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2010: Signs of hope and disquiet

A priority agenda of the new government is to restore faith in government by mending the institutions that were undermined by the outgoing regime.

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As the country opens a new year in its political life, one explores for a breath of hope and optimism. But optimism is borne out of one's ability to grapple with the problems that lie ahead and events that will yet unfold. The roots of these realities – others call it uncertainties – took shape in the year just past and even farther back.

Much awaited in the political sphere is the holding of the synchronized national and local elections on May 10. In the elections, some 16,655 elective positions are up for grabs by at least 90,000 candidates with about 48 million voters expected to troop to the polls.

Three major concerns foreshadow some electoral woes, however. First, is the absence of clear and well-articulated platforms that distinguish each presidential aspirant from the others. Second, is the incumbent President's undisguised greed to stay in power – still at the helm of it – through a different track. And third, are the slips and blunders involving the preparations for the first fully-automated national elections.

Four months to the polls, the average voter remains undecided on who to vote for in the presidential race. Although this puzzle may be untangled a few weeks before the election, such voting behavior is likely due to an increasing belief that whatever is the outcome of the presidential race makes no difference anymore either to public governance or to people's lives.

The presidential aspirants should show a lucid electoral platform and prove convincingly that their candidacy is driven not just by the mere replacement of a highly-discredited president but by the need to institute meaningful reform. They should show their

record of performance and be transparent about their financial, political, and other ties. Given, however, the candidates' penchant to wage their campaign with a media publicity of sights and sounds without substance there is not much hope in this area.

Inconsequential

Just the same, whoever will be elected as new president will likely be inconsequential or his powers shared by the outgoing president in a new arrangement. Once elected as a congresswoman in her home province of Pampanga, Gloria M. Arroyo is expected to get the House speakership en route to the post of Prime Minister via a charter change. There is, however, a big IF to this scenario: Arroyo must ensure that the still dominant Kampi-Lakas-CMD coalition will retain the majority in the lower House as well as the LGUs in the provinces.

Meantime, there are major gridlocks to the holding of the automated elections. Twenty of these have been singled out by the Automated Election System (AES) Watch, a new formation of citizens' groups and individuals which is monitoring the Commission on Elections (Comelec) preparations. Among the urgent concerns are the system's lack of transparency (absence of voters' verifiability), possible transmission failures, lack of a geographical information system (GIS), and loss of the BEIs' right to generate their own passwords. The Comelec failed to submit its report to Congress on January 4 on the state of preparedness for the coming elections. Without adequate safeguards installed and fraud machineries checked, the likelihood of automated cheating or failure of election is high. The political

repercussions are grave enough as to raise alarms that the elections will likely result in a constitutional crisis leading to a holdover presidency.

Assuming elections will push through with manageable glitches, the challenge confronting the new president – and his government – is formidable. A priority agenda is to restore faith in government by mending the institutions that were undermined by the incumbent president including the lack of accountability, a corruption-ridden bureaucracy, abuse of presidential power, an ineffective justice system, human rights violations, and so on. The restoration of accountability should begin with the litigation of the sitting president's alleged wrongdoings and constitutional transgressions.

Political clans

Having been for decades the backbone of the country's traditional political infrastructure, the system of political dynasties and its worst form – warlordism with a culture of impunity that is exemplified by the

Maguindanao massacre – will stay for awhile. Political clans will continue their hold on Congress, the executive office, local governments, and even the judiciary. Their hegemony will, however, be steadily challenged by change- and reform-oriented political forces in both chambers of Congress and in the LGUs.

If there's anything new that deserves much anticipation in 2010, it is the role to be played by reform-minded, cause-oriented groups and the “civil society” movement. Reforms that respond meaningfully to the demands for effective leadership and governance as well as wide-ranging social and economic reforms need a more assertive social movement. Reforms cannot be left in the hands of traditional politics not only because the powers that be have failed miserably to provide an effective, results-oriented leadership but also because they have been precisely the source of the country's political, social, and economic disintegration.

Transformation can only be actualized by those long marginalized not only from political participation but also from social and economic opportunities.

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