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# Understanding how the Filipino Legal System Works

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## Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** The Historical Roots of the Filipino Legal System
- **Chapter 2** Indigenous Laws and Customs Before Colonization
- **Chapter 3** Spanish Colonial Influence on Philippine Law
- **Chapter 4** American Legal Traditions and Their Impact
- **Chapter 5** Developments Through the Commonwealth and Republic Eras
- **Chapter 6** The Structure of the Philippine Government
- **Chapter 7** The Legislative Branch: Lawmaking in the Philippines
- **Chapter 8** The Executive Branch: The Powers and Duties of the President
- **Chapter 9** The Judicial Branch: The Philippine Court System
- **Chapter 10** The Hierarchy of Laws and Sources of Authority
- **Chapter 11** The 1987 Constitution: The Supreme Law of the Land
- **Chapter 12** Statutes, Republic Acts, and Presidential Decrees
- **Chapter 13** The Role of Judicial Decisions and Precedent
- **Chapter 14** Administrative Rules, Regulations, and Local Ordinances
- **Chapter 15** International Law and Its Place in the Filipino System
- **Chapter 16** Civil Law: People, Property, and Obligations
- **Chapter 17** Family Law and Personal Relationships
- **Chapter 18** Criminal Law: Crimes and Punishments in the Philippines
- **Chapter 19** Labor and Employment Law
- **Chapter 20** Commercial and Business Law
- **Chapter 21** Indigenous and Islamic Law in the Philippine Context
- **Chapter 22** The Legal Profession: Lawyers, Judges, and the IBP
- **Chapter 23** Access to Justice and Legal Aid
- **Chapter 24** Alternative Dispute Resolution in the Philippines
- **Chapter 25** The Future of the Filipino Legal System

## Introduction

The Filipino legal system stands as a testament to the country's rich and multifaceted history, reflecting centuries of cultural interaction, colonial imposition, adaptation, and resilience. Unlike many legal systems with singular legal roots, the Philippine system draws from an extraordinary blend of indigenous practice, Roman civil law, Anglo-American common law, and Islamic law. This hybrid nature is a uniquely Filipino response to layers of historical experience, providing both strengths and challenges as the nation continues to evolve under the rule of law.

To understand how the legal system works in the Philippines, it is crucial to appreciate the historical trajectory that shaped it. Indigenous communities living in barangays had their own customary laws long before European contact, and these traditions—rooted in consensus and social harmony—remain evident today in some legal principles and alternative methods of dispute resolution. With the arrival of the Spanish in the sixteenth century, the Philippines was introduced to the intricacies of civil law, a legal tradition built on codification and the precedents of Roman law. The American regime then overlaid this framework with common law principles emphasizing judicial precedent, adversarial procedure, and constitutional governance, ushering in profound change and enduring legal institutions.

Today, the Republic of the Philippines operates a unitary, presidential, constitutional government with a well-defined separation of powers among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. At the top of the legal hierarchy stands the 1987 Constitution, the fundamental charter from which all authority in government and law flows. Below it are statutes, judicial decisions, administrative regulations, ordinances, and—uniquely—the recognized customs and traditions of diverse Filipino communities. International law also plays a significant role, especially as the country continues to engage with the global community.

The modern Filipino legal system encompasses a vast range of legal domains. From civil and criminal law to labor, family, commercial, indigenous, and Islamic law, the system provides for the fair and orderly resolution of conflicts. It ensures that rights and obligations are defined, upheld, and, when necessary, enforced. The country's extensively codified statutes, such as the Civil Code, the Revised Penal Code, and the Labor Code, reflect the civil law tradition, while the pivotal role of the Supreme Court in interpreting laws and the Constitution demonstrates the enduring influence of common law.

It is also worth noting the vital role played by legal professionals and institutions throughout the Philippines. Lawyers, judges, justices, and support staff, alongside

alternative dispute resolution providers, all contribute to the administration of justice and to the continuous evolution of the legal framework. Their efforts ensure the accessibility, integrity, and efficiency of legal processes, even as new challenges arise.

This book is written for anyone seeking a reliable guide to how the Filipino legal system operates, whether you are a student, professional, or simply someone interested in understanding the laws that govern the country. By exploring the history, structure, and key areas of the legal system, this guide aims to demystify the complexities of Philippine law and illuminate the ways in which justice is sought, upheld, and continually reinvented in the archipelago.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: The Historical Roots of the Filipino Legal System**

To truly grasp the intricacies of the Filipino legal system today, one must embark on a journey through time, tracing its evolution from ancient customs to the complex tapestry of laws that govern the archipelago in the twenty-first century. This system isn't the product of a single legal tradition but rather a fascinating mosaic, shaped by layers of history, conquest, and cultural exchange. It is a living testament to the resilience and adaptability of the Filipino people, absorbing influences while retaining a core sense of identity.

