

A Dehydrated Electoral Contest?

Crucial as the 1992 general elections may be, the early runners have thus far failed to fire the popular imagination.

Next year's balloting shall be the first "normal" electoral exercise in more than two decades. It is important for the Philippines' democratic institutions that the electoral arena becomes the exclusive terrain for validating and legitimizing governance.

The 1969 elections was overdetermined by the untrammelled use of state resources to overwhelm the opposition. Popular disgust over the outcome of that exercise fueled the outburst of the First Quarter Storm and propelled the political polarization that characterized the next decade and a half.

The senatorial elections of 1971 was highlighted by the bombing of the Liberal Party rally at Plaza Miranda. The balloting of that year was characterized by extreme emotionalism and a very high degree of violence.

The electoral exercises during the period of the dictatorship were held largely for demonstration purposes. The outcomes of these exercises were blatantly "managed" by the autocracy and, as a consequence, encouraged popular disdain.

The popular uprising of 1986, it will be recalled, was made possible by the organization of broad political forces along the framework of partisanship for the '86 presidential elections. Popular anger over the attempt by the Marcos dictatorship to steal the elections was the most proximate cause for the insurrectionary explosion of February 1986.

The congressional elections of 1987 and the local elections of 1988 were held in the long shadow of euphoria thrown by the 1986 uprising. The dynamic of political polarization evolved through the years of resistance to the Marcos dictatorship continued to characterize the post-Marcos elections and override other factors. The elections caught the new political forces unprepared for electoral competition and saw the restoration to power of traditional political dynasties and oligarchic power brokers in many localities.

The changes in the political terrain and electoral demographics were not fully reflected in the outcomes of the two elections. In the next elections, these changes might prove too compelling to ignore.

By 1992, about a quarter of all voters shall be between the ages of 18 and 25. More than half shall be in their mid-thirties and below. A

overwhelming majority shall be forty -- the First Quarter Storm generation -- and under.

Changes in the political economy of Filipino society should reflect in the voter composition. More than half of them shall be urbanized, diminishing the power of traditional rural bailiwicks. A great number of voters shall have rotated abroad at least once as migrant

workers, constituting a significant layer of an articulate and precarious lower middle class freed from the parochial worldview that traditional power brokers feed on.

Media saturation shall be unprecedented. Radio shall have a saturation rate approaching ninety per cent, while television reach shall be in the high seventies. The latter is more compelling; and it dispenses a basically metropolitan reading of events.

The high percentages of unemployment and underemployment shall have a bearing on voter decision-making. Many voters will primarily respond to visions and programs that outline economic opportunities rather than to traditional considerations of regionalism or past partisanship.

The economic upswing expected for the second semester of this year will reflect in a

more hopeful, more forward-looking electorate. This electorate will be largely immune to the politics of character assassination and negativism that has been the stuff of past contests.

Yet in spite of the above, the main presidential contest appears, at the moment, dominated by personalities from a political

past many Filipinos would rather forget. They work on personalist issues that voters are unresponsive to. They have yet to offer a compelling view of the future that shall crystallize public optimism.

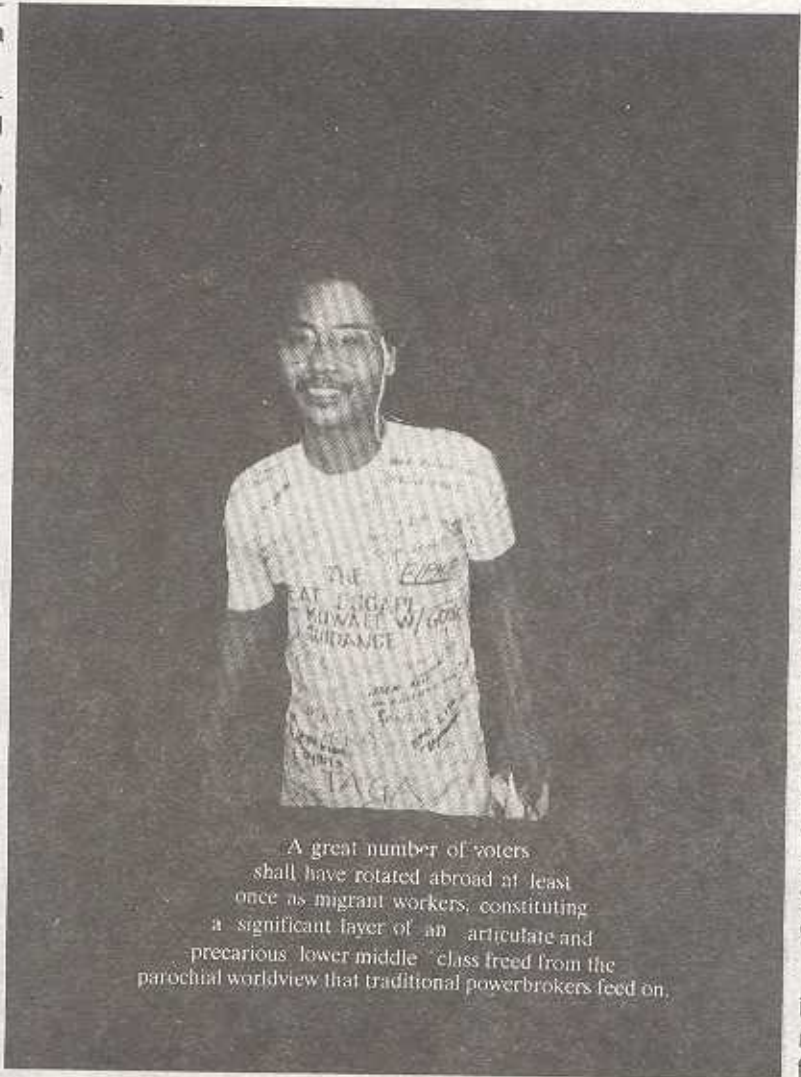
For these reasons, none of them has inspired a vigorous following. None of the frontrunners has developed a political momentum that assures it of a place in the final showdown.

At the same instance, the new political forces are mired in end-

less doctrinal debates about electoral participation. They are in imminent danger of becoming irrelevant to the forthcoming electoral exercise.

The 1992 elections shall either be a dehydrated exercise featuring old faces and a disinterested electorate; or, a critical turning point featuring the rapid rise of new faces and the crystallization of new constituencies.

It is too early to tell.



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