

Analysis

## Philippines: Massive election spending

Sunday 9 May 2010, by [DORONILA Amando](#) (Date first published: 11 February 2010).

THE HEAVY ELECTION SPENDING OF SEN. Manuel Villar on political advertisement seized the spotlight at the official start last Tuesday of the 2010 presidential election. It overshadowed the issue stemming from the Senate report recommending censure for Villar for unethical conduct in connection with the C-5 road extension project traversing his real estate properties in Paranaque and Las Piñas. It has become the defining theme of the campaign.

Villar's rivals drew blood on the spending issue at the Inquirer-sponsored forum of eight presidential candidates at the University of the Philippines by taking turns in lacerating him for his political ads swamping the mass media, including TV and prime-time shows.

The issue was the hottest item in a wide range of issues taken up in the forum and evoked lusty applause from the audience. Sen. Jamby Madrigal, who initiated the Senate investigation of Villar's interventions in the transactions of his real estate companies, started the fireworks by confronting Villar, "The use of actors—you had to pay P30 million to endorse you—is an insult to the Filipino intelligence."

She also criticized Villar for using children in his ads. "The jingles, the use of the children ... just to endorse you is an insult to the Filipino intelligence," Madrigal said. "People who have spent P2 billion (on) ads, who think they can buy Malacañang have no right...." But she had to admit at some point during the forum that she used drama actress Judy Ann Santos as an endorser when she ran for the Senate in 2004. She said she had regretted "the folly of my ways."

Sen. Richard Gordon picked up the cue from Madrigal, and criticized Villar for claiming to be pro-poor. "If you claim to be pro-poor, you show it," Gordon said. "But what is happening? The poor are becoming poorer."

The rest of the presidential candidates, including Villar's closest rival, Sen. Benigno Aquino III, scion of the wealthy Cojuangco family of Hacienda Luisita fame, cannot hold a candle to Villar's campaign chest, and are complaining of tight cash to finance their campaigns.

All these attacks put Villar on the defensive. He was forced to protest that he was spending his own money, making him not beholden to any donor for campaign funds. But the reply begs the question. When Villar was asked how he would separate his business interests from his political life, he said he was already rich when he entered politics, adding that he stopped being a businessman when he became a politician. "I stopped being a businessman a long time ago," he said. "I was the industry leader. We became an industry leader, home builder before I entered politics."

Is this true? Many were asking on the sidelines of the forum. How did he get involved in the C-5 controversy? Unfortunately, the tight time limit for questions and answers in the forum (two minutes) did not permit follow-up questions.

Pertinent to the conflict-of-interest issue, we ask: Was Villar not doubling up as businessman and a member of Congress when Congress was scrutinizing the transactions on the C-5 road extension

project? The building of the road was scrutinized by the budget and finance committees, since it involved budgetary allocations for public works and loans with government financial institutions.

Let's hear from Sen. Joker Arroyo who said in 1998, "So in the case of Speaker Villar, it is simple. If he wants to continue in business and deal with government financial institutions, he can do so but he cannot also be a congressman. If he wants to be a congressman, then he must not be in business which deals with the government. We have to pay a price."

Villar has never denied he is a billionaire with independent means that enabled him to swamp his opponents with spending on advertising. In fact, he takes pride in his wealth and being a self-made real-estate tycoon. In fact, he is flaunting his spending before the public.

The underlying issue in this lavish spending is whether or not it is the explanation for his catching up with Aquino's big early lead in the surveys. I don't buy this explanation. This explanation implies that who wins or loses the election is a question of who can buy the election. But massive election spending is an insufficient explanation. There are a number of factors that determine the outcomes of elections, including the issues, the distress of people, the personal charisma and trustworthiness of the candidate, and the honesty of the election process. If we explain winning elections only on financial means to buy voters through lavish spending or cash handouts, we have to remember that Marcos had all these advantages in the 1986 snap elections—he had the army, the money to buy voters, the patronage resources, control of Comelec, the Batasang Pambansa, the bureaucracy and his cronies' wealth— and yet he lost. The cheating in the counting of votes was not accepted by the people. It sparked a popular revolution.

Massive election spending smacks of Marcos' style of winning elections. It reminds voters of his methods. The voters cannot accept the proposition that their votes are being bought by rich politicians. They want change, but they don't want prototypes of Marcos or of the reviled President Macapagal-Arroyo to be their next president. Villar has to show he has more to offer and that he can be trusted to give good government instead of piles of cash.

**By Amando Doronila**

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