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Philippines

The Philippines prepare for elections

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General elections in the Philippines are scheduled for May 10, 2004.



Gloria Arroyo became president in 2001 after an impeachment trial of her predecessor Joseph Estrada. [1] Her main rival is a leading Filipino film star. Concerns for the well-being of the Philippine population seem remote from the manoeuvring of these figures meanwhile grass roots forces who have a limited access to electoral representation are also preparing for the elections, not knowing whether at the last moment president Arroyo, scenting defeat, will implement the NOEL (no elections) scenario.

Brief Introduction

The country has shifted to election mode since last year. Nothing has been spared by this "politicking" from the judicial, legislative but most especially the executive from all levels of government functionaries from the barangay (village) up to Malacanang (the Presidential Palace).

This passion for politics by public officials has been so intense that its success is gauged by the extent of the damage it has inflicted on its opponents. The incumbent officials have the "built in" advantage of having all resources of the government at their disposal while the opposition has to employ other means to withstand and counter the attacks made against them by the ruling party. One of these, which the latter has really maximized, is popularity. There have never been in the country's history elections where so many actors and actresses or TV personalities have run for government offices in all levels.

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Meanwhile, more than fifty percent (50%) of the Philippine population lives below the threshold of poverty. Social Services are almost nil. If there are services like education and health they have been created as publicity for the incumbent and not really for answering the basic needs and welfare of the population. They are even timed to be launched during elections.

And as the election fever has intensified, there has been growing restiveness among the rank and file of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). Two attempts at coups have been launched by the junior officers from the (AFP) in the last eight months. They have common issues such as protesting the use of the AFP for election purposes and using them to implement the Anti-Terrorisms hysteria in places like Mindanao.

These political developments have directly affected the economy of the country. Among its Asian neighbours it has the lowest rate of Gross Domestic Products (GDP). The Philippine currency (Peso) has been devalued many times in the last two months alone and now it has reached its lowest value in history vis-à-vis the US dollar. For a country, which is import dependent, and export oriented such a currency situation is very alarming.

Meanwhile, the progressive and the revolutionary parties and groups have been trying to maximize the situation in their own advantage. The extreme left - that is the Maoist and Stalinist Communist Party of Philippines - has been intensifying its armed offensives while other revolutionary parties have been engaged in the electoral process trying to gain a wider and stronger presence in the bourgeois electoral machine.

The Revolutionary Workers' Party-Mindanao has been strengthening its capacities in different arenas of struggle: parliamentary, electoral, international mass movements, peace and the armed struggle. It has been preparing its membership and apparatuses for effective political leadership in these fast-unfolding events in country.

The 2004 elections

The May 2004 elections are both national and local selections of candidates for the next three to six years. The people are going to put into office more than fifty thousand officials from the President down to the municipal Mayors.

The ruling class of the country will try to consolidate their ranks and will try to undo and outmanoeuvre each other on who is supposed to be in place for a period of time. The manner of campaigning has been termed as unparalleled in Philippine politics. It is worse than the pre Martial Law period. Candidates now are campaigning on the basis of popularity not programmes, cash not credibility.



Gloria Arroyo...

The candidates (presidential) have tried their best to present themselves as the most effective to implement the

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neoliberal project of globalization in the country and the more they are acceptable to their US imperialist masters the more they think they become likely to win.

Some political analysts would say that these elections are still a choice between the Arroyo government and the ousted President Estrada.

There are six qualified candidates for the President; one has just been disqualified as a nuisance candidate. But at present there are strong signs that the contest has been narrowed down to President Arroyo and the popular actor and closest friend of Estrada - Fernando Poe Junior. The incumbent government has been trying its best to disqualify Mr. Poe by raising the issue of citizenship and his being a high school drop out and so on. As we write the Supreme Court has made a decision in favour of Mr. Fernando Poe Junior. That means he is a natural born Filipino citizen. The petition for his disqualification has boomeranged on its authors (identified with the ruling party) because it has generated much publicity for the opposition's presidential candidate.



