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## 26

## Election Campaigns in the Philippines

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The Philippines is often described as the loudest democracy in South-East Asia. At first glance, Philippine campaigns do indeed look like big fiestas with colorful campaign posters and singing candidates. But that's only half of the story. In reality, Philippine campaigns are a fascinating mix of traditional patronage politics and modern high-tech campaigns.

In order to comprehend Philippine campaigns, it is important to understand the country's political system, history and geography. In the 1950s, the Philippines was a more or less functioning democracy.<sup>1</sup> In 1965, Ferdinand Marcos was first elected president and after his re-election, he declared martial law and established an authoritarian regime. This regime collapsed in 1986 after the so-called People Power I, a popular uprising provoked by the murder of opposition leader Benigno Aquino. In a snap election, Aquino's widow Corazon succeeded Marcos.<sup>2</sup> A new constitution, which makes the Philippines a democratic republic following the US model, was approved. As typical in presidential systems, the head of the government, the president, is elected by direct universal suffrage for a six-year term. It is important to highlight, however, that in the Philippines the president and the vice president campaign together but—unlike in the US—are elected separately. As a result, it happened in 1992 and in 1998 that the president and the vice president were from opposing tickets. The multi-candidate system without a runoff has consigned the country to be governed by a minority president, a situation that has not helped the stabilization of the Philippine democracy.<sup>3</sup>

The Philippine Congress has a bicameral structure. Following the US model, it consists of a House of Representatives and a Senate. There are 219 members of the House who are elected for three-year terms in single-member constituencies. Then, there is a varying number of members elected through a party-list system, whose total cannot exceed 20% of the total number of members of Congress. The party-list seats in the House (in the present Congress there are twenty-one such seats) are thought to help represent the disadvantaged sectors of the society such as labor, the urban poor or the indigenous cultural communities.<sup>4</sup> As a result, each voter can cast two votes for Congress: a vote for one of the candidates in his or her district and a second vote for a party, with many voters not using their vote for the party list.

The Senate has twenty-four members who are elected for a six-year term with half of them being elected every three years. A senator can run for one re-election, then needs to wait for three years before he or she can run again for another two terms. Unlike in the US, however, Philippine senators are elected at large, which has important consequences on campaigns. Every election cycle, there are about twenty to twenty-five nationwide (senatorial) campaigns going on.

Philippine politics are personality- and candidate-centered and as a result, parties are fairly weak.<sup>5</sup> Similar to the situation in many Latin American countries, Philippine parties are more like electoral platforms and network organizations rather than programmatic associations of politicians with a similar political ideology. In terms of structuring the political space, the polarization around the president is in fact more important than the parties. Political players are either for or against the president; hence they belong to the administration or opposition camp.

The most basic unit of Philippine politics is the family where the wife of the candidate is often handling the campaign finances. Especially in the provinces, elections have a feudal touch where a few family clans compete against each other. This said, some of the main parties are the Christian Democratic *Lakas*, the Liberal Party (LP), the conservative Nationalist People's Coalition and the *Laban ng Demokratikong Pilipino* (LDP) (Struggle for Democratic Filipinos). *Akbayan* as well as *Bayan Muna* are leftist parties of socialist inspiration (and therefore do not compare with European social democratic labor parties). In fact, the communist party and the labor movement in general is a special case and subject of important previous research.<sup>6</sup> In short, the left played an important role during the People Power Revolution but then missed integration into the political system. To an important degree, the left remained an armed, revolutionary force and as a result, a mass social democratic party as there is in Europe and in some Latin American countries such as Brazil never developed. As a result, the re-distribution of wealth is not really an issue in Philippine politics the way it is in countries where such mass social democratic parties did develop.

