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Philippines

Brief Description of the Current Philippine Situation Before the Elections - Part 1

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On 9 May, the Philippines will have its local and national elections. It will be the fifth presidential elections since the Marcos dictatorial regime was ousted from power.

Introduction

More than fifty four millions (54,363,844) registered voters (including the 1.4 millions Overseas Filipino Workers) will elect the seventeen thousand two hundred (17,200) national and local officials this coming May 9, 2016.

The current President and current Vice-President, 12 senators (out of 24), 285 members of the House of Representatives (including 50 members of the Party List), 81 governors, 144 city mayors and the same number for city vice mayors, 2,980 municipal mayors and vice mayors, 1 each for governor and vice governor of the Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), 24 ARMM Regional Legislative Assembly members, 772 Sangguniang Panlalawigan members (provincial council), 1610 Sangguniang Panglunsod members (city council) and 11,000 members of Sangguniang Bayan (municipal council) will mostly vacate their positions on or before June 30, 2016. There are politicians who have not yet reached the maximum allowable terms who can still be re-elected in the same positions.

There are also politicians (542) who are sure to occupy the same positions because they do not have opponents – simply said there is no elections in their areas. Prominently among those 542 officials without opponents are the daughter of the late dictator Marcos – Imee Marcos – running for Governor in Ilocos and the former President Gloria M. Arroyo – who is running for a seat in the House of Representatives in Pampanga. These are the two areas in the country where the number of voters are among the biggest – and therefore those who are running for national positions and who want to win in these vote-rich areas – have to deal with people like Imee Marcos and Gloria M. Arroyo and their allies.

The May 9, 2016 elections is significant in the sense that it will be an end of the term of a second Aquino presidency (2010-2016) whose election has been mainly due to the peoples' reaction to a very unpopular presidency of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. His mother (President Corazon C. Aquino) was literally put into power by peoples' uprising against the Marcos dictatorship-a very hated and unpopular president in the country's history. Such electoral process has come full circle. The two Aquino presidencies have greatly failed to institutionalize the democratic principles and peoples' power which put them into office.

Coming from the bourgeois landlord elite of the country, the people do not expect the Aquino-Conjuangco regime to institute a system change but at least they could have started some democratic reforms and pro-people programs and policies. The first Aquino Presidency had greatly failed in making sure that Marcos and his family were made to answer their crimes against the Filipinos. She (Corazon C. Aquino) has even agreed to honor all the debts of the country (including those incurred by the Marcos cronies) by putting this commitment in the country's 1987 Constitution (30% of the national budget is yearly and automatically set aside for debt payment). The most glaring failure of the first Aquino Presidency is to recover the more than 10 billion dollars stolen by the Marcos family from the impoverished people of the country. The same stolen wealth and money have been used to hire high caliber lawyers by the Marcoses to fight the legal blocks and processes thrown along their way in getting back to power. But more than anything else, the first Aquino presidency had failed to prosecute the Marcoses and made them accountable to the human rights violations they committed against the more than seventy thousand (70,000) human rights victims. It has been thirty years now since the Marcos dictatorship was ousted and yet the victims have yet to

see justice.

At present, under the watch of the second Aquino presidency, the Marcoses have not only recovered the Ilocos areas but also consolidated them to become one of the formidable electoral block in the country. This block together with other allies is about to put another Marcos and namesake of the dictator into a heart bit away from the Presidency. Senator Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. is currently running for Vice President of the country and in fact leading in all the poll surveys conducted before the May 9, 2016 elections.

The two Aquino Presidencies have gravely failed to institute genuine and truly democratic land reform-again a clear manifestation of their haciendero hearts and interests.

They (the Aquinos) have been credited in allowing the bourgeoisie and the elite (of the pre-dictatorial period to gain back and in fact control some of the strategic businesses in the country. The Lopezes, Ayalas and Aboitez among others have been building and consolidating their business empires during the Aquino administrations.

In the case of Mindanao, the current Aquino government has shown the same historical failure as his mother did to the dictator and his family by not acting decisively on the case of the 2009 Maguindanao massacre. The 2009 massacre of 52 people, including more than 30 journalists was the single biggest election related crime in the country and even in the world involving journalists. Obtaining justice to the massacre victims became one of the bottle cries of the Aquino in 2010 presidency campaign.

This single deadly event is very significant because it is the result of giving special favors and accommodation of then President Gloria Arroyo of a Maguindanao influential clan who became a powerful warlord in the island. Before November 23, 2009 Maguindanao Massacre the clan had been committing murders and crimes basically with impunity. The clan had total control of the ruling political machinery of then President Arroyo in the area as well as the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the Philippine National Police (PNP).

