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The 2022 Philippine Elections Primer: A Democratic Citizenship Perspective

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February 8 marked the official start of the campaign period for the upcoming 2022 Philippine National Elections. The presidential and vice-presidential elections will take place alongside elections for Congress and local governments on May 9, 2022. During election day, the President and Vice-President are elected separately based on the first-past-the-post voting rule.

The May 9 elections are seen by experts as a critical juncture in the history of Southeast Asia's oldest democracy. The upcoming democratic contest will look to replace populist strongman President Rodrigo Duterte. While Duterte is facing allegations of massive corruption related to the government's COVID-19 response and an impending International Criminal Court investigation on his violent war on drugs, he still enjoys a high approval rating. His rating is still the highest compared to other previous outgoing Philippine presidents (CNN Philippines 2022). The President's high approval will allow him to leverage political support to influence the trajectory of the upcoming elections even though he has been quiet about whom to endorse as his "official" successor (Teehankee 2022).

The 2022 national elections are seen as a decision to salvage or wipe out the 1986 People Power narrative. Observers have noted that the Duterte presidency paved the way for the "start of the end" of the post-Epifanio de los Santos Avenue (EDSA) People Power Revolution regime. Activists argue that the outgoing President implemented policies that weakened liberal democratic institutions and shrunk civic spaces (Rama 2018). Also, the rise and popularity of Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr, son of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos who was ironically ousted by the 1986 uprising, as the leading contender for the presidency signals how this election serves as a referendum on the EDSA democratization project.

The Contenders

Bongbong Marcos Jr., former Senator and former Governor of Ilocos Norte, has been the consistent frontrunner of the 2022 presidential derby based on recently released polls. Running under the platform for "national unity", he holds an unapologetic stance on the grave faults of political repression, violence, and mass corruption during his father's regime. This is tied to the continuous

praise of the supposed golden years under the Marcos dictatorship invoking both political nostalgia and vindication among his supporters. He is running beside Vice Presidential candidate, Davao City Mayor Sara Duterte who is the daughter of President Duterte. Mayor Duterte has also a strong showing in recent polls. The Marcos-Duterte team up is perceived as an alliance of strong political dynasts brokered by traditional political machines of ex-presidents and families (Remitio 2021). Voters who elected President Duterte in the previous election are expected to support this tandem albeit that the current President has not endorsed any candidate for president.

Marcos Jr. is currently facing several electoral disqualification petitions filed by citizen groups mostly composed of human rights victims during the Marcos martial law era.¹ While the cases have been recently dismissed by the Commission on Elections (COMELEC), observers expect that the final resolution of the cases will go the distance and be ruled at higher courts (Patag 2022). Moreover, the Marcos-Duterte ticket has been criticized for not participating in debates and public forums organized by major media organizations (The Straits Times 2022).

Looking to defeat Marcos Jr. is Vice President Maria Leonor “Leni” Robredo. Consistently placing second on recent surveys, Robredo seeks to replicate her 2016 feat when she defeated Marcos Jr. for the vice presidency. The incumbent Vice President is running on a platform of good governance and the restoration of liberal democratic institutions. Her sustained opposition of the Duterte administration and the criticism of the potential comeback of the Marcoses has earned her both the ire of Duterte supporters and increasingly aggressive support from members of her own camp. Former senior government technocrats, civil society organizations, professional associations, and business groups have expressed their support for Robredo (CNN Philippines 2022).

First term City of Manila Mayor Francisco “Isko” Moreno Domagoso has also joined the presidential derby. Moreno, a former movie/ television actor who was raised in the slums of Manila is pushing to replicate the success of Manila’s social development programs for the whole country. Armed with his long-standing experience in local government, bravado, youth, and populism, the Manila local chief executive’s campaign is focused on achieving public service delivery results albeit having ambivalent positions about controversial political issues related to Duterte and the Marcoses. Recently, a faction of President Duterte’s supporters has expressed their endorsement of Moreno (Domingo 2022).

