

Brief Description of the Current Philippine Situation - IV - After the Elections

Monday 16 May 2016, by [DE SILVA Raymund](#) (Date first published: 14 May 2016).

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The Context

It has been five (5) days since the national and local elections in the country and yet the final conclusion has still to be reached. The Commission on Election (COMELEC) sitting en banc, as the National Board of Canvassers (NBOC) has announced that they are going to proclaim the winning candidates on the national level on May 17 or 19 of this year. The NBOC will proclaim the 12 winning Senators and more than 50 Party List Representatives. The Congress (House of Representatives and the Senate) sitting as one body will canvass the voting results for the President and Vice-President respectively and formally proclaim the winners on the last week of this month.

As of this writing, the canvassing of voting results has reached 96.5 percent of the total votes casted last May 9, 2016. More than a million votes has still to be counted including the 17,657 votes coming from 14 municipalities and 55 barangays in Mindanao and Visayas which had been declared failure of elections due to security and technical reasons.

Almost all of the local candidates have been proclaimed winners. These include members of the House of Representatives (District Representatives), governors and vice-governors including the members of the provincial legislative bodies, the mayors (cities and municipalities) and the vice-mayors including the members of the cities and municipal legislative councils. Formal proclamation had also included the Governor and Vice-Governor of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) including the members of its Regional Legislative Assembly.

While there has been no formal proclamation yet on the final results of the Presidential elections, Davao City Mayor Rodrigo R. Duterte has been recognized by everybody as the runaway winner. He got the mandate of almost 40% of the voters on the Election Day. He has more than 16 million votes which is a mile ahead of the second runner candidate (administration candidate - Mar Roxas). All other presidential candidates had already conceded their defeats and had sent their congratulatory greetings to the presumptive President Duterte saying his victory is the victory of the Filipino people. Some of the world leaders have already sent their greetings to the president-elect even with no formal proclamation yet-breaking diplomatic protocols.

It is altogether a very different situation with regards to the vice-presidential race. It is still a neck-to-neck battle between the administration's candidate Congresswoman Leni Robredo and Senator Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr.-the only son and a namesake of the ousted dictator Ferdinand E. Marcos. Currently, Robredo is leading the young Marcos by a very slim margin of 225,226 votes with

still more than a million votes to be canvassed including those coming from the Absentee Overseas Workers. Since the second day after the elections, Robredo has been leading Marcos by overtaking the latter's lead of more than a million votes during the early period of counting. Such development prompted the Marcos' camp to raise complaint of possible irregularities in the pattern of vote counting. Their complaint albeit informal, has been re-enforced when the SMARTMATIC- a Venezuelan computer company, which won the bidding for the supply of the instruments used in the voting counting machines (VCMs)-Specialist mentioned that there was its intervention in the COMELEC Transparency Server to correct some topographical errors. But it (SMARTMATIC) claimed that it was just a cosmetic change and did not affect the counting of the votes. The so-called cosmetic change became more serious when the COMELEC claimed that it did not give its approval to the SMARTMATIC move. The timing of the cosmetic correction corresponds to the observations of the Marcos camp of the time when its lead began to decrease over the votes of Robredo.

Currently, the two camps and the COMELEC have been focusing on the points raised by Senator Bongbong Marcos. But as the day of the formal proclamation by Congress of the new President and Vice-President of the country is fast approaching, the Duterte-Marcos tandem is becoming bleaker.

With regards to the Senatorial race, the first 10 slots are becoming firmer and final. With the more than a million votes still to be counted the contested slots will be for the last two slots (11th and 12th). Only 12 senators are elected this year. At this point, it will be safe to mention that there will be 5 or 6 senators coming from the Liberal Party (LP), 3 or 4 Independent Senators, 2 Senators from United Nationalist Alliance (UNA) and 1 from the Nationalist People's Coalition (NPC). Two (2) re-electionists Senators (Senator Serge Osmeña and Senator TG Guingona) did not make to the magic 12.

