. However, when these institutions are driven by personal discretion, favoritism, and political manipulation, the public trust in institutional impartiality gradually erodes. Consequently, moral reasoning is not lost; rather, it is displaced from formal institutional ideals toward informal moral frameworks grounded in personal relationships, shared values, and cultural norms.

In the absence of reliable institutional rules, the cultural values of *pakikipagkapwa* and *bayanihan* become increasingly relevant in discussing *ayuda* distribution. Due to the lack of trust in the impartiality and neutrality of institutional rules, people turn to more familiar moral languages to understand the essence of distribution-languages rooted in shared humanity, solidarity, and reciprocity, the very core of *pakikipagkapwa* and *bayanihan*. However, this transition is not morally neutral. Since patronage politics operates through the Filipino moral values, it is easy for it to manipulate and distort the meaning of said values, thereby legitimizing discretionary distribution. In this manner, analysis and discussion must expand beyond institutions alone and examine how cultural moral frameworks interact, sustain, or impede unjust distributive practices. Understanding this interaction is quite necessary to fully grasp how patronage politics persist despite various safeguards. It is not only confined to the political sphere but also influences everyday social life.

From a cultural perspective, it is important to clarify that patronage politics does not erase Filipino moral values such as *pakikipagkapwa* and *bayanihan*. Rather, patronage politics operates through them. These values are eternally present in the Filipino moral consciousness and continue to influence how Filipinos view and practice solidarity and mutual care. The concern, therefore, is not the existence of these values but how they are expressed within the context of *ayuda* distribution. Patronage politics distorts and manipulates them, thereby reframing them in unintentionally justifying unequal and discretionary practices in the distribution of *ayuda*.

Originally, *pakikipagkapwa* means the recognition of another person as a fellow human being (*kapwa*), equal in dignity and deserving of moral consideration regardless of status, affiliation, or power (Enriquez, 1997; Cleofas, 2016). It emphasizes shared humanity and equality. In its original form, it challenges hierarchical divisions and affirms that moral worth is not determined by political loyalty or familial relations. However, when this value operates within the public sphere of state-administered *ayuda*, the moral context also transforms.

Government assistance is meant to serve the public, administered through public rules and distributive standards. Since it occurs in a public sphere, it is no longer a purely interpersonal encounter. In this manner, the language of relational closeness may be subtly transformed into preferential distribution. The moral instinct to prioritize those with whom one shares a familial bond can begin to influence decisions that ought to be governed by impartial rules. In this sense, *pakikipagkapwa* is not the direct cause of such injustice. Rather, it becomes vulnerable to false reinterpretation. What was originally meant as shared humanity becomes narrowed into preferential treatment, risking an unintentional justification for flawed distributive practices.

Similarly, *bayanihan* is also affected by this dynamic. *Bayanihan* is traditionally understood as communal cooperation and collective responsibility, reflecting the voluntary willingness of individuals to contribute to the welfare of others (Barrameda & Barrameda, 2011; Farolan, 2013). During emergencies, it has motivated grassroots initiatives to assist others in dire need of assistance. However, within the context of a heavily politicized distribution of *ayuda*, the meaning of *bayanihan* is also subject to be reframed. When government officials frame *ayuda* as an act of personal benevolence or generosity rather than an institutional obligation grounded in justice, the language of collective responsibility may be used to reinforce personal indebtedness. In this reframed understanding of *bayanihan*, citizens perceive assistance not as a matter of right but as a personal favor granted by benevolent politicians. Collective responsibility subtly transforms into reciprocal loyalty, unintentionally justifying discretionary distribution. Pointing out this distortion is especially important not because Filipino values are inherently flawed, but because their ethical dimensions may be utilized either to challenge or sustain unjust structures.

Taken together, patronage politics morally compromises *ayuda* distribution by undermining impartial administration, violating distributive justice, and eroding institutional and cultural moral credibility. Instead of functioning as a just and fair social welfare mechanism, *ayuda* risks functioning as an instrument of political manipulation. Yet recognizing these dynamics is insufficient in settling the normative question of justice. While Filipino moral values such as *pakikipagkapwa* and *bayanihan* may explain how people understand *ayuda* in practice, they remain vulnerable to patronage politics' reframing and reinterpretation in the public and relational context. To evaluate and reform *ayuda* distribution, a normative framework is needed- one that does not depend on political favor or personal closeness but can be publicly justified to citizens as free and equal. This requirement makes it necessary to proceed to John Rawls' theory of justice as fairness, which provides the essential institutional criteria for impartial distribution and acts as the moral standard for evaluating political bias in distributive decisions.

