



PERSPECTIVES

What is your assessment of the recent elections in your country?

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In authoritarian and totalitarian societies, political power is in the hands of a few, notwithstanding the existence of formal rules regarding elections or a formal adherence to democracy. The choice of political leadership belongs to them alone. There is no room for the will of the people outside of the dominant group to prevail.

In a democracy, elections are determined by popular will. Political power and governmental authority are conferred by the exercise of sovereignty of the people. It is therefore possible that dominant political groups and governmental policies may change from time to time depending on how the people vote. I will assume that this is the sense that democracy and elections are used for the purpose of this conference.

It is essential for democracy that there be, first, the rule of law. The rules on elections are contained in the constitution and legislations. It is necessary that the rules are obeyed by all participants in the electoral exercise: the government, the electorate, the political parties, civil society. There should be no room for arbitrary deviation from these rules.

Second, the authority to review all acts must be held by an independent judiciary whose ruling must be authoritative and effective.

Third, there must be a primary authority to enforce these rules. This authority must be independent. In the Philippines, this is the constitutionally created Commission on Elections.

Fourth is the democratic ethos shared by the people.

The rules of elections may be simple or complex depending mostly upon a host of factors. For example, the Omnibus Election Code of the Philippines is unique in that it contains provisions which were

designed to counter many of the practices observed during the dictatorship aimed at controlling the elections. Thus, there is a detailed set of rules on preproclamation controversies. Reaction to the experience of proclamation grabbing and leaving the parties with no recourse but to bring judicial protest—a slow process which is concluded, if at all, at the end of the contested term. Little did the framers anticipate that preproclamation protests would become as complicated and as tedious as the regular protest itself, so are the rules that grant the Commission on Elections control over the military and police during the election period.

But even in what can be considered democratic countries, you may still have a whole range of situations which undermine the democratic character of electoral exercises. The thing to do then is to analyze the reasons for these situations and to mobilize the democratic forces to change them that popular sovereignty may be enhanced.

Many of the participating countries in this conference have recently emerged from long periods of authoritarian rule. In the heady early days of the removal of the rulers, the danger always lurked to assume that a complete transformation of institutions, way of thinking and way of doing things would automatically follow. It is useful to remember that only the initial step of change has taken place. Many of the practices and outlooks that have developed over the long years of authoritarianism may stay in place. Thus, if people are not careful, the new power holders may carry over habits and practices of the past which are anti-democratic. This may have to do with the system of elections, campaign finance and vote buying, the use of fraud, threats, intimidation and the fears of the ordinary people. It is therefore important to address these problems to dismantle the vestiges of the old system and to come closer to the aspirations of democracy.

Democracy is always a work in progress. To bring this about, special attention should be given to the following:

1. The systems of elections—in the Philippines, the system of elections from president to the local officials remain essentially the same despite some changes that lessened the number of candidates at the local level. This despite the adoption of Republic Act No. 8436 that directed the shift from the manual system of counting and canvassing of votes to an automated system as expressed in the law; for the May 1998 Elections, the new system “shall be applicable

in all areas in the country for the positions of President, Vice-President, Senators and parties, organizations, or coalitions under the Party-List System.” This law came into force in 1997 but for one reason or another, it has never been implemented. Controversy has hounded attempts to implement it and it is not certain whether it will be enforced in the next elections in 2007. I would suggest that the countries’ participants in this conference consider the experience of India which quickly counted and proclaimed the results of elections this year.

2. Campaign finance and vote buying—because of widespread poverty, there is always the danger of vote buying. Campaign finance rules should be closely studied so that the same may be enforced. In the Philippines, there are many rules on campaign finances, but the authority of the Commission on Elections is inadequate to enforce the same. The result is that rich and influential people who contribute heavily to the campaign funds of candidates and political parties not only get away with their violation but also unduly influence policy-making at the expense of the ordinary voters.
3. The use of intimidation, violence, and fraud—the right to vote must be exercised freely. Resorting to violence, intimidation, and fraud must be eliminated.
4. Where poorer and marginalized representatives are generally excluded from political power because of the difficulty in competing with other candidates, affirmative action should be taken to enable them to have a portion of sovereignty. In the Philippines, this has been done by virtue of the constitutional and legal provisions on the party-list system. By this device, candidates who otherwise could not compete with regular members of congress have been able to enter the legislature.

All of the above will be helped along if there is a strong voter education program. While there is no guarantee even in developed democracies that intelligent choices will, in fact, be made in the course of elections; voter education, if effective and widespread, shall ensure at least the possibility that such choices will be made. And instead of leaving the voters to make choices on the basis of personalities, voter

education shall effectively bring them to making choices on the basis of policies and programs.

I hope that as the delegates to this conference go through the details of their discussions, they will be able to identify common principles and concrete mechanics that will support and advance greater democracy in our part of Asia.