The just concluded elections in the country once again reinforced the belief that machineries and resources (technical and financial) did matter. It will be different of course in the case of the President-elect Duterte. But those who won in both national and local positions have maximized their machineries and their resources especially finances to effectively use all forms of media including social media to project themselves and increased tremendously the level of people's awareness of their candidacies. Those candidates who have less resource and machineries often times were not able to project their political platforms and could not have a fairer chance to match the rich candidates. This development can be clearly seen in the case of the elections of the Party List Representatives. The top scorers of this system are those whose nominees are either millionaire or even billionaires (case of AKO BICOL-number 1 scorer of the PL system-and its first nominee is connected with a big construction firm in Bicol. And another case is the 1-PACMAN PL whose first nominee is a billionaire businessman). The other Party List who have won are those which are controlled by political dynasties including Anak Mindanao or AMIN whose first nominee is the wife of the ARMM incumbent governor. The few others who made it to the winning list are those with strong and widespread machineries and effective advocacies like the Makabayan Block.

This is a broad picture of the composition of those who will represent the marginalized and voiceless sectors of the country.

The results of the local elections are also revealing because many of those who won from the mayors up to the governors are those identified by the ruling coalition-the Liberal Party and Akbayan. Vote buying was so widespread and rampant. Money was literally and figuratively flooding the streets especially a day before and the actual election day. Alliances and commitment of support of candidates had been readjusted and realigned which explains why the overwhelming presidential choice of Duterte is a foregone conclusion.

The senatorial candidacies of people like Walden Bello and Neri Colmenares whose strong and

consistent advocacy for good governance and commitment of pro-people economic programs and political reforms are beyond question have no chance in making it to the Senate. People have elected new leaders that promote elite politics and political dynasty and neo-liberal globalized economy remains the same. The new administration can either continue and strengthen such policies and programs or can make some substantial reforms for the people who overwhelmingly put them into office in the firm beliefs and unwavering hope that change can indeed happen.

I. The Duterte's Presidency

The people have spoken and they made sure that it will be heard throughout the four corners of the country and of the world. In fact the voters turn out was the highest (81%) in the Philippine election history. It should be recalled that the turn out of the 2016 elections when the outgoing president Benigno Simon Aquino III was elected was only 71% and in 2013 (mid-term elections) was 77% turn out. People from all walks of life had made sure that their voice through their votes would be heard and be counted by patiently queuing in their respective polling precincts to cast their votes.

Mayor Rodrigo Duterte was voted by people from all the classes in the society. In fact, the higher the class the higher the votes he got compared to all his opponents.

Duterte has the highest votes in the country's history of Presidential elections, that whatever sinister plan to block his candidacy was overwhelmingly thwarted. His seemingly unstoppable victory as shown in the pre-poll surveys had made not a few economic elites and the ruling political parties very uneasy. Some global powers including the United States of America do not feel comfortable with Duterte's presidency. This explains the panic mode of the administration and the last minutes "below the belt" attacks against his (Duterte's) person coming from attack dogs and their principals who definitely would not want the perks and privileges they enjoy under the second Aquino presidency to be affected and discontinued. Reliable sources would even reveal that if Duterte will only lead the administration's candidates by 10% they were prepared to change that lead in favor of the latter.

But the people simply would not want to give up their hope to immediately and sustainably end their predicament and extreme desperation under the current administration. They strongly expressed their voice for change and they want to have it now notwithstanding the non formal proclamation of Duterte.

President-elect Rodrigo Duterte has made history because he is the first president of the country coming from the south-Mindanao. And as the 16th President of the country since 1935, he and his team prepare themselves to hit the ground running.

Presumptive President Duterte will become the president of more than 100 million peoples on the afternoon of June 30, 2016 after he officially take his oath as the President of the Republic until 2022.

At this period he has already formed his Transition Team and Selection Committee, an indicator of the consultative nature and collectiveness in making his decision in his administration.

A strong manifestation that his 6 years administration will be open and transparent is its prioritization of the approval of the long-delayed Freedom of Information (FOI) Bill mothballed in Congress for years.

Duterte has revealed that the composition of his cabinet will be gender-balanced and sensitive. He

will appoint young and committed people into his cabinet and those who are not involved and tainted in anyway regarding corrupt practices or corruption cases.