... and opponent

Mr. Fernando Poe Junior is the most popular actor in the Philippines today. He is even more popular than his closest friend and the ousted President Estrada. That is why, since he formally declared his candidacy, the camp of President Arroyo has been preparing for the worst scenario. Right now, President Arroyo has appointed two new commissioners in the Commission on Elections (in charge of counting and proclaiming the winners of elections) and retired two Estrada-appointed commissioners one year earlier than scheduled. For financial back up, the Arroyo government has just successfully moved through the Lower House that the 2004 budget will not be approved by the Congress, thus automatically re-enacting the 2003 National budget. This means that since there is a big amount of money budgeted for projects already implemented, the President through her discretionary power has the right to re-allocate and realign the budget, which will surely be used for electoral purposes.

Government insiders have been saying that, if the difference between the President and Poe's votes is around two million, they (Arroyo's supporters) can still manage to manipulate the results in their favour. But if the difference is between three to five million then it will be almost impossible. So another tactic will be employed. And this is possible by creating the NOEL scenario.

This is a "no election" situation. This would be justified by creating a war or exploding bombs, most likely in Mindanao with Abu Sayyaf and the Al-Qaeda activities or a coup d'etat by disgruntled military officers or both. Already in the past, some retired and active military officers identified with former President Ramos who openly supports Arroyo's presidency, demanded that a constitutional change should first take place before the election.

Whatever the outcome in elections or no elections, the AFP will have a decisive role. And it is very important to note that right now, even the AFP has been divided for instance thirty percent (30%) of the officers coming from the Philippine Military Academy (PMA) have been identified with Senator. Panfilo Lacson (former military general and

one of the six presidential candidates). The Revolutionary Nationalist Alliance or RAM (an organization of commissioned and non-commissioned officers) has been supporting Mr. Poe's candidacy through Senator Gringo Honasan.

Senator Lacson has also been considered as a strong presidential candidate because of his image as a no nonsense crime buster, and his anti-graft and corruption campaign slogans. Aside from the military he has strong backers from the Chinese communities in the country. He still maintains good relations with Mr. Poe's camp (both are identified with the former president Estrada) from which some would surmise that Lacson is a reserve just in case Mr. Poe is disqualified and of course no civil wars and NOEL scenario occur.

Another presidential candidate is Mr. Raul Roco, a former Senator and Education Minister of the Arroyo government. He had consistently topped the surveys in the past (but lately, he has been consistently third in the surveys after Arroyo and Poe) but he does not have the electoral machinery and resources to go through with the campaign. He has been campaigning for an alternative government where the welfare of the people will be addressed first but these are so far general statements. They do not have a clear programme against the neo-liberal programme of globalization in the country. He, just like the others, has been very careful on this matter because he might be treading on dangerous and deadly grounds and the neo-liberal gods might be angry.

Effects on the economy

When Fernando Poe Junior formally announced his candidacy for the President, the value of the peso plunged compared to the dollar. Since then it has not recovered and it even reached PhP56fi30 to 1 US dollar, the lowest in Philippine history. The Arroyo government has been quick to put the blame for such devaluation of the peso on Poe's candidacy and the latter's consistently topping of the surveys.

And to really make a point that Poe's presidency will bring worse for the economy, a survey was conducted among the members of the Makati Business Club (MBC), the country's business elite where they voted zero for Poe and gave highest score to President Arroyo. But to the ordinary masses this picture informs them that the economy, under Mrs Arroyo's government, is very unstable, because the mere prospect of her replacement is already very devastating to the country's economy. It simply means that the economic fundamentals, if indeed there are, of the country under the present government do not stand on firm ground. But the economy of the country is inseparable from Mrs Arroyo: as her campaign slogan tells us, "President Arroyo still our best hope".

Another indicator of the bad shape of the economy is the budget deficit. Last year the budget deficit was 211b or more than 25% of the national budget for the year. Now with the re-enactment of 2003 budget for 2004, it is expected that government spending will be more than it will earn from the collection of taxes. The Bureau of Internal Revenue (BIR) targeted to collect taxes in February 2004 to PhP30fi43b but it got only PhP28fi83b, a short of 5fi3%. Even the annual remittances of the Overseas Filipino workers (OFWS), which have reached almost \$7b or PhP500b (nearly fifty percent of the National budget), cannot cope with the government deficit. This will become worse with the coming elections where money will flow to buy votes or influence the voters.

