

## **The Transformation of Filipino Elections**

On the surface, the electoral process currently underway appears to be dominated by old faces and traditional forces.

But before dismissing the process too hastily as nothing more than a repeat performance of oligarchic politics, the discreet changes that have happened and that now figure in the electoral battle ought to be reviewed more closely.

The electoral financing pattern for this campaign departs quite radically from the patterns characterizing elections before the intervention of the dictatorship. Primary financiers during the sixties were logging concessionaires and plantation owners. They invested in elections to acquire licences for extractive economic activities or protect existing land ownership forms.

Changes in Philippine political economy have marginalized the importance of the plantation-based power blocs. The devastation of Philippine forests has made it futile for concessionaires to invest in political influence. Much of the electoral financing figuring in the current electoral contest comes from urban-based economic sectors: the mercantile sector, manufacturing, finance, as well as the "gray economy."

These economic changes have reflected in the organization and electoral behavior of the contending groups. Urban-sourced financing (including access to state funds) has strengthened the control of the central party organizations. In the past, provincial elites played a controlling role in the candidate selection process because of their role in the electoral financing structure. For this election, central party organizations actually finance the candidacies for local posts of provincial supporters. Unable to finance their own candidacies, rural elites (who also control a smaller share of the national vote) submit to the alignments of urban-based players.

The character of electoral machines has also been profoundly affected by changes in the larger political economy.

Before, electoral machines were basically alliances of landed elites. Today, political party machines are professionally-run organizations that attempt to include as broad a range of economic and sectoral interests as possible. The new form of the political party organizations was necessitated by the fragmentation and diversification of the Filipino economic elites as well as the rise of significant new constituencies.

Modern political party machines broker constituencies independent of the economic elites and modulate contending interests within the party framework. On this aspect, the major political party groups -- particularly the *Laban ng Demokratikong Pilipino* (LDP: Fight of the Democratic Filipino) -- appear to be moving on a trajectory towards the pattern exhibited by such parties as the UMNO in Malaysia, the Golkar in Indonesia, the PAP in Singapore, the Kuomintang in Taiwan, and the Japanese LDP. These parties mediate social interests within the party framework and prevent sharp breaks in policy resulting from electoral changes in the actual governing elites.

Functioning as a buffer organization between the social interests and the policymakers, such party organizations assure both continuity in basic policies and increased autonomy for the bureaucracy. The political wars of contending economic blocs are fought within the political party organization rather than in the terrain of direct governance. Over the longer term, the emergence of large party organizations free from the hegemony of specific economic blocs will encourage the development of "professional" politicians.

There are no major ideological questions to be settled in this elections. A broad national consensus has quietly formed on the key issues: decentralization, economic liberalization, and a smaller sphere for state intervention. The details of these points of consensus shall be left to the technocrats and the skilled legislators to actualize.

The governing elite will increasingly become the product of political promotion through the party organization rather than on the basis of traditional political families. Promotion up the party ranks will be largely on the basis of personal merit rather than of economic power. This will contribute to the erosion of the oligarchic character of the governing elite over the longer term.

Because of this trend, certain basic things have become quite clear at the early stages of the current electoral campaign. The more ideologically distinct a political grouping is, the narrower its support will tend to be. The more pluralist a political organization, the wider its electoral base.

The business of winning elections in the Philippines will increasingly become a matter for electoral technicians to solve.