Before the arrival of foreign powers, indigenous communities across the islands lived under their own systems of customary law. These unwritten rules, passed down through generations, varied from one barangay to another but shared common threads rooted in the need for social harmony and dispute resolution. Governance was often local, with chieftains and elders playing key roles in interpreting and enforcing community norms. These early legal frameworks were intimately connected to daily life, addressing matters of property, family relations, and the redress of wrongs, often prioritizing compensation to the offended party over punitive measures.

The arrival of Ferdinand Magellan in 1521 marked the beginning of the Spanish colonial era, a period that would profoundly transform the legal landscape. Spain brought with it the civil law tradition, deeply rooted in Roman law and characterized by extensive codification. While initially allowing some native customs to persist, Spanish law gradually became the dominant framework, introducing new concepts of crime, property ownership, and legal procedure. The establishment of institutions like the Royal Audiencia in Manila solidified Spanish legal authority and began to weave a complex web of regulations drawn from Iberian sources and adapted for the colonial setting.

For over three centuries, Spanish law held sway, shaping the foundational principles of family law, property law, and criminal law that remain discernible in the Philippine legal system even today. Spanish legal texts, such as *Las Siete Partidas* and the *Leyes de Indias*, were applied, creating a framework distinct from the customary laws that had previously governed the islands. This period laid the groundwork for a legal system based on written codes and hierarchical judicial structures, a significant departure from the decentralized, custom-based systems of the pre-colonial era.

The end of the Spanish-American War in 1898 brought another seismic shift with the advent of American rule. The United States, operating under a common law system,

introduced its own set of legal principles and institutions. This transition did not simply replace Spanish law entirely; rather, it layered common law concepts onto the existing civil law foundation. American influence was particularly strong in areas such as constitutional law, criminal procedure, and public law, bringing with it ideas of judicial review, the adversarial system, and the separation of powers that are central to the Philippine government structure today.

The American period saw the abrogation of Spanish political laws and the introduction of codes and statutes that reflected American legal ideals. While some Spanish private law was retained, public law, criminal procedure, and the overall governmental framework were heavily influenced by American models. The establishment of a modern court system and the introduction of a constitution modeled on the U.S. Constitution cemented the common law influence and set the stage for the development of jurisprudence based on judicial precedent, a concept less emphasized in the prior civil law regime.

Following the American colonial period, the Philippines entered the Commonwealth era and later gained full independence in 1946. These periods saw the further development and refinement of the legal system, building upon the hybrid foundation established by centuries of diverse influences. The adoption of subsequent constitutions, including the current 1987 Constitution, reflected the nation's evolving identity and legal aspirations, integrating both inherited traditions and new principles aimed at promoting democracy, justice, and human rights.

Even amidst these dominant colonial influences, indigenous legal traditions did not entirely disappear. In many rural areas and among indigenous communities, customary laws continued to govern aspects of daily life and dispute resolution. Furthermore, in the southern Philippines, particularly in Muslim-majority areas, Islamic law (Sharia) has historically played and continues to play a role in personal and family matters, recognized and integrated into the broader legal framework through specific laws and institutions. This further underscores the uniquely multifaceted nature of the Filipino legal system.

Understanding this historical evolution is not just an academic exercise; it is key to making sense of the various sources of law, the structure of the government, and the specific legal principles that operate in the Philippines today. The interplay between civil law codes and common law jurisprudence, the recognition of customary law, and the existence of Sharia courts are all direct consequences of this rich and complex history. Each historical period contributed distinct elements, creating a system that is both challenging to categorize neatly and remarkably effective in addressing the diverse needs of a nation built on a foundation of multiple cultural and legal streams.

The journey through the historical roots of Filipino law reveals a system that has been constantly adapting and integrating. It is a system that learned from ancient customs,

absorbed the structured codification of civil law, embraced the procedural and constitutional principles of common law, and acknowledged indigenous and Islamic legal traditions. This ongoing synthesis continues to shape the legal landscape, influencing how laws are made, interpreted, and applied, and ultimately, how justice is pursued in the Philippines. Future chapters will delve deeper into each of these layers, exploring their specific contributions and how they manifest in the various branches and areas of Philippine law today.

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