

Philippines: Notes on the May 10 elections

Sunday 23 May 2010, by [MELENCIO Sonny](#) (Date first published: 17 May 2010).

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THE MAY 10, 2010 ELECTION has been bandied about as the cleanest and the most peaceful election since the restoration of this exercise after the fall of the Marcos dictatorship in 1986. This is attributed to the computerized election which ensured the quick counting of votes so that there would be no sufficient time for any of the trapo (traditional politician) to cheat the votes.

However, there have been many reported election irregularities according to independent organizations which observed the elections. These include the distribution of 'faulty' compact flash (CF) cards which delayed the voting and transmission of results; the failure of several Board of Election Inspectors to use ultraviolet lamps to verify the authenticity of the ballots; the actual number of disenfranchised voters (from 2.5 million to five million mostly first-time voters according to the watchdog Kontra Daya); and the many reports of malfunctioning precinct count optical scan (PCOS) machines.

Even the camp of former President Joseph Estrada, who's tailing behind Benigno 'Noynoy' Aquino Jr., claimed that the compact flash cards and memory cards had been preprogrammed to certain candidates who bought them for fees for as much as P30 million. Estrada's lawyers are now demanding that the flashcards be examined during the canvassing in Congress slated next week.

But the votes for Noynoy Aquino look believable from all accounts. With Noynoy just waiting for the proclamation, we are now ushering in a new administration that carries with it the mantle of the seemingly incorruptible regime of Cory Aquino, the mother of Noynoy and the saint-like icon who governed the country for six years immediately after the Marcos dictatorship. People's euphoria will not be like the initial years of Cory's, but there will surely be a honeymoon period between the broad ranks of Noynoy supporters, including the more than 14 million people who voted for him, and the administration that Noynoy will set up.

Will Noynoy's administration be able to govern under a formidable opposition now composed of Arroyo's Lakas-Kampi-CMD party? Will Noynoy compromised his declared intent to persecute the Arroyos for cases of plunder and crimes against the people? Will Noynoy reverse the disastrous economic and fiscal policies pursued by the Arroyo government to the detriment of the Filipino people? All these remain to be seen when Noynoy starts to form his own cabinet machinery; but this early, many have noticed that Noynoy himself or some of his advisers have started to talk about recruiting in his cabinet the likes of Gibo Teodoro (Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's presidential

candidate) and some others in the Arroyo camp. There is a strong possibility that Noynoy and his camp may strike some deals with the Arroyo camp and with other trapo clans to mitigate the division among factions of the elite and to ensure the stability of the state.

Noynoy's victory

Noynoy's victory is a confirmation that the main issue in the election was the high-handed corruption of the Arroyo regime. People voted for Noynoy because they were sick and tired of the never-ending cases of graft and corruption involving the Arroyo family and their sycophants. Noynoy's campaign slogan "Kung walang corrupt, walang mahirap" may not be true (as poverty emanates not mainly from corruption but from class exploitation and class rule) - but it rings the bell and has attracted a broad number of people to support Noynoy in the election.

Conrado De Quiros, in his column at *Philippine Daily Inquirer* today, even called Noynoy's running as "an Edsa [feat] masquerading as an election" as it mobilized people not only to vote for Noynoy but to vote for the ending of nine years of misrule, or illegitimate rule, of the Arroyo regime. Calling Noynoy's campaign an Edsa (or a 'people power election') is plain too much, but the fact is that Noynoy won on the strength of anti-Arroyo sentiment. During the election, this was also proven in the trouncing of Justice Secretary Raul Gonzales, Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita, General Hermogenes Esperon, Jocelyn 'Jocjoc' Bolante, who, among others, were all well-known Arroyo henchmen.

During the campaign, it was not only Noynoy who represented the people's ire against Arroyo. 'Erap' Estrada also thrived on it, and the fact that he landed number two in the counting despite his perennial number three status in the surveys proved the validity of the anti-Arroyo sentiments. What Erap lacks was media support, and it was this support that catapulted Noynoy to a very early lead in the surveys and in the people's minds. The media campaign for Noynoy started immediately after Cory's body had been laid to rest on August 5, 2009, or nine months before the elections. After this, almost not a day passed that Noynoy was not mentioned in the media, or graciously featured in the ABS-CBN TV stations that supported his presidential campaign to the hilt.

