
Filipino Elections and 'Illiberal' Democracy

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The aftermath of the Marcos dictatorship's downfall in the Philippines in 1986 has been referred to, rightly or wrongly, as a period of 're-democratization'. The Aquino government restored 'democratic space' and produced a new Constitution providing for the return of free and fair elections. On 11 May 1998, Joseph Ejercito Estrada was elected to succeed Fidel Ramos as president of the country. This essay reflects on the 1998 election season and examines how it measures up to the standards and values of a re-democratized polity.

FILIPINO DEMOCRACY HAS BEEN VARIOUSLY CHARACTERIZED or mocked by mainly Filipinos themselves as 'elitist', 'oligarchic', 'irresponsible', 'authoritarian', 'colonial', 'nominal', 'problematic', 'rambunctious', 'anarchic', 'violent', 'irrelevant', and 'meaningless', in spite of the country's long experience with liberal democratic forms. Occasionally, we hear of some grudgingly positive observations on the Philippines as a 'vibrant' or 'viable' democracy. But however negatively democracy in the Philippines has been portrayed, it remains one of the 118 current 'democracies' among 193 countries in the world comprising 54.8 percent of the international community (see Zakaria 1997).¹ In a recent provocative article, Fareed Zakaria (1997) adds another negative adjective to the many that have been heaped on the nature of democracy internationally: *illiberal*. 'From Peru to the Palestinian Authority, from Sierra Leone to Slovakia, from Pakistan to the Philippines, we see the rise of a disturbing phenomenon in international life — illiberal democracy.' We shall return to this point later.

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The Philippines elected a new president on 11 May 1998 in what could be the most bruising, mean-spirited, vicious, vitriolic, expensive, and 'star-studded' elections in the nation's political history. Surprisingly, it turned out to be basically peaceful and, compared with the 1992 elections, speedy in terms of coming out with the results. Though there were the usual 'hot spots', it was generally orderly and non-violent, in spite of earlier dire predictions of 'NoEl' (No Elections), 'FaEl' (Failure of Elections) and 'NoProc' (No Proclamation of winners). One veteran politician, who was to file his candidacy for the presidency at the last minute, went so far as to predict a military takeover 'if the widening rift between church and state worsens and the divisiveness among the political and business groups heightens the instability of the country' (Cabacungan 1998). Similarly, the media had speculated on various scenarios, some apocalyptic, under which such failure of elections could occur, ranging from 'the Mindanao Agenda' to strike action on the part of public school teachers without whom elections could not be conducted. Earlier, the country came to the brink of 'People Power II' as Jaime Cardinal Sin and former President Corazon Aquino led a mammoth crowd to denounce what was perceived as then President Fidel Ramos' veiled design to extend his term through constitutional fiat, appropriately called 'Cha-Cha' (Charter Change).

In the end, the absence of large-scale violence and the much-anticipated '*dagdag-barwas*' (adding and shaving votes) scheme was basically attributed to the vigilance of the poll watchers and volunteer workers fielded by the different political parties and numerous organizations committed to protecting the ballot. Some argued that the orderly elections was proof that the country was indeed a 'functioning democracy'. The outgoing Ramos administration understandably felt proud that it had conducted the elections as scheduled and proclaimed the winners in a relatively prompt and peaceful transition of power.

Since *democracy* and its variant *democratization* constitute the main topic of this issue of the journal, it is fitting to reflect on the 1998 presidential elections in terms of how it has enhanced or debased this basic theme. Of course, this objective is largely problematic as there is probably no other term in the entire lexicon of political science that has been given numerous meanings than 'democracy'. It has a magical ring to it such that every government claims itself to be democratic.

But in reality the term is very hard to define. Cynical observers note that, theoretically at least, democracy means that everyone should be able to participate in the affairs of government and compete freely for public office. But this is a grand illusion. It often takes enormous amounts of money, resources, and power to run for public office, thus effectively barring large numbers of qualified people from entering public life. And even though democratic mechanisms and institutions such as political parties may exist, the results of electoral contests often affirm the dominance and corruption of entrenched powerful groups. It has been several decades since C Wright Mills and Robert Michels formulated their 'power elite' and 'iron law of oligarchy' theories on the nature of power, but many political systems around the world, even those that call themselves democratic, are in fact autocratic or essentially undemocratic.

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We will take a critical look at the 1998 political season in the Philippines and see if it measures up to the test of democratic values. But before doing so, it is necessary to provide some theoretical backdrop to the discussion below by going back to the notion of 'illiberal democracy' cited earlier and other concepts related to democratic rule.

REVISITING DEMOCRATIC THEORY

WHAT has been happening, according to Zakaria, is that in the past 50 years or so, governments or regimes which have been democratically elected often ignore constitutional limits to their power and routinely violate the basic rights of their citizens. Zakaria constructs a spectrum of the phenomenon of 'illiberal democracy', ranging from 'modest offenders' like Argentina to 'near tyrannies' like Kazakhstan and Belarus. The majority of countries lie somewhere in between, but it is Zakaria's contention that half of the so-called 'democratizing' countries in the world today are really illiberal democracies.

This has been difficult to recognize as a problem, Zakaria argues, because for almost a century in the West, democracy has essentially meant *liberal democracy*. This means a 'political system marked not only by free and

fair elections, but also by the rule of law, a separation of powers, and the protection of basic liberties of speech, assembly, religion and property' (Zakaria 1997). He notes further that the latter bundle of freedoms should be more appropriately termed 'constitutional liberalism', which is historically and theoretically distinct from democracy. But in time the two notions became intertwined in Western political thought and liberal democracy emerged as the model for much of the modernizing and democratizing world.

