

Brief Description of the Current Philippine Situations - II - Before the Election

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The Context

It is only ten more days before the actual election in the Philippines. More surprises, political gimmicks, and circus are daily unfolding and shown to the electorates. Social media, more than ever, has played very important role in projecting and spreading issues for and against the candidates - especially - presidentiables and the vice presidentiables. Those who have seen its importance are maximizing this modern information technology. They can put up defenses against their attackers/critics and can easily demonize and demolish their opponents and winning in the pre, actual, and post elections surveys. With more than sixty percent of the electorates having easy access with the internet, social media can easily reach them and influence their decisions to elect candidates.

The candidates who have enough resource can always gain the upper-hand in influencing the minds of the voters through information technology. This comparative advantage is game changer in the close electoral contest which is happening in the country today.

The voting of the Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) thru the absentee overseas voting system (AOV) can virtually be observed from any point in the country. The very minimal voting results or participation of the OFWs (only 15% of the total registered OFW voters) has reached the country in real time. Through the internet exchanges, one would easily know that OFWs in almost all the receiving (host) countries in the world have strongly indicated their preference to vote for Mayor Rodrigo Duterte as the president. For many of them, Duterte symbolizes change and they want to express the profound dismay for the general unconcern of the corrupt government on their welfare and well being. But as of today, complains of OFWs of some irregularities of the absentee voting system have been raised. The voting receipts they got do not reflect the name of the one they voted.

In the past few days, websites of the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) have been hacked and government bodies like the National Bureau of Investigation (NBI) cannot still determine the extent of the damage. This incident is popularly called 'Comeleak'. People have strong apprehensions that the data and information stolen from the website can be used to manipulate the conduct and eventually influence the results of the elections.

Just before the second and last presidential debates (April 24) the poll surveys conducted on April 19 to 24, Mayor Duterte has continued to lead the other Presidentiables. In fact he got the highest point lead away from the second candidate (he got 33% while Grace Poe got 22%). At this stage, the presidential race has narrowed down to only four presidentiables.

I. The Importance and role of the Political and Electoral Party

The two party system which had played a very important if not decisive role in the Philippine elections in the past, is not existing anymore today. The Marcos dictatorship had succeeded in the elimination and banning the existence of a multi-party system. The dictator had built and strengthened new party-reflecting his one party system of *Kilusang Bagong Lipunan* or KBL (New Society Movement). This party faded away after the dictator was ousted. However, the Marcoses have tried to revive the KBL today. Traditional politicians have also revived the old traditional parties but they (parties) are closely connected to the individual personalities who are running for different positions in government.

When the Liberal party was revived, it was closely linked with the PNoy's presidency and when the Nationalist Party was given life again it was for Senator Manuel Villar's bid for 2010 Presidency. United Nationalist Alliance (UNA) was put up purposely for Vice President Binay's presidency. The People's Reform Party (PRP) of Senator Miriam Defensor Santiago was revived three times when she attempted to become President (1992, 1998, and 2016). Partido Demokratikong Pilipino (PDP) is the party which was used to put up Duterte's presidential bid.

The current phenomenon reveals that it is more of the personalities rather than the parties who plays an important role in the country's elections. As the situation stands today, there are presidentiables running with vice presidentiables both coming from the different parties. The situation of the Nationalist Party is a case in point. Duterte's vice president is Senator Allan Peter Cayetano (Nationalist Party). Miriam Defensor's tandem is Senator Bong-bong Marcos (Nationalist Party) and Senator Trillanes, another member of the Nationalist party is running for vice president as an independent. The NP does not have decision whom to support for the president and vice president respectively so as to maintain coherence and continue to stay afloat as one party. Individual NP members can support their preferred candidates.

Traditional politicians are very pragmatic. In one party they can support different candidates, expecting their candidates to also support them or their preferred candidates in return. They approach politics as always addition and not division. Principled politicians can never survive in this kind of set-up or they can also end-up as traditional politicians.

One of the most glaring phenomenon which has developed in the country's politics is dynasty. Members of the family are running politics in all levels in government. It is ordinary to see a situation where the father (husband) is the mayor and his wife or sons or daughter is the vice mayor. More than 50% of the members of the Congress are related either by blood or by marriage. But it will be the family interests that matter rather than Party politics. Hence, it is also ordinary to see members of the family belonging to different political parties just to maintain the family interests in a given territory. Their party affiliation is just tactical and only for the purpose of getting all the resources and support extended by different political parties to their political base. They (families) can even agree to divide the votes to different parties but maintain their power in their political base. More often, they do not have opponents in their political bailiwicks.