Trapos galore

However, the main beneficiaries of the anti-Arroyo votes were also the trapos in opposition to Arroyo. Most of them are not even consistent opposition as they were formerly allied with Arroyo and the administration party. They only jumped ship when they thought Arroyo's ship was already sinking. Take the top 12 senatorial winners in the election. All of them belong to the trapo clans. All, except Ferdinand 'Bongbong' Marcos Jr., the son of dictator Ferdinand, were former senators who are now making a comeback. The surnames of the top winners represent the trapo clans which have been well-entrenched in various parts of the country (except for Drilon who has just started a trapo career of his own): Revilla (Cavite), Estrada (San Juan), Defensor-Santiago (Quezon City), Enrile (Cagayan), Cayetano (Taguig), Recto (Batangas), Sotto (Cebu), Marcos (Ilocos Norte), Osmeña (Cebu), Lapid (Pampanga), and Guingona (Bukidnon).

The only non-trapo Left candidate who was running close to the 'magic 12' is Risa Hontiveros, a former Congress representative from the Akbayan Party List. Hontiveros' rise to number 13, bypassing even other senior trapos, is by itself phenomenal. This is proof enough that the Left has a chance of taking on top electoral position. As number 13, Hontiveros might still make it if she is allowed to fill up the vacancy in the Senate with the ascension of Senator Noynoy Aquino to the

presidency. But the ungrateful trapo senators who have won through massive trapo machinery and buying of votes have already decided to exclude her even if there has been a precedent for this - in a previous election in 2001, the number 13 senatorial candidate (Gregorio Honasan) was taken in due to the promotion of then Senator Tito Guingona to the vice-presidency.

Other Left candidates such as Brig. Gen. Danilo Lim, the incarcerated military rebel, Satur Ocampo of Bayan Muna, Liza Maza of Gabriela Party List, and Atty. JV Bautista, former representative of Sanlakas in Congress, occupy lower ranks in the senatorial list of candidates.

According to some Left observers, the May 10 elections consolidated the rule of 100 political clans, more or less, starting from the presidency down to the local elective posts in the country. What does this mean? If we grant that the election were fair and square, as what the Commission on Election and the government always say, then it would mean that the masses are still beholden to trapo candidates and to patronage politics that characterize trapo rule. This in a way constitutes the explanation of some quarters in the Left why the Left has failed miserably in the 2010 elections.

Dismal performance of the Left

However, we cannot simply blame the low level of political consciousness of the masses to account for the dismal performance of the Left in the elections. The Left had it all coming since its intervention in the elections in general failed to draw a distinction between its politics and that of the trapos.

First, a pragmatic alliance had been formed by various sections of the Left with various sections of the 'lesser evil' trapo candidates and political parties: the Reaffirmist (RA) Left established an alliance with multibillionaire Manny Villar and its trapo Nacionalista Party; the Akbayan Left and other sections of the Rejectionist (RJ) Left formed an alliance with Noynoy Aquino and the Liberal Party; JV Bautista ran under the Partido ng Masang Pilipino of former President Joseph Estrada; and so on. The only candidate that was snubbed by any section of the Left was Arroyo's anointed Gibo Teodoro who was seen by all as representing the 'most evil' or the 'principal enemy'.

Secondly, while others may argue that there is nothing wrong with striking an alliance with the 'lesser evil' or with the 'secondary enemies', the alliance with sections of the 'lesser' trapos prevented the Left from projecting its own unadulterated platform. It came to the point that some of the Left even defended the platform of their presidential candidate as the "most patriotic and progressive", as in the case of the RAs support to Manny Villar. The Left was not only inundated by trapo-style campaigns - the personal bickerings and mud-slingings, the show-biz mindless glitz, the extravagant and costly paid advertisements, etc. - at worst, the Left also joined the fray. At best, their campaigns promoted some reasonable demands, although couched in motherhood platitudes.

The Left's strategy in the elections became mired with pragmatism. Critical voices now coming from among the RAs call it Right opportunism. The strategy merely aimed at gaining material and political advantages that translate into funds and possible posts in the bureaucracy. Instead of aiming to expose the bankruptcy of the election, the rottenness of trapo politics, and the debauchery and shenanigans of the elite; instead of highlighting the difference between the Left's platform and program compared to that of the trapos and the elite - funds and resources or posts in the bureaucracy became the overarching aim of intervening in the bourgeois election.