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KEYNOTE SPEECH DELIVERED AT THE ASIAN CONFERENCE ON

DEMOCRACY AND ELECTORAL REFORMS

NOVEMBER 12-14, 2004, PHILIPPINES

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Death should close off discussion of public personalities. The popular injunction against speaking ill of the dead is well grounded. In death, Fernando Poe Jr. (FPJ) precludes the continuation of his one failing—allowing himself to be used by crafty old politicians. Susan Roces sensibly prevented FPJ's funeral from being used as he was in life.

Towards the end of the presidential campaign I said what the campaign showed is that FPJ never learned how to be a politician—that he could not possibly win without being one. Though his supporters reacted strongly, I insisted that I was paying him a compliment.

My analysis earlier in the campaign about how difficult it would be for FPJ to transform his cinema persona into votes was, I now admit, wrong. Despite the obvious organizational and financial weakness of his campaign, he came close to defeating an incumbent president. His defeat was, in the end, more the fault of the politicians surrounding him.

The politicians around FPJ know that Philippine elections are not just contests of popularity. It is about the use of money and violence, and the manipulation of patronage relations and the electoral process itself. This came through starkly during the tumultuous national canvass in Congress. The opposition could not even organize itself enough to document its accusations of fraud and make them credible to the public.

Perhaps FPJ's fault is that he took his movie persona as defender of the poor and oppressed seriously. Perhaps he felt that as president ,

he could use real bullets in his movie prop guns. What is amazing, and sad, is that 11 million people felt the same way. To be sure, the politicians surrounding FPJ did not. What worries me no end is that this combination of cynical politicians, a well-meaning but naïve popular actor, and millions of people desperately grasping after hope came close to winning the most powerful political position in the country.

Strangely it was not the politicians who attacked me for coming out against FPJ early in the campaign. People on the Left criticized me for helping President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (GMA). I could not convince them that it was, logically, possible to oppose an FPJ presidency without choosing an opposing candidate. The most vociferous among my critics later revealed he was for Raul Roco. Since even before his illness, it was clear Roco did not have much chance of winning. My critic's vehemence was probably only a loser's *pikon* (gripe).

Parties on the Left saw President Arroyo as the Chairman of the Board of the ruling classes. Far from seeing FPJ as a better alternative, they saw an FPJ presidency as possibly causing a disruption of the state, opening, they hoped, insurrectionary spaces. More immediately, they thought they could get money for mass mobilizations. The most obvious opportunism was shown by the reaffirmists (RAs) who started with trying to get into the FPJ camp, then later when it looked like FPJ would lose, tried to make deals with GMA and her people.

In the process, these factions of the Left encouraged the people's populist hopes. They abandoned their materialist pretensions by not exposing the naivete of reposing people's hopes on a populist hero. They betrayed the very masses they are supposed to serve by cynically transposing hopes for a better life to their own insurrectionary illusions. They did not understand that right-wing populism of the Joseph Estrada (Erap)/FPJ type demobilizes people. In the end, they put themselves further away from the masses they hope to lead.

The reason we have come to this dangerous pass can only be understood by going right to the heart of our political system. It is a system built on networks of local political notables organized in ascending order until the national level. For most of the last century, these networks negotiated control of patronage among themselves. But they retained enough influence on voters to give elections a semblance of democratic reality while retaining control over the allocation of power.

Population growth brought a rapidly expanding electorate. Urbanization and commercialization eroded traditional patron-client ties of deference. The inability of corrupt and incompetent governments to do anything about scandalous poverty eroded trust. Politicians controlled less and less of the vote. Their political parties never developed enough to give people electoral choices. Media—action stars, news anchors, comedians and basketball heroes—took over from politicians in guiding electoral choice.

Ferdinand Marcos had the audacity to pose an authoritarian option. Greed, incompetent would-be captains of industry, lupus, and a powerful antidictatorship movement led by the Left closed off the authoritarian option. It is no accident that populist politics chose to link with this political option. Erap and FPJ shared a bloated, macho sense of their capacity to shape reality with Marcos. Perhaps we should add some leaders of the Left to this cabal of people whose belief that their grasp of history, willingness to use violence, and to manipulate popular sentiment add up to a nasty, noxious antidemocratic brew.

I was worried about FPJ's limited education and experience. But I was more worried about the company he kept, about Juan Ponce Enrile, Francisco Tatad, Ernesto Maceda and the other Marcos-era types. They managed to claw their way back to power when Erap became president. Imagine the frustration when he was booted out. Double that with FPJ's defeat and you can begin to understand the kind of political desperation behind pushing poor Susan Roces to lead the opposition. Or the pitiful rumors of destabilization plots.