Rawls' Distributive Justice as a Normative Response to Political Bias in Ayuda Distribution

John Rawls' theory of justice as fairness is utilized not as a ready-made solution to the lingering presence of patronage politics in the political reality of the Philippines, but as a moral assessment framework for evaluating the moral legitimacy of distributive practices. In the previous discussion, it was established how patronage politics distorts institutional procedures and cultural understanding in the distribution of *ayuda*. To correctly identify whether these practices are just politically motivated or fundamentally unjust, a principled normative standard is a necessity. Rawls provides such a standard by grounding distributive justice in impartiality, public justification, and priority for the least advantaged. In this manner, Rawls does not provide an immediate solution to resolve the problem of patronage politics. Rather, he clarifies why and how it constitutes an injustice.

One of Rawls' core ideas is the demand for public justification. In his conception of the original position and the veil of ignorance, rational citizens are deprived of knowledge about their social status, political affiliation, and personal advantages, ensuring that distributive principles are chosen impartially (Rawls, 1993; Rawls, 2001). When this principle is fleshed out in a public assistance program, this translates into access to aid being determined by an objective criterion, wherein anyone could reasonably accept without the personal knowledge of being a beneficiary or not. In this manner, political loyalty, personal connections, and selective distribution based on favoritism clearly violate this principle. No rational person behind the Rawlsian veil of ignorance would freely choose a system where aid is provided depending upon one's political affiliation or partisan loyalty.

Additionally, the difference principle designed by Rawls establishes a clear standard for assessing irregularities in a social assistance program. His difference principle clearly states that inequalities are only allowed if they are to benefit the least advantaged members of society (Rawls, 1993). In line with this, the *ayuda* programs appear to align with it, as they are originally intended for vulnerable persons suffering from a crisis or emergency. Barrientos (2016) and Gozum & Aguas (2022) argued that this kind of emergency response in the form of assistance programs reflects Rawlsian concern for the least advantaged. In this manner, *ayuda* can be argued as the institutionalization and operationalization of the difference principle governing distributive justice.

However, a closer examination of Rawls' theory of justice as fairness and the actual design and implementation of the *ayuda* program reveals a fundamental tension. On the one hand, Rawls envisioned the difference principle to guide and permeate the basic structure of society. It must be at the core of long-term decisions that affect life prospects, such as legal systems, labor markets, and social policies (Rawls, 2011; Freeman, 2007). On the other hand, *ayuda* was conceived as a short-term emergency response, a crisis intervention rather than an institutionalized social welfare system. Its nature is temporary and reactive, contrary to Rawls' theory, driven by stability and permanence in applying distributive justice. Hence, using the difference principle as justification for the *ayuda* program without critical examination risks the mistaken application of Rawls' theory. Moreover, this fundamental tension becomes more emphasized in a society marked by institutions consistently plagued by patronage politics. Rawls presumes a reasonably well-ordered society where institutions are generally compliant with principles of justice and where citizens are motivated to uphold fair terms of cooperation (Rawls, 1993). However, in the Philippine setting, the form of governance is frequently described by low accountability, low public trust, and the frequent politicization of social assistance programs (Naher et. Al., 2020; Baclig, 2021).

Due to the presence of these non-ideal situations, even if Rawls principles continue to be normatively strong as a standard for critique, their practical effectiveness is limited.

The main issue with Rawls' theory is that it assumes ideal institutional conditions to exist and govern a society, which patronage politics actively undermines. If the difference principle must be utilized faithfully according to Rawls' original concept, distributive mechanisms must be impartial, transparent, and fully insulated from political manipulation. When the distribution of *ayuda* is influenced by personal discretion and political networks, the institutional mechanism necessary for Rawlsian justice collapses. In this manner, inequalities produced by systems mediated by patronage politics cannot be morally justified as aligned with the difference principle, even if some poor individuals do receive assistance.

Criticism and skepticism of redistribution and its positive effects are unnecessarily reinforced due to these failures. The libertarian critique proposed by Robert Nozick argues that redistributive schemes unjustly appropriate individual's holdings to benefit others without consent (Nozick, 1974). Rawls counters by framing redistribution in fair social cooperation through reciprocity. Since citizens benefit from shared institutions, they have reciprocal obligations to support systems that promote justice for all (Rawls, 1993). However, this justification is deeply reliant on institutional integrity. When patronage politics distorts *ayuda* distribution, resistance to continued welfare programs is not only grounded in opinion but rather demonstrates a rational response to a perceived injustice (Punongbayan & Suzara, 2025).

