

**Philippine Elections 2010: Simple Change or True Reform?** by Virginia Watson

*Virginia Watson [watsonv@apcss.org] is an associate professor at the Asia Pacific Center for Security Studies in Honolulu.*

On May 10, over 50 million Filipinos are projected to cast their votes to elect the 15<sup>th</sup> president of the Philippines, a position held for the past nine years by Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. Until recently, survey results indicated Senators Benigno Aquino III of the Liberal Party and Manuel Villar, Jr. of the Nacionalista Party were in a tight contest, but two weeks from the elections, ex-president and movie star Joseph Estrada, of the Pwersa ng Masang Pilipino, gained ground to reach a statistical tie with Villar for second place.

Currently on top is “Noynoy” Aquino, his strong showing during the campaign primarily attributed to the wave of public sympathy following the death of his mother President Corazon “Cory” Aquino last August, whom many Filipinos regard as the iconic figure of the “People Power” revolution that ended Ferdinand Marcos’ 20-year authoritarian rule in the Philippines. Aquino’s political platform is built around the issue of honest government and leadership, vowing “not to steal,” in effect making good governance the defining feature of his presidency. His simplicity, uprightness, and unpretentious demeanor have translated into a strong showing in the pre-election polls.

“Manny” Villar, one of the country’s biggest real estate magnates, has touted himself as a “self-made billionaire,” boasting that he was able to lift himself out of humble beginnings through entrepreneurship. His populist model of success, according to his lavish campaign, will be a key element of his administration’s agenda in addressing the issue of poverty in the country.

“Erap” Estrada’s last-minute resurgence is not surprising. His familiar campaign strategy of going straight to the people and promoting himself as the “real leader of the poor” is gaining momentum among the poorest Filipinos – the so-called “class D and E” sectors, who proved decisive in his victory in the 1998 presidential elections.

While Aquino has been criticized for his lack of administrative experience and political accomplishments while free-riding on the memories of his deceased parents, Villar’s campaign has been tainted by corruption charges and is under Senate investigation. His detractors also point out that his road to wealth and power was not exactly a “rags-to-riches” story but rather facilitated by his marriage into one of the 10 richest and politically powerful families in the country. Observers have noted that he has completely sidestepped the issue of good governance during his campaign. Estrada’s main

problem is his loss of credibility stemming from his ouster as the country’s president in 2001 on charges of corruption.

Survey results for vice president mirror the presidential race. Aquino’s running mate, Sen. Manuel Roxas, Jr. has pulled ahead with 37 percent. Sen. Loren Legarda, in her second attempt at the vice presidency, dropped to the third spot garnering 20 percent, identical to the results of the Nacionalista Party’s presidential candidate, Villar. Estrada’s running mate, former Makati City Mayor Jejomar “Jojo” Binay, has surged past Legarda and he is now in second place with 28 percent supporting his candidacy.

One issue that looms large is whether any of the top three contenders represents a new kind of politics and governance distinct from Macapagal-Arroyo, whose administration has been marked by corruption scandals and human rights abuses while leaving the country in a state of increasing poverty – the worst among countries in Southeast Asia according to the World Bank. The campaign rhetoric reveals very little, with the candidates paying lip service to promises of change, to improve the economy, to eliminate graft and corruption, and to prioritize education. But their political platforms lack details or a compelling vision for the country. All three have noticeably been quiet, if not evasive, on hard issues such as comprehensive land reform.

The fact that President Macapagal-Arroyo and at least three members of her family will be around also complicates things. With her victory as a House of Representative candidate of her provincial district virtually assured, she is expected to be nominated as the Speaker of the House. She will thus join three other Arroyos in Congress, setting a Philippine record on the number of family members in one law-making body at the same time. If one of her sons is successful as the nominee for a party-list group representing tricycle drivers and security guards, there will be an unprecedented five members of her family in the House. Moreover, her string of administrative, military and judicial appointments puts into place, post-election, a loyal cast of supporters that will pave the way for her to continue to exert political influence.

Macapagal-Arroyo’s critics have also alleged that she will use her position as house speaker to orchestrate constitutional change, which would create the opportunity for her to become the country’s first prime minister. The success of such a maneuver will depend on Aquino’s ability to wield effective leadership within the framework of the present presidential system. Creating a political environment receptive to constitutional revisions is difficult and conversion into a parliamentary form of government will be less likely if the government is performing well.

Much of the attention on May 10 will be focused on whether the country’s adoption of its first-ever automated

elections will afford a clean, honest, and efficient electoral process. Trial runs of the system have revealed problems and many who initially endorsed the automated system are now skeptical of its effectiveness. Aside from the technical problems of the precinct count optical scanners (PCOS), in part because several security features were removed, the reputation of the Commission on Elections (COMELEC), most recently evidenced in its corrupt practices and actions during the 2004 and 2007 elections, have raised serious doubts about its credibility as overseer of the election process.

The “techno-fix” that electronic voting was supposed to provide to past corruption is poised to become a problem rather than a solution in restoring the integrity of the voting process. The options are book-ended by resigned acceptance of the election results and another “People’s Power” revolution and/or military take-over. Aquino has warned that absent a peaceful transition or a failed election scenario, a “People Power” uprising is going to be an option.

Both in matters of substance and process, pre-election discourse has exposed the public’s strong desire for ethical leadership and good governance. Despite his lack of political experience compared to his two closest rivals, Aquino’s campaign message anchored on good and clean government has resonated with the public, allowing him to consistently secure the top spot in election surveys.

The Filipinos are primed for political change. The question is whether the elections will bring simple change or true reform to a country in dire need of political transformation. If Aquino wins by a landslide, Macapagal-Arroyo will have to deal with his incorruptible image, but he also will have to build key alliances with traditional politicians. Her well-positioned political network will provide critical leverage and could stall Aquino’s momentum. Alternatively, the initiatives of the new administration and a new Congress could circumscribe her influence for the time being. Given that all of the candidates are part of the ruling elite, the expectation is that whoever wins the election will carry an agenda that will primarily be responsive to the political and economic interests of their family and friends.

*The Pacific Forum CSIS notes with great sadness the passing of one of Asia’s great thinkers, Dr. Hadi Soesastro, a founder and former senior economist at CSIS – Jakarta. Our thoughts and prayers are with his family and close colleagues.*

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