Since neither Brother Eddie Villanueva nor Raul Roco had a chance, and Panfilo "Ping" Lacson in the end stayed in the race only to take votes away from FPJ, working against an FPJ victory meant helping President Arroyo get reelected. But I am not comfortable with the "lesser evil" frame. Not just because it imposes a Manichean, moral frame to political choices which are complex. More because it makes choice passive, imposes criteria divorced from political projects, makes us bystanders to competition among the elite.

It's not as if I, or even the Left in general, played significant roles in determining the outcome of the election. The question I asked myself was what electoral outcome at least kept the possibility of political reform open, widened or at least maintained democratic space for building parties of the Left. Populism is the antithesis of reform. President Arroyo's severe charisma deficit precluded populist politics.

While her being risk averse often gets expressed in continued recourse to *trapo* politics (traditional politics), the EDSA 2 crowd is a distinct Arroyo constituency. These are people within the Arroyo administration we can work with.

The way electoral modernization got played out in 2004 provides a good example of President Arroyo's ambivalence on reform. She supported modernization, allocated funds for it, allowed reformists in her cabinet to assist the Commission on Elections (COMELEC). But they were either not aware of, or not strong enough to prevent, the kinds of shenanigans that led the Supreme Court to invalidate the contract for the counting machines. Nor to prevent the appointment of two new COMELEC commissioners with reputations for being corrupt. The failure, yet again, to implement electoral modernization was one of my biggest frustrations in 2004.

Another arena of reform in the 2004 elections, the third running of the party-list election, was also a grab bag of retreats and advances. Three of the parties that won are linked to religious groups. It is obvious that they violate the law, but since they are capable of organizing votes, what politicians are going to push for their disqualifications? Three parties in the same national democratic camp as the Maoist underground also won. Taken together these results do not add up to a resounding victory for a democratic future. But if you put together all the votes for parties of the Left, the total is close to half of all the votes cast.

If we did not have to count the cost, an insurrection that overturns the system in one orgiastic feast would be tempting. If we did not have the example of what happened under Erap, one could share the emotional satisfaction of the victory of a populist hero. But if we want a real democracy and a government capable of doing something about poverty, there's no substitute for careful, painstaking advocacy for reform, combined with building political parties of the Left. More than the ultra Left and the populist Right, the real enemy of this political project is frustration and the comforts of cynicism.

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The highly contested May 2004 presidential elections and its aftermath reveal the current limits of Philippine democracy. Almost 18 years after ousting authoritarian rule, the country still struggles to develop a full-blown democratic political system. Anomalies in the conduct and outcome of the polls indicate that we have not even met the most basic requirement of such a system: the institutionalization of competitive elections.

Clean, fair, and open elections are said to represent the threshold of political democracy, mainly because they contribute to a consensus among political elites on how to resolve competition over power and state resources. Democracy theorists from Dankwart Rustow to Adam Przeworski, for instance, argue that for democratic processes to endure, competing political parties and groups must accept that under the new rules of the game everyone has a fair, if not an equal chance at one day winning political power. The relatively level playing field that comes with the robust rule of law, the free exercise of political rights and civil liberties, and a relatively balanced media mitigates the advantages of incumbency and encourages counter-elites to regard procedural democracy as the only means to advance their power and policy agendas.

The May 2004 Philippine presidential elections failed to meet this standard. From the outset, Malacañang issued two memoranda, instructing Cabinet secretaries to mobilize their agencies and devote publicity and resources to the presidential campaign. During the campaign period, public spending increased tenfold—ostensibly for service delivery—in ways that blurred the line between governance and campaign. In response to the legal question of whether a sitting president can run for the same office despite a one-term limit imposed by the Constitution, the Supreme Court issued a more limited opinion that Gloria Macapagal Arroyo could run since she came to power through the rule of succession after the ouster of then-President Joseph Estrada in 2001. The Court refused to address the spirit behind the constitutional ban designed to prevent an incumbent from using his or her office to stay in power. By its silence, the Court indirectly countenanced the use of public funds for electioneering, a clear violation under the Omnibus Election Code. Arroyo also chose to fill two vacancies in the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) after Congress had adjourned for the elections, thereby breaching a constitutional provision requiring the Commission on Appointment's

approval on appointees to the electoral body (See Article 9, Section 2.2.).

The opposition's charges of massive electoral fraud were summarily dismissed by both the COMELEC and Congress dominated by the administration party. Moreover, establishment media generally refused to publish stories against the president and flatly rejected the dominant opposition *Koalisyon ng Nagkakaisang Pilipino's* (Coalition of United Filipinos) efforts to present its unofficial tally, demonstrating that its standard-bearer and vice-presidential candidate were winning. In fact, barely a week into the national canvass, the Department of Justice issued a press statement warning against the publication of any reports that cast doubt on the credibility of the elections, citing such reports as a threat to the state. The administration was also quick to use the state's full police power: security forces implicated in many cases of election fraud, linked election-related street protests with destabilization, and used strong-arm crowd-control techniques reminiscent of the martial law years to break up opposition rallies.