What would it matter had the Left won with this kind of pragmatic strategy? We might have posts in the government but the masses would not have learnt a thing about the moribund character of bourgeois rule and politics. It would not contribute to the development of class consciousness,

struggles and experiences of the masses. If we intend to come to power through lies and subterfuges, or through an alliance with the forces that we are in fact intending to depose in a revolution, then we have no right to call ourselves revolutionaries. Opportunists perhaps, as the RA critics of the Villar alliance are now calling the architects of this deplorable alliance.

Limitations of the bourgeois electoral system

Thirdly, while we acknowledge the problem with this 'pragmatic' approach to bourgeois election, we have to say that the issue goes beyond the pragmatism of the Left forces. The nature of the bourgeois election goes against the nature of the revolution; it is the method by which the next batch of representatives of the elite gets to take their seats as the new executive committee of the ruling class. It is the manner by which trapos are reproduced on a fever-pitch scale. The bourgeois electoral system itself has a built-in defect that is disadvantageous to the working class masses. The electoral system has been perfected to the extent that it systematically blocks all attempts of the Left and the socialist forces to use the electoral arena to capture crucial posts in the state machinery. The Left understands this, and this is probably the reason why pragmatism has a sway among the Left during periods of election.

So far for the Left, the only possible opening in the parliamentary structure has been the party list system. This was one of the lasting gains brought about by the dismantling of the Marcos dictatorship through the Edsa uprising. The party list groups are mandated by law to join the elections and to elect representatives coming from the so-called marginalized sectors of society. But the party list system has its severe limitation; it could only acquire 20% of the seats in Congress, or 53 seats in a 268-member Congress.

Up until 2007, the Left and all other party list groups could only send up to 20 members in Congress. In 2007, the rules had been relaxed to allow the filling up of the 53 seats, although it was also in the 2007 elections that the Arroyo regime launched a demolition operation to decimate the number of Left representatives in the parliament by fielding a number of administration-supported party list organizations.

Because the Left and the marginalized sectors were only considered as trimmings in a trapo-dominated and trapo-controlled Congress, the former could not even sponsor pro-people bills that would pass in the legislative body's second reading. For the Left, Congress has simply become a source of funds (from 'pork barrel') and other resources that ordinary trapos receive and enjoy in the course of their duties. The only difference is that the Left is using them to expand their ranks and to undertake campaigns for its mass forces.

Trillanes opening

While the Left make do with the openings in the lower house of Congress, one military rebel was able to crash into the halls of Senate, the upper house of the legislature. Navy Lt. Sonny Trillanes was elected senator in 2007 despite being in jail for organizing a military mutiny in 2003 (he's still in jail). Everyone knows that Trillanes won also because of the anti-Arroyo sentiment of the masses.

This was the feat that jailed military rebels Brig. Gen. Lim and Col. Ariel Querubin were trying to duplicate by running as senators, but the Trillanes factor failed to materialize in the polls. This could be attributed to a number of factors: one of which may be the Trillanes example itself, which means that if Lim and Querubin win, it would be a 'waste of vote' all over again since like Trillanes, the two

could also not function as senators while they are in jail. On a negative point, the Trillanes example was also about the failure to use the Senate to project continuing resistance against Arroyo rule and the elite rule in general. Trillanes' continued incarceration and his attempt to justify a senator's work with the number of bills he had authored while in detention actually worked to his disadvantage. He simply could not blend in or keep up with the humdrum work of the Senate given his predicament, and yet he was expected by the masses to be more daring, radical and bombastic in his dealings with the Arroyo regime.

Anti-trapo campaign at the local level

By merely focusing on the sidelines of electoral politics - i.e., concentrating on party list intervention or tail-ending dubious alliances with trapo forces - the Left failed to project itself as a serious independent force that could contest bourgeois rule. On the other hand, progressive individuals not belonging to any organized Left forces have taken the lead in concretely contravening trapo rule in their areas, like Fr. Ed 'Among Ed' Panlilio and Grace Padaca who ran in 2007 as governors in Pampanga and Isabela, respectively, and won through people's power-type of electoral intervention.

