

Defining the May 11 Mandate

MAY 11 WAS A CRUCIAL TEST OF THE ABILITY OF THE RESTORED democratic order to allow a peaceful transfer of presidential power.

Presidential power was last transferred by peaceful constitutional means nearly three decades ago. In 1965, President Diosdado Macapagal lost his re-election bid to then Senate President Ferdinand Marcos. Amid the usual charges of fraud and intimidation, Macapagal turned over the presidency to his young and popular successor.

In 1969, using government funds freely, Marcos won over challenger Sergio Osmena, Jr. Electoral overspending forced the devaluation of the peso and upset the economy, encouraging the intensification and radicalization of political opposition. In 1972, Marcos imposed martial law. In the next year, he replaced the basic law, thereby allowing him to hold on to the presidency beyond the term of office allowed by the 1935 Constitution.

In 1981, in the face of spreading popular opposition to the autocratic regime, Marcos nominally lifted martial law and stood for elections. The major opposition groups, seeing through an obvious ploy to recycle legitimacy for an unpopular government, boycotted the elections. Marcos handily defeated a minor politician that many believed was sponsored by the autocrat to provide some semblance of an electoral contest. The political base of the Marcos dictatorship continued to erode.

In November 1985, under pressure from Washington, an ailing Marcos agreed to call for snap elections. While tolerating a snowballing opposition campaign led by Corazon Aquino, Marcos unleashed an awesome machinery of fraud and intimidation on election day. In a climate of intense polarization,

Marcos tried to steal the elections, precipitating the popular uprising of February 1986.

Six years later, Fidel Ramos, a leading participant in the uprising, topped a seven-cornered presidential race with the backing of the Corazon Aquino administration. Among his rivals for the post were Imelda Marcos, the former autocrat's widow, and Eduardo Cojuangco, a close associate of the deposed dictator.

The real surprises in the outcomes of the presidential race were the unexpectedly strong performance of Miriam Santiago, who did not have a political organization of any significance, and the unexpectedly miserable performance of Ramon Mitra, who had the backing of the largest political party formation in the field. Jovito Salonga, supported by cause-oriented groups, finished sixth. Salvador Laurel, with his severely decimated Nacionalista Party, predictably brought up the tailend.

A few things are made clear by the results.

The socio-economic changes that accumulated over the last two decades are reflected in a drastically changed electorate. Increasingly urbanized and with greater access to information, Filipino voters demonstrated a high degree of independence from the traditional brokers of votes. Both the patronage-fueled "lider" (leader) system and traditional influentials such as the churches diminished in significance as arbiters of voter decision-making. Even comparatively "new" arbiters such as the trade unions and peasant cooperatives failed to deliver "command votes" to back up their endorsed candidates.

May 11, 1992 showed a clear transformation from feudal to mass politics. Henceforth, political factions will have to reach down to the individual voter in order to win elections.

But what mandate did the electorate give the next government?

In a situation of synchronized elections, Filipino voters were found to be more engrossed with local electoral contests than they were with the national contests. There was a more discerning voting population as the presidential candidates came through to the voters as personifications of broad themes.

Ramon Mitra suffered from the image of being a "traditional politician" although he worked the public expectation for rapid rural development and relief from a high unemployment rate. Eduardo Cojuangco attracted significant support on the theme of decisive economic management although his candidacy was set back by apprehension about his record as a monopolist.

Miriam Santiago attracted voter support on her image as graftbuster. The strong support she received from voters may be read as an indictment of the old political aristocracy dominated by large landed political clans. It is important to note here that the large political clans such as the Laurels of Batangas, the Osmenas of Cebu, the Sumulong of Rizal, and the Romans of Bataan lost heavily in the last elections.

Fidel Ramos, the frontrunner, represented political stability and the continuity of the core reform policies of the Aquino administration -- trade liberalization, deregulation of the economy, and decentralization of government. The cumulative impact of these reform policies is the diminution of the traditionally extensive powers of the Philippine presidency.

Since the colonial period, Filipino politics followed a consistent pattern of increasing centralization of power in the national government apparatus and the expansion of the regulative powers of the state over economic activities. This pattern -- responsible for producing a "presidentialist" political system -- could not have been reversed by the dictatorship. It was a pattern that was finally reversed only during the Aquino period by a political leadership confident in the popular support it enjoyed.

Withdrawal of protectionist barriers was, after all, unpopular among the domestic manufacturers and the labor aristocracy in the economic sector often organized into "militant" trade unions. The devolution of executive power to the local government units, as formalized by the Local Government Code, cut into the traditional prerogatives of the Filipino president. Deregulation of the economy required that the state give up those instruments that have traditionally allowed the political aristocracy to corner the spoils of political power and reward factional supporters.

The mandate of the voters will have to be read in terms of the large votes given to the top three contenders.

Voters expect more effective and more competent management of the fundamentals that shall assure the best conditions for growth. At the same time, they reject an interventionist state and prefer a continuation of the three main policy reforms. These policy reforms imply a diminution of the actual and residual powers of government. This may, in turn, be read as preference for political pluralism combined with administrative efficiency.

The large support enjoyed by both Ramos and Santiago clearly indicate a popular rejection of the old political aristocracy and a wide public quest for a new breed of political leaders who have prepared for leadership through service in the meritocracy. The support voters have given political "outsiders" is, at the same instance, a vote against the "insider" circuit of vested interests perceived responsible for the politics of accommodation that has interfered with our nation's progress.