All told, the May 10 elections revealed the shallow ground on which the country's democratic institutions lie. That the electoral process, whether by design or chance, worked to shut out the dominant opposition's standard-bearer suggests the resilient factions that exist among the elites, eating away at our democracy's heart. It has been said that the dismantling of authoritarian rule in 1987 saw the return of "cacique democracy," or laissez-faire oligarchic rule. Walden Bello has called attention to the "EDSA state" that combines regular political competition between the ins and the outs belonging to the same class with an "insurrectionary" tradition (i.e., people's uprisings).

Nevertheless, perhaps a more defining feature of the present political configuration appears in Malacañang's ability to lodge itself at the center of the state. Today, we witness a political pyramid in the Philippines, with power and state resources being rapidly centralized in the presidency. Two key mechanisms link public authority with the incumbent's personal gain: the spoils system and the ruling elites' apparent fear of class outsiders intruding on what has historically been their private preserve.

Three years under Arroyo have institutionalized personalistic rule and eroded the democratic system of checks and balances that constrains the abuse of power. Arroyo appointed to the Supreme Court a senior partner in the law firm that represents her and her family, thereby facilitating executive-judicial collaboration. She tightened control

over Congress not only through the pork barrel system, but also by appointing loyal politicians or their surrogates to Cabinet positions, and so undermining Congress's fiscalizing role. Equally important, she appointed top-ranking military officials, media barons and practitioners, and civil society leaders to choice or lucrative positions in the national government or government-owned corporations. The network of Arroyo appointees and beneficiaries grows virtually impregnable as economic interests develop to support these political alliances.

On the other hand, the administration has successfully manipulated the fear of a possible populist electoral rise to gain support from the oligarchs and an illiberal middle class. The fear of the unknown—sharpened on the specter of a Ferdinand Marcos, or an Estrada—may partly explain the collective resignation to Arroyo's dubious election victory. This apprehension partly fuels the call for a parliamentary system of government that can insulate the political process from outsiders, mass movement leaders, and charismatic personalities. Under the "pure form" of parliamentary system, the electorate votes for political parties that, upon winning, select leaders who will form the new government, including the head of state, from among themselves. Hence, since the people do not directly elect their leaders, this system of government gives professional politicians and party insiders a stronger ability to prevent outsiders from attaining office.

The drive to concentrate power and resources in the presidency seems even stronger in the post-election Cabinet reorganization. In particular, two old military hands have been appointed as Executive Secretary and Department of Interior and Local Government Secretary—a masterstroke that will ensure Malacañang's vertical and horizontal chains of command. The post-election reorganization provided yet another opportunity to dispense patronage among politicians and administration officials who were instrumental in Arroyo's May election, with the co-chair of Congress' joint canvassing committee (responsible for the national election count) appointed as Justice Secretary.

Indeed, the emerging highly centralized, personalistic rule has more in common with constitutional authoritarianism than the administration will admit. Centralization, by definition, almost always presumes an exclusionary political system shutting out specific sections of the counterelites, notably potential competitors. Perhaps the fundamental difference between Arroyo and Marcos, between today's democracy and yesterday's authoritarianism, is that while Marcos

blatantly used the state's coercive power to manage political and social cleavages, Arroyo primarily uses patronage or "political payback" for the same objective. In this sense, the Philippine's so-called democracy rests on a neopatrimonial foundation, fusing institutional legacies from both the pre-Martial Law period and the Marcos years.

Whether the present political configuration is tenable remains to be seen. Political alliances built primarily on largesse will be difficult to sustain in a cash-strapped country like the Philippines. After more than three years under the Arroyo government, the country's finances are in the red: by the end of 2003, the national government's total debt amounted to P3.36 trillion, equivalent to almost 75 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) while the public sector's consolidated debt was more than 130 percent of GDP. At the end of election year 2004, the government's outstanding debt grew by 13.4 percent. The country's staggering debt, coupled with a dismal revenue collection of only 12.5 percent of GDP in 2003, prompted economists to warn of an impending fiscal crisis.

The viability of patrimonial rule rests on the national leadership's ability to extract resources from society and the international community; on both fronts, the Arroyo government has been relentless. The government fast-tracked the exploitation of the country's mineral resources and centralized transactions over large-scale mining operations, thereby marginalizing local governments and communities in the negotiations. With technical assistance from multilateral agencies, the administration is exploring ways to increase migrant remittances—the country's main source of foreign exchange earnings—although it has not yet responded to charges that it used Overseas Workers' Welfare Administration (OWWA) funds for electioneering. The Arroyo government is also set to sell remaining government assets such as its shares in the San Miguel Corporation, including the 27 percent representing the coco levy fund; these resources were designated to modernize the coconut industry (on which some three million small and poor farmers depend).

