

“Redefining” Democracy through Electoral Politics

Kasarinlan’s “Electoral Politics 1” (volume 19, number 2 [2004]) issue highlighted the electoral experiences of selected Asian countries—i.e., Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, India, and the Philippines—in light of addressing the “democratic deficit” that exists between the elected and the electorate, mainly the “marginalized” in society. The “Electoral Politics 2” issue revisits the electoral experiences of Asian countries, with particular focus on how democracy is being “redefined” through electoral politics in their particular societies, namely, Thailand, South Korea, and Malaysia.

Park Young-Key’s article, “An Analysis on the 17th General Elections of South Korea,” examines the 17th general elections (April 15, 2004) of South Korea, which points out that elections affected the manner in which Korean democratic politics has been carried out. Most significant is “the entry of more liberals, newcomers, the younger generation, and more women in the National Assembly.” Moreover, it also witnessed the weakening, if not the eradication, of regionalism. There is thus optimism that more reform-oriented liberal policies will be implemented, which will be more congruent to the Korean people’s aspiration for further democratization.

Thailand, however, does not share the Korean optimism. In her article, “The 2005 General Elections in Thailand: Toward a One-Party Government,” Siripan Nogsuan points out that “money politics” has taken over Thailand’s party politics. This was made possible by the country’s 1997 Constitution. Big money has taken advantage of the mass media, the professionalization of the electoral campaign, and vote

buying, among others to win the elections. What has emerged is a one-party system as epitomized by Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's *Thai Rak Thai* Party. Siripan sees this as a setback to the democratization process in Thailand.

Money politics also plays a key role in electoral politics in Malaysia as argued by Francis Kok Wah Loh in his article, "The March 2004 General Elections in Malaysia: Looking Beyond the 'Pak Lah' Factor." Money is part of the 3-Ms in Malaysian electoral politics, the other two of which are media and machinery. The 3-Ms go together with the rise of "developmentalism" as a new political culture that impacts on elections. This political culture highlights economic growth and consequently consumerist habits which Malaysian society has equated with political stability under *Barisan Nasional* (BN) rule. Loh argues that these factors, together with the fragmentation of ethnic groups in the country, have debunked the view that the electorate votes candidates along ethnic lines which spells the success of the Barisan Nasional, a multiethnic coalition.

The role of the media, which is also highlighted in Thai electoral politics, also finds relevance in Malaysian elections. Mustafa K. Anuar's article, "Politics and the Media in Malaysia," argues that the manipulation of the mainstream media by the ruling party was made more apparent during the recent general elections. This was mainly manifested by the nature of media reporting during that period, which sought to protect and promote the interests of the BN coalition party. One factor that made this possible was the concentration of media ownership in the ruling coalition's cronies. As for members of the media who were not part of this network, they were prevented from seeking and publishing information critical of the establishment by particular laws.

With the exception of South Korea, therefore, the "parameters" by which electoral politics can push for further democratization in countries like Thailand and Malaysia have been greatly limited and even undermined by some factors. ❀

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For this issue we wish to welcome Josephine C. Dionisio, Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of the Philippines-Diliman, and Deputy Director of the Third World Studies Center as a new member of the *Kasarinlan* editorial staff.