

Beyond **Machine Politics?** Reformism, Populism and Philippine Elections

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The general elections in the Philippines are fast approaching. On May 10, more than 85,000 candidates will contest some 17,000 elected offices, including the Presidency, half the Senate, the entire House, and all elected local positions (governor, vice governor, board members, mayor, vice mayor, councillors). Much attention is focused on the presidential candidates and their campaigns, featuring political speeches, star-studded rallies, and, invariably, candidates breaking into song and dance. With an expected three million first-time voters and projections of a 'youth swing vote' from the 40 percent of registered voters aged 18-35, the election period has also seen more concerted efforts to mount 'virtual campaigns' using web-based tools, in particular presidential front-runners Senator Benigno 'Noy' Aquino (Liberal Party) and Senator Manny Villar (Nacionalista Party).

I. Democracy in the Philippines

Democracy in the Philippines has been described variously in terms of "factionalism" and "clientelism", "caciquism" and "bossism" but the overall pattern has been clear. Elected politicians have been drawn from the landowning, commercial and industrial oligarchy of the archipelago, representing its interests both directly and through delegation. Competition for political office has revolved around contestation for the spoils of state power between rival families and factions within this ruling class. Poverty and economic insecurity have combined with a highly decentralised political structure to render the majority of Filipinos susceptible to clientelist, coercive, and monetary inducements and pressures during elections. Meanwhile, the prominent role of money in Philippine elections – for buying votes, bribing officials, and otherwise oiling the machinery – has created a structural imperative of fund-raising that guarantees politicians' continuing use of state powers and resources for personal and particularistic benefit and their abiding reliance on landowners, merchants, bankers, and industrialists. Small wonder that observers have been most impressed by the continuities in this seemingly seamless system of oligarchical democracy in the Philippines, as seen in the close attention paid to "political dynasties" that have dominated municipalities, congressional districts, and in some cases entire provinces across several generations and many decades.

II. Back to the Future: New Forms of Voter Mobilisation

Of course, it is also possible to discern efforts aimed at challenging or circumventing such political dynamics through alternative forms of voter mobilisation. During what I have termed 'critical elections,' the mobilisation of – voluntarist, non-partisan, patriotic – national citizens campaigns for 'free and fair elections' have helped energise the opposition's bid for the presidency against a continuista incumbent. Such campaigns accompanied the 1953, 1969, and 1986 elections, and, as I have shown elsewhere, enjoy a close affinity with the demonstrations of 'People Power' that helped unseat a president in 1986 and, again, in 2001.

Since the restoration of formal democratic institutions and practice in 1986, moreover, contests for the highest elected office of the land have also seen – failed and successful – alternative forms of voter mobilisation in the Philippines. On the one hand, in the first presidential election since the fall of Marcos, anti-graft and corruption crusader Miriam Defensor Santiago launched an electoral campaign in 1992 characterised by unprecedented reformist zeal and appeal, especially to younger generations of voters who have come of age in the post-authoritarian period. Whether or not her failed presidential bid fell foul of large-scale electoral fraud, as widely charged at the time, including in an election protest filed with the Supreme Court, the outcome signalled that “democratic consolidation” had been achieved, albeit in such ways as to confirm the staying power of Philippine oligarchic democracy and the vigour of its electoral machinery, at the expense of greater democratisation.

On the other hand, in the second presidential elections in the wake of authoritarian rule, the populist appeal of opposition candidate and (former) movie star Joseph ‘Erap’ Estrada succeeded in captivating a nation and capturing the presidency in 1998. Having won election first to the vice-presidency in 1992 and then the presidency with the largest vote margins in Philippine history, Estrada found himself the target of mounting public criticism and the first presidential impeachment hearing to reach the Philippine Senate, prior to his unceremonious unseating by ‘People Power’ in January 2001.

Fast-forwarding to 2004, the third presidential elections to be held in the post-authoritarian period, what stands out is the failure of Philippine cinema’s all-time great Fernando Poe, Jr., popularly known as ‘FPJ’, to translate his long-standing and nation-wide iconic star into electoral victory. As in 1992, the successful capture of the presidency by the ruling party candidate was accompanied by allegations of wholesale electoral fraud. Once again, the opposition filed an election protest with the Supreme Court, but in addition, this time the allegations of electoral fraud gained much wider traction and directly

implicated the re-electionist presidential incumbent Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo who, as Estrada’s former vice-president, had assumed the top job in 2001. As in 1992, however, the Supreme Court dropped the case and the ruling party’s candidate was declared the duly elected president of the Philippines.

In the post-Marcos period, it is thus possible to discern at least two distinct forms of voter mobilisation that, in different ways and to varying degrees of success, have sought to circumvent the role and significance of clientelism, coercion and capital in Philippine politics and society. As indicated by the brief review above, in two out of three presidential contests during this period, the 1992 and 2004 electoral campaigns to elect Miriam Defensor Santiago and Ferdinand Poe Jr. respectively, suggest themselves as significant instances of such alternative forms of voter mobilisation. At the same time, they failed to translate widespread support – for ‘Miriam’ in 1992 and for ‘FPJ’ in 2004 – into final victory at the polls. By contrast, while the winning presidential bid of ‘Erap’ succeeded in mobilising voters in ways irreducible to machine or money politics in 1998, neither his unprecedented vote margin, nor his enduring popularity, could prevent the extra-electoral ouster from power that followed in mid-term. As a result, (former) vice-president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo assumed the presidency without having won election in 2001.