The government's preoccupation with averting a fiscal crisis comes at the expense of any serious attempt to secure the country's sustainable economic and social development. Mainly to meet its outstanding obligations, the government has sought to maximize "unearned" income (through aid and loans and by exploiting extractive industries and overseas workers' remittances) as well as to raise fees and indirect taxes with no commensurate improvement in government services.

Such measures represent significant financial impositions on ordinary citizens, including the middle class. As government resorts more and more to domestic borrowing (accounting for 52.5 percent of its total debt), it also begins to compete with struggling Filipino entrepreneurs for capital. Already, government moves have provoked protests from the affected sectors. Because key decisions and developments leading to the country's deteriorating fiscal position all occurred on Arroyo's watch, she will have no one else to blame for the economic hardship that awaits Filipinos in the months ahead.

This apparently all-consuming drive to raise resources compels one to ask whose ends these revenues will serve. As the key questions about our democracy come more to center on substantive issues, it makes sense to remind ourselves that political power (i.e., who makes decisions and how) influences social and economic outcomes. Salient policy themes in current government initiatives aim unwaveringly at appeasing domestic big business, political allies, and international creditors. Yet such creditors, more than foreign investors, proved critical in Argentina's economic meltdown; and Arroyo's business and political supporters lie at the heart of allegations of electoral malfeasance. Since the elections did not produce a president with a clear, unassailable mandate, let alone one representing change, how the imminent crisis is resolved may prove to be the real crucible of Philippine democracy.

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Separation of church and state, moral terrorism, and modern day inquisition are but a few of the bombs lobbed at the Church whenever it intervenes in the affairs of state. This was most evident with the regimes most inimical to the Church when it took a progressive and activist posture. Thus it was typical of Ferdinand Marcos and his apologists to use the abovementioned critiques against the Church. It was the same with Joseph "Erap" Estrada. Fidel V. Ramos (FVR), however, took a subtler approach being the military strategist that he is. The two women presidents have been most friendly and accommodating to the Church. Frequent meetings between Corazon Aquino and Jaime Cardinal Sin were a given. Gloria Macapagal

Arroyo's frequent photo opportunities (photo-ops) with bishops, nuns and leaders of various religious movements are a predictable occurrence whenever crisis knocks at her door. I recall how Gloria used the media and the church in projecting or forcing the picture of a credible victory in the elections. If the church is with Gloria, if God is with Gloria, how can she lose?

Examples of this could be found in the following: *Philippine Star*, March 16, 2004, C-12, "The Gloria of Teaching," i.e. Gloria with the Assumption nuns; *Philippine Star*, June 2, 2004, the front page picture of members of Couples for Christ praying over Gloria with the caption, "The group prayed for the winner in the presidential election to extend the hand of reconciliation and the loser to accept defeat with humility;" *Philippine Star*, June 3, 2004, front page lower box picture of Gloria with the Carmelite Sisters of Cebu; *Philippine Daily Inquirer (PDI)*, June 3, 2004, big front page picture of Gloria visiting Carmelite Sisters of Cebu with caption, "Nun Sense" and a story on A9 with the title, "18 years after Cory, nuns give GMA sanctuary;" *Philippine Star*, June 3, 2004, page 2, "GMA on CBCP declaration (on the absence of conspiracy to commit massive fraud in the May 10 elections): It's the answer to our prayers;" *PDI*, August 1, 2004, big front page picture of Gloria with Cory visiting the Pink Sisters; and *PDI*, August 1, 2004, A4, "GMA asks religious leaders to take part in 'values formation'."

It is so glaringly clear how the Church has been used to legitimize Gloria who is never heard to invoke the principle of "separation of church and state." Never was this clearer than in the last presidential election. A paid ad put out on *Philippine Star* (June 5, 2004, 8) carried a most telling title, "The bishops have spoken and we support them." The paid ad underscores the legitimizing role of the Church in no unclear terms; "The CBCP statement on the conduct of the May 10 national polls should put an end to all allegations of massive fraud and aspersions against the integrity of the last elections."

The pursuit of mutually beneficial agenda of both government and Church seems to be the product of careful political agreements or compromises between Gloria and the Churches (Catholic, *Iglesia ni Kristo* [Church of Christ], Evangelicals under Bishop Efraim Tendaro, *El Shaddai* [God Almighty], etc.). Such compromises have sadly emasculated the Churches' moral energies. But in the end you might have only one, not two, institutions benefiting from the compromise. No, not the Church(es) but Gloria's government.

There is hope however with the new Archbishop of Manila, Gaudencio Rosales. He is unusually quiet compared to his predecessor. He does not have a comment on every issue. Impatient media comments on how he seems to wait forever or for the last two minutes before making a stance.