Party switching is rampant in the Philippines. As an example, while presidential candidate Joseph Estrada won a clear victory in 1998, his allies won only about 20% of the congressional seats. Within a few weeks after the election, however, enough legislators switched so as to give Estrada a majority.<sup>7</sup> The weakness of the parties has an important impact on campaigns. In an environment with weak parties and a volatile public opinion, any politician with popularity and money can build a campaign organization.<sup>8</sup>

Logistics is a major challenge in a country that consists of more than 7,000 islands(!) and that counts eighty-eight million people. The islands are often divided into three major groups, namely Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao, but many of them are also extremely small. The national language is Tagalog, a Malay language, which is however not understood in many parts of the country. Local dialects such as Cebuano in Cebu, Visayas in Mindanao but also Ilongo, Bicolano or Ilocano are quite important. English is de facto the language of business but as far as the broader electorate is concerned, communication has to be in the local dialect. Though the Philippines was once the richest country of Asia after Japan, it is today officially classified as a developing country and one of the poorest in the region. It is still predominantly agricultural and a major source of exported labor. In recent years however, the administration of President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo has been very successful in stabilizing the budget and attracting foreign investments. As a result, the economy has been continuously growing and the country has become a major destination of business process outsourcing.

What contributes to the description of the Philippines as the loudest democracy in South-East Asia, is the sheer amount of offices that are elected by universal suffrage. In addition to the president, the vice-president, the 250 members of Congress and the twenty-four senators, the elected powers include the governors and vice-governors of the eighty-one provinces as well as thousands of mayors and vice-mayors. Finally, the legislative power of the cities (the city councilors) and of the province (the provincial board members) are also elected by universal suffrage and at large.<sup>9</sup> While the Philippines is not a federal state (a transfer to a federal system has recently been debated), local elections have a long tradition in this country. As in many other countries, Philippine local government has gained in power and political importance during the past years.<sup>10</sup>

The quality and the consolidation of the Philippine democracy have been largely debated in previous research.<sup>11</sup> While democracy has been formally re-introduced after People Power I, the country has still some major problems including rampant corruption and activity of communist insurgents as well as Muslim separatists.<sup>12</sup> The latter one is subject of an important amount of research such as for example the studies about Islamic Mindanao offered by Thomas M. McKenna and Nathan G. Quimpo.<sup>13</sup> Further, previous research has also discussed the fact that the Philippine political system is still largely dominated by the elite. Many members of Congress, for example, belong to the old rich elite.<sup>14</sup> It is also sometimes debated to what degree the military—especially the younger generals—are devoted to democracy. Presidents since People Power I have indeed survived numerous coup attempts.<sup>15</sup>

Putting the Philippine democracy in comparative perspective, Mark R. Thompson concludes in a study that the Philippines is off the list of endangered democracies.<sup>16</sup> Other authors and observers go into the same direction and note that Philippine elections are more than episodes of vote buying.<sup>17</sup> Of course, the attempt of vote buying is (still) omnipresent. The simple fact that many politicians spend a third of their campaign budget on election day might be suspicious in this respect. Most Philippine voters have experienced attempts of vote buying and, of course, many voters take the offered money. But, who they really vote for on election day is another story.

While irregularities exist, the recent elections again offer several examples of underdog candidates winning against well-organized and financed political clans. In the province of Pampanga, Eduardo “Among Ed” Tongol Panlilio, a Catholic priest won an uphill fight against two well-entrenched clans. Grace M. Padaca, a former journalist and polio victim won re-election as governor of Isabela beating a powerful family clan for the second time in a row. The same holds true at the national level. During the 2007 Senate elections, two imprisoned military coup leaders made it to the winning top twelve. Pedro Laylo Jr and Carijane Dayag-Laylo come to a similar conclusion in an analysis of the 1998 presidential election.<sup>18</sup> Beyond the impact of family clans, regional and ethnic cleavages, the authors of this study found that the image of the main candidates had a significant impact on the vote. While their operationalization of the concept “image” is quite superficial (largely defined as trust and other positive personal qualities), the general conclusion (that there is more to electoral success than vote buying) is nevertheless important.

Philippine campaigners often talk about the concepts of *free market votes* and *command votes*, which are indeed helpful to comprehend Philippine elections. *Free market votes* are won through campaigning using ads, billboards, image and speeches. *Command votes*, on the other hand, are votes that local leaders deliver in exchange for patronage, pork barrel or other favors. This second kind of campaigning is often called *local machinery* in the Philippine campaign jargon. Most politicians have local leaders on their payroll. They are paid an allowance for each week of the campaign. In exchange, they wear the t-shirt of the candidate, go from fiesta to fiesta and let everybody know how great the candidate is. As television becomes more important, however, *machinery* is becoming less important. As a rule of thumb, it can be said that the more local the office a candidate is running for, and the more rural the district, the more important are the *command votes*. On the other hand, the higher the office and the more urban the district, the more important are the *free market votes*.