Panlilio and Padaca lost in today's election, but this just got to show not only how well-entrenched the trapos are, but how much problematic it was to maintain and manage a reform platform in the midst of the dominant and dominating trapo politics. The reforms that Panlilio and Padaca tried to introduce were hemmed in by the non-support of the national bourgeois government and the unrelenting sabotage of the trapo forces (composed of several mayors and other influential capitalist and landlord forces) in their provinces.

In the 2010 election, another model for the Left was the campaign launched by Ric Reyes, a Left leader who ran for mayor in Pasig City. The campaign was commendable for its uncompromising politics. Reyes ran under a transitional platform that highlighted his activist bearings and his socialist politics. His rival came from the main trapo clan of the Eusebios, which was considered a warlord clan in Pasig, the alleged mastermind of the killings of political opponents and the coddler of the drug syndicate in the city. Reyes lost the elections, but managed to get 20% of the votes which was substantial considering the high-level type of political campaigning he did in a warlord-dominated city.

Latin American electoral strategy

In a letter to a comrade residing in Bolivia, I mentioned that our party the PLM (Partido Lakas ng Masa) was adopting the Latin American electoral strategy of building local bases first in order to contest the national leadership in future elections. The comrade replied that this was not the Latin American strategy at all.

The strategy, he said, was not focused on building local bases first, but on preparing the capacity to contest the presidency through a broad alliance of progressive and socialist forces. It means using the strength of the mass movement, and in some cases the mass uprising, to force the scenario of changing the bourgeois leaders of the land by the combined forces of the Left, the social movements, and the broad progressive forces. These have been the experience, according to him, of the electoral victory that brought Hugo Chavez and Evo Morales into power in Venezuela and Bolivia, respectively.

Here in the Philippines, it is surprising to see that the Latin American electoral strategy is being

practiced not by the Left but by such organization as Kapatiran, a middle-class based (read: petty-bourgeois) party with strong support from the Catholic Church hierarchy. Kapatiran has run a high-profile campaign on its platform (the right to life, or anti-abortion, is a crucial campaign pitch), and it has fielded candidates from the presidency down to senators and other local seats. Its daring electoral stance and projection made its presidential candidate a contender in almost all presidential debates organized by media and civic organizations. Through these highly-publicized events, also shown on several television channels and aired on several radio programs, the Kapatiran candidates were given a full hearing and were able to elaborate on their platforms. By contesting the top post, they were able to expand their ranks, build networks, and increase their projection as a contending group. While this is happening, the Left has been marked out in the sidelines, doing deals with the trapos in order to carry out its peripheral campaigning. Imagine what the Left could have done had it aspired to intervene ala-Kapatiran?

From boycottism to pragmatism and back?

Given the nature of bourgeois election and the limitation of the bourgeois electoral system, the Left can always take a choice between two options of boycotting the election or intervening in the election. The latter has always been the debate when the Left was mainly (not solely) the Communist Party of the Philippines with its Maoist upbringing. Time has moved on, and both the RA Left and the RJ Left (as well as the Left of other traditions too) have taken a participatory stance with regard to post-Edsa elections.

The Left has to acknowledge that to intervene in bourgeois elections means to tread on tricky ground by balancing between the objectives of winning electoral seats and raising the level of the consciousness of the masses. Some of the critical voices within the RAs have now raised anew the issue of participating in the 2010 elections as this has “deflected [their] strategic march” towards a strategic stalemate of the guerrilla war in the Philippine countryside [1].

I think the Left should assess its intervention in the 2010 elections, including the previous elections, to learn its lessons well. But in a quick response, I am reminded of Plekhanov’s assessment of the failed 1905 revolution in Russia and Lenin’s classic reply. Plekhanov said, “The working class should not have bore arms”; Lenin replied, “On the contrary, they should have bore more arms”. To paraphrase: We should shun the idea that we should not have contested the elections; on the contrary, we should have contested it more. It means we should have aimed at the top, and should have stayed focus till we get to the top.

By Sonny Melencio

May 17, 2010

Footnotes

[1] See <http://bulatlatan.multiply.com/reviews/item/43>