III. Something New: ‘Philippine Democracy, Inc.’

Despite the considerable staying power of an entrenched system of voter mobilisation through clientelism, coercion, and capital in the Philippines, it is thus also possible to see the addition of ‘something new’ to such pervasive patterns. First of all, it is worth recalling that in the Philippines, as elsewhere, the structural decline of patron-clientelism has been linked to demographic change. Since the late 1960s, the expansion of a segment of urban poor and, in absolute terms, a growing urban middle class, has anticipated an overall decline in what has been

referred to elsewhere as the 'integrative capacity' of political machines. The resurrection of formal democratic institutions in the post-Marcos period saw the resumption of economic growth and the rapid growth of many urban and peri-urban landscapes across the Philippines, which, once again, raised the spectre of new social imaginaries.

Second, shifts in the political party and voting system in the Philippines have followed changes to the electoral rules in the post-Marcos period. The new electoral rules introduced with the resurrection of formal democratic institutions spelled the end of the two-party system and the associated zero-sum logic of Philippine elections. As the new rules removed representatives of the incumbent administration and the dominant opposition parties from boards of election inspectors and canvassers, they also anticipated the shift to multi-party electoral competition that has characterised Philippine politics and society in the post-authoritarian period. This shift, in turn, has opened up new possibilities for a more variegated and 'flexible' array of political parties and coalitions to field candidates in the contestation for an unprecedented number of elected seats at municipal, provincial, and national level.

Third, in class terms, the configuration of elected representatives has changed in tandem with the expansion and differentiation of the Philippine economy. That is, the diversification of business interest across economic sectors and administrative districts has anticipated patterns of brokerage by which the owners of the largest conglomerates in the Philippines lend support to top corporate lawyers, veteran machine politicians, and celebrities. This development has been evident in both the Philippine House and Senate and has seen major magnates bankroll clusters of candidates in elections, as well as lobbying campaigns on specific pieces of legislation during their terms. This pattern of brokerage indicates a shift in the relationship between the spheres of business and politics, allowing for a new cast of candidates to 'take the money and run.'

As suggested by the succession of presidential contests in the post-authoritarian period, however, there are at least two key constraining conditions working against the realisation of the kind of transformative potential suggested by the enabling shifts identified above. On the one hand, electoral fraud and undue advantages enjoyed by the incumbent administration have served to delimit the scope for 'something new' to register in the canvassing of votes during elections (1992, 2004). In this regard, the changes in electoral rules and the pattern of brokerage described above have also encouraged electoral fraud of a so-called 'wholesale' kind in the canvassing of votes. Little surprise then, that the (comparatively untested) introduction of an automated vote count in the 2010 elections is a cause for concern. According to a recent national survey, almost half of respondents (47%) agreed that "[t]he machines that will be used to count the votes in the 2010 election can easily be sabotaged in order to fake the election results" (Social Weather Station October 24-27, 2009).

On the other hand, the mid-term ouster of a sitting president who had won election against the (former) incumbent administration candidate was not merely unprecedented, but arguably, also a new, unconstitutional precedent against the future inroads of 'something new' in Philippine politics and society. As opposition politicians, corporate executives, and Catholic clergy returned to the parliament of the streets with calls for 'civil society' to support the 'moral crusade' against Estrada, 'People Power' spelled the unceremonious end to a Philippine presidency in mid-term. Having first changed the course of history in 1986, by helping to prevent Marcos from sanitising his long-term authoritarian rule through a national ballot, 'People Power' has since gained added circulation as political discourse, no longer merely part of the repertoire of protest against the conduct and outcome of elections, but also against an incumbent president. Whether 'the end justified the means,' as argued by some in the aftermath of Estrada's ouster, this turn of events presented

a departure from the constitutionally prescribed procedures for presidential succession. As such, it has also left a complex legacy for the consolidation of democratic practice in the Philippines.

The post-Marcos period therefore suggests a rather mixed picture in terms of new forms of voter mobilisation and, not least, the effects thereof for shrinking what has been referred to as the 'democratic deficit' in the Philippines. As indicated by the 2010 election campaign, the phenomenon of 'political branding' is an important aspect of the trends in shifting voter mobilisation in the country. Assisted by professionalised campaign managers, media consultants, and national opinion surveys, a political brand is developed to help advertise a candidate and his/her platform in the market of votes. In the 2010 general elections, for example, there are evident efforts at such branding of the two front runners, Manny Villar and Noyoy Aquino, as young outsiders ready to take on oligarchical rule, party cartels, political corruption and electoral fraud. Of course, neither Villar, nor Aquino is new to Philippine politics, or without the political machinery of the country's two oldest parties. Nonetheless, their campaigns underline the extent to which political branding has made inroads in Philippine elections, supplementing more familiar modes of voter mobilisation in the country.

In conclusion, as discussed above, underlying changes in the human geography of voters, the regulatory framework of elections, and the economic diversification of oligarchs have contributed to opening up possibilities for new forms of voter mobilisation. At the same time, such possibilities and the promise they hold for further democratisation in the Philippines continue to struggle against not merely the old, familiar politics of clientelism, coercion and capital, but also the more recent permutations of certain kinds of wholesale electoral fraud. While typically associated with progress and change, and, indeed, with 'new citizens-cum-voters', 'People Power,' as a perhaps all too familiar repertoire of protest, may also have emerged as part of the challenges to institutionalising democratic consolidation in the Philippines. ■

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