

# **Elections in the Philippines: the revenge of the Marcos clan and the campaign of Leni Robredo**

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**On 9 May, the Marcos clan regained the power from which it had been excluded since the fall of the dictatorship in 1986. In counterpoint, the campaign led by Leni Robredo, who came second, opened up a space for resistance for progressive forces.**

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Many polls, local and national, are held on a general election day in the Philippines. Some are local and regional, but three are national:

- Presidential and Vice Presidential elections. These are two separate votes, so the winners may belong to two opposing parties (this has already happened several times and is precisely the case now with Rodrigo Duterte as president and Leni Robredo as vice-president [1], the latter being deprived of any role by the former).
- The renewal of half of the Senate (or upper house of Congress). It is composed of 24 members elected for 6 years, but renewable by half every 3 years: the 12 candidates with the most votes are declared elected. In the current state of voting, it seems that the only progressive candidate to be elected is Risa Hontiveros, from the Akbayan party (she is in eleventh position).
- Members of the House of Representatives (parliament) are elected by constituency but, since 1987, 20 per cent of the seats are reserved for nationally elected party lists. The original aim of this reform was to allow parties that had no chance of winning in a first-past-the-post election against the established powers to obtain MPs and represent popular social sectors. The “big” parties were not allowed to run in this election. For a while this did allow for the election of MPs from the militant left, but the traditional (trapo) politicians eventually took over and ran multiple bogus parties.

## **Democratic elections?**

The outgoing president, Rodrigo Duterte, has trivialized a regime of terror (multiplication of extrajudicial executions, arbitrary arrest of opponents [2], etc.). He has ensured the greatest impunity for the repressive forces. Recently, it has engaged in an all-out war against progressive movements in the large southern island of Mindanao. Concerning the organization of the elections, in a report published on 17 May, an observation mission mandated by the ICHRP [3] noted a number of concrete problems: a high level of malfunctioning in the electronic voting system, poor

maintenance of the electoral roll, campaigns to denigrate candidates and fake news via social networks, threats made against the “reds” (real or supposed), etc.

The use of social networks, Facebook, TikTok or Youtube by the government is reaching new heights in the Philippines, and a large part of the youth, addicted to mobile phones, is only connected in this way, especially in the working class.

## **The return of the Marcos clan**

After imposing a martial law regime in 1972, Ferdinand Marcos really privatized the state apparatus to the benefit of his clan and its allies, excluding the big rival families from all power. It was not until 1986 that the dictatorship was overthrown in the “EDSA revolution” [4], combining a minority military rebellion with a vast popular mobilization, with Marcos being exfiltrated from the country by Washington.

The return to power of the Marcos clan is therefore an event. It is the culmination of a process during which several presidents gradually rehabilitated the family, hindering the prosecution of Imelda Marcos, Ferdinand’s widow, for crimes committed during the dictatorial couple’s reign, and allowing the return of exiles to the country in 1991. It was sanctioned by the alliance forged for the 9 January elections between Ferdinand Marcos Jr, known as “Bongbong” (BBM), his father’s unrepentant son running for president, and Sara Duterte, her father’s unrepentant daughter, running for vice-president. The rallying of other important family clans made it a winning alliance.

Alliances between large families play a prominent role in the Philippine political and institutional game. The power of political dynasties is rooted in a particular province or region: Ilocos Norte for the Marcoses in the North or Davao for the Dutertes in Mindanao. They invest the parliamentary institutions, a place of permanent negotiations for the sharing of prebends.

Today, the Marcos clan is raking it in, much more so, it seems, than the Dutertes. Bongbong, a good, popular, charismatic speaker, promised much during his election campaign. It is safe to assume that the clan (and Imelda) is above all eager to re-establish its former prominence and wealth. Power and money are at the heart of elections. An election costs a lot of money and winning it must be worth a lot. Thus, the flow of money that elected officials control allows them to distribute lucrative positions and to feed patronage networks, creating a deeper relationship than the simple purchase of votes (which also exists), implying a certain reciprocity to ensure a clientelist base in the long term.