"The material basis for intensification of revolutionary work is becoming more fertile"

The country's foreign debt has also been increasing because of the need to borrow money in order to fill the deficit

gap, but even more because 70% of the country's foreign debt is in dollars - therefore every time there is a devaluation of peso, the foreign debt is directly affected. And the national budget has an automatic allocation of more than 40% to the payment of interest on the foreign debt. So practically nothing is left for basic social services and the welfare of the people. With election money flooding the country, the prices of goods will definitely increase, while the wages of workers and employees have stagnated for a very long time. Such a situation will continue long after the elections.

Worse, the unemployment rate has been steadily increasing. In January 2004 it reached 11%, compared to 10.1% in October 2003, and peaked at almost 13% in July 2003. In the National Capital Region (NCR), one in five workers is unemployed. This confirms the miserable failure of President Arroyo's employment programme.

The "wait and see" attitude of the business sector (both local and foreign) has added to almost zero growth in the economic life of the country. Even the Banko Sentral ng Pilipinas (Central Bank of the Philippines) mentioned that the Portfolio Investment this month (March 2004) hit a low of \$809m compared to \$6758m in March last year. This means that both local and foreign investors have seen the uncertainties in these coming elections.

The attitude of the church, mass media and the middle forces

As the election date draws nearer, the choice for the people has narrowed to two candidates: the incumbent President Gloria M Arroyo or Fernando Poe Junior. Arroyo's campaign line is to continue her policies of the last three years (the period left by the ousted President Estrada). And that is nothing to boast about, as far as the basic masses are concerned: the social services are impoverished, the unemployment rate has increased, peace and order remain very unstable, graft and corruption have intensified - involving even the president's family etc... Fernando Poe Junior (known as the King of the Philippine Movies, and whose only qualification is that all his movies are mega hits) believes now that he should act as President of the Philippines because he has to repay his movie fans. According to him, this is the greatest performance of his life. Recently, he announced that, if elected, he would try to request a restructuring of the country's debt. Immediately trading in the market nose-dived. And his announcement was also quickly recanted by the opposition. He had stepped into dangerous political and economic minefields, and his advisers were not happy.

Both candidates are indicating their intention to continue the neo-liberal project of globalization in the country, given that Fernando Poe's economic advisers are those who advised former and deposed President Estrada.

Within this limited option, the church has to maintain its independence and call on its followers to vote according to their consciences. The retired Cardinal Sin of Manila has indirectly endorsed Raul Roco, but this does not carry much weight anymore. Like the business sector, the church has to maintain a wait and see attitude; otherwise, if they endorse an unsuccessful candidate, there might be difficult consequences for their properties and business interests. There is one presidential candidate - Brother Eddie Villanueva - who is founder of the Jesus Is Lord movement, but even the churches are showing no sign of supporting him.

The mass media, as in any other election, have been very active and obviously partisan. The big politicians have been paying large sums of money for lobbying, and to ensure publication of polls they have commissioned to claim a trend that they are ahead of other candidates. The issue of the Vice Presidency has been very decisive, since the EDSA People Power II where, by direct intervention of the people in a symbolic place like EDSA, they can change the leadership in the country. It is a sign of weak democratic institutions and an act that can be challenged constitutionally; but they can also use the Constitution to push their interest on the issue of succession.

It is in this context that the ABS-CBN - the biggest television network in the country and whose owner also controls the country's Electricity and Waterworks - has supported its own former talents for the Vice Presidency. The two Vice Presidential candidates of Arroyo and Poe are from the ABS-CBN. Talking of a win-win situation, this is a classic example from a media giant like ABS-CBN, which has other interests in vital industries in the country, including electricity, water, and real estate construction.