This reveals a crucial limitation Rawls' theory encounter in the Philippine context. While Rawlsian theory remains a reliable moral critique of the impact of patronage politics, it lacks the cultural and motivational resources needed to confront distributive practices entrenched in relational political norms. Rawls' model relies on abstract reasoning and procedural fairness, whereas political behavior in patronage-based societies is often shaped by personal obligations, emotional ties, and expectations of reciprocity (Mulder, 2013; Anastacio & Morandarte, 2023). Consequently, Rawls' theory can effectively determine injustice and articulate how a fair system works based on its principles, but it is insufficient to reform the moral motivations that allow patronage to persist. The difficulty, therefore, is not that Rawls' principles are flawed, but that their full application and realization is dependent on the presumption of institutional conditions that are undermined by political realities shaped by deeply embedded patronage politics.

Overall, Rawlsian distributive justice is normatively strong but contextually constrained. It remains effective in providing a critical standard that diagnoses patronage politics as unjust, yet it requires supplementation to be culturally resonant and practically transformative. This limitation, however, does not weaken Rawls' theory; rather, it clearly specifies the proper role it plays. Rawls serve as the institutional and moral criteria of justice, but addressing entrenched patronage practices requires engagement with a wider range of ethical resources capable of reshaping moral motivation and reasonably appealing to the public. At this juncture, the Filipino moral values of *pakikipagkapwa* and *bayanihan* become philosophically necessary- not as theoretical replacement for Rawls' justice as fairness, but as complementary moral resources that can reinforce and challenge its application in the local context.

Filipino Moral Values as Ethical Resources and Normative Constraints in Ayuda Distribution

The preceding analysis uncovered a structural limitation in depending solely on Rawls' theory of justice as fairness in the Philippine political landscape. Rawls offers a powerful moral standard rooted in impartiality and public justification, yet it presumes a well-ordered society with its citizens readily participating with fair terms of cooperation. In contexts such as the Philippines, where distribution of resources usually operates under patronage, injustice persists not just because of undefined and weak principles. Rather, they persist because the moral motivation of citizens is influenced by interpersonal relationships rather than strictly abstract principles.

Rawls can effectively diagnose patronage-based *ayuda* distribution as unjust, but diagnosis alone is insufficient in effectively pushing for reforms. In a society where political life is heavily influenced by personal relationships, reform cannot proceed by a purely institutional redesign. The moral reasoning of Filipinos is frequently expressed through culturally resonant concepts of humanity, shared identity, and solidarity. Since reform must be both normatively strong while remaining socially intelligible, it is a necessity to engage with a moral language

through which citizens already understand what it means to be equal and responsible. In this manner, Filipino moral values serve not an ornamental or symbolic purpose, but as rich, functional ethical resources capable of reshaping moral motivation within distributive practices.

Among the myriads of Filipino values, *pakikipagkapwa* and *bayanihan* stand out as particularly relevant in this discussion since they correspond directly to Rawls' principles. *Pakikipagkapwa* affirms the dignity and equality of every person regardless of social status or political affiliation. This directly complements Rawls' emphasis on equality but translates it into a lived relational attitude rather than a purely abstract and institutional rule. Also, *bayanihan* highlights shared responsibility, enriching moral support for distributive practices aimed at helping the least advantaged. While Rawls' theory secures the institutional requirement grounded in fairness and impartiality, these values correspond to the motivational and cultural aspects necessary to sustain just distributive arrangements. However, these values also possess an ambivalent character: while they contain the potential to justify redistribution schemes such as the *ayuda*, their meaning might also be subject to distortion and manipulation, unintentionally reinforcing patronage-based practices if unconstrained by just, fair, and impartial institutional principles.