With regard to the consolidation of democracy, it is also important to mention that the Philippines has a vibrant civil society with thousands of non-governmental organizations that are active for the disadvantaged sectors of the society.<sup>19</sup> The country also has probably the freest press in the region where most television and radio stations are privately owned. The Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility (CMFR) regularly monitors the news coverage of presidential candidates.<sup>20</sup> For the last presidential election, when Fernando Poe Jr challenged incumbent president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, the CMFR study noted that there was barely an incumbency advantage or challenger disadvantage in terms of air time or news coverage. This being

said, what Fritz Plasser calls *merchandizing journalism* is frequent especially at the local level.<sup>21</sup> The concept refers to the idea of politicians paying journalists for (positive) news coverage. Sometimes, candidates negotiate packages where candidates are offered interviews and coverage in exchange for and together with a certain amount of time buy.<sup>22</sup>

Religious faith is very important in Philippine culture.<sup>23</sup> More than 80% of Filipinos are Roman Catholic, while 5% are Muslim (who are located in Mindanao, the southern island of the country). Similar to Catholic Latin American countries such as Brazil, evangelical churches are on the rise in the Philippines. Religion and the Catholic Church in particular are important and powerful in Philippine politics. The Catholic Church firmly opposes birth control, which is one of the reasons explaining why the Philippines has one of the fastest growing populations in the world. This has important implications for the election campaigns. Since half of the voters are below the age of thirty-five, it is crucial for every candidate to court the youth. During the People Power Revolution, which ended the authoritarian regime of President Marcos, the Catholic Church played an extremely important role.<sup>24</sup> According to Samuel P. Huntington, Jaime Cardinal Sin may have played a more powerful role in bringing about the end of a regime than any other Catholic leader since the seventeenth century.<sup>25</sup> Cardinal Sin negotiated the arrangements that led to a united opposition ticket in the snap elections of February 7, 1986. He was further engaged in the election campaign and when Marcos tried to manipulate the election, Cardinal Sin used the church organization and the church radio station to mobilize the population.

This said, there are also limitations to the political influence of the church. During the 1998 presidential election campaign, the church clearly let voters know that it was opposing the election of movie actor Joseph Estrada; he still won in a landslide. Hofman makes an interesting point in this respect, comparing the influence of the church in Brazil, the Philippines and Kenya, concluding that in these cases under authoritarian rule, “the church became the primary channel of political opposition and became a surrogate of the interests of broader civil society.”<sup>26</sup> Later when the political space opened up, the influence of the church became more selective. In all three cases, the churches were more successful in influencing constitutional reforms, a more restricted and contained process than highly partisan and politicized presidential elections, such as the election of Estrada in 1998.

In addition to the Catholic Church, there are other religious groups that play an important political role. The *El Shaddai* prayer movement and especially *Iglesia ni Cristo* (Church of Christ) are said to deliver the votes of their members in bloc.<sup>27</sup> In addition to the church, it is important to highlight that women played an important role in democratization in Asia.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, over the past decade and a half, women have led successful popular uprisings against dictators in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Pakistan and the Philippines. The female leaders were widows, wives or daughters of political martyrs and continued the cause of their male relatives. As a result, it is no surprise that women are more prominent as office-holders in the Philippines than in many other countries.<sup>29</sup>

Philippine election campaigns are festive occasions. During the campaign, candidates sing and dance, play jingles, bring singers and dancers to rallies, use nicknames and create colorful gimmicks. They are often described as candidate-centered popularity contests with name recognition being extremely important.<sup>30</sup> To understand the reason for this, it is important to highlight a unique feature of the Philippine electoral system: voters themselves have to write in the names of the candidates they select for each post.<sup>31</sup> This means that a voter is required to write (and remember) more than twenty names on election day. As a result, a candidate needs to appear on television and/or tour the provinces months (if not years) in advance of the election. It is therefore also no surprise that actors and other celebrities, who bring universal awareness to the table, have often been successful in Philippine elections.<sup>32</sup> However, it seems that in post-Estrada politics, celebrities have lost some of their appeal. During the 2007 elections, famous actor Cesar

Montano and star boxer Manny Pacquiao both lost their respective bids for Senate and Congress badly.

