



UNISCI Discussion Papers

WHERE ON THE ROAD TO DEMOCRACY IS THE PHILIPPINES? ¹

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Any successfully held elections are usually celebrated – not least for the victory of democracy and for the cause of democratic consolidation in a country. The May 2004 general elections in the Philippines is one such event. It follows too that the period immediately following the election is one of the best times to reflect on the prospects of the newly elected government. The main objective of this article therefore is to provide a broader perspective of post-election Philippines with particular focus on the on the issue of democratic consolidation in the country.

Although the Philippines has been having general elections every four years, except during the Martial Law regime (1972-1986), the dynamics of the 2004 elections and the slim margin victory of the incumbent, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo reflect salient developments that point to some issues with regard to the quality of democratic practices that had prevailed over time in this country. This brief article therefore essentially wants to address the question of: Where, on the road to democracy, is the Philippines?

1. Why democratic consolidation?

It may seem irrelevant to pose the question of democratic consolidation at this point in Philippine history—given the fact that since its independence in 1946—the country was considered as one of the earliest democracies in Asia. In fact, political participation, a hallmark of political development/democracy started as early as 1907 when under the Commonwealth administration, the Filipinos were already able to elect their own President, Vice President and members of Congress. While this democratic tradition may have been interrupted during the Martial Law regime between 1972-1986, under the authoritarian rule of Ferdinand Marcos—a period that spelt bitterness, violence, deep societal division and inflicted

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so much pain among the Filipino people—it was eventually overcome 14 years later with the first *People Power* Revolution—also known as *Edsa Uno*—in February 1986.

To those Filipinos who took part and/or witnessed *Edsa Uno*, it was more than a momentous celebration of the return to democracy to the Philippines. To many who had classmates, colleagues and friends who suffered and/or even disappeared during the Martial Law regime—*Edsa Uno* was a moving victory against the ills of mankind. *Edsa Uno* was a triumph over the terrible misuse of political power and abuse of people's trust in the political institutions that had been established to protect human rights and the welfare of Filipinos. People power therefore was the ultimate testimony of how the citizens of a country—even in the worst circumstances—could muster the will to exercise their right to withdraw political support from a leader and an administration that had lost its legitimacy to rule.

And, if we consider in our '*tour de force*' of contemporary Philippine politics that the country subsequently had another 'People Power II' and even 'People Power III', it would appear impertinent to even raise this point about democratic consolidation.

I would submit, however, that it is precisely because of this inability of the country (and its people) to consolidate this political and historical project of democratic consolidation that the Philippines, at least until 1986, has been plagued by a number of structural problems that continues till today. These include, among others, the deep political cleavages that oftentimes account for incoherent and flip-flopping national policies, political instability brought on by decades-long problems of communist insurgency and Muslim separatist movements, the attendant problems of a laggard economy hampered by poor infrastructure, and an ever widening gap between rich and poor. It's been reported that more than 40 million Filipinos live below the poverty line. This picture helps to explain why millions of Filipinos are seeking employment overseas. For every batch of migrant Filipino workers sent abroad, the huge drain on the country's human resources continues.

2. What democratic consolidation means?

One of the important historical lessons taught in many schools in the country has been encapsulated in the classic line adopted by the late Philippine President Manuel Quezon after the Philippines got its independence from the United States. President Quezon's sentiments about colonial rule was unequivocal when he said that, 'I would rather have a Philippines run like hell by the Filipinos than one run like heaven by the Americans.' Such statement was more than one of nationalism and against colonialism—one could also take it to be a statement of purpose that the Philippines post-independence was ready to take on the mantle of setting out its own political system grounded on the fundamentals of representative government, as outlined in its own constitutional framework.

But more than 50 years on, this fight for freedom and democracy remained the **unfinished revolution** in the country. The phenomena of Edsa (People Power) 1-III were, in a way, the permutations of that big revolution still waiting to be completed. In short, unless this is addressed—the Philippines would continue to display the same kinds of symptoms regardless of which administration is in power.

Thus, contrary to arguments that the democratic consolidation in the Philippines is not an issue, I am proposing that the issue of democratic consolidation has to be revisited and



examined seriously. To begin with, let us examine what democratic consolidation actually entails. In this regard, let me highlight two points.

a) Instilling respect for political institutions. By institutions here, we refer broadly to the institutions of government (executive, legislative and the judiciary). It is certainly not enough to establish or create these institutions. What is more important is for these institutions to command respect and trust. More importantly, these institutions are the instruments of government within a state; they facilitate the adoption of a regulatory framework for accommodating varying interests within a polity. These institutions also allow for the rule of law to prevail.

Moreover, political institutions such as political parties, are important particularly when issues of political participation and representation are at stake. Hence when time for elections come, citizens could then be reassured that the people running for office are elected because of the credibility of their political parties' platforms, rather than on the strength of their personalities.

b) Ensuring that institutions are credible. It follows that good governance requires that institutions and processes allows of transparency in political decisions, accountability, participation, observance of the rule of law, equity and inclusiveness, and last but not least, effectiveness and efficiency.

Credible institutions therefore allow the country to grow out of its political culture largely defined by patron-client relationship, and remove the crippling instruments of patronage politics. Institutions enable the state to correct its political system that has been embedded in clientelism. Institutions ideally also reverse the symptoms of a weak state that has been captured by a few oligarchs that have impeded the project of social justice and distribution.