Incumbent senator and world boxing legend, Emmanuel “Manny” Pacquiao has also sought the presidency. Capitalizing on his rags-to-success story, the senator is running on a pro-poor platform reminiscent of former president Estrada’s brand. Pacquiao’s views on religion and social mores have earned mass criticism from the more liberal sectors and the LGBTQ community, thus marking him as a clear candidate for social conservatives. Yet his vocal opposition to Duterte’s policies including pro-China policies has placed him outside the latter’s circle.

Another hopeful who threw his hat in the ring is incumbent Senator Panfilo “Ping” Lacson. The former police chief renews his old anti-crime and clean government platform. His strong track record in the Senate substantiates his consistent anti-corruption stance while his record as police chief provides the base for a tough stance on crime. However, some critics have dug up his role in human rights violations during the martial law era of the Marcos dictatorship (McCoy 2011).

Branding himself as the genuine alternative is veteran labor union leader Leodegario “Ka Leody” de Guzman. Ka Leody is campaigning for social democratic advocacies ranging from labor

¹ Marcos Jr. is currently facing disqualification cases borne out of failure to file income tax from 1982 to 1985.

rights and social welfare to various forms of economic redistribution through expanded social programs. This is the first time since 1935 that the Philippine Left has a presidential candidate for the national elections.

A backdrop to the May democratic contest is the threat of COVID-19. Although the COMELEC had laid out health and safety guidelines, civil society organizations and other electoral stakeholders have been clamoring for better effective communications and sound risk planning including the implementation of more simulation exercises (NAMFREL 2021). Multistakeholder and inclusive approaches to planning and implementing COVID-19 related policies have also been advocated. Although the Philippines generally exhibits high voter turnouts in every election cycle relative to other democracies, threats and risks of potential COVID-19 surges serve as a real challenge to electoral administration (Hecita et al 2022).

With Marcos Jr. enjoying a formidable lead in all the pre-election surveys conducted since last year, observers have been arguing that there is a need to have a “united opposition” or one candidate to stop the son of the late dictator from winning the presidency (Tomacruz 2022). While there have been informal meetings and talks between the non-Marcos camps, the talks did not eventually result in the endorsement of a “united opposition” candidate (Luna 2022). The supposed disunity of the opposition may suggest the erosion of the old administration-opposition dichotomy that has defined electoral politics in the Philippines. Duterte’s endorsement is still pending and earlier attempts to form a united opposition have broken down into a controversy. This illustrates how the admin-opposition dichotomy has been rendered into both practical irrelevance and a frustrating ideal for the upcoming elections. Contributory to this phenomenon are the fundamental weaknesses of the party system in the country. Political parties in the Philippines are limited to being vehicles of the elite to gain political power rather than having a fundamental role in articulating citizens’ interests and being accountable to the general polity. Elections are seen as a means to access power, private accumulation, and rent-seeking (Hutchcroft 1991). The party system is so weak that even the ruling party that President Duterte belongs to, does not have an official presidential candidate (Cupin 2021). In a strategic move to attract more allies outside the political opposition, Vice President Robredo who is known as a staunch critic of the Duterte administration is running for President as an independent candidate (Manahan 2021).

The 2022 Elections as an Issue of Democratic Citizenship

With surveys showing a small number of undecided voters (Pulse Asia 2021), it appears that the Filipino citizenry has reached a level of political “maturity” if one defines it as the solidification of political values, attitudes, and convictions. Contrary to public discourse, Filipinos are neither apathetic nor immature (lacking any firm conviction) (Borja 2017). Instead, the question shifts to where this maturation is leading (e.g. illiberal outcomes). Nevertheless, public discourse has yet to reflect the shift.

