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MOMENT OF TRUTH Voters go to the polls on May 9

Begun in 1992 when Imelda R. Marcos ran for the presidency, the Marcoses' climb back to power went steadily for 30 years. Imelda R. Marcos, 91, the widow of deposed president Ferdinand E. Marcos, lost her bid in 1992 but ran again in 1998 only to withdraw. But she was elected four times to the lower House. Similarly, her other children occupied elective positions including the governorship of the home province, Ilocos Norte, as well as Senate seats for the only son, Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr., 64, and sister Imee Marcos, 66, who is separated from husband-businessman Tommy Manotoc. The Marcos family's stratagem to regain the presidency that was lost after Ferdinand E. Marcos's ouster by military-civilian uprising in 1986 appears close to being clinched by Marcos, Jr. (Bongbong Marcos or BBM) in the coming May 9 elections.

Since 1947, the Philippines has had two political dynasties in control of the presidency – Corazon C. Aquino (1986-1992) and son Benigno SA Aquino II (2010-2016); Diosdado P. Macapagal (1961-1965) and daughter Gloria M. Arroyo (2001-2010). If Bongbong Marcos wins on May 9 the Marcoses will then have two presidents likewise.

With just a few days left before the moment of truth (May 9), the latest Pulse Asia survey on presidential preference (April 16-21) indicates a possible win by Marcos, Jr., with 56% of survey respondents choosing him compared with his closest rival, Vice President Leni Robredo, whose April rating of 23% against her previous 24% rating in March remains statistically unchanged. Surprisingly, third placer Manila Mayor Isko Moreno was lodged out by former senator Manny Pacquiao who got 7% against the former's 4%, a drop from 5% in a preceding survey. Sen. Panfilo Lacson remained at the fifth slot with 2%. Marcos, Jr.'s teammate, Davao City Mayor Inday Sara Duterte, topped the vice-presidential race survey with 55% with Senate President Tito Sotto, Lacson's vice-presidential tandem, a far second at 18%.

Results of past credible surveys tracking the presidential race including the 2016 elections have served as a gauge for predicting election outcomes. While initially a tailender, Duterte topped later surveys shortly before the actual election that year – and won as predicted. Assuming the April 16-21 surveys to be accurate, the May 9 elections will give the country's top elective positions to Marcos, Jr. and Sara Duterte.

The March 17-21 Pulse Asia survey also showed Marcos, Jr. receiving the highest positive preferential responses from Class D with 56% compared to Robredo's 25%. Based on approximations, a candidate preferred by Class D normally has the highest chance of winning since at least 70% of voters belong to this class while Class ABC comprises about 10-12% and Class E about 15 to 18%.



If the bleak narratives of Marcos rule particularly during martial law (1972-1986) which saw massive rights violations, crony corruption, and economic bankruptcy were to be decisive in determining the outcome of the surveys, then BBM would have taken a beating in the ratings. But more than half of survey respondents (as well as actual voters) are 40 years old and below with no direct experience of the Marcos years (total term, 20 years). Similarly, the historical truths of the Marcos dictatorship have not been taught adequately in schools leaving many youths who now constitute more than 50% of the electorate uninformed about what is considered the dark years of Marcos rule.

Conversely, many who had lived under martial law were dissatisfied with post-Marcos administrations for failing to keep their promises of making their lives better after acting as major players in the ouster of Marcos. Leading this pack were Cory Aquino and son Benigno SA Aquino II who were leaders of the Liberal Party (LP). The LP has been headed by Vice President Leni Robredo who chose to run as “Independent” with a new color image of “pink” in place of the discredited “yellow” of the LP. In fairness, the Estrada and Macapagal-Arroyo administrations were said to have worse records. Many people who loath being under the LPs again now see BBM as some “pie in the sky”.

Other factors should play to explain the ascendancy of Marcos, Jr. First, the continuing popularity of President Duterte has worked to the advantage of BBM who is paired with Sara. People who like Duterte and daughter Sara are also more likely to vote for BBM especially since Duterte has not formally repudiated the former in spite of his earlier expressions of disapprobation of BBM’s candidacy for the presidency. Second, is the extreme division of the broad opposition bloc against a unified, single administration team. Third, is the huge financial and organizational resources of the BBM-Sara team especially with the support of the most powerful dynasties and oligarchs.

