

## **PANEL 35: MODERNIZING DEMOCRACY: The Philippine Experience**

**Short reading paper of ROMULO M. TUAZON**

### **Participant No. 3\* - Political Clans Remain Dominant: Prospects of Modernizing Democracy**

Abstract: The modernization of democracy in the Philippines should lead to ensuring equal opportunities in public service for the majority of Filipinos who have long been denied effective representation in government. Past elections did not break the dominance of political clans in all levels of elective positions; in fact in the last May 2010 automated elections their number increased. Key to the perpetuation of political dynasties is the use of money, private armed groups, weaknesses within the Comelec bureaucracy, and the politicized state security forces.

(\*Please note that the original Participant 3 – Cleto R. Villacorta III – cannot make it to the conference, thus Romulo M. Tuazon, formerly Participant 4, will be taking over as No. 3. Prof. Lilia Q. Santiago from the University of Hawaii has been added to Panel 35.)

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In 2010, proponents and state election authorities automated the elections in the Philippines strongly guided by a belief that the use of modern technology will modernize democracy in the country. Studies on the election automation done by the Center for People Empowerment in Governance (CenPEG), other research groups, and citizens' election watchdogs cautioned about the risks, vulnerabilities, and limitations – technical, management, and legal - of the poll technology to be used. Post-election studies done by the same groups contradicted the early claims of “astounding success” for the automated election – which was later downgraded to “qualified success” – by poll authorities and the foreign technology supplier. Despite an admission that the technology system indeed had program errors and deficiencies, the country's election administrator – Commission on Elections (or Comelec) – decided to use the same technology for the 2013 mid-term elections.

From the very start of the project to automate Philippine elections (1992), Comelec officials, legislators, and many politicians alike were one in thinking that the use of modern technology will modernize the election process and, thus, democracy itself. Strong was their premise that the introduction of modern technology is the key to election modernization which, in turn, will modernize Philippine democracy. Under the manual election system – which had been in use since general elections were introduced under U.S. colonial rule in 1907 – election fraud or cheating was endemic and the process itself was slow. Modern technology, it was believed, will put an end to these obstacles to democracy. The priority objective was to minimize if not totally prevent “human intervention” by speeding up the electoral process. While in fact only a few countries were using full election automation, the political hard sale was that the Philippines should catch up with the rest of the world where most countries were already computerizing their elections.

In varying degrees, democracy in the Philippines is described by many scholars and observers as oligarchic or elitist. A recent book published by the UNDP and authored by the country's leading political science scholars concludes that 26 years after the fall of the Marcos dictatorship democracy in the Philippines remains elusive, in the words of one of them, as a “pseudo democracy.” The

hegemony of the oligarchy in Philippine politics dates back to the Spanish colonial regime with its consolidation in contemporary times configured by 20<sup>th</sup> century colonialism where colonial management was pursued in collaboration with the local elite. Thus, for more than 100 years – particularly more than 60 years after independence - until today government leadership has been shaped by the political hegemony of family dynasties. Today, elite dominance remains well-entrenched in Congress, the executive office, and the local government units (LGUs). Despite election automation, the results of the May 2010 polls reveal the further expansion and consolidation of political clans throughout the country with the use of another route – the Party-list system.

Oligarchic rule in the Philippines is entrenched by the unequal distribution of wealth and resources between a small minority of elite and the broad majority of marginalized classes. Recent studies have shown that wealth accords advantage to elite dynasties in the monopoly of elective positions – a trend indicated in all elections that transpired for the past 100 years. Wealth and the staying power of the elite enables the latter to bankroll the operations of election machineries to ensure their victory including vote buying, influence over election officials, private armed groups, and other forms of fraud. The system of political dynasties and patron-client ties helps nurture a traditional political culture that continues to characterize elections as basically a race of political personalities (name recall, e.g.) thus discouraging the development of a vibrant political party system with the exception of a few Party-list groups and coalitions that advocate comprehensive social, economic, and political reforms. Efforts toward the de-monopolization of political dynasties such as the legislation of anti-dynasty bills as provided for in the constitution have been futile.

The management and administration of elections is also highly-politicized. Comelec tends to compromise its mandate as a constitutional, independent, and non-party election administrator given that its chairman and members are appointed by the president. Its trust and integrity is further tainted by corruption. Peace and security of elections is also adversely affected by the partisan role played by military and police forces as evidenced by their conduct during the 2004 presidential contest (when generals were implicated to fraud that gave the presidency to Gloria M. Arroyo) and a culture of impunity perpetrated against progressive Party-list groups since the Party-list elections began in 1998.

When social and political scientists, IT experts, and citizens' watch groups faced a wall of exclusiveness by Comelec in their efforts to adopt the minimum requirements of transparency, security, and auditability it became clear that the project of poll automation lacked the modernizing elements it needed. When the election results revealed the increase in the number of political dynasties occupying government seats, it also showed the overarching predominance of traditional holders of power suggesting that no amount of modern technology infused could alter the power equation in the Philippines. The increase in the number of election protests in 2010 – with many cases alleging electronic fraud - compared with those in previous manual elections raised a question whether poll automation succumbed to – or was rendered powerless in the face of - traditional fraud. To illustrate, in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) where the new technology was pilot-tested in the 2008 regional polls the casting of ballots by election cheats was expedited by local poll inspectors out of feudal kinship or partisanship.

The authors and promoters of election automation were flawed in believing that such use of modern technology will modernize Philippine democracy. This mistake is quite consistent with historical errors where foreign models of modernization and development were introduced in the Philippines only to result in the aggravation of poverty and widening the gaps in income distribution, among others. Election is an instrumental process toward achieving democracy. The building of democracy goes hand in hand with the process of wealth equalization, developing a viable political party system, and the de-monopolization of clan politics, among other requirements. The process of democratization requires a transformation that enables the transfer of power from the elites to the people. Unless these imperatives are addressed – and this will take generations – the simplistic use of modern election technology will only affirm the caveat: “Who controls the technology controls the vote.”