II. Economic Agenda of Duterte's Administration

Duterte's economic team has already made a broad picture of his economic agenda (8-point Economic Agenda) which are the following:

1. Continue and maintain the current macro-economic policies. However, reforms in tax revenue collections efforts will be complimented by reforms within the bureaucracy of the top collecting agencies (Bureau of Internal Revenue-BIR) and the Bureau of Customs-BOC).
2. Accelerate infrastructure spending by addressing among others-major bottlenecks in the Private-Public Partnership (PPP) program. Maintain the target of setting aside 5% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) to infrastructure spending.
3. Ensure attractiveness of the Philippines to foreign direct investments by addressing restrictive economic provisions in the Constitution and our laws and enhancing competitiveness like "ease of doing business".
4. Pursue genuine agricultural development strategy by providing support services to small farmers to increase their productivity, improve their market access and develop the agricultural value chain by forging partnership with agri-business firms.
5. Address the bottlenecks in our land administration and management system.
6. Strengthen the basic education system and provides scholarship for tertiary education which are relevant to the needs of the private sectors' employees.
7. Improve the income tax system to enable those who earn little to have more money in their pockets.
8. Expand and improve implementation of the Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) program.

According to Duterte's Economic Team, these agenda have been the results of consultations among various stakeholders throughout the country.

In the main, the economic agenda of the new administration is to continue to develop and improve better the neo liberal program of the past Philippine administrations. Duterte's Economic Team is headed by businessman Carlos "Sonny" Domiguez his classmate and close friend and one of the authors of President Fidel Ramos' Philippine 2000 Economic Program.

The early announcement of the economic agenda is to remove altogether the uneasiness felt within and among the foreign and local business communities. And true enough the peso currency strengthens (0.7%) against the US Dollar. The stock exchange has also shown upward trend (6%) increase right after the election of Duterte and the announcement of his economic agenda.

The Economic Team has emphasized that the focus of the economic agenda will be the removal of opportunities for corruption. Efforts will be vigorous in catching people involve in corruption and immediately prosecute and put them in jail.

This early the presumptive president and his team have announced the need of major revisions of

the 1987 Philippine Constitution. The focus of such change will be to make sure that the protectionist parts of the constitution regarding ownership of business in the country will be removed. Thus, leveling off the playing fields between the foreign and local business firms. The incoming administration has also indicated a major constitutional change in the system of government in the country. That is from Presidential with bicameral legislative body and judiciary system to Presidential unitary and parliamentary form of government.

These constitutional revisions will be done through a Constitutional Convention which means calling for the election of the National Constitutional Delegates.

Moreover, the incoming administration strongly believes that they can implement these constitutional revisions because it has just received an overwhelming mandate from the people. This simply means that the past and unpopular administrations could not do such changes without inviting nationwide protests. They (past administrations) would surely be accused of having self-interest as their motive behind such kind of initiative. So the new Duterte administration is “striking it out while the iron is hot”.

The important consideration here is the timing of the start of the Constitutional revision. There should be identification of its priorities. It should practice the principle of first thing first. This simply means that aside from constituting its new cabinet and other organizational and administrative positions and machineries, the incoming administration has to literally and figuratively organize itself in Congress. These legislative works are very basic in order to ensure to get the support of friends and allies in Congress to pass its urgent bills and pave the way for the constitutional initiatives.

As the current standing in the Senate (including the results of the 2016 elections), the following are its composition and their party affiliations. Out of 24 senators the LP has the highest number with 7 members. These include the old and newly elected senators. UNA has 5 members. There are also 5 independent senators. The Nationalist Party (NP) has 3 members. The Nationalist People's Coalition or NPC has 2 and one each for the Partido Demokratiko ng Pilipinas-Laban ng Masa or PDP-Laban-Duterte's Party and the Philippine Reform Party or PRP of Senator and losing presidential candidate Miriam Defensor.

With such composition in the Senate, it needs to have effective and brilliant alliance/coalition works for the PDP Laban to steer the Senate towards Duterte's Legislative Agenda. In fact, the urgent question here is who will be the Senate President.