3. Whither democratic consolidation?

It is against the two features cited above where the Philippines is sorely lacking. The current state of affairs in the country point to the need for the country to have a strong state and a strong civil society. At the moment, the relationship between the two is asymmetrical. This had not and will not help any administration in power to command respect and legitimacy. Furthermore, absent strong institutions, strong leadership can only go so far. With the departure of a strong leader, particularly if he/she does not command legitimacy, the country goes back into same vicious cycle of being a weak state, with a corrupt and inefficient bureaucracy, and crippled economy.

In the study of political development, we recognised the salience of analysing state-society relations and examine the extent to which both are able to engage each other in the spirit of mutual trust and authority. In a democratic and representative system, the state (represented by its political leaders) acquires its legitimacy to rule from its people (society), in return for the leaders' bounded duty to guarantee the protection of human rights and welfare of its citizenry.

The major task of political development in the Philippines can thus be summed up in the need to consolidate its democracy through institutionalisation and building of political legitimacy. Unless these issues are addressed, the country will remain stuck in the features of



'*cacique democracy*' where only the political fiefdoms rule. The dominant characteristics of an exclusive brand of elite politics that perpetuates patronage politics have always been the bane in the Philippines' attempts at consolidating its democracy. It is this vicious pattern that have been the cause of many unresolved political conflicts, including the long standing problem with communist insurgency and the unrest in the Southern Philippines led by the Muslim separatist groups like the Muslim Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the infamous Abu Sayyaff that had alleged links with the international terrorist group of Osama bin Laden.

Thus, despite the success of a relatively peaceful 2004 presidential election, the problems plaguing elections remained. Among these included:

1. *The preponderance of money politics.* According to one report, a congressional campaign can cost a candidate as much as \$500,000. The high cost however can apparently be recouped once in power since the business of money politics starts to roll with the state being used as a cash cow by elected politicians through the usage of pork-barrel funds; and where loans, franchises, tax exemptions and subsidies are just among the many strategies one could employ to build up one's coffers.

2. *Personalities rather than political parties.* One of the main highlights of the May elections was the candidacy of another action movie star³, Fernando Poe Jr, who ran against the incumbent Gloria Arroyo, a US trained economist and daughter of former president Diosdado Macapagal. Equally interesting was the candidacy of a born-again televangelist Eduardo Villanueva. The ease within which these personalities enter politics has been perceived as a weakness in the nature of political parties in the country that focuses more on personalities rather than on coherent political platforms. It could also be misunderstood as a signal of lack of political maturity on the part of voters. But movie personalities often become strong electoral contenders, especially among the poor constituencies as they are often regarded as more politically sensitive to the plight of the poor, as opposed to the 'traditional' politicians who are regarded as only interested in plundering the state rather than working for the interest of their constituencies.

3. *Persistence/Allegations of electoral fraud.* Electoral results are often contested on the ground of massive cheating and vote buying. An informal survey conducted in the Philippine capital, Manila, revealed a widespread popular perception that the May presidential election result was stolen from the popular movie star, Fernando Poe. To date, Poe is still contesting the results, alleging manipulation of results by the administration and influential Catholic church's bias toward Arroyo.

In post-election Philippines, one sees the country once again entering a period of renewed uncertainty and heightened vulnerability. To be sure, the challenges facing the country remain formidable.

However, against these lamentations of lack of progress toward democratic consolidation and a weak state, there are however positive trends that must be captured that could signal a move beyond toward political reforms. While these are preliminary observations, they are nevertheless worthy of mention if only to suggest that there is movement toward possible change. Among these new trends are:

³ Former president Joseph Estrada who was overthrown in Philippine People Power II was also an action star hero.



- a) The entry of new political actors in the political arena: It is interesting to note that in the country's northern province of Isabela, the victory of a paraplegic newscaster over an entrenched political dynasty signals the opening up political space to new breed of political actors who may not be beholden to clientelist/patronage type of political system.
- b) New voting patterns: The several surveys conducted on electoral trends reflect that voting patterns in the country could in fact, be changing, i.e. a poor vote is thinking vote. Regardless of the strength of personalities over political parties, the emerging trend toward more informed political choices could reflect the development of a more politically mature population that is not easily swayed by vote-buying and personality driven candidates.
- c) Establishment of institution of help govern electoral systems: The establishment of the civil society watchdog—National Citizens Movement for Free Elections(NAMFREL) has been a strong push for working toward a cleaner and freer elections. And, so far the credibility of NAMFREL has been sustained over the years.
- d) Impact of overseas voters: For the first time in Philippine election history, overseas Filipinos were now allowed to cast their votes. This could bring about significant changes in the nature of electoral results since this cohort of voters are known to demand for political reform and efficient government.

To conclude, it is important to note that the trends cited above would still need to be carefully examined to assess the extent to which these lend toward democratic consolidation. Nevertheless, one would also need to appreciate the fact that while the Philippines is beset by a slew of structural problems, the project of democratic consolidation is an on-going work in progress. Indeed, it is only by sustaining work toward this goal that the Philippines—like the rest of the international community—can persuasively demonstrate that democracy does matter.