Pakikipagkapwa

Originally, *pakikipagkapwa* refers to the moral recognition of the other as a fellow human being (*kapwa*), equal in dignity and deserving to be respected as such. It finds its roots in a highly complex Filipino psychology, emphasizing shared humanity, relational equality, and moral recognition beyond material or social status (Enriquez, 1977; Cleofas, 2016). This moral value questions a society dominated by hierarchical concepts, emphasizing the fact that moral worth is not determined by affiliation and proximity to the wealthy, the powerful, and the politically adept. In this manner, *pakikipagkapwa* serves a complementary role to Rawlsian principles by transforming the understanding of the poor not as passive recipients of charity and objects of benevolence, but as co-participants in a shared moral community deserving and entitled to concern and respect as equals. To claim that *pakikipagkapwa* can be subject to manipulation does not mean that shared humanity itself becomes immoral, nor that solidarity is innately exploitative. This vulnerability only emerges when a moral value appropriately expressed in interpersonal relations is transferred in the public distributive setting without clear institutional constraints. In a private context, *pakikipagkapwa* is often manifested through a personal encounter-recognizing the other as *kapwa* and acting with care and relational regard. In this sphere, partiality is often seen as morally permissible. It is acceptable to feel stronger obligations towards those with whom a person has direct contact and shared experiences. However, the distribution of *ayuda* is situated in the public sphere. It is a public act carried out using public resources. Once the boundaries between the public and private domains are blurred, as established by Mulder (2013), the moral language of *pakikipagkapwa* can be subtly reframed from being an instrument of equal moral recognition to selective recognition.

This subtle shift does not happen instantly but occurs in stages. First, moral recognition becomes narrowed. Instead of affirming the equal dignity of everyone who meets the objective criteria of need, recognition becomes limited to those who are connected, near, or known. The value itself remains universal, but its practical application becomes constricted. Second, equality is reinterpreted as relational closeness. Since *pakikipagkapwa* is naturally expressed through personal closeness, it can be invoked to justify preferential treatment. Hence, individuals are prioritized not because their need is greater, but because their relationship is closer. In this way, the qualification based on justice, characterized by eligibility, need, and vulnerability, is replaced by the qualification based on familiarity, characterized by closeness and endorsement. Third, what should be a public entitlement begins to be perceived as a personal favor. When beneficiaries see *ayuda* as something to be accessed through informal channels such as familial connections rather than impartial and institutional rules, the ideal moral response of civic responsibility is replaced by gratitude. In a political setting, gratitude can be weaponized and converted into an obligation that demands reciprocity and loyalty, thereby forming political indebtedness. The beneficiary is no longer seen as citizens entitled to receive state assistance under justifiable rules, but as a dependent recipient morally expected to reciprocate in terms of loyalty or support.

In this light, *pakikipagkapwa* itself does not create injustice. Rather, its interpersonal origins can be manipulated when extended into state distribution without the constraints of impartiality. Patronage politics exploits the gap

between the authentic meaning of relational care and the political requirement of fairness. It preserves the language of shared humanity while reframing its social function toward maintaining discretionary power. Hence, this is the precise reason why *pakikipagkapwa* must be treated only as a complementary ethical resource and not a replacement for Rawlsian principles. They are essential for cultivating dignity and moral regard, but must be normatively constrained by Rawlsian standards so that shared humanity supports justice rather than serving as a pathway through which favoritism becomes morally justified.

Similarly, this ambivalence also affects *bayanihan*. Traditionally, *bayanihan* is understood as communal cooperation and collective responsibility, where individuals willingly contribute their time, labor, and resources for the welfare of others (Barrameda & Barrameda, 2011; Farolan, 2013). Historical depictions of *bayanihan* frequently use communal labor as the preferred image. Recently, during the onslaught of the pandemic, this value was embodied by community pantries, serving as grassroots initiatives that supplemented gaps in state assistance, demonstrating the moral capacity of communities to respond to urgent needs (Galang et al., 2021; Gozum et al., 2021). In this sense, *bayanihan* complements Rawlsian distributive justice by highlighting the community's shared responsibility to care for the least advantaged. On the one hand, Rawls focuses on the institutional arrangements. On the other hand, *bayanihan* highlights the moral motivation necessary to sustain such arrangements. It transforms the image of the government's social assistance programs from mere legal compliance to a collective moral endeavor grounded in shared responsibility and solidarity (Bersamira & Macaraeg, 2022). Hence, *bayanihan* can reinforce public support for redistributive schemes by cultivating a sense of common purpose and mutual care through shared responsibility.