Of late, Archbishop Rosales launched the “*Pondong Pinoy*” (Filipino Fund). More than the usual understanding of the *Pondo* as “collecting 25 centavos from the poor” is the idea that the little is not useless, the poor is not helpless; like the mustard seed, the Kingdom of God does not prefer big donations, big projects but the constant and consistent doing of good deeds whether big or small. The good Archbishop is now looking the other way, away from politicians towards the seemingly disempowered, disenfranchised poor. A new Church is to be born where the poor are not only objects but also responsible and respected subjects in the community—the family called Church.

The Archbishop’s unusual silence becomes clear when we look at how an outspoken Church can run the risk of being used one way or the other. In the first two EDSAs the Catholic Church under Cardinal Sin took a strong stand against Marcos and Erap who were both adjudged unfit to morally govern the country. Yet, immediately after the downfall of Marcos and Erap, the Church slips into a disturbing silence, which became more and more suspect as it lasted. Could there be secret deals and collusions between government and Church? Both seem to say, “We’ll keep quiet about you if you keep quiet about us. We’ll be sparing in our criticisms of you if you are sparing in your criticisms of us.”

Clearly, silence can be manipulated or be the result of manipulation. In the period after 9/11, the Church said little about the American-led war in Iraq. Many interpreted the Church’s silence as acquiescence to the Bush doctrine on the global war against terror. Many asked the President of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) for comments. The most that came out of the CBCP then was a rather timid suggestion from one bishop, “Let’s give Bush a chance.”

Sometime earlier, EDSA 3 erupted and the hallowed grounds of EDSA Shrine were declared desecrated. The backlash against the Church was immediate. Words like “*prayle* (friars),” “*clerico-fascist*” were resurrected. EDSA 3 was painful and it almost marked a turning point in the life of the Church when in one pastoral letter Cardinal Sin asks the Clergy of Manila to go back to the poor, live simply, avoid

using and buying luxury cars, eating in hotels, and living a life of comfort. The Cardinal strongly insisted that all bishops and priests should spend more time with the poor than with their rich benefactors. This time the Cardinal spoke to the Church not to the state. This time the Cardinal asked for change within.

Many of us expected more out of the pastoral letter. Unfortunately, in the months that followed something stranger took place. EDSA Shrine was put under heavy guard and blocked off from any public or so-called “political” activity. No one was allowed to approach EDSA Shrine, even the so-called “heroes of EDSA 2.” In the EDSA 1 celebrations that followed in 2002, 2003 and 2004, only President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, her Cabinet and groups loyal to her were allowed inside and outside EDSA Shrine. Rallyists critical of Gloria were kept far, far away from the Shrine. In this year’s EDSA 1 celebration, I pushed the “*Kariton ni Maria*” (Maria’s Pushcart) with members of the urban poor from Katipunan towards EDSA Shrine. However, a company of police awaited us at the corner of White Plains Avenue and Temple Drive. When I asked the police officer why we were being blocked, his simple explanation was, “Orders from EDSA Shrine say no one is allowed in the Shrine except those with passes or those included in the program.” I protested and said, “But I am a priest and a citizen.” His plain answer was, “Even you, Fr. Robert, is not allowed to proceed.”

In the last three years this has been the clear trend in the relationship between government and Church. The relationship has been reduced to an empty formality without real substance. Even Malacañang created an office with the specific function of maintaining such formality without substance. The Office of the Presidential Assistant for Church and Media Affairs was thus created and given to Conrado “Dodi” Limcaoco, a close friend of Bishop Socrates “Soc” Villegas and certainly a very loyal ally of President Gloria.

The exercise of the Church’s moral role is not and never will be a question of convenience, compromise and, worse, collusion. The Church need not speak all the time but she also cannot be silent all the time. Moments of prophetic intervention may be few but incisive, cutting into the very moral fiber of a nation and her people.

There is now a raging debate on the “fiscal crisis” and how to solve it, if it could ever be solved. The politicians have spoken from two perspectives: the half-measures and the full measures as far as the pork barrel is concerned. And so we have it; some in the administration are

willing to slash their pork, the opposition asserts that only if all, and not only some, solons will slash their pork will they do the same. Many are scandalized at how even neophyte party-list representatives like Teodoro “Teddy” Casino of *Bayan Muna* (People First) fight for pork. Even when it is not only fashionable but also necessary to choose nobility, many still choose practicality. This pathetic intramurals of politicians over the perks of pork happens amidst the hunger, sickness and despair of the poor. It is equally pathetic to see how Ping, again in a brilliant stroke of timing, is the first to volunteer to give up 100 percent of his pork barrel. And now what have you a saintly, “pork barrel-less” mastermind of the *Kuratong Baleleng* (a robbery and kidnap-for-ransom gang) rubout?