However, if we observe the distinction between the two concepts and look at the empirical evidence, Zakaria maintains that democracy is flourishing while constitutional liberalism is not. The two strands of the liberal democracy paradigm are 'coming apart' in much of the modern world. Democracy tends toward accumulation of power by governments, while constitutional liberalism is concerned with its limitation.

What this argument wants to point out is that democracy has been associated with a country's ability to hold open, competitive, free, and multiparty elections. Elections are often considered the supreme test of democratic tenets like the 'consent of the governed' and 'rule of the people'. These can only be determined by free and fair elections. This basic theory of democracy as a process of electoral competition to select leaders and form governments has been echoed over time by political thinkers from Alexis de Tocqueville to Samuel Huntington.

On the other hand, constitutional liberalism refers more to a government's goals, in particular the protection of the 'individual's autonomy and dignity against coercion, whatever the source — state, church, or society' (Zakaria 1997). It developed in Western Europe and later in the United States (US) to protect individual rights and promote equality under the law. The concept also imposes restraints on the exercise of power.

It is possible then to have free and democratic elections but the governments produced by such elections may be corrupt, inefficient, incompetent, or incapable of functioning for the public good. According to Zakaria, US State Department official Richard Holbrooke cites the 1996 elections in Bosnia as an example of how competitive elections do not necessarily lead to good government. 'Suppose the election was declared free and fair,' Holbrooke had said, 'but those elected are racists, fascists, and separatists who are publicly opposed to peace and reintegration. That is the dilemma' (Zakaria 1997). The point is, constitutional liberalism, rooted in

the rule of law, is the broader concept which has led to democracy, but the latter has or does not necessarily lead to constitutional liberalism. Democratic elections can lead to ratifications of traditional power rather than to genuine political change. Thus we see in many of the East Asian countries today a mix of 'democracy, liberalism, capitalism, oligarchy, and corruption — much like Western governments circa 1900' (Zakaria 1997).

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While the distinctions pointed out by Zakaria are useful, they do not go far enough to make a case for two other dimensions which should be central to the concept of democracy, and these are economic security and social justice. Liberal democracy stresses political rights and civil liberties. Its central axiom is individual freedom. Some would go so far as to argue that if you are free to say whatever you want and do whatever you wish, you are already living in a democratic society. If there are a hundred people running for a few positions, that is even more democratic, the argument continues. In fact, chaos or unwieldiness is mistaken for democratic choice. And responsibility and accountability, which should complement political freedoms, are never really demanded of democratically-elected leaders.

ALTERNATIVE DEMOCRATIC THEORY

A MORE trenchant formulation on democratic theory that includes both 'form and content' has been articulated by Michael Parenti (1980). In his view, a political system should be judged not by its ability to hold elections but to serve democratic ends. Democracy is not about procedures but about substantive outputs, i.e. actual material benefits and the kinds of social justice that it dispenses. Nor are elections a sure test of democratic values. A fuller explication of Parenti's alternative democratic theory follows:

Democracy refers to a system of governance that represents both in *form* and *content* the needs and desires of the ruled. Decisionmakers are not to govern for the benefit of the privileged few but for the interests of the many. In other words, their decisions and politics should be of substantive benefit to the populace. The people exercise a measure of control by electing their representatives and by sub-

jecting them to open criticism, the periodic check of elections and, if necessary, recall and removal from office. Besides living without fear of political tyranny, a democratic people should be able to live without fear of want, enjoying freedom from economic, as well as political oppression. In a real democracy, the material conditions of people's lives should be humane and roughly equal. (Parenti 1980)

When Parenti was writing this in the late 1970s, the 'privileged few' he was referring to was the corporate world which was the dominant sector of the US 'politico-economic system'. His central thesis involved the relationship between economic wealth and political power. In short, it was a critique of American liberal democracy, in particular its major underpinning of corporate capitalism. His hope was that people would become increasingly intolerant of the injustices of the capitalist system and move toward a 'revolutionary solution anchored on substantive political and economic equality.'

Nearly two decades later, Parenti's observations are still valid. They could also be applied to certain non-Western societies in the modern world seeking to democratize. As we approach the end of the century, not much has changed in the nature of liberal democracy that Parenti deplored. With the upsurge in globalization, there has been an expansion of the forces of

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the capitalist economic system that cause chronic instabilities in societies all over the world. In turn, these destructive or wasteful effects of globalization processes translate into political discontent or social turmoil in affected societies. Of what use is a country's democratic experience, no matter how long — as would be the case in the Philippines — if it cannot produce the material and other benefits that it needs for the vast majority of its population? One of the

first things that newly-elected President Joseph Ejercito Estrada announced upon assuming office was that the Philippines was bankrupt. A few weeks later, several international dailies ran a front-page picture of thousands of job-seeking Filipinos demonstrating on the presidential palace grounds, some of them scaling a wire fence trying to have an audience with

the new president. Two were killed and several were injured in the melee. With this background, let us examine some of these issues on democratic governance and values in Filipino politics with particular reference to the election season in May 1998.

THE 'ERAP PHENOMENON'

AN appropriate way to begin this discourse is to reflect on the resounding victory that Estrada, popularly known as 'Erap', achieved in the last presidential elections.² When the dust cleared, Estrada had won by a huge margin of 6 million votes over his nearest rival, Jose de Venecia who was the standard bearer of *Lakas-NUCD*, the Ramos administration's party. This margin was much more impressive than Ramos' victory in the 1992 elections of a measly 800,000 votes over Miriam Defensor-Santiago. Estrada was the choice of nearly 40 percent of the total votes cast in the elections in a field of ten 'presidentiables', compared with the 24 percent who voted for Ramos in 1992. However, Estrada's party formation, LAMMP (*Laban ng Makabayang Masang Pilipino*, or Struggle of Patriotic Filipino Masses), failed to muster a majority of the congressional and local positions.