Another defining characteristic of the 2022 National Elections is an aggravation of Duterte’s aggressive politics at the level of citizens. This is tied with both the blossoming of Marcos apologetics and conspiracy theorizing and equally perceived illiberal and elitist tendencies among opposition supporters who are trying to revive the discourse of “bobotante” (stupid voters). Furthermore, it is

plausible to argue that the political values underpinning the 2022 National Elections are bound together by nostalgia. On one hand, this nostalgia is for a now-defunct liberal democratic regime. On the other, it is for a supposed golden age that Marcos apologists have defended despite all the facts against it; conjuring conspiracy theories or legalist arguments to justify a once repressed sense of vindictiveness which have been widely circulated via social media such as YouTube and Facebook (Soriano and Gaw 2021). One camp seeks to avenge the collapse of the EDSA regime under the guise of restoration and normalcy. The other seeks to re-assert the legitimacy of a deposed dictator and all their personal attachments to it. Overall, the political moral fibers that have been opened back in 2016 are now in full display and aggravated by a sense of desperation from the camps involved.

What matters is that the question of elections, and democratization in general, is ultimately the question of citizenship. How do Filipinos see themselves as political actors? Will the upcoming elections affect their political identity? If yes, to what extent? If no, then what are the psycho-political conditions that would remain constant? The toxicity of daily social media activities is but the tip of an iceberg since only a minority of the citizenry is active online. Underneath, as have been alluded to earlier, lies illiberal political tendencies tied with disempowerment (Borja 2018).

Filipinos have a clear attachment with representative institutions. However, they don't usually share other liberal ideals. Consequently, they are leader-centric by giving primacy to personal leadership and the executive branch over institutions and the ideal balance of power, respectively. Many are also intolerant, equating plurality with disorder while approving government regulation over the circulation of ideas in society. Alongside illiberal tendencies are sustained levels of disempowerment among ordinary Filipinos (Borja 2020). Though they are interested in politics and see it as important, they do not see themselves as capable of influencing public affairs after elections. They also deem themselves as incapable of fully understanding politics even if they are exposed to it daily through media. Consequently, they hardly participate in politics other than elections despite their habitual enthusiasm to vote.

Pathways to Democratic Renewal: Going Beyond Elections

The prospects of democratization in the Philippines seem bleak with mass disempowerment and resurgent illiberalism among citizens, and chronic weaknesses among key liberal democratic institutions. Nevertheless, there are prospects for democratic renewal beyond contested institutions like elections and the party system. Specifically, efforts for democratization must invest more in fostering strong democratic citizenship that will enable future generations of citizens to be less reliant on representatives and traditional politicians while being closer to the policy process itself. After the elections, the progressive and democratic forces should not focus on short-term and mid-term opposition to anti-democratic forces. Instead, they must lay the foundations for the expansion and development of democratic citizenship.

Under a general civic education program, two opportune and intertwined areas can contribute much to the aforementioned goal. First is e-governance and the maximization of digital technologies to bring government and public affairs closer to citizens (Roberts and Hernandez 2017). The latter point is important since efforts on e-governance are not necessarily democratic. Second and in relation to the latter point, there must be an expansion of democratic and deliberative spaces at the local level

in order to bring citizens inside the government. Both can provide opportunities for citizens to see themselves as effective members of the polity and their local communities without being reduced to mere voters. Moreover, alongside the benefits of harnessing local knowledge and building consensus among constituents, participatory governance can provide spaces for common work and deliberation that can offset the impacts of political intolerance that have pitted citizens against each other. Overall, the prospects of democratic renewal in the Philippines are hinged on increasing the value of one's citizenship; of making Filipino citizenship substantially democratic. This is because democratic institutions are founded not merely on legislation but on civic habits. Political power can thus be redistributed in favor of ordinary citizens while remaining within legal boundaries (Barber 2003).

To conclude, citizenship lies at the heart of democratization (Schneider and Schmitter 2004). One can speak endlessly about structural, institutional, and systemic reforms. But if talk, thoughts, theory, and practice miss the essence of what democratic politics is, then one misses the entire point of democratization. In the absence of an active citizenry, ability to effectively participate in the policy process, democratization is doomed to fail while paving the way for its own reversal. ■

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