Nevertheless, like the previously discussed *pakikipagkapwa*, *bayanihan* may also be co-opted and manipulated by and to patronage politics. Arguing that *baynihan* can be manipulated does not deny its ethical significance as a complement to both Rawls' theory and *pakikipagkapwa*. Rather, it is a recognition of its ambivalent character when this value is applied to the public sphere without clear institutional constraints. In the private sphere of life, *bayanihan* represents a horizontal participation to assist those in need, not because one is compelled to help, but because of a recognition of shared vulnerability as equals in the community. However, when applied in the context of state-administered *ayuda*, the moral landscape changes. It is important to clarify that the distribution of *ayuda* is not a voluntary act of neighbors assisting one another. Rather, it is the distribution of public resources that must be governed by impartial institutional standards.

In comparison with *pakikipagkapwa*, the distortion of *bayanihan* also occurs gradually. First, communal responsibility is reframed as personal benevolence from political leaders. Instead of being seen as a coordinated government response to emergencies funded by taxpayers and governed by publicly justified rules, *ayuda* is reframed as a personal initiative driven by the benevolence of political figures. When the distribution of *ayuda* is framed as an act of personal benevolence or generosity, it blurs public entitlement to social assistance or welfare programs with personalized favor. In this sense, *ayuda* is no longer seen as a public right but as a form of benevolence from generous leaders, thereby reinforcing reciprocity through political loyalty. Second, public entitlement to being beneficiaries of *ayuda* is replaced with narratives of benevolence. In this manner, *ayuda* is perceived as an expression of a political leader's personal compassion rather than being a form of institutional duty grounded in justice, compelling beneficiaries to respond not as citizens deserving of fair treatment but as recipients of personal benevolence. Third, communal solidarity may gradually transform into loyalty. When its authentic meaning of cooperation, emphasizing shared responsibility among equals, becomes intertwined with symbolic gratitude, the language of communal care becomes entrenched within networks demanding reciprocity. Abad (2021) noted that this kind of moral framing permits personal discretion to govern distributive mechanisms while effectively insulating it from criticisms, as challenging the notion of *ayuda* can be claimed as ingratitude.

In this sense, *bayanihan* does not innately produce favoritism. When its call for communal responsibility is misappropriated, it becomes a sort of moral justification for discretionary authority. Its moral relevance highlighting shared solidarity makes distributive actions appear compassionate even when the underlying mechanisms are no longer driven by impartial standards. Without stable institutional safeguards, the resonating call for shared responsibility blurs the need for publicly justifiable standards. This establishes why *bayanihan*, while remaining morally rich in its authentic meaning, is insufficient to serve as an independent principle of distributive justice. Its strength lies in sustaining participation and social support for social welfare programs,

but its application in the public sphere such as the state-administered distribution of *ayuda* must remain constrained with impartial criteria. When grounded in Rawlsian principles, *bayanihan* cultivates collective commitment to just institutions. Separated from it, it risks reinforcing hierarchical patterns of generosity and loyalty that mirror the structure of patronage politics.

Confronting this apparent conflict reveals a crucial tension and unlocks a necessary philosophical insight. While the Filipino moral values of *pakikipagkapwa* and *bayanihan* remain ethically significant, they cannot serve as the sole basis of distributive justice. Their role is the sustenance of a distributive mechanism by providing moral motivation and cultural resonance, not institutional impartiality, which is an essential Rawlsian demand. When invoked independent from the principles of structural justice, these values may be co-opted and distorted, thereby legitimizing dependency, exclusion, and favoritism. In this manner, Rawls serves an important part by insisting that distributive principles must be embedded in institutions governed by fairness, transparency, and public justification (Rawls, 1993; Freeman, 2007).

Pakikipagkapwa and *bayanihan* should not serve as a replacement for the principles of justice Rawls put forward. Rather, they function as rich ethical resources that complement and challenge it simultaneously. If properly integrated, insulated from possible co-optation and manipulation, and normatively constrained by impartial rules, they provide a cultural and ethical richness while remaining faithful to the principles of fairness and impartiality advanced by Rawlsian distributive justice. Detached from these principles, they risk becoming instruments legitimizing patronage-based practices rather than reforming them. *Pakikipagkapwa* exalts humanity over the devaluing caused by poverty, affirming the equal dignity of beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries alike. Meanwhile, *bayanihan* cultivates communal responsibility that sustains public commitment to just institutions and their mechanisms. When appropriately utilized, both Filipino moral values enhance justice as fairness by providing lived moral experiences without compromising their normative identity and structural integrity. This synthesis completes the philosophical reconstruction of *ayuda* distribution, establishing a hybrid framework that is both ethically rigorous and culturally relevant.