Estrada's winning margin was provided by the combined 'D' and 'E' votes, which gave him 52 percent compared with de Venecia's 11 percent. In Filipino survey lingo, voters are divided into five classes: A and B are considered the elite or upper classes; C, the middle class; D, the lower middle class and poor; and E, the very poor or destitute. The D and E voters have the least education in the above categorization. In a pre-election poll conducted by the Social Weather Stations (SWS), Estrada garnered 37 percent of those who only had an elementary school education. On the other hand, Alfredo Lim, supported by former President Corazon Aquino and Jaime Cardinal Sin won 25 percent of voters who had a college degree.

There are many ways to interpret the 'Erap phenomenon' (see, for instance, Abueva 1998a, 1998b and Cacho-Olivares 1998a, 1998b, 1998c) but we will stress the democratization perspective in keeping with the main theme of the journal. In fact, Estrada won handily even by refusing to participate in open debates with his opponents, a conventional practice in democratic politics. His major opponent, de Venecia, challenged him to a treadmill test instead, a pointed reference to Estrada's reported failing health due to his

drinking and reckless lifestyle. Estrada returned the invitation by challenging de Venecia to a boxing bout. Such was the banter that was being traded in the political arena. It was absurdity, rather than democracy, that was at work in many phases of the campaign. It was mudslinging, rather than informed dialogue, which set the tone for the campaign.

In spite of his long years of service as a town mayor, senator, and vice-president, Estrada did not really strike the voters as someone who had the needed experience and competence to serve as the highest leader of the country. He himself did not stress his government experience and mainly

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relied on his popularity with the masses. He was continuously and mercilessly attacked by his opponents and the media as an 'intellectual pygmy', a womanizer who had fathered several illegitimate children, college drop-out, brawler, gambler, heavy drinker, and an authoritarian personality

not given to open dialogue. Just about every sleazy charge had been leveled against him, including an assassination plot against Fidel Ramos and the murder of witnesses in the infamous '*Kuratong Baleleng* massacre' during his tenure as 'crime czar' of the Ramos administration. Estrada was even accused of being involved in an investment scam leading to the loss of 800 million pesos. Yet in the end, Estrada's critics were red-faced as he pulled off a stunning poll victory in contemporary Filipino politics.

There was no doubt that Estrada's popularity spawned by his many years as a movie actor won much of the day for him. He also put together a formidable campaign machinery organized by professionals adept at handling the treacherous turns and predatory tactics of Filipino politics. But what brought his campaign home in addition to his popular *persona* was the symbolism of non-elite politics that he embodied, even if he was a product of an elite family himself. Here was somebody who sounded sincere and attuned to the '*masa*' (masses) who embodied their aspirations, and one who could not speak good English like most of them. Running on a pro-poor platform, Estrada energized popular participation, which is another salient dimension of open and democratic politics. He and his political strategists were skillful in manipulating the popular heartbeat and mind-set. Estrada did not give impassioned visionary speeches about making

the nation great again or saving Filipino democracy; he stuck to bread-and-butter issues, precisely what the majority of voters wanted to hear. In fact he was even demagogic and simplistic in some of his campaign speeches. He vowed to 'make farmers rich' without really spelling out how. He promised 'quick fixes' and redistribution of wealth without any real basis.

Ultimately, all the relentless criticisms against Estrada's intellectual deficiencies and moral laxity backfired as the masses he represented perceived these 'put downs' as directed against them too. Even upper middle-class voters got weary of the vicious verbiage directed at Estrada on a day-to-day basis. Many voters who were undecided probably gave their 'sympathy votes' to Estrada.

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Erap did not have the 'honeymoon period' of a 100 days with the media and elite circles that is traditionally observed by incoming presidents. Now that Estrada is in dire straits trying to cope with the continuing fundamental problems of the country, his detractors continue to say, 'We told you so.' But it is doubtful if any of the other nine 'presidentiables' would have done any better under the present circumstances. The current problems are structural and institutionalized in nature. If democracy is to become a living reality, economic and education levels must be raised, otherwise, there will continue to be massive poverty and unemployment. The chances of sustaining a viable democratic order are better with a growing middle class and a higher degree of educational achievement for economic advancement. A society with a yawning gap between the few rich and the teeming poor is inherently unstable. Unfortunately, the fledgling Estrada presidency has already re-empowered the Marcos family and cronies who were responsible for the economic devastation of the country not so long ago.

MULTIPARTY POLITICS

THE 1998 presidential election season outdid the previous one by attracting 11 (later reduced to 10) candidates, many of whom put together party

formations practically at the last minute. Seventy more individuals filed their candidacies with the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) which was unable to disqualify many of them even if it was obvious that they were just token or nuisance candidates. The 10 major candidates and their parties were: Miriam Defensor-Santiago, People's Reform Party (PRP); Jose de Venecia, *Lakas-NUCD-UMPD*; Renato de Villa, *Partido para sa Demokratikong Reporma* (*Reporma*, or Party for Democratic Reform); Santiago Dumlao, *Kilusan para sa Pambansang Pagpapanibago* (KPP, or Movement for National Renewal); Juan Ponce Enrile, Independent; Joseph Estrada, LAMMP; Alfredo Lim, Liberal Party (LP); Manuel Morato, *Partidong Bansang Marangal* (PBM, or Noble Nation Party); Emilio Osmeña, *Probinsiya Muna* Development Initiative (PROMDI, or Provinces First Development Initiative); and Raul Roco, *Aksyon Demokratiko* (AD, Democratic Action).

Political parties are the engines of democratic growth, serving to link the people with government and performing other vital functions. The Philippines at this stage of its redemocratization following the ouster of the Marcos dictatorship in 1986 is still groping for a suitable system of political parties. For many decades Filipino politics revolved around an adaptation of the US two-party system built on the personal following of candidates. Under Marcos, there were no parties except his own. In the post-Marcos period, several party alliances but mostly short-term loose alliances developed without stable memberships and institutional resources.