With regards to the House of Representatives, it has been known that the LP dominates this part of Congress. The PDP-Laban has hardly reached 2 dozens in terms of membership in this Lower Chamber. Again, it means brilliant alliance/coalition works in order to get the effective majority in this 282 house members. In addition, the question of who will be elected as the Speaker of the House is a very important consideration. This point is decisive in the sense that impeachment process starts from the House of Representatives. This chamber also appropriates and approves the National Annual Budget of the country.

On the other hand, a very important consideration in this regard is that in the Philippine politics, the politicians specially the traditional ones tend to gravitate around the victorious president. In short, it will be expected that there will be a massive “jumping of ships” from different parties and coalitions to the PDP-Laban, the incoming ruling party. Otherwise, it is next to impossible to think about congressional leadership supporting the programs of a very popular president.

Earlier, Senator Aquilino “Coco” Pimentel III, the PDP-Laban chair and the only PDP-Laban member

in the Senate, said that while they expect a massive increase in the number of their membership in both houses of Congress, they prefer to work in coalition to push for the Legislative Agenda of the president. This kind of arrangement will not surely work in the context of Philippine politics. There is always strong tendency among politicians to be identified organizationally in a ruling party in a given period.

III. Political Agenda of the Incoming Duterte Government

The day after the elections, Duterte's votes had already indicated that he would leave his opponents miles behind.

Presumptive President Duterte with his sure victory at hand, offered his hands to all his opponents including his critics for reconciliation, healing and unity, a very unorthodox practice in Philippine politics.

He won the hearts and sympathy of many if not most media practitioners. And his activities have been closely watched. His early morning visit to the tombs of his parents had been recorded including his sobbing and begging for help from his mother asking for guidance to see him through in fulfilling his job as president of the country. His driving of a taxicab (his ways to check and be updated in the events of the City of Davao) and fetching passengers did not escape the attention of the media. He did this activity incognito and got answers from ordinary folks.

People have come to know about these activities of the incoming president through different means and ways of communications.

He has been projected as an ordinary human being and as a hands-on administrator. One could immediately recall the kind of packaging and projecting of Duterte as the president of the masses and of the people to that of the late President Ramon Magsaysay. The latter had been very popular to the masses and was able to initially solve the insurgency problem of the country at that time. But concerned observers have also become wary about this kind of projection for it might be in exchange of strong hand approach in governance and people might pay a high price for this kind of discipline.

Duterte's famous moniker is "The Punisher" so he most likely instill discipline with iron hand approach in solving the heinous crimes, drug problems and lawlessness in the country. He will use the Davao experience to make things happen in the whole country. Duterte even made his announcement to revive the death penalty in order to emphasize his point in curbing out the crimes and lawlessness through this form of extreme punishment. And there have been strong reactions from different sectors in the country including the church, very divisive move for the incoming administration.

The presumptive president's approach in peace process will still be in general the mainstreaming approach. This means that he will continue the talks with the Moro Revolutionary Fronts including the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) under the framework of one nation-state. In fact, he made known his concept of peace process with the Moro fronts, which includes the review of the Bangsamoro Basic Law (BBL), which will be done in an inclusive manner. He said during the campaign period that peace talks without Misuari (Prof. Nur Misuari is the chair of the MNLF) will not be complete. He also mentioned the Indigenous People's Agenda in any of the peace processes is very important and therefore can only be inclusive if the IPs can actively participate.

He has advocated federalism as political framework to invite the Moro fronts to directly participate in the economic and political affairs in their respective territories. It was also in this manner that he

said more possibilities for the indigenous people to have their proportionate representation and participation to directly determine their lives and their future.

