

Instability of institutions - American elections through Filipino eyes

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Because the Philippine political system has been largely modeled after that of the United States, Filipinos have an abiding interest in knowing how the system is supposed to work. We have always looked to America for lessons on how to improve our own political processes so as to keep them aligned to the democratic ideal.

The arrival in 2016 of Donald Trump as president of the United States, however, made us rethink all that. Almost overnight, America began to look a bit like the Philippines—uncertain about the stability of its institutions, jolted by the deep resentment of many of its citizens against the political establishment, and shocked by the readiness of a president to cater to the darkest and unexamined instincts of a resentful public.

For one, it is the unusually prolonged period for counting the votes, and the public restlessness this has engendered, that has given rise to comparisons of the latest US presidential election with those from fledgling democracies. Part of this delay is due to the decision of a big number of American voters to request for mail-in ballots in view of the risks brought about by the ongoing pandemic.

The unprecedented number of voters opting for this mode of casting their ballots has brought its own problems. Some forgot to sign the form that came with the ballot. Others gave conflicting information that required verification. There were voters who requested mail-in ballots but decided at the last minute to cast their votes in person. Some ballots were postmarked within the allowable period, but failed to arrive on election day. All mail-in ballots had to be “processed” separately before they could be counted. In some states, this was done weeks or days before election day. In others, it could only be done on the day itself.

The electoral commissions of almost every state anticipated most of these possible issues. To assure them the system is working, they enabled all absentee voters to track their mailed ballots in real time. Authorized election volunteers were deployed to contact voters whose ballots needed authentication, and to ask them to help election officials “cure” these so they won’t be invalidated. Decisions were made beforehand as to when and how to process and count the mail-in ballots.

But, ignoring all these efforts to assure the public of the transparency of the system, President Trump wasted no time in questioning the legitimacy of absentee voting. He said, without showing how, that it opens a large space for committing fraud. During the presidential debates, he claimed that mailed ballots in known Republican strongholds had been seen scattered around garbage dumps, implying that sinister forces were out to sabotage the elections. He gave no proof to substantiate this reckless claim. He expressly told his supporters to vote in person, and took every opportunity to cast doubt on the validity of mailed ballots.

It was as though he was already preparing the ground to declare a failure of elections in battleground states where the presidential race was expected to be close. So familiar is this

infuriating tactic to Pinoys that the creative minds among them have recently filled social media with “Hello Garci” memes showing Trump on the phone desperately telling “Garci” to reverse the steady whittling down of his early vote lead.

Like the proverbial local politician who ascribes every defeat to electoral fraud, Trump has predictably gone to court to demand a stop to the counting in places where he is losing. He has impugned the integrity of the electoral process in those counties and states in which the results were not those he expected—even when the local officials who had oversight functions over the elections were from his own party.

He vigorously pushed for the “midnight” appointment of his nominee to the US Supreme Court, in total anticipation of the inevitability that election-related petitions would come before the high court, which he expects to vote along party lines. Asked to affirm his trust in the American electoral process, he refused to make a clear commitment that he would respect the election results. He insisted that he would do so only if he was fully convinced that the voting had been fraud-free—a strange thing for a sitting president to say.

By insinuating, again with no proof, that “they are stealing the elections” and “finding” more votes for his opponent in the crucial battleground states where he was being overtaken, he supplies his most ardent supporters with reasons to “stand by,” ready to defend the vote by their militant presence. In the process, he summons the dangerous dark twin of “people power,” which, in our own post-Edsa politics, has done much to downgrade the idea of active citizenship.

Indeed, no other president in recent American political history has tested the outer limits of democracy in the United States as much as Donald Trump. His rise to the presidency showed the weaknesses of the institutional guardrails that had hitherto kept reckless adventurers like him from entering America’s highest office.

His looming exit from the White House will hopefully energize the pushback against rightwing populism and authoritarianism everywhere. It may, however, take a while before the institutional damage he leaves behind is repaired. For, in many ways, the rise of Trump is a symptom of, as much as it is a reaction to, the failure of the structures of democratic governance to check the excesses of neoliberalism and corporate greed. It will not be enough for his successor to merely aspire to bring back the status quo before Trump.

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