One of the worst practice of political dynasty is in the Party List system. The 1987 Constitution has tried to correct the country's elite politics especially in Congress by introducing reform in its composition. The framers of the Constitution has instituted the marginalized sectors' representation in this legislative body by making sure that 20% of the composition is elected by the unrepresented and marginalized sectors of the country. The first application of this system was in 1998 national and local elections. Marginalized sectors put up their own Partylists and elect their nominees to represent their Party in Congress. The Party which gets the 2% of the total votes casted for the Partylist will have a seat in Congress (4%-2 representatives and 6%- will get 3 seats and the

maximum number of seats a Party-list can get in Congress). The Partylist system was faithfully practiced in spirit and in substance during the first two elections (1998 and 2001). Later, the ruling elite got wind of this system and they found out the loopholes in the law to make them participate in the Party list election – stating that one does not need to be coming from the marginalized sectors in order to represent the latter. The Supreme Court decided in favor of the elite’s interpretation so as to accommodate at that time the son of the former President (Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo) who claimed to represent the security guards, drivers, etc. So from then on the elite of the country began to represent the marginalized and control the Party list system in congress.

The worst thing is that when political dynasty is combined with the Party list system, one will find that family of political elite is controlling the partylist nominees. The number one nominee is the father, the second nominee is the mother, and the rest of the nominees are the sons and daughters or their relatives. At present, there are more millionaires in the Party list representatives than from those in the district representatives (percentage wise).

And the worst still to happen is, in the same Constitution, it is stated that there will be a ban to the political dynasty in the country. It will be the congress which will define the implementing principles and guidelines for the specific law. With all the elites controlling the 80% of the Congress and have now gotten control of the remaining 20% of the seats intended for the unrepresented marginalized sectors, one can only ask who will ban whom. It is just like expecting a genuine land reform implemented by landlords in Congress.

The ruling Party (coalition of Liberal Party, Akbayan, etc) has the advantage today because the current President is with Liberal party (LP) and in the past, many, if not all politicians from all levels would jump ship and become members of the ruling party. So today, the LP has 69 out of 81 governors in the country. But since the elections this year will include the election of a new President, this advantage of the equity of the incumbent will matter less because it will depend on the popularity and winnability of candidates. For instance, if the standard bearer of LP is not showing positively well in the poll ratings/surveys then it will be expected to see politicians from this party to jump ship to the most popular candidate and his/her Party as the actual elections is approaching. Unless of course, the allies of the ruling coalition could create their own surveying institution to make their standard bearer top their own make believe survey.

The situation at present as described by the poll surveys and observations on the ground is such that the four presidentiables and vice presidentiables are in a very tight race just a few days remaining in the campaign period. Some of them are considered statistically tied for a period. The lead taken by Mayor Duterte and Senator Bong-bong Marcos for president and vice president respectively can still change in the next few days. All other candidates, their allies and attack dogs will throw any garbage at the ones leading the surveys. It will become dirtier as the election day is nearing.

Clearly, it can be seen that the respondents of the poll surveys reflected only the sentiments of around 80% (43.52 millions out of 54.4 millions registered voter) on the actual day when the survey was conducted. This means that the four sets of candidates are not very far from each other’s lead because the poll ratings range from 33% to 18%. The remaining 20% (10.9 M) of the undecided voters or have not participated in the survey’s will really make a big difference. The number of almost eleven (11) million voters even if only 50% will participate in the elections will be almost 5-6 million votes. Definitely, these voters can make or unmake a President or a Vice President for that matter.

A big consideration here is given, that is, if those who preferred a candidate in the popular surveys will not change their choice of president or vice president up to the election day. In any case, to attract those undecided to vote for candidates, there is a need for machineries and

workable coalitions and alliances. Effective machineries can really make sure that the undecided or those who will make changes in their choices of candidates will vote for those with organized human as well as financial and logistical resources.