In the 1992 elections, seven candidates for the presidency were already considered too many in terms of obtaining a credible mandate. As a result, a minority president who got only 24 percent of the total vote was elected. Having ten candidates in the 1998 elections was even more unwieldy. But the fact that Ramos could win with only a fourth of the electorate emboldened several of these candidates who were hoping they too could win by a narrow margin. Osmeña relied on a strategy of localism aimed at capturing the 1.5 million 'Cebuano vote'. His PROMDI (a linguistic corruption of 'from the province') formation was inspired by his economic success as governor of Cebu. Roco appealed to his Bicolano constituency. De Venecia banked on the 'Solid North'. Lim was certain Manila would go for him. De Villa hoped to capture the vote-rich Southern Tagalog region, being a Batangueño. In short, a candidate was confident that his or her ethnic lin-

guistic, and geographic bailiwick would spell the needed margin of victory, no matter how slim.

The result was mini-scale anarchy rather than democracy. While it was true that there were more candidates to select from, their party platforms did not mean a great deal. The muddled situation also indicated how cavalier the candidates were in treating a supposedly serious political institution like the presidency. Political analyst Amando Doronila (1998a) quipped, 'The Philippine presidency has been so devalued that any entertainer, illiterate actor, policeman, village idiot, or political operator thinks he could be President of the Philippines.'

Political parties are essentially meaningless in the Filipino system; and this does not bode well for the future of Filipino democracy. As Conrad de Quiros (1998) noted, 'Nobody remembers the party; everybody remembers the candidate.' Parties have to be rationalized along ideological issues to become effective 'inputting' mechanisms allowing citizens to have their interests and needs heard by government. A standard textbook in political science argues that 'by working in or voting for a party, citizens can make an impact on political decisions. At a minimum, parties may at least give people the feeling that they are not utterly powerless, and this belief helps maintain government legitimacy, one reason even dictatorships have a party' (Roskin et al. 1991). Parties could aggregate smaller and discrete interests, which tend to proliferate in such a diverse, fragmented society like the Philippines, into larger and stronger positions *vis-à-vis* government. This would require building coalitions that transcend individual ambitions. It is always mentioned that the political system in the Philippines was basically patterned after the US, but the successful examples of coalition politics that could be emulated in aspiring democracies elsewhere are ignored. A classic example was demonstrated in the 1930s when US President Franklin Roosevelt revolutionized the Democratic Party by mobilizing what seemed like a 'rainbow coalition', consisting of unionized workers, farmers, Catholics, Jews, blacks, and other previously underrepresented or misrepresented sectors of American society.

There was some attempt to form a 'Third Force' among four or five 'presidentiables' in the 1998 Filipino elections, which should have reduced the playing field to about three major formations: Estrada, de Venecia, and whoever would have been the 'Third Force' nominee. But this idea died

before it could be launched because each of the four or so candidates thought he should be the one representing the 'Third Force'. Individual egos are very strong in Filipino political contests. No one wants to give in regardless of whether he or she has a reasonable chance of winning. Candidates who do not get their party's nomination leave in disgust and form

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their own parties. This is probably the kind of 'rugged individualism' that was fashioned from the 'democratic experience' with American-style political institutions like individual freedom. The beauty with democracy the way we Filipinos play it out, according to journalist Pete Lacaba, is that anybody can run for president or any public office. The trouble is 'everybody wants to run.' Always, the argument is

that 'many' is more democratic. Quality falls by the wayside as every election attracts far too many candidates — a measure of how politicized the system is.

To be fair, part of the reason for the 'Third Force' fiasco may be attributed to the fact that Filipino politicians do not yet have sufficient experience in coalition-building compared with older and established democracies in other parts of the world. There is the case of de Villa who bolted *Lakas* and formed his own group when he did not get Ramos' 'anointment', instead of forging a coalition with the ruling administration. He tried to spearhead the 'Third Force' alternative but failed. Even Ramos himself bolted his own party in 1992 when he failed to get the nomination and set up his own rump group to support his candidacy.

But there were examples of successful coalitions in the 1998 campaign as well. Former 'presidentiable' Edgardo Angara, realizing his uphill battle, forged a winning coalition with Estrada and dropped down to the vice-presidential slot. This is the kind of rational calculation that should inform future attempts to coalesce in the interest of larger issues and interests. Similarly, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, beset by campaign difficulties, offered herself as the vice-presidential standard bearer of *Lakas-NUCD*. She won overwhelmingly.

It is recognized that both the Angara and Macapagal-Arroyo decisions may have been motivated more by convenience, and some would say opportunism especially in the case of the latter, but they were realistic in the world of Filipino politics. Angara would never have made it in the presidential slugfest. Likewise, if Macapagal-Arroyo continued her presidential quest under the circumstances she found herself in, she might never have made it, no matter how popular she was. In running for vice-president, she took the pragmatic way out and ended up getting more votes than Estrada himself. So, while multi-party politics confounded and confused voters in the 1998 polls, it has some promise as a democratic vehicle which allows broad participation of competing interests and encourages substantive political change.

While multi-party politics confounded and confused voters in the 1998 polls, it promised to be a more democratic vehicle than the previous two-party system.