The second Aquino presidency has again failed to continuously prosecute and consummate the hearing of cases against the Ampatuans (the clan behind the Maguindanao Massacre). It is in effect, continuing the policy of impunity of the Arroyo government. Peoples in Mindanao will pay a high price to this historical inaction. At present, the Ampatuans have almost recovered their old power and glory in some areas in Mindanao. They have maintained their arsenal of weaponry and the money they have accumulated during the Arroyo administration. They are participating in the May 2016 elections in the second district of the province of Maguindanao.

The appreciation of this context will help people to understand the current national political landscape and the actual conduct of politicians in their campaigns to win in May 9, 2016 elections. Will there be changes in the conduct of the electoral campaigns of the candidates? Will the political platforms or the personalitycentered campaign styles prevail during these elections? What will be the role of the political-electoral parties and their machineries in these electoral activities?

The Presidentiables and Their Machineries

Five politicians are vying for the 2016 Presidency. The four are running under political parties while one is running as an independent candidate. The current Vice President is running as President under the United Nationalist Alliance (UNA) – a multi-party electoral alliance replacing the former United Nationalist Opposition (UNO) which was launched as a single political party on July 1, 2015 by Vice President Jejomar Binay for his Presidential candidacy in 2016. The

alliance is composed of Bagumbayan-Volunteers, Pwersa ng Masang Pilipino (PMP) ER Ejercito wing, Nationalist Peoples' Coalition (NPC) Mark Conjuangco wing and LAKAS-CMD and affiliated local parties.

Currently, UNA has three members in the Senate (out of 24) and 8 members in the House of Representatives (out of 282 in the 16th Congress). UNA has a nationwide machinery with local candidates running under its name.

The second candidate is Davao Mayor Rodrigo Duterte who is the last candidate to file his candidacy for the presidency and he is running under the Partido Demokratiko Pilipino (PDP). Senator Aquilino "Koko" Pimentel is the current President of the party while Mayor Rodrigo "Rody" Duterte is its national chairman. The Secretary General of the party is Martin Diño who had filed first for the presidency while Duterte was not yet ready and who was later substituted by Duterte as the party's candidate in the last minute of filing and substituting candidates for presidency. PDP members are mainly coming from Mindanao especially after the resignation of Vice President Jejomar Binay as its party chairman.

The third Presidential Candidate is Senator Grace Poe who is running under the Partido Galing at Puso (Wisdom and Empathy). It is an umbrella coalition party between support groups for the 2016 presidential candidacy of Senator Grace Poe and the 2016 Philippine Senate election line up. The Wisdom and Empathy Party is composed mostly of non-affiliated supporters of Poe and a current Senator of the Philippines and her vice presidential running mate, Francis "Chiz" Escudero) and supporters from the Nationalist Peoples' Coalition (NPC). Basically, they (Poe and Escudero) are running as independent candidates. They are building their party machineries while campaigning.

The fourth candidate is Mar Roxas who is running under the Koalisyon ng Daang Matuwid (Coalition of the Straight Path). It is the umbrella of the administration-backed presidential and senatorial line up for 2016 Philippine elections. It is composed of mostly supporters of former Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) Secretary Mar Roxas who announced his presidential bid after the endorsement of President Benigno Aquino III during the event dubbed as a "Gathering of Friends" at the historical Club Filipino on July 13, 2015. It is the remnant of the Team Pinoy which was formed by the Liberal Party along with Akbayan (Citizens' Action Party), Laban ng Demokratikong Pilipino, Nationalista Party, Nationalist Peoples' Coalition and the National Unity Party as its coalition members.

The fifth Presidential Candidate is Senator Miriam Santiago of the People's Reform Party (PRP). It is a center-left political party founded in April 12, 1991 of former Agrarian Reform Secretary Miriam Santiago for her bid as President in the 1992 Presidential elections. In this 2016 elections, Santiago invited Senator Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos to be her running mate (Vice President). The PRP Senatorial Candidates are all guests' candidates – who principally run in the other political parties.

The Conduct of the elections

As the election day is nearing the conduct of the Presidential campaigns has intensified and has reached its lowest level. Daily the voters and their families have been hearing and witnessing in the tri-media the below the belt styles of campaigning of the presidential candidates and their followers.

Earlier on, when the current Vice President Jejomar Binay announced his bid for presidency he has been subject of various attacks. The most notable one is the Senate investigation conducted by senatorial allies of both the administration and opposition who have been planning to put their own candidates. For more than one year, Vice President Binay and his family have been subjected on issues of corruption heard live in national television. It is no wonder then that from being number one in the earlier poll surveys, the Vice President has been tailing two other candidates in the current poll surveys.

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It has become a trend then, that whoever tops and is the leading candidate in poll survey he or she will always be subjected to different issues and attacks by those tailing in the said surveys. This is a big advantage for those candidates who have not been on the top's spots notably Mar Roxas-the administration candidate and Miriam Santiago who have never been in serious campaigning because she is under medication for cancer.