A successful integration of Rawls' theory of justice as fairness with *pakikipagkapwa* and *bayanihan* is not just a mere contextual enrichment or symbolic alignment, rather it is about providing a functional, structural mechanism to govern a just and fair distribution of *ayuda*. In this hybrid framework, Rawls' principles act as institutional constraints, while Filipino moral values function as moral motivation necessary for sustaining a social welfare endeavor. Rawls clearly defines the boundaries and limitations within which these values may effectively transition from the private to the public sphere in the context of public distribution.

First, Rawls' requirement of public justification constrains *pakikipagkapwa*. The moral recognition of another as *kapwa* must be manifested in a manner that is justifiable for all citizens, not just those who are close to the distributing authority. This means that eligibility does not depend on closeness or recognition. Rather, it must shape how beneficiaries are seen as equals once eligibility is determined through an impartial criterion such as income level, vulnerability, or disaster impact. It is only then that *pakikipagkapwa* might operate by ensuring that recipients are treated with dignity and respect as equals. The constraints set by Rawls actually prevent *ayuda* from being co-opted by patronage politics by insisting that distributive rules are acceptable under the veil of ignorance. In this manner, equality remains universal rather than being transformed into relational. Second, Rawls' difference principle constrains *bayanihan*. Shared responsibility cannot replace institutional fairness but can reinforce it. The difference principle demands that inequalities must be for the benefit of the least advantaged through stable institutional mechanisms. *Bayanihan* reinforces this requirement by cultivating public support for redistributive policies and encouraging participation without coercion. However, Rawls' prevents solidarity from transforming into loyalty by grounding redistribution in justice rather than personal benevolence. The distribution of *ayuda* using taxpayers' money is justified not because leaders are generous, but because institutions are obliged to secure fair terms of cooperation. In this manner, communal participation does not justify discretionary authority. Instead, it strengthens accountability and transparency.

Simultaneously, Filipino values broaden and deepen Rawls' practical applicability, especially in non-ideal contexts. While Rawls establishes an impartial structure, *pakikipagkapwa* supplies the lived moral attitude that affirms and recognizes beneficiaries as equal members of the moral community, not as recipients dependent on

a political leader's benevolence. Also, this prevents bureaucratic indifference. While Rawls establishes the necessary prioritization of the least advantaged, *bayanihan* fosters collective commitment to sustain such mechanisms even when the distribution of public resources requires sacrifice. In this set-up, institutional fairness and impartiality govern allocation and eligibility, while cultural values shape interpersonal treatment, cultural resonance, and moral motivation.

Hence, the hybrid framework integrating Rawlsian principles with *pakikipagkapwa* and *bayanihan* does not weaken nor romanticize Filipino values. Instead, it clarifies their distinct yet complementary roles. Rawls ensures impartiality and public legitimacy, while *pakikipagkapwa* and *bayanihan* cultivate equal standing, dignity, and collective responsibility within those impartial structures. When structured in this manner, Filipino moral values cease to be vulnerable instruments of patronage politics and instead become ethically rich supports for Rawls' justice as fairness.

CONCLUSION

This study has argued that the distribution of *ayuda* in the Philippines becomes morally compromised when it is shaped by patronage politics rather than governed by impartial and publicly justifiable standards of justice. The problem is not merely one of administrative inefficiency, but of distributive injustice: access to public assistance becomes vulnerable to political discretion, personal loyalty, and selective benevolence, thereby undermining both fairness and equal civic standing.

John Rawls' theory of justice as fairness provides a powerful normative basis for criticizing this distortion, particularly through its emphasis on public justification, impartiality, and priority for the least advantaged. Yet the Philippine context also reveals the limits of relying on Rawls alone. Because justice as fairness presumes reasonably just institutions, its practical force is constrained in a political environment marked by weak institutional accountability and entrenched patronage practices.

For this reason, the study proposed a hybrid normative framework in which Rawlsian principles remain the governing institutional standard, while the Filipino moral values of *pakikipagkapwa* and *bayanihan* serve as complementary ethical resources. Properly constrained by fairness, transparency, and impartiality, these values can deepen moral motivation and cultural resonance without being allowed to justify favoritism or political indebtedness. In this way, *ayuda* may be reconceived not as an instrument of patronage, but as a genuinely just form of social assistance oriented toward the least advantaged.

Future research may further explore how this hybrid framework can inform empirical and policy-oriented studies on the governance of social assistance in the Philippines.

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