THE PARTY-LIST SYSTEM

CONSIDERED a boon to democratization in the 1998 elections was the observance for the first time of the so-called party-list system in the election of candidates to the House of Representatives. This innovation was envisioned by the framers of the post-Marcos Constitution, ratified in 1987, to allow non-governmental organizations (NGOs), people's organizations (POs), and small political parties to have a voice in Congress which has been historically dominated by elite politicians and traditional political parties. The Ninth Congress passed the Party-List System Act in 1995, defining it as a 'mechanism of proportional representation in the election of representatives to the House of Representatives from national, regional and sectoral parties or organizations or coalitions thereof with the Commission on Elections.' (RA 7941:1995). The 12 sectors identified in the party-list system were women, handicapped, youth, peasantry, elderly, professionals, indigenous peoples, fisherfolk, overseas workers, veterans, urban poor and labor.

With the passage of this law, all voters are entitled to two votes for the House of Representatives. The first is the candidate whom the voters want

to be their district representative. The second is for the party-list representatives, meaning the sectoral party, group, or coalition to be chosen from among a list of such organizations accredited by the COMELEC. On this space in the ballot, voters can write only the name of one party, group, or coalition, not the name of any person or candidate running for office.

The COMELEC accredited 125 political parties, sectoral organizations, and coalitions to participate in the first party-list elections in May 1998. At stake were 51 seats, or 20 percent of the total membership (250) of the House of Representatives, roughly equivalent to one party-list representative for every four legislative districts. To win a seat, a party or organization must obtain at least two percent of the total votes cast for the party-list. If they obtained more than two percent, winning parties are entitled to a maximum of three seats. The COMELEC required every participating organization to submit a list of at least five nominees. If the organization wins three seats, the first three in the list will become the party-list organization's representative in the Lower House.

The philosophy underlying the party-list system is good — even revolutionary — because, as political scientist David Wurfel (1998) sees it, this novel idea is the best hope in the long run for ‘the transformation of the *trapo* (traditional political) system into one with more programmatic parties, more responsive than at present to the needs and concerns of the majority of the people — the workers, farmers, and fishermen.’ This is a surprising piece of progressive legislation coming from the traditionally elite-held Congress. One wonders if the legislators fully realized the impact this would have against their powers if properly implemented. Tet Abelardo (1998) of the Institute of Politics and Governance in the Philippines adds that the party-list system was conceived as ‘a way of institutionalizing people’s participation specifically in the delicate task of national legislation, through which they may safeguard and promote their respective interests and welfare.’

Unfortunately, like all new ideas or innovations, the implementation of the first party-list experiment in the 1998 campaign was extremely problematic, mainly due to confusion, ignorance, misunderstanding, and deception. The COMELEC was financially ill-prepared to take on such a demanding task. There was no nationwide campaign to educate the electorate on the complex details of this new system. Only about 200,000

primers were prepared in a country with 34 million registered voters. There were too many organizations in the list to choose from and the voters had no idea what they stood for, except for a few major ones that had visibility and national reputation. Voters were also used to voting for a real person, not for an abstract entity representing a sector. There were also some ambiguous categories like 'professionals'. The Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industries (PCCI), a businessmen's group was allowed to run in the party-list elections. Were they not represented enough already? All these questions confronted the ordinary voter who had never heard of this new system.

Worse, according to Wurfel, was the confusion in the COMELEC itself. A high-ranking COMELEC official had admitted that he and other COMELEC personnel 'do not completely understand' the party-list system. If the very people who were supposed to implement the project did not even have a decent understanding of it, how much more with the voters? The COMELEC also had a bias, or was probably just plain ignorant, toward certain groups that were trying to register for the party-list system. One of the most progressive groups, *Akbayan*, was initially denied accreditation because 'it did not represent a sector' (Wurfel 1998). A party-list party does not necessarily need to represent a 'sector'.

The splintering of sectors, rather than the building of coalitions, was another major drawback. Even organizations that were under a similar grouping were pitted against one another. For one sector such as labor, there were 13 registered party-list contestants. The women's sector was also the subject of contention between competing groups. For instance, the National Council of Women of the Philippines (NCWP) was stung by an accusation from *Sanlakas*, a left-wing group, that it was being used by the Ramos administration which planned to dominate the party-list elections. Another charge that surfaced was that around 60 percent of the total number of organizations participating in the elections were actually 'satellite camps' of the five major political parties which were excluded from the party-list system (Galvez 1998).

As a result of these difficulties and problems, only 12 of the more than 120 organizations that registered for the party-list elections won at least two percent of the total vote. John Carey (1998), a political scientist, estimates that 39 seats or 75 percent of the total number allocated for the mar-

ginalized sectors would be left vacant. He thinks that the law was poorly drafted, particularly with regard to the method of filling party-list seats, which 'bears little resemblance to the principle of proportional representation' (Carey 1998). Carey suggests that the party-list law be amended based on an adequate proportional representation formula that avoids leaving some of the seats vacant because of the thresholds imposed by the law.

Whatever its shortcomings and failings, the party-list experiment is a positive step in gradually democratizing a system that has stagnated for far too long. Wurfel notes on hindsight that the confusions and misunderstandings that have complicated the implementation of the law may have been a blessing. The elite does not surrender power that easily, and 'if establishment politicians had really understood the purpose of the party-list system, and believed that it was actually capable of achieving that purpose, they may have done a more thorough job of frustrating its implementation' (Wurfel 1998).

Although there had been blunders and misrepresentations as editorialized by the country's biggest daily, the system aimed to equalize the electoral playing field and advance politics on the basis of principles and platforms. 'Properly carried out, the party-list system could make Filipino voters more mature and democratize Philippine politics and elections' (PDI 1998a).

POLITICAL DYNASTIES

FOR several generations, the dominance of family-based dynasties has been a given in Filipino politics. If democratic rule requires, as it should, breaking up or leveling off this continuing dominance of political dynasties, the Philippines will certainly flunk this test. There has never been an election in Filipino political history, particularly in the postwar period, when an Osmeña, Laurel, Cojuangco, Aquino, Dimaporo, Veloso, Lopez, or any other descendant of an elite family was not running for public office. One often hears the joke in every election in Cebu, for instance, that the only Osmeña not running is the Puente Osmeña (Osmeña Bridge). There are political dynasties that have been in power continuously for five or six generations.