The three candidates who have been topping the poll surveys namely Binay, Poe and Duterte have been the center of attacks and harassments mainly coming from the followers/supporters of the administration and for those candidates who are not on the top of the surveys. So after Binay, Poe has been attacked on the issues about her citizenship and number of years of stay to qualify for the Presidency. These attacks have persisted even after the Supreme Court has declared that Poe is qualified to run as President. At present, it is Mayor Duterte who has been leading the latest survey and therefore everybody has attacked him from all angles.

In the last three to four surveys conducted nationwide, the Mayor (Duterte) led all other presidential candidates. In fact, many has expected him (Duterte) to drop his rating after his famous or infamous statement on rape case of an Australian woman missionary in the 1989 hostage case in Davao City. But the opposite is happening – the mayor has still topped the latest survey (conducted after his rape statement).

Seemingly, there are reasons for this phenomenon. The people or the voters for that matter are so fed up with all the bad news that they have been exposed that they simply want a change. The rape case for instance happened when people have heard about the killings, intensifying drug issues, lawlessness and the inability of the current Aquino government to act and prevent such crimes and implement basic social services. Many people have reacted especially to the failure of the government and its agencies to give adequate and timely assistance to the victims (mostly farmers) of the El Niño or the long drought which affected many farmers in the rural areas.

It can be observed that Duterte has been consistently showing in his campaigns and speeches a decisive and determine leader to act on the most pressing problems like drugs and corruption. He shows that he is not bothered by bureaucracies and even legal processes when solving these heinous crimes. People want to see immediate action to solve these crimes. Duterte promises to deliver solutions in the first three to six months of his presidency. And the people seem (as shown in the latest survey April 12-17) to approve such method and swiftness in solving such crimes. On the other hand, it might also be that Duterte's statement on the rape case has not yet reached and digested by the people/voters so that it has not yet manifested in the result of the poll surveys.

Surely this phenomenon is affecting the administration-backed candidate Mar Roxas. He has been tailing in all the surveys and some administration supporters in the provinces have continue to jump ship (Governor Joey Salceda of Albay has declared his support to Grace Poe) and the Almarios in Davao Oriental have supported Duterte and not Mar Roxas).

This trend is showing the voters' preference of the hard line approach or even dictatorial tendencies of leadership styles as personified by Duterte. This is indeed bringing some serious concerns. This is even alarming when one sees that in the vice presidential candidates – Senator Bongbong Marcos – the son of the former dictator Marcos – is also leading in the poll surveys for the vice presidency. What is even worst is that the voting preferences for both Presidency and Vice-presidency is coming from the voters from the people in Metro Manila and the upper and middle classes of the country. And to think that it has just been thirty years (this year), that the people had ousted the Marcos dictatorship. Today, all signs have shown that the dictatorship in another form is coming back and this is having chilling effects on the democratic and progressive forces in the country. A Duterte and Bongbong Marcos presidency and vice presidency respectively is becoming a reality.

It is simply that the people is so desperate of the current miserable situation that they are ready to cling and believe to any promise (solving these problems in three to six months) that people like Duterte and the younger Marcos have

promised them.

Despite the administration's difficulties in running its campaigns on the slogan of the continuity of the "matuwid and daan" (The Right Path), it has tried other stocks and reserves in its arsenal to hit a surprise to its opponents.

The administration has been maximizing its resources (finances and influence in the other branches and agencies in the government) to hit or debase its opponents. For instance, the Ombudsman and the Sandigang Bayan not mentioning the Department of Justice, the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) and the Bureau of Internal Revenue (BIR) to file cases against well known supporters of other Presidential candidates. Not a few governors and local officials have been unseated to their offices during the crucial periods of the campaigns. This method of campaigning is running the elections by eliminating the opponents and their supporters before the actual elections. The areas affected by this method is the vote-rich provinces like Laguna (the suspended governor is a well known Binay supporter, The Mayor of Cebu city- the highest registered number of voters in the country but also a known Binay supporter was also recently suspended by the DILG.

At this stage of the campaign, funds have been seen changing hands among local politicians identified to the administration, to put hold and control their supporters and machineries while the elections are nearing. This is an attempt to prevent them from jumping ship and prevent a bandwagon effect of the leading trend of other candidates. The funds are coming from the national leadership of the ruling coalition.

It is not circumstantial that drugs-related crime and kidnappings have intensified during this period. This is obviously to raise funds for the elections. Everybody has been fully aware that in the coming election funds coming from drugs related activities are flooding the communities especially in those areas where people are experiencing extreme miseries and hardship because of the long drought. Buying votes have reached Php 5000 per family. This is known as narcopolitics – using drug money to influence the results of the national and local elections. The drug lords have supported candidates who can protect their interests.

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