The incoming President has also made clear his openness to resume the peace talks with the communist movements especially with the Communist Party in the Philippines (CPP), the New People's Army (NPA) and the National Democratic Front (NDF). In fact, in the skype conversation with Jose Maria Sison the founding chair of the CPP a few days before the elections, he (Duterte) promised to visit Sison in the Netherlands to have initial talks before his inauguration as the President of the country. This promise seems to become a reality. Duterte's spokesperson has already mentioned the presumptive president's plan to visit the Pope in Rome to personally ask for forgiveness for his curses on the Pope during the early period of the campaign. He will make the visit before June 30, 2016 which means among others is to fulfill his promised visit to Sison. Of course this last activity is not publicly announced. Earlier on, he also made a promise to release a considerable number of political detainees and agreed with Sison to have a bilateral ceasefire. Some points will be worthy of considerations with regards to these initiatives. First consideration is the tone of the CPP leadership based in the Netherlands about the release of political detainees including all NDF consultants, which seem to be a pre-condition of the resumption of the talks. There is also a some sort of reminder for the incoming Duterte' government to honor all the past agreements with the past administrations in order to proceed correctly with the plan peace talk with the new Philippine government. Still another concern is the statement of several sectors and groups identified with CPP, which in effect is criticizing the economic agenda of the incoming administration. These groups have already raised their own agenda and programs to be the only viable ones vis-à-vis Duterte's economic agenda. For instance the CPP identified groups would want to have national industrialization and implementation of genuine land reforms, which are all parts of their own transitory national democratic programs since almost four decades ago.

Currently, these kinds of sentiments have provoked negative reaction from the Duterte's team and this is not providing proper and healthy atmosphere in approaching the resumption of the peace process with the CPP. But the presumptive president is still open to offer some government positions to the CPP personalities and their allies.

CONCLUSION

The Philippines has just finished its fifth National and Local Elections since 1986. It has yet to have a final conclusion but one can already see the general political landscape of the country in the next six years.

Through these democratic activities, the people of the Philippines had elected more than 17,000 national and local officials. The methods of these electoral activities have been more of the same as in the past practices that have been controlled by the elite and traditional politicians. The difference is the use of the modern information technology to the advantage of the resource-rich politicians. Another difference is that the people's participation turned out in the actual election day had been monumental with 81% voting percentage. And the most blaring difference is that people from all classes of society want a change. This phenomenon is comparable only to the people's participation in the ouster of the Marcos dictatorship in 1986.

Now when all the dusts and smokes have begun to settle down one can already have a clearer glimpse that political dynasties have been in place once again. If there is a difference, it is a new family of politicians replacing another political families in different levels in government.

At this period, a clear choice of a president has been made with more than 16 million votes-the

highest in the history of Philippine elections.

Duterte and his team have bared their economic agenda, which in the main can be described as the continuation of the macro-economic framework of the country's economy-a Neo Liberal economic program. A promised to curve out corruption in the government is mentioned as integral part of the economic agenda of the new administration.

The incoming president and his political team are initiating peace processes with the Moro revolutionary fronts and the communist movements. The guidepost for these peace processes in order to be genuine and sustainable should be directed in solving the root causes of insurgency. The framework of the peace talks should be the elimination of economic deprivation, political oppression and cultural alienation of the vast majority of the people with multi-nationalities in character. The extreme poverty of 26.4% of people living on the annual income of USD 230 should be effectively addressed and reduced.

The continuous exodus of the workers in the country (6,092 workers leaving the country every day) to seek employment abroad because there are no job opportunities in the country should be stopped by creating more jobs through sincere rural and urban development programs. And these can only be realized not only with strong political will of the administration but with economic framework, which is not export-oriented and import-dependent.

The incoming government of Duterte should invite all the revolutionary fronts and parties to be active stakeholders in building the country for the people and for the next generations.

In the attempt to hit the ground running, the Duterte's presidency will try to organize the Congress to hasten the administration's legislative agenda. The Constitutional revisions will be the priority of Duterte in order to implement the economic and political programs of the next government.

The incoming president is very popular and no body has doubted about this fact but he must make the realization of all his promises like solving or suppressing the crimes, drug problems and social ills in 3-6 months. These should be urgently implemented or the people might get back to their old frame of mind of getting used to the politicians promises not being fulfilled. People should go back to the basic principle that in achieving real change they should defend its own interests and depend upon themselves in achieving change for themselves, for their families and for the country.

Raymund de Silva, May 14, 2016

(Last of the Four Series)