In recent years, the relatively young population born after 1986 when Marcos was ousted from power have become vulnerable to a media strategy of propaganda and disinformation funded by the Marcos wealth which had been reportedly plundered from the nation’s wealth.

Social media strategy: “historical revisionism”

The image-reengineering of the Marcoses was first reported by an online publication, *Rappler*, whose executive editor, Maria Ressa, was recently awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. *Rappler* claims it learned of a “Marcos family image” rebranding in 2019 saying that Marcos, Jr. had approached the London-based political data company, Cambridge Analytica, to undertake said project. (The information came from a former employee-turned-whistleblower, Brittany Kaiser.) The Cambridge Analytica CEO, Alexander Nix, saw it as a financial opportunity. The job was ramped up sometime 2014 when the Marcos family decided for BBM to run for the presidency, the first step of which was a vice-presidential run in 2016. In her book, *Targeted*, Kaiser described the Marcoses’ efforts to rebrand their family as historical revisionism dished out by online data.



Thus the rebranding strategy used an extensive network of fictitious Facebook pages managed by groups to alter the public perception of the Marcos family. This was done by either downplaying or outrightly denying kleptocracy and human rights violations during the martial law years. In addition, the Marcos patriarch's achievements were exaggerated while critics, rivals, and mainstream media were vilified. New fan pages, *Rappler* said, were continued after Marcos Jr.'s loss in the 2016 vice presidential derby. Another former Cambridge employee, Christopher Wylie, said the Philippines became the company's "petri dish" (laboratory) to test its techniques. (Cambridge also helped craft the social media strategy of Duterte for the presidential race that year.)

The Cambridge Analytica project was also confirmed by the *Washington Post* in a separate report in April 2022 saying that the company also used Facebook, Wikipedia, YouTube, and TikTok – which have millions of users in the Philippines – to spread key messages debunking Marcos as a "corrupt kleptocrat" but one who brought glory, wealth, and infrastructure to his country.

The *Rappler* expose' was denied in 2020 by Marcos' spokesman Vic Rodriguez and branded the report as "patently fake, false, and misleading."

If the rebranding stories are true, many of the votes that could go to Marcos, Jr. on May 9 can be said to be the result of social media manipulation. Social media manipulation is a new election strategy that will continue to nuance future elections even as the country's electoral process has long been dominated by political dynasties. In the current election, the electoral process is further weakened by institutional infirmities like the lack of a genuine political party system, a highly-politicized Commission on Elections (Comelec), and the lack of an informed electorate. Personalities dwarf the need for issue-based politics that would go a long way toward creating an enlightened electorate.

Comelec and Smartmatic

As of April, all members of the Comelec are appointed by the sitting president, Rodrigo R. Duterte, which casts doubt on the credibility of the poll body to ensure a level playing field in the May 9 elections. Duterte's political party, PDP-Laban (Cusi wing) had thrown its support behind the BBM-Duterte tandem. Aside from PDP-Laban (Cusi wing), the tandem has the formidable support of two former presidents, Joseph E. Estrada and Gloria M. Arroyo, and former Senate President Juan Ponce Enrile. The religious group, Iglesia ni Cristo (INC), which claims to represent 2M votes has also thrown its support behind Marcos, Jr.

On the other hand, the foreign company, Smartmatic, has been the Comelec's preferred source of the automated election system (AES) since 2010 despite persistent systemic flaws rooted in the overall lack of transparency in the automated process, including the lack of a thorough source code review, non-compliance with key legal requirements like digital signatures for members of the Electoral Board, prompt Random Manual Audit of elections returns, and public safeguards for the secure digital cards (SDs). A few weeks before the actual elections some concrete



problems have already surfaced including the printing of ballots without the presence of representatives from political parties and electoral watchdogs, compromised pre-shaded ballots in the case of the ongoing voting at OFW voting centers abroad, and data hacking by Smartmatic personnel. Smartmatic is now under probe by the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) and Senate for alleged security breaches.

Filipinos trooping to the precinct polls on May 9 may be unaware about the perennial vulnerabilities of the Comelec-contracted Smartmatic let alone whether their votes will be counted correctly. #