The popularity of Mayor Rodrigo Duterte and Senator Grace Poe as shown in the latest poll surveys does not or will not automatically be translated into actual votes in the election day. The two (Duterte and Poe) are known to have weak machineries and less resources. They are building and strengthening their machineries as they are campaigning. There will always be problems with translating the spontaneous and popular sentiments of the people into warm bodies and actual votes for a certain candidate.

Candidates with strong and widespread machineries and alliances will definitely have big comparative advantage over the other candidates with weaker machineries and lesser resources.

Social media has played a very important role for swaying options and choices. Projecting the popularity of candidates to enhance the voters awareness on the candidate's platform will try to fill in the gaps of weak machineries and lesser resource. But they definitely could not replace the role of actual machineries especially in the actual voting. And more than ever, machineries can always play a very important role in protecting the candidates' votes during the actual and post election period.

II. The role of Demographic Location of Voters and the choice of Candidates

The five presidential candidates and their running-mates belong to the different parts/provinces of the country. It has been a practice that if a presidential candidate is from Luzon, most likely his running-mate should be coming from either Visayas or Mindanao. The reason is simple, they want to cover the whole archipelagic country in terms of the spread and reach of their campaigns and captured voters. It will be a natural advantage for the candidates to naturally spread their followers and allies from the north to south and from the east to the western parts of the country.

Vice President Binay who is from Makati and his running mate Senator Gregorio Honasan is coming from Southern Tagalog area. The tandem has a natural weakness in the Visayas and Mindanao areas. They try to reach other areas through other machineries like fraternities and other civic and religious organizations. Binay is very strong with his fraternity and the Association of Boy scouts in the Philippines by maintaining its presidency for more than a decade.

Mayor Duterte is a far away leader in the poll surveys in Mindanao. He also gets much support from the Cebuano speaking islands in the visayas, e.g. Cebu, Bohol, part of Negros and Samar. Senator Allan Peter Cayetano's influence can bring them votes in Metro Manila and Southern Luzon.

Senator Grace Poe is very strong in Metro Manila and the Ilonggo speaking provinces in the visayas and Mindanao. Senator Chiz Escudero, her running mate is strong in Metro Manila as well as parts of the provinces of Southern Tagalog.

Former Secretary Mar Roxas, aside from being promoted by the loyalists of the Administration, he is very strong in Metro Manila and the Ilonggo speaking in the Visayan islands like Negros and Iloilo. His running mate Representative Leni Robredo is very strong in the Bicol areas and the women workers, advocates, and women voters.

Senator Miriam Defensor Santiago is strong in the Ilonggo speaking provinces in the Visayas and is influential with the student voters. Her running mate Senator Bongbong Marcos has maintained his strong base with the Ilocano voters. He is projecting a strong support from the solid North.

It has been known that voters would always prefer candidates from their places and when they belong to the same ethnolinguistic groupings. The Ilonggos will tend to vote for the Ilonggo candidates, the Ilocanos will vote for Ilocano candidate and the Cebuanos will most likely vote for a Cebuano candidate.

There should also be a considerable importance given to the endorsement and support of influential civic and religious movements and personalities. Some of these groups are known to have maintained command votes.

So it is not surprising that in the very tight race on these national and local elections, many candidates are seen visiting the houses and headquarters of these groups' personalities. These politicians are even making big donations for these groups and their movements just to get their blessings and support.

Nobody can really ascertain the difference that these religious and civic groups can make or unmake for the politicians who have sought the latter's endorsements. Most of these endorsing groups are known to make concessions and favors for their support. In short, most of the endorsement is not voluntary nor for free. Definitely this is not out of principle like the groups and movements are openly and formally endorsing these candidates because of their record on good governance and sincere commitment to serve the people and their constituencies.

The officials and the hierarchies of these civic and religious groups and movements are endorsing certain candidates in the name of their followers in exchange of favors and interests.

This is another form of elite politics in its worst form. The leaders of these groups are commanding their followers to vote for their chosen politicians.

It should be noted that the timing of the endorsements happens in the later period of the campaign. It could only mean that the leadership of these civic and religious groups and movements have already studied the voting trend and pattern as shown in the pre election poll surveys. They (civic and religious leaders) usually give their endorsements and support to the winning candidates in the surveys. And in the past, the politicians who won would also be the ones endorsed by these groups. In short, we should really have serious rethinking whether there is really what is called block or command votes.

Raymund de Silva, April 28, 2016
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