Yes, truly, even a very serious national tragedy of a fiscal crisis is a good opportunity for political mileage. Gloria is not yet really budging. Her grip is still hard and firm on her own pork barrel. Jess Abrera’s editorial cartoon (*PDI*, August 30, 2004, A14) shows Gloria jealously holding on to her presidential pork barrel symbolized by a *lechon* (roasted pig) on a bamboo pole while axing another *lechon* on a pole held by solons into half with a *bolo* with 40 percent written on it.

Today, Archbishop Rosales breaks his silence once again. His message simple, “Fast on corruption, give up the pork barrel.” This is a good start and hopefully will be sustained by a constant and consistent call to selfless sacrifice for the nation, especially for the poor. Hopefully, he will not spare anyone even the President who seems to hold on to her enormous “pork” which includes the Presidential Social Fund, P1 billion contingent fund, P500 million intelligence fund, and the P2 billion calamity fund. Hopefully, this will also mean pursuing the spirit of *Pondong Pinoy* and that of the call of Cardinal Sin immediately after EDSA 3 to radical lifestyle change and conversion, and the return of the entire Church to the poor.

When speaking on politics, the Church can only shine with sterling credibility if she is seen to practice what she preaches. A moral position perceived as selective and guilty of favoritism will always be suspect. When the Church enters into the fray of politics, she should be well-versed in the unpalatable realities of realpolitik. This is important for her engagement, during times when she must speak and act. This is equally important for her disengagement, during times when she needs to withdraw not only in word or silence but even active support for and collaboration with a regime that has failed God and the people.

Archbishop Rosales has a number of times implied that “Politicians are not the hope of the country.” Angrily, politicians retort, “Neither are bishops, priests and religious the hope of the motherland.” Is the nature of each assertion distinguished by the profession of the speaker? One being moral (expressed by a bishop), the other being political (expressed by a politician)?

The present “fiscal crisis” no longer gives us the luxury to philosophize on mental categories as “separation of Church and state.” No one, whether individual or institution, can be indifferent now. No one can be selective and partial in analysis and prognosis. The present crisis makes us see no longer in fragments but in wholes. No, not the state alone; the churches too must change. No, not one or some but all politicians must change. No, not half or forty percent of the pork barrel but all of it must be put into a general fund to be used only for the good of all. No, not only solons in both Houses but the President and her entire cabinet should let go of the perks of pork.

The Archbishop clarifies why the pork barrel should be given up, “The pork barrel was a source of huge temptations for legislators, some of whom were too weak to resist them. That is why they are tempted. When say, P80 million goes to the hands of someone who is weak, then he would easily succumb to temptation. That is why they should give it up” (*PDI*, August 30, 2004, 1).

The same temptation is surely present in the Church who is not less human than her counterparts in government. This is one area where Cardinal Sin and other Church leaders fail. We have been rather selective in the nature or content of our prophetic ministry. We have also been rather selective in the object of our proclamation. Cardinal Sin’s call after EDSA 3 was one golden opportunity that we seemed to have lost. Archbishop’s Rosales short stint of four years as Archbishop of Manila (until he retires at 75) may just be the opportunity for the Church to better lead her leaders and members towards understanding and living out the meaning of “integral evangelization and liberation.” While the Church is primarily here to remind us of the spiritual and moral dimensions of life, she is here to proclaim the Kingdom of God which embraces all of what we are: political, moral, spiritual, economic, social, cultural, physical, etc. This is where a corrective to our selective and selfish myopia is needed: to correct the reduction of the nation to the state, the state to a political party and a political party to the president; to correct the reduction of the Kingdom to the Church, the Church to a diocese, the diocese to a bishop and to correct the malicious separation between institutions, sectors, regions,

communities and persons as though it were actually possible to separate mind and body, person and spirit.

The fiscal crisis will not go away that easily. It may just be the opportunity to correct the destructive and tragic reductions and separations that continue to take place within, between and among all of us.

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OUR LADY OF THE MIRACULOUS MEDAL PARISH

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When discussing the democratic character of the 2004 Philippine elections, it is necessary to examine the election process in the peripheral regions. Especially in Mindanao, characterized by religious and ethnic cleavages, we can determine structural patterns of clientelistic incorporation, with effects that make it difficult to call the outcome of the election process fair and democratic.

Of course, one of the main problems in the Philippine elections is cheating, which is, according to international election observers, chronic in the whole country, particularly in Mindanao, where there is no close media coverage and the transport of the ballot boxes is virtually a monopoly of the military. One drastic example is the reported voting turnout of almost 90 percent for the Presidential election in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), a result that has to be considered quite improbable. The overall results show that cheating is not significant enough to reverse nationwide trends completely. For sure, it has relevant effects on the published results, but the regional trends in general should be valid.

Examining the election results in Western Mindanao, one observable trend is the strength of Gloria Macapagal Arroyo in all regions with the single exception of Region XII, where right-wing candidate Panfilo Lacson seemingly collected the Christian votes at Arroyo's cost. Nevertheless, in all other regions she came off far better than her main competitor, the late Fernando Poe Jr., who was supposed to collect votes especially of the economically-disenfranchised and politically-marginalized.

