

Philippine Elections 2007: padding and shaving

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Nearly three weeks after election day, there are still no definitive results for the Philippine elections to the Senate and House of Representatives. Counting is still continuing and in a number of provinces it has not even begun.

This has nothing to do with inefficiency and everything to do with ballot-rigging. The Philippines is one of the most corrupt 'democracies' in the world. During the 2004 presidential election, the victory of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo was widely attributed to large-scale fraud. A tape was massively circulated of a conversation between the President and Virgilio Garcillano, head of Comelec, the national election commission. Arroyo was heard addressing him familiarly, 'Hello Garci', and the election chief proudly assured her that he would guarantee her a million-vote majority.

The diffusion of the tape led to widespread protests and attempts to impeach Arroyo, which failed because the opposition was unable to secure the necessary number of votes in Congress. One of the things at stake in these elections is to prevent the opposition winning enough seats to change that. That would require it to win eight of the twelve (out of twenty-four) Senate seats that are up for re-election. It is not looking good for Arroyo. Current estimates of the votes counted give the pro-Arroyo Team Unity (TU) just two seats, with eight going to the Genuine Opposition (GO) slate, and two to independents. At least one of these, retired army officer and serial coup plotter Gregorio 'Gringo' Honasan, is no friend of Arroyo. He is currently awaiting trial for an alleged coup attempt last year.

Fraud occurs throughout the country, as elections take place under the sway of 'guns, goons and gold'. By intimidation and/or bribery, the contents of ballot boxes are changed. Some candidates' votes are 'shaved'(reduced), others are 'padded'(increased). Indeed in some particularly blatant cases, no actual voting takes place. Ballots are filled in with the names of the appropriate candidate by the local warlord or corrupt village chief and handed over to the election authorities.

But much of the fraud is concentrated in the southern island of Mindanao, the second biggest in the Philippines. Mindanao and the adjacent islands has been the scene of armed conflict for more than thirty years. The resulting instability largely favours election-rigging. Populations have been displaced, accurate records of the number of voters are unavailable or intentionally concealed. The heavy presence of the army and police (two-thirds of the Philippine armed forces are concentrated in Mindanao) does nothing to guarantee fair elections, quite the contrary. At present, counting still has to begin in seven provinces of Mindanao. This is a common feature of Philippine elections, and these late counts are used to 'adjust' the overall results and increase the votes of pro-government candidates.

A glance at the country's main newspaper, the Philippine Daily Inquirer, provides daily evidence of cheating. One of the most picturesque concerns the island province of Basilan, off the coast of Mindanao. Teachers assigned to supervise the elections were taking ballot papers over in a motor boat. They were surprised to be accompanied by armed goons in the hire of a local mayor. Half way

across, these men ordered the ferryman to stop, confiscated the ballot papers at gunpoint and began to fill them in with the name of their candidate. Only heavy waves forced them to stop and continue in a house on the island. Voters in the precincts concerned never saw a ballot paper.

All 252 seats in the House of Representatives are up for re-election. Most are elected in constituencies, and Arroyo is fairly sure of winning a majority by hook or by crook. But 20 per cent are allocated to party lists, by proportional representation. Previously used mainly by radical left groups unable to compete financially in the constituencies, this election has seen a flurry of government-inspired 'parties' take part. The votes of the really independent party lists are particularly vulnerable to fraud, and they have to try and physically protect their votes up to the time of the proclamation of the results.

In Mindanao, the radical left party list Anak Mindanao (Amin), which fights for peace and cooperation between the 'tri-people' of the island (Muslim Moros, indigenous peoples, Christian settlers and their descendants), and which has at present one Congressman, is having to combat widespread fraud. Votes in its bastions are being attributed to government-sponsored party lists that no one in Mindanao has heard of - including a Manila-based list of...tricycle drivers.