The dynamics of continued political dynastic rule by elite families in the Philippines has been analyzed ably and extensively in recent scholar-

ship, and we will not focus on much of its antecedents here (see, for instance, McCoy 1993). We will instead examine some of the results of the 1998 elections to see how they stack up against this dominant pattern.

One of the results that was most distressing was the resurgence of the Marcos dynasty with 'Bongbong' (Ferdinand Jr) winning the governorship of Ilocos Norte and his sister Imee besting her distant granduncle, Simeon Valdez, for a seat in Congress. Once again, the 'Marcos country' has been resurrected under auspicious circumstances. The new president, Estrada, though not a Marcos crony or loyalist in the classic mold, is a Marcos supporter whose first act as a president-elect was to decide unilaterally to bury the late dictator at the Heroes' Cemetery. Estrada's administration, unlike the previous two dispensations, will provide sympathetic, if not fertile ground for the 'comebacking' Marcos family and cronies to regain power.

Hundreds of successful candidates are the children, spouses, siblings or close relatives of known politicians who have long been in the political scene. The prime example is President Estrada's own son, Jinggoy, who was re-elected mayor of San Juan in Metro Manila. In addition to Bongbong Marcos, another ex-presidential son, Benigno Aquino III, won as Tarlac representative. Father and son Ramon and Bong Revilla scored victories as senator and governor (Cavite), respectively. Senator Robert Barbers has two sons, Ace and Robert Jr, who won as Surigao representative and Makati councilor, respectively. Ralph Recto of the famous Recto clan was re-elected Batangas congressman, while his wife Vilma Santos, a popular movie actress, won as mayor of Lipa City. In Iloilo alone, at least 20 of the 40 or so 'termed-out' mayors simply 'anointed' their wives, children and other relatives to run in their place. The fact that there are now more women elected does not mean feminism has arrived. They are simply taking the place of their husbands, who in all likelihood, will continue to wield the real power.

Partly to blame for the perpetuation of the dynasty phenomenon is the Constitution itself, though inadvertently. Because of the disastrous experience with the Marcos regime, the framers of the 1987 charter wanted to end political dynasties. They included provisions for term limits for holders of public office — one six-year term for the president and vice-president, two six-year terms for senators, and three three-year terms for representa-

tives, governors, mayors, and other local officials. It seemed like a radical idea then which was welcomed by the electorate.

What happened in the last elections was that the officials who were 'termed out' simply 'anointed', as indicated above, or selected their own spouses, children, and other relatives to run in their stead while they filed their candidacy for other offices. It was a case of playing political musical chairs. A typical example may be seen in the case of the long-standing Ortega dynasty in La Union. Victor Ortega, son of the late Speaker Protempore Francisco Ortega, had exhausted his three terms as representative. He fielded his younger brother Manuel to run in his place. This was just perfect for Manuel, who was also being 'termed out' as mayor of San

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Fernando, the capital town (later city). But who would take his place as mayor? Simple. Another Ortega — this time Mary Jane Ortega, wife of Victor. That way Victor could be *de facto* mayor. As though this was not enough for the Ortegas' 'greed', a younger brother also ran for the Provincial Board, and two other brothers ran for the municipal councils in San Fernando and Bauang. All but one of the Ortegas won through the usual vote-

buying and 'warlord' techniques. Interviews by the author with various townspeople revealed that the Ortegas spent a staggering 110 million pesos in San Fernando alone, buying votes for as much as 1,000 pesos a head and 3,000 pesos per family. Informants pointed out that the Ortegas have been entrenched in local politics for several decades and thus have accumulated a 'war chest' generated by corruption and other shady activities. But some of the money apparently came from the de Venecia campaign funds. After the elections, the new representative, Manuel Ortega, switched sides to Estrada's party. It is vintage Ortega, as it must be with other local dynasties, to simply change parties in the direction of whoever wins. This is basically how the dynasties have survived over time.

What the Constitution should have provided as a safeguard is that a relative up to a certain degree cannot be eligible for the incumbent's position. Without it, every 'term-vacated' position has become fair game to the

incumbent's relatives. So, instead of contracting or undermining dynasticism, the absence of such a provision in the Constitution greatly expanded the size of the incumbent political dynasties.

Needless to say, the Ortega example and several others across the country is a mockery of democratic choice. Many local constituencies are literally in the pockets of continuing dynasties. The outrageous thing is that dynasticism has become more pervasive, sparked by a widespread contagion. Earlier in our political history, we could name only a few of these ruling classes — the Osmeñas, Duranos, Marcoses, Montanos, Crisologos, Aquinos, Josons, Singsons, Dimaporos, and Espinosas. Now they have proliferated to include even previously little-known names like the Abineses of Cebu and the Esquivels, Diazes, Perezes, and Ruizes of Nueva Ecija. The Visayas and Mindanao regions have accelerated their dynastic growth as well, with older dynasties like the Dimaporos and Antoninos being joined by newer ones like the Barbers family, the Almendras brothers, the Rabats, the Plazas, and many more.

The Church has denounced both the continuing and emerging dynasties but this has to be strengthened by more vigorous measures with even more forceful implementation. Local people are helpless and powerless against well-heeled and well-armed political machines. Oppressed citizens have no means of redress against abusive local officials who control the police, bureaucracy, and other instruments of power. Thus the national government should enforce sanctions against erring local officials and challenge the power of local bosses if necessary. There should also be a corresponding body of sanctions on the national level to punish abuses of local power. The conviction of Mayor Antonio Sanchez for murder and rape was a welcome decision, but something like this is the exception rather than the rule. There should be a more institutionalized system of justice, with the national government taking the lead in disciplining criminal or abusive local officials.