The middle forces have been divided. Those who want change because they are the hardest hit by the neoliberal economic policies of President Arroyo, have to choose between Poe, with no coherent economic program thus far; Raul Roco, who has at least a blueprint of his economic programme as embodied in his slogan "Alliance of Hope", but who lacks resources and machinery and certainly will not make it to the presidency; and Lacson, the retired general and currently a Senator of the Republic, who promises concrete changes in solving crime, graft and corruption, but whose background says the opposite of what he is exposing. A difficult choice indeed.

The attitude of progressive and revolutionary parties

The initial victories of some parties in the 2001 election struggles have made them strive for more positions and seats this coming election.

There are some progressive groups and parties which have given more focus to electoral reforms than others vis-a-vis the social movements; while there are others which make maximum use of electoral struggle for propaganda and resource generation.

Even the Maoist and Stalinist party - the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) - has intensified its electoral movement and created six more electoral parties. Aside from using the election as a fundraising occasion, by collecting Permit to Campaign

Fees from politicians of both the ruling party and the opposition, one can see their cadres and militants putting up political posters for their candidates. It should be noted that in the last election they entered into terms and conditions with the newly installed President Arroyo, because of their participation in EDSA II, which catapulted Arroyo into the Presidency. They were able to gather more than enough votes to get three seats in the Congress. Obviously, much of this effort in terms of recovery, expansion and consolidation came from the electoral energies they got from the 2001 election. Now they want another boost.

"Genuine workers' parties will not let this opportune moment pass without pushing through the hastening of steps for the fulfilment of the socialist project in the country"

All other underground political parties (except for one) have put up their own electoral parties and candidates. (The Marxist-Leninist Party of the Philippines or MLPP is not participating)

It is clear that everybody has been awoken to the importance of participating in bourgeois elections, after coming from very Maoist and Stalinist traditions which consider elections as derailing the path of revolutions. This situation is a new phenomenon. The perks and privileges of an elected office can help in the expansion, consolidation and even recovery of these parties. The danger of being eaten up by the reactionary system has been eclipsed by these

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advantages. It can even be observed that the one or two parties coming from the national democratic tradition have been focusing their political energies on the electoral struggle alone. Thus the social mass movements have often been subordinated to the electoral struggles.

It is obvious that these parties have all adopted the principle of "participate to win" at the expense of making political propaganda. Given the profiles of the presidential candidates, with their programmes and electability, nobody from the progressive and revolutionary groups and parties has been openly endorsing campaigning for any candidate. Lately, however, it is becoming clear that the CPP-NPA related political parties have endorsed in a very subtle manner the candidacy of Fernando Poe and his Vice Presidential candidate Loren Legarda. The reason is obvious: aside from weakening the state through a weak President, they will have access to the inner circle of the Poe Presidency, and through Legarda for the resumption of peace talks; and they can claim the bulk of the human rights victims' indemnification money from the Marcos wealth.

Everybody in these groups and parties has been aware of and preparing for the NOEL scenario. The sitting President and her government, notwithstanding her influence and control over the Commission on Elections (COMELEC), and even the Supreme Court, is consolidating her power in the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) which is clearly divided. Since last year she has been conducting loyalty checks among her Generals on the basis of loyalty assignments, and reorganizations are carried out regularly.

The threat of "terrorists", especially in vote-rich Mindanao, has been regularly claimed as the context for the NOEL scenario and the control of vote counting. Areas will be declared as hot spots, and the counting of ballots will be done in the military camps.

Even the peace talks with different revolutionary groups (CPP-NPA, MILFBIAF, RPMM-RPA, etc) have occasionally been revived for additional positive electoral points for the incumbent President. The bourgeoisie's traditional method for settling their conflicts and consolidating their ranks is no longer their sole domain. The revolutionary groups and parties are, with varying objectives and orientations, preparing themselves to participate and win in this election.

Whatever the outcome of the election, the basic flaw in the neo-liberal economic policies of globalization for the country will be more exposed. The material basis for intensification of revolutionary work is becoming more fertile. Genuine workers' parties will not let this opportune moment pass without pushing to hasten steps towards fulfilment of the socialist project in the country.

[1] For an explanation of the events around the Estrada impeachment see the article '[A view on the developments and prospects in the Philippines today](#)' in International Viewpoint No 328, February 2001.