While a clearly conservative trend (in the sense of an affirmation of the nationwide trend) emerged in the presidential race, it is feasible to demonstrate ethnically specific behaviour in the election process for the Senate in the Mindanao regions. However, any formation of local interest aimed at the national level is absorbed by a significantly high party or election movement loyalty. For this reason, striking examples can be found in the senatorial race. Local candidates like Parouk Hussin, Amina Rasul or Didagen Dilangalen got a majority of the total of their national votes in the regions of Western Mindanao, but all of them were running for big nationwide election movements. Because of the extremely expensive campaigning process, they would have had no chance to get much attention from the electorate if running on their own.

Nevertheless, the question remains why dominant national party groups keep supporting these local candidates, especially if we consider that this support sometimes means sacrificing other more promising candidates in the nationwide race. An eloquent example is the case of Robert Barbers. Barbers, running for *Lakas ng EDSA* (Power of EDSA)-Christian Muslim Democrats (Lakas-CMD) and traditionally strong in Mindanao, was confronted in the ARMM with Governor Parouk Hussin, also running for Lakas-CMD. Hussin had no chance to win a seat on the national level. Hussin effectively won the province, Barbers was fourth; but none of them won a Senatorial seat, Barbers being beaten by a ridiculous small margin. Had Hussin withdrawn in favour of Barbers, Barbers would have made it easily to the Senate, strengthening Lakas-CMD even more.

Although this outcome could be foreseen and was actually indicated by pre-election polls, Lakas-CMD chose to support Hussin. The reason for this must be found in the outstanding importance of the Presidential race. Therefore, if a local candidate is willing to support the presidential candidate of a movement or a party, he or she is likely to get the support of this movement or party for his or her senatorial bid. This is of crucial relevance for the Muslim parts of Mindanao, where the population is thought to vote in blocs (Diaz 2003:67).

Such incorporation is based on tactics dating back to the colonial period by the parties and election movements of the national political elite: the formation of strategic or tactic bonds with local strongmen (Migdal 1988, Abinales 2000). Thus, the national elite is successfully undermining the development of democratic parties with an overtly ethnic, religious (in this context referring to Islamic), or regionalist background.

Indeed, there were some party-lists with explicit Mindanao background achieving some access in the party-list race (e.g. *Anak Mindanao* [Child of Mindanao] and the indigenous *Ang Laban ng Indiginong Filipino* (Struggle of Filipino Indigenous Peoples [ALIF]), although none of these partylists pronounced an explicit background of an ideology of political Islam, which would not have been a surprise given the circumstances. The only party that touches somewhat on such sentiments, the Islamic Party of the Philippines (IPP) (McKenna 1998), mainly focus on regional issues and runs in alliances with big election movements.

In conclusion, the observed structural patterns can be explained by two primary benefits for the political elite in the national centre. The first, and most important short-term benefit, is caused by a technical condition of the respective election systems: the linking of the presidential election with other national elections for both chambers of the parliament and, closely related to this, the overwhelming importance of the Presidency for the political systems. These factors generate the possibility—and perhaps even necessity—to incorporate popular local figures into the national election campaigns. This is interacting with the populist character of the campaign process. Such a process demands financial resources that are unobtainable on a regional basis for independent campaigners. Secondly, the long-term political and economical dividends of such links should not be underestimated. Since colonial days, these links of political agents from the centre and local strongmen have generated revenue for both sides, primarily in the struggle for control in conflict-ridden regions.

However, even if we agree that the practices described above work well temporarily as methods of governing of weak states such as the Philippines, especially in its peripheral regions, we assert that without a political system allowing an effective representation of all interest groups, the potential for conflict remains. The 2004 Philippine elections show that these processes, at best, fail to contribute to a potential solution of existing regional tensions. More probably, they represent a grave obstacle to democratic development.

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On August 12, 2004 the third Prime Minister in Singapore's brief thirty-nine year history as an independent city-state was sworn into office. This was an event that did not stir ordinary Singaporeans, as they have been expecting this eventuality for many years. The new Prime Minister (PM), Lee Hsien Loon, had been Prime-Minister-designate since his anointment by the second PM Goh Chok Tong several years ago. Indeed, many would say that he had been PM-in-waiting since his father, Lee Kuan Yew, stepped aside as PM in 1991; many had unkindly insisted that PM Goh was merely a 'seat-warmer' until the junior Lee was ready for the PM's Office (PMO). However, the popularity of PM Goh among Singaporeans, his initiation of many redistributive policies in education, healthcare and share-ownership schemes, his steering of the country through the 1997 Asian regional financial crisis and finally, his efforts and success in expanding Singapore's presence in foreign relations, especially through free trade negotiations and agreements