

## **SHORT PAPER / ICOPHIL**

### **Panel Title: MODERNIZING DEMOCRACY: The Philippine Experience**

#### **Participant #1 - The Hegemony of the Culture of Traditional Politics in Philippine Elections**

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Abstract: Election in the Philippines is highly influenced by a culture of traditional politics (i.e., personality-oriented campaign, political parties run by families, vote buying) thus making the political exercise vulnerable to fraud with poor public enlightenment on issues. The adoption of election modernization was not congruent with the level of technology awareness of the electorate more so as the automated election system process lacked public transparency, adequate voter education, and other requirements. This paper will show that given the current political culture in the Philippines technological upgrading will be very slow and mechanical; it may contribute to change but only externally. More decisive is the transformative change in social and political conditions toward bringing about modernization in the electoral process.

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Philippine elections have been characterized as a personality or popularity contest given a weak political party system and being constantly marred by election overspending, violence, coercion, corruption, and cheating. Under the 1987 Constitution, elections are held every three years. Once every six years, synchronized national and local elections are held for national (starting with the presidency) and local elections (municipalities and cities) where about 16,500 elective positions are contested with more than 100,000 candidates in the race. The 2010 election had 51 million registered voters. Elections are also held for the conflict-ridden Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) and barangay elections for 42,000 villages.

The use of computer technology – the Automated Election System (AES) – in 2008 when it was first pilot tested in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) in southern Philippines – and nationwide in the May 2010 synchronized elections provided no exception or break to the traditional electoral process. As in past manual elections, there were widespread reports of cheating, overspending, violence, and coercion. The incidents triggered tensions in several provinces prompting the poll administrator – Commission on Elections (Comelec) – to either suspend the elections or hold special polls later. The last elections yielded two unprecedented incidents: massive voter disenfranchisement with, according to independent estimates, a low 60 percent voter turnout and an increase in the number of election protests compared with past manual elections.

A level playing field in the election – a requisite to democracy – was unseen, despite the use of modern technology. Elite politicians from the country's well-entrenched political dynasties dominated the elections in all levels from the presidency down to the municipal mayors and councilors. Elected president was Benigno S. C. Aquino III, son of the late President Corazon C. Aquino. Aquino III succeeded Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, daughter of the late President Diosdado P. Macapagal. All the country's 11 presidents since the end of World War II in 1946 belonged to political clans. Despite a dismal record in Congress, Aquino III became the last-minute choice of the old Liberal Party after the death of his mother – said to be the icon of democracy after the fall of

the Marcos dictatorship in 1986 – catapulted once more the name “Aquino” to national prominence, a name-recall asset for election victory.

Philippine election is transactional politics in a society often characterized by the unequal distribution of wealth with only a few families owning the bulk of income and an economy dependent on foreign market. The concentration of wealth in a few families – from land ownership, to extraction of resources, strategic industries and services, and trade – has been in hegemony for over a century now. From these families have risen the wielders of political power with some 250 political dynasties lording over the country’s state institutions led by the executive department and Congress. Election allows these holders of political power to invest upon themselves the legitimate authority to govern – even if this process has consistently favored the dynasties on account of their wealth advantage, easy access to campaign funds, and capacity to manipulate election results through corrupt practices and other means.

As a form of transactional politics, election is generally a trade-off between the politicians and financial supporters, with winnability providing the edge in the solicitation of campaign kitty. In return for their financial support, suppliers of campaign money – business, political patrons, illicit business such as gambling, sometimes even kidnap-for-ransom and robbery gangs – are paid back in terms of projects, favorable business transactions and licenses, protection from prosecution, and the like. Being essentially a race between antagonistic political clans makes it inevitable for many politicians to engage in vote buying, provisions of money for the delivery of votes, tampering of registration, and all types of fraud ranging from manipulating election returns (ERs), certificates of canvassing (COCs), to pay-offs for election inspectors, buying out poll watchers, and coercion and violence. Where the reign of political dynasties is most entrenched particularly in depressed provinces ruled by political warlords the level of election violence is most intense involving private armed groups (PAGs) and hired killers, among them minors.

Politicians maintain networks of patronage for vote buying with operations most active in poor communities where this systemic practice is often attended by coercion. The supply and demand rises in every election. Traded in this patron-client bilateral relationship are cash or material goods instead of a credible political platform. This way, election perpetuates oligarchic power and has never been a mechanism for accountability.

The political culture that lies underneath this traditional electoral process is set in the framework of a weak state in the Philippines. The presidency is a powerful institution where patronage politics (e.g., pork barrel allocations) is used to influence Congress, local governments, and, to a degree, the judiciary. This relationship weakens the accountability mechanism and check-and-balance system in government. Moreover, the electoral process being essentially a competition for power among political clans and its outcome determined largely by popularity and money hinders the development of a real political party system where divergent political platforms are the basis for informed choice among the electorate.

The current political culture and fragile state are not congruent with modern technology that seeks to democratize the election. Until the political culture undergoes a transformation that includes a level playing field in elections, equalization of political participation, an informed choice on

alternative programs, and a fairly developed technological awareness among voters the computerization of elections will fail to enhance democracy.

Today, the process of democratization in the Philippines is borne out of a continuing social conflict involving the elites and a broad cross-section of society striving for comprehensive social, economic, and political reform. At the heart of this historical conflict is the struggle of marginalized classes for equal representation in law-making, legislation, and local governance decision-making. Aside from the Bill of Rights, the 1987 Constitution upholds the people's sovereign rights for a voice in government such as proportional representation in Congress through a Partylist system. But the roadmap that would ensure the people's sovereign representation is rough and bumpy – and mainly procedural - so that even the Party-list system has been co-opted by the elite to enhance their dominance in Congress.

(This presentation will be supported by 2-3 case studies in Bicol region in southern Luzon and Biliran in the Visayas and, in the final paper, with references, bibliography, and theoretical discussion.)