The 2004 presidential and senatorial election was a turning point in Philippine election campaigns. It was the first election that was held under the "Fair Election Practices Act," which allowed political television advertising. While a relatively new campaign tool in the Philippines, political ads have changed campaigns fundamentally and are now very important in Philippine campaigns.<sup>33</sup> During the last presidential election campaign, the main candidates spent roughly half of their campaign budget on advertising. Candidates who know how to use the new tool, can further influence an already volatile public opinion. This is exactly what happened during the 2004 and 2007 elections: candidates who were completely unknown or have already been written off had excellent results thanks to well-orchestrated and well-executed television campaigns. Other candidates, who early polls showed as winning, lost badly because they were on the air too late or with poor campaigns. Television networks are highly centralized in the Philippines and as a result, it is difficult to buy local advertising windows. Nevertheless, some members of Congress, mayors and even vice-mayors were already on the air during the 2007 campaigns. It is very likely that the trend for local candidates to go on television will further increase over the next few election cycles.

The new Fair Election Practices Act does not specifically prohibit negative advertising. Nevertheless, in view of the political culture and the multi-candidate and multi-party system, negative advertising might very easily backfire. Competitive or confrontational statements are seen as contrary to the Asian culture, which celebrates values such as harmony, politeness and respect. In order to fully comprehend Philippine campaign material, it is also important to highlight that the country is a "high-context culture" as compared to the "low-context culture" of the United States.<sup>34</sup> In the latter, campaigners rely on straightforward, explicit verbal messages. In the Philippines, however, where mutual respect and harmony are important cultural traits, what is said is less important than who is making a point and how things are said. In this sense, the meaning lies in the bigger environment consisting of a combination of events, relationships and images.

Other important campaign tools in addition to television—especially for local campaigns—are billboards and campaign posters.<sup>35</sup> In addition, the Manila Broadcasting Corp. (MBC) launched an important network of tiny radio stations with the goal of reaching every consumer and citizen at the local level.<sup>36</sup> With a radius of about six kilometers, these stations represent the most direct media link to communities and offer a precious opportunity to politicians.

Scholars and political observers are somehow split on the question whether the Internet plays an important role in Philippine campaigns or not. On the one hand, in a poor country such as the Philippines only a minority of the population has access to the Internet. As a result, it is an inadequate tool to reach the masses. On the other hand, it is true that the Internet played an important role during People Power II, the popular uprising that led to the ousting of President Joseph Estrada. The driving force behind the uprising was the more educated and Internet savvy elite and middle class. As many as 200 anti-Estrada websites and about 100 e-mail groups made it a multimedia revolt.<sup>37</sup>

Manila is often described as the text capital in the world. As a result, text messages sent via the mobile phone are an important campaign tool. During the mentioned ousting of President Joseph Estrada, more than seventy million text messages were sent during one day (compared to thirty million messages per day during Christmas break).<sup>38</sup> In fact, text messages are sometimes also preferred to diffuse negative and attack propaganda—often in the form of jokes. (See also, Chapter 20, by Julie Barko Germany and Justin Oberman, mobile phone technology and the Philippine elections.)

Going house to house and holding big rallies are also still quite important in Philippine campaigns. Especially as far as local offices are concerned, voters want to see and touch their

candidates. In this respect, an extensive study of the Institute of Philippine Culture at the Ateneo University on how poor Filipinos make their voting choices is of particular interest.<sup>39</sup> The study found, for example, that the poor are very sensitive when a politician treats them as dirty or secretly sanitizes his hands after making contact.

The importance of fundraising is very important in Philippine election campaigns.<sup>40</sup> Similar to Thailand, the Commission of Elections "COMELEC" supervises the lawful conduct of elections. Philippine election laws are indeed quite detailed and complex. For example, campaigns are limited to a certain period of time (ninety days for nationwide and forty-five days for local elections). All campaign activities have to stop one day before the election and it is prohibited to sell alcohol on election day and the day before. While the liquor ban is strictly enforced, other rules, such as the spending limits, seem to be enforced less vigorously. Election day itself is a holiday. As a result, the Philippines generally has a high turnout with about 75 to 80% of the registered voters going to the polls.<sup>41</sup> Unlike, in the US, get-out-the-vote activities are less crucial for electoral success.