'STAR-IZATION' NOT DEMOCRATIZATION

THE other phenomenon that was exemplified by the last elections was the '*star-ization*' of Filipino politics, so-called because of the inordinate number of movie stars and other 'showbiz' personalities or celebrities running for and eventually winning public office. No doubt this was inspired by the

political success of 'Mr. Showbiz' himself, Erap, a popular hero in reel life for more than two decades.

If Nora Aunor had run for office, she would have won overwhelmingly, as did fellow movie star Vilma Santos who was elected Lipa City mayor even if she is only a 'Batangueña' by affinity. Other actors who made a run for public office were Rey Malonzo, Joey Marquez, Edu Manzano, Herbert Bautista, Rico Puno, Dante Varona, and Lito Lapid. A top TV personality, Loren Legarda, won the highest number of votes in the senatorial race, followed by another TV host, Rene Cayetano. In third position was still another high-profile ex-movie comedian and TV host, Tito Sotto. Top basketball star Robert Jaworski also landed a Senate seat. Compare this with elections not too long ago when it would take a brilliant lawyer and experienced politician like Jovito Salonga, also a bar topnotcher, to top the senatorial race. Are movie stars and media celebrities the new breed of Filipino politicians? Is '*star-ization*' the wave of the future in the country's politics?

It was obvious that the main quality and qualification these stars brought to the campaign scene was their glittering popularity. Their utter lack of political experience or competence did not bother the voters. The Senate used to be a chamber of highly articulate leaders who were adept at the business of government. It was dominated by lawyers. It was always referred to as an 'august' body. That it is now possible to be elected senator just by being a third-rate actor, comedian, basketball player, or TV person-

ality says something about the changing course of the nation's political waters. The Senate is no longer the respected body it once was nor does it epitomize the intellect and wisdom of political leaders. Doronila (1998b) suggests that the ascendancy of 'showbiz' personalities in Filipino politics may be due to the 'rise and pervasiveness of the visual media for mass communica-

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tion.' This establishes a 'persistent presence before the public eye' which leads to easy recall by voters. Loren Legarda had an elegant presence on television while Rene Cayetano was an articulate host for '*Compañero y Compañera*.'

Instead of great speeches on the future of the nation, candidates up and down the line mounted 'star-studded' extravaganzas in which they themselves sang and danced and frolicked on stage. Estrada always had his colleagues in 'stardom' like Fernando Poe Jr, Nora Aunor, and Philip Salvador on the campaign trail. People attended rallies by the thousands, drawn by the presence of movie stars they had previously seen only on the silver screen. They were there for the entertainment, not to listen to high-minded speeches on politics and government.

The 'starlike' quality of the campaign season was to last until the inaugural ceremony for President Estrada. It would have been inappropriate to transform Barasoain Church, the site of Estrada's swearing-in, into a song-and-dance and eating fiesta. So, it was extended to Rizal Park in Manila where Poe and Aunor, King and Queen of Philippine movies, respectively, performed major roles before a mammoth crowd. *El Shaddai* also hosted a feast of 5,000 roasted pigs (*lechon*) and 20,000 roasted chickens, with the *lechon* alone costing 7.5 million pesos. It was probably the most festive and expensive presidential inaugural ever. But this was also a sad commentary on the values of the incoming presidency. A country that is perennially on the edge of economic survival could ill-afford such extravagant celebrations. The money could have been spent for a more useful project that would set the tone for the Estrada presidency, such as producing millions of copies of his speech in Filipino for distribution to the libraries, offices, and other institutions in the country. This historic accomplishment, the first inaugural speech delivered in Filipino, needed to be memorialized, not drowned in the cacophony of inaugural celebrations.

It is hoped that the 'showbiz' aura of the Estrada campaign and its victory will give way to more serious reflection on the problems of the nation. In short, 'the party is over' and it is time for Estrada to follow up on the general message of his inaugural speech to use 'people power' not only to defend democracy and advance economic development but 'for the people themselves'.

QUASI-RELIGIOUS MANIPULATIONS

IN spite of the principle of separation of church and state that is often invoked to remind us of the secular nature of representative democracy, churches and religious groups of all persuasions have long participated in

the Filipino political process one way or the other. The Catholic Church, especially under Cardinal Sin, has had a high profile in contemporary political situations, be it 'People Power' or 'Anti-Cha-Cha'. The Bishops aggressively bombard the 'flock' with pastoral letters whenever there is a major political event, such as an election or public rally. Likewise, it is no secret that the *Iglesia ni Kristo* (INK, Church of Christ) has long supported candidates of its choice, which means millions of votes delivered, block voting style.

The last elections showed the most intense participation of religious and quasi-religious groups in contemporary political memory. Cardinal Sin called Estrada 'morally unfit to serve as president,' a statement he said he did not regret saying because he was only helping voters to make a 'correct decision' in their choice for president (Herrera 1998). The CBCP (Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines) released a pastoral letter the day before the polls opened, which the headlines bannered as ABE (Anybody But Estrada). The clergy seemed obsessed, even desperate, to stem the 'Erap phenomenon'.

Other Church-related efforts were more positive. They consisted of pinpointing 'hot spots' and forming 'watchdog groups' to help ensure clean elections by guarding the ballot in 71 percent of the total number of precincts. Sister Roseanne Mallilin, executive secretary of CBCP's National Secretariat for Social Action (NASSA), invoked 'divine intervention' as one of her group's major weapons against fraud. 'We will do it both on the physical and spiritual levels. We do what we can physically, and leave the rest to prayer' (Locsin 1998). Among the church-affiliated 'watchdogs' were the National Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL), Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPCRV) and VoteCare. Joining the alliance was the Integrated Bar of the Philippines (IBP), which was to provide legal assistance to teachers and other poll workers who faced harassment or intimidation by partisan forces.

