

## Electoral Politics and the “Democratic Deficit”

Elections generally remain to be the formal process by which people vote who their leaders will be. The assumption is that those who are chosen will bring about political stability, enlarge whatever democratic space is existing and bring about a development that will trickle-down to the majority as well as to the ethnically “marginalized” in society. Attaining these is viewed as addressing the “democratic deficit” that characterizes the gap between the elected representatives and the people, which ultimately spells the failure of the leadership to develop the legitimacy found in established democracies. This seems especially true for developing countries. The “Electoral Politics 1” issue of *Kasarinlan* looks into the factors in the recent elections of Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, India and the Philippines which bring optimism as well as pessimism that such a “democratic deficit” will be addressed.

Priyambudi Sulistiyanto’s “The 2004 General Elections and the Virtues of Indonesian Presidentialism” provides cautious optimism that popular pressure for amendments to the 1945 Constitution and the redefinition of Indonesian presidentialism resulting into a desired balance of power between the parliament and the president augurs well for Indonesian democracy. The result is seen in the direct presidential election in April 2004. Formidable challenges, however, still remain; one of which is the failure of President-elect Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, succumbing to pressure from political parties and renegeing on his promise, to come up with a “professional cabinet.”

In the case of Malaysia, the secret to confronting the obstacles to democratization and development does not lie in constitutional

changes but in the change in leadership. As discussed by Marzuki Mohamad's "Malaysia's 2004 General Elections: Spectacular Victory, Continuing Tensions," the election of Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, former deputy minister of Mahathir Mohammad, promises optimism to the Malaysian electorate as Badawi offers a "clean" image and a platform of "progressive Islam" which tries to bridge the ethnic divide among the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians. Despite the seeming victory of "politics beyond ethnicity," however, the Malaysian elections mirrors other sources of tensions. These tensions are epitomized by the demand for a sustainable development that cuts across racial lines to sustain multiracial support for the new leadership, continued sensitivity to cultural identity, and the need to further push for the democratization process, as seen in call for *reformasi*—a platform identified with the Malaysian middle class and closely associated with the recently released from jail political oppositionist Anwar Ibrahim.

Optimism on the role of elections, despite the challenges it has to confront, also underlies Lawrence Surendra's "Indian Elections 2004: A Retrospective Analysis and Overview." Surendra highlights situations whereby elite manipulation of electoral politics failed. Among the examples he used during the 2004 parliamentary elections were the failure of the incumbent Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to undermine the constitutional structures of India through personal attacks on high constitutional functionaries and the insensitiveness of the BJP's "India Shining" advertising campaign which was perceived to be a mockery of the poor in the country. Other electoral factors, which give hope to the democratization process in India as highlighted during the elections, were the growth of regional parties and the national character of the Left parties. And lastly, the Indian elections brought about the realization that the political elites can no longer bank alone on cultural nationalism to secure votes but will have to address the harsh realities brought about by the country's free market economic policy.

The optimism which can be deciphered from these three articles seem to be amiss in Narad Bhadravaj, Shiva K. Dhungana and Bishnu Raj Upreti's "Electoral Bottlenecks and Problems of Governance in Nepal." They point to developments in Nepalese electoral politics which further widens the "democratic deficit" between the leadership and the people. The foremost culprit they point to is the pervasive feudal culture of authoritarianism as perpetuated by the monarchy as well as the elite-led political parties. With the eradication of the one-

party *panchayat* system in the 1990s coupled with the prodemocracy movement in the country, there was hope that elections could pave the way for a government that is responsive to the needs of its peoples. There was also a hope that external influences such as those from China and India as well as multilateral donor agencies could help facilitate the democratization movement. This, however, does not seem to be the case at the moment as never-ending obstacles such as the absence of elected democratic institutions, party infighting, the nine-year long Maoist insurgency, the power struggle between the king and his people among others continue to overwhelm Nepalese society.

Pessimism with regard to electoral politics in rectifying the “democratic deficit” grows even dimmer in the case of the 2004 Philippine elections with charges of alleged cheating in favor of the incumbent president, President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (GMA). This is the argument of Roberto Verzola based on the nature of the tabulation made by NAMFREL, a citizen’s electoral watchdog. He points out in particular how precinct-based election returns collected by NAMFREL does not cover election fraud and the limitation of NAMFREL to release to the public their breakdown of precincts reported by provinces. Verzola also argues that the NAMFREL data was skewed in favor of GMA in at least three different ways namely: GMA votes were counted faster than Fernando Poe Jr.’s (FPJ), her closest presidential rival; the counting of votes in GMA’s bailiwicks was faster than in FPJ’s bailiwicks; and that the NAMFREL Terminal Report data revealed that more FPJ votes remained uncounted than GMA votes. For a country which prides itself for its historic “1986 People Power Revolution,” the allegations of massive cheating in the recent elections dampens whatever gains that have been made in the country’s democratization process. ❀

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For this issue we wish to welcome two new members of the *Kasarinlan* Editorial Board: Alejandro Bendaña, Director of the Centro de Estudios Internacionales and Alexander R. Magno, Associate Professor of Political Science and former Director, Third World Studies Center, University of the Philippines. We also would like to welcome Zuraida Mae D. Cabilo and Sharon M. Quinsaat as our latest additions to the *Kasarinlan* editorial staff.