In East Asia—and the same holds true for the Philippines—there are few companies that specialize exclusively in political campaigning.<sup>42</sup> (See also Chapter 27, by Christian Schafferer, on other Asian elections systems.) There are few comparable networks such as journals, professional associations or academic programs as in the United States or in Latin America. Oftentimes, journalists, columnists, businessmen, advertising executives and/or legislative staff fulfill the role of campaign operatives and political consultants in the Philippines. The declaration of martial law was not helpful for the development of campaign skills. Luz Rimban explains in an investigative report on Philippine election campaigns that this is one of the reasons why some of today's operatives trace their roots to the revolutionary, leftist movement.<sup>43</sup>

To a certain degree, public opinion research companies fulfill the role of political consultants and strategists. The country has several polling companies with Social Weather Stations (SWS), Pulse Asia, Asia Research Organization (ARO), AC Nielsen and Philippine Survey and Research Center (PSRC) being the main ones. However, many candidates rely on self-made surveys that predict the respective candidate an electoral success only to be surprised when they lose on election day. As a result of the feudal structure of politics, it is often family members who play important roles of campaign operatives—even at the presidential level.<sup>44</sup> Oftentimes, the core group of the candidate, who makes the fundamental strategic, tactical and organizational decisions, consists largely of family members and personal friends. Allied politicians frequently fulfill the role of campaign manager such as the case of Senator Vicente Sotto III, who served as campaign manager for presidential candidate Fernando Poe, Jr, in 2004.

Philippine presidents have often hired American public relations consultants and lobbying firms to polish their personal and the country's image in the US as well as to lobby US Congress.<sup>45</sup> On the other side, there is also a long history of foreigners—especially Americans—coaching Philippine politicians. In 1969, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos hired Joseph Napolitan, who had previously consulted for Presidents Kennedy and Johnson in the United States. This event marks most likely the beginning of modern international political consulting. Together with media specialist Robert Squier, Napolitan polished Marcos' image and assisted in overall campaign strategy. Since few people outside of Manila had television, radio became the most important communication tool. The campaign secured fifteen trucks, outfitted them with movie screens and projectors, and drove them from village to village.<sup>46</sup> When Corazon Aquino challenged President Ferdinand Marcos, American consultants were involved on both sides. While media consultant David Sawyer worked for Aquino, Marcos was represented by the firm of Black, Manafort, Stone & Kelly. Yvonne Chua, a journalist of the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, reports that other American political consultants such as Paul Bograd and David Sackett of the Virginia-based Tarrance Group have also worked for Philippine clients.<sup>47</sup>

It might indeed be helpful for a Philippine candidate to use public opinion research the way American political consultants use it, namely to develop a message and a campaign strategy. The power of message politics has long been under-estimated in Philippine politics. It was in fact presidential candidate Joseph Estrada in 1998 who pitched voters with a short but credible and appealing message. The entire campaign—one might say Estrada's entire political life—was an appeal to the masses, that he understands them, cares about them, that now is their time and that he will lift them out of poverty. It was concisely summarized in his campaign slogan "*Erap para sa mahirap*" (Erap—the nickname for Estrada—for the poor). While previous presidential candidates all belonged to the elite, Estrada tried to convey the impression that he was one with the poor. A good example for this was the day when Estrada filed his candidacy at the office of the Electoral Commission. In the Philippines, people use a *jeepney*, a sort of a small bus, as their most frequent transport vehicle. The day Estrada filed his candidacy, he drove and rode a *jeepney* himself and inside of the *jeepney* was his senatorial ticket. Further, the campaign had a clear strategy. While politicians normally tried to appeal to the ethno-geographic loyalties of Filipinos, Estrada's strategy was to target the poor nationwide. All the resources such as campaign funds and time of the candidate were allocated according to this strategy.

Since Estrada, several other candidates with an appealing message have successfully challenged frontrunners who only offered bland statements. Relying on unprofessional surveys, under-estimating the importance of the campaign message and a wrong allocation of resources are the three top reasons explaining why competitive candidates end up losing in Philippine elections. Successful Philippine candidates start early, build up the momentum of the unstoppable winner and find the right mix of *free market* and *command votes*. They have a simple but credible message, enough money to communicate the message and the discipline to implement the campaign plan.

## Notes

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