One of the ugliest features the elections witnessed was the blatant 'politicking' of several 'born-again' or 'charismatic' groups, specifically *El Shaddai*, Jesus Miracle Crusade (JMC), and Jesus is Lord Movement (JIL), headed by Mike Velarde, Wilde Almeda, and Eddie Villanueva, respectively. What was reprehensible was their constant invocation of God's

name in their political endorsements. Both Almeda and Villanueva 'anointed' de Venecia as their candidate and declared that he was 'God's choice' to succeed President Ramos. Almeda went so far as to intone, after blessing de Venecia, 'I hereby decree in the name of Jesus that he will be the next president' (PDI 1998b). It was both sickening and bizarre.

This disgusting appropriation of God's name by the 'born-again' preachers so exasperated columnists like Max Soliven (1998a), who blurted out, 'For heaven's sake, let's leave God out of these God-forsaken endorsements!' Soliven said that never in his 'poor sinner's life' did he see so many 'Bible-thumpers mixing it up riotously in politics.' With less than a week to go in the heated campaign, Soliven (1998b) wrote that 'we are being bedevilled by the pious *ululations* of a bunch of mad *mullahs* who are trying to enlist God in the "anointment" of their favorite presidential *wannabes*.'³

Some of the candidates themselves wittingly fell into the trap of these pseudo-spiritual entrepreneurs who were obviously not working in God's interest but their own. De Venecia traveled like a pilgrim to pray to the 'spirits' at Mt Banahaw. A picture showed him nearly kissing the ground surrounded by religious sisters. Another picture showed him jumping as high as he could with a pained expression on his face. That was supposed to be his joyful 'victory jump'. He was told by a 'born-again' preacher that he had to jump seven times to be eligible for God's blessings. Exacerbating the circus was President Ramos himself who likened de Venecia to the prophet Joshua, the great deliverer (Agnote 1998).⁴

No one could deny the quasi-religious groups their right to participate in politics, but it was obvious that religion was being used by the leaders to manipulate both their 'flock' and credulous candidates. As arbitrary, unrealistic, or naive as the statement may sound, this essentially anti-democratic and opportunistic tendency under the guise of religious freedom should no longer be tolerated. A dangerous herd mentality perpetuated by unscrupulous bogus spiritual leaders is clearly a threat to Filipino democracy. Only an enlightened and educated citizenry can reverse this regressive trend. And the chances of sustaining a democratic life will grow with increasing levels of the voters' ability to cast their vote based on their informed and honest choices.

CONCLUSION

WE can cite more examples of tendencies and activities in the last elections that ran counter to the supposedly democratic foundation of Filipino political culture. But the above should be sufficient to illustrate the basic point in this essay that the Filipino electoral system is flawed because it continues to allow the worst abuses and flagrant excesses of plutocratic, corporatist, crypto-religious and otherwise insidious forces which undermine or frustrate democratic participation or genuine interests. It is our view that while the kind of democracy that Filipinos have developed enables them to go through electoral exercises that can be considered open, free, competitive,

The kind of democracy Filipinos have developed has not nurtured the deeper meanings of economic and social justice that can bring about a democratic society in the real sense.

and so on, it has not nurtured the deeper meanings of economic and social justice that can bring about a democratic society in the real sense. At best, to paraphrase Zakaria, the Philippines remains an 'illiberal democracy'.

The results of the last electoral season are disturbing from a democratic standpoint. The traditional ills of vote-buying, voter intimidation, 'flying voters', cheating, and depredations of political dynasties

and warlords were supplemented by inordinate doses of 'star-ization', quasi-religious manipulations, excessive mudslinging, vicious propaganda, and other conditions that made one wonder what electoral competition really meant. Someone as talented and competent as Haydee Yorac could not get elected mainly because she was not in one of the mainstream party formations. There is something seriously wrong in a system if it rejects someone like Yorac and elects Jaworski, a basketball player.

Elections remain at the heart of the democratic process but it is not enough to just go through the electoral forms and processes without any real issues. The multiparty system must be reformed to provide a firm foundation for genuine electoral competition. The parties are so unstable and party personalities so volatile they cannot possibly forge a solid framework to hammer out a politics of meaning and substance, not to mention democracy.

As badly flawed as it may seem right now, the party-list system is a logical arena to begin in working out a more representative, inclusive, and equitable way of selecting the leaders of the nation. To quote Parenti (1980) again, we must 'liberate our political imaginations and learn about alternative forms of social organization and alternative social values.' Only then can we begin to talk about Filipino democracy, no longer illiberal or whatever else, but closely approximating what the term really means.

NOTES

1. Zakaria does not indicate the variables used to designate which countries are 'democracies' but he does mention Freedom House's 1996-1997 survey, *Freedom in the World* which measures democracy based on political liberties and constitutional liberalism based on civil liberties.

2. 'Erap' is a take-off from the word *pare* (spelled backwards), which means 'buddy' or 'friend'. It symbolizes Estrada's populist orientation and his sense of identification with the ordinary Filipino from the ranks of the '*masa*' (masses), who comprise at least 70 percent of the country's population.

3. The underscoring of 'ululations' and 'wannabes' was supplied for the benefit of foreign readers. Soliven used 'ululations' as a derivative of '*ulul*', which means 'crazy' or 'idiotic'. The term 'wannabe' is a contraction of 'want to be' and the candidates for the presidency in Filipino-speak were called 'presidentiables' or 'presidential *wannabes*'.

4. Joshua was the Biblical character to whom Moses passed on the mantle of leadership as the Israelites made their journey back to the Promised Land.

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