The electoral fabric of the Philippines is complex. Regionalism is rooted in the geography of a mountainous archipelago and the complexities of the colonial past, as well as in cultural identities: Filipinos speak many languages and dialects. Some churches play the clientelist card to the hilt, securing entry into the spheres of power by dictating the votes of their followers. One of the major challenges for the left forces is to overcome this fragmentation of the popular strata, without trying to erase the diversity of regional histories.

This recognition of diversity is obviously particularly important where mountain people (in the north and in Mindanao) and Muslim populations (in central and southern Mindanao in particular) live.

## **Leni Robredo: the dynamics of a campaign**

The Commission on Elections (Comelec) gave 59 per cent of the vote to Bongbong and 28 per cent to Leni Robredo - the next candidate only got 7 per cent, even though he was Manny Pacquiao, a once

revered boxer turned senator. As the Comelec is not known for its probity and effectiveness in the fight against electoral fraud, one can be sure that the result credit to Leni is not overestimated.

The opposition candidate brought together votes from a variety of backgrounds. She is not a flamboyant and charismatic figure, but she ran a grassroots campaign that had a real activist momentum, with up to 20,000 people at some rallies. It was not a foregone conclusion.

Leni Robredo, a member of the Liberal Party and outgoing vice president of the Philippines, campaigned this time as an independent candidate. She was nevertheless identified with the Aquinos, whose party is the LP, although she is not related to them. However, Ferdinand Marcos (father) had Benigno Aquino assassinated in 1983 and his widow Corazon was brought to power in the “EDSA revolution” in 1986. The electoral confrontation thus seemed to be the umpteenth episode in the perpetual conflict between these two dynasties. However, a large part of the Filipino population is unaware of the dictatorship’s past, which has been systematically eradicated from memory and transformed into a mythical golden age. Instead, they have experienced the abortion of the 1986 promises of progressive reforms and the arrogant rule of the Aquino clan (based in Tarlac, Central Luzon). The presidency (2010-2016) of “Pinoy”, Benigno “Nonoy” Aquino III, was particularly discrediting. This is one of the reasons why the time had come for the Marcoses to take their revenge.

Leni Robredo managed to break out of this pre-determined framework. A human rights lawyer, she was very active in the fight against the Covid-19 epidemic, denouncing the inaction of the Duterte regime. Her personal integrity is well known. She embodied a democratic alternative to the Marcos-Duterte bloc and promoted the formation of the Pink Movement [5], which was open to numerous trade union, social and civic organizations and volunteer networks, with the active participation of many young people and the support of parties of the militant left. Given the circumstances, it seems a sign of success that the Comelec had to credit her with second place.

Another left-wing list was running with Leody De Guzman for president and Walden Bello for vice-president. Leody is a labour activist, a leader of the Partido Lakas ng Masa (PLM, Party of the Laboring Masses). Walden, a former MP for Akbayan, is well known in international anti-globalization circles. Leody is credited by the Comelec with 0.17 per cent (eighth out of ten candidates) and Walden with 0.19 per cent (seventh out of nine candidates). The specific objective of this tandem was to popularize the socialist perspective, it opened up a space for substantive discussion that activists were able to take advantage of.

It is always tricky to write an article from France on a subject as complex as the scope of elections in the Philippines until you know what the progressive forces in the Philippines are saying. The experience of Leni Robredo’s campaign should, in the eyes of the popular currents involved in it, ensure the foundations of a lasting resistance to the Marcos presidency (which will become effective on 30 June). Once again, it was not a foregone conclusion, but the momentum was there. At a rally on 13 May, Leni declared that “this day is not the end, but the beginning of a new chapter”.

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## Footnotes

[1] In the 2016 elections, Leni Robredo was elected vice-president against the candidacy of

Bongbong Marcos, son of dictator Ferdinand Marcos, who won the presidency against her this time. She was only the second woman to hold the position.

[2] The best known, incarcerated for 5 years, is Senator Leila De Lima.

[3] The International Observer Mission sponsored by the International Coalition for Human Rights in the Philippines (ICHRP).

[4] From the name of the avenue where the rebel military barracks and the demonstrators were located: Epifanio de los Santos.

[5] Pink movement - pink is the color chosen by the candidate to make her campaign more visible and to help the electorate find its way. She deliberately chose a different color from the yellow that was Corazon Aquino's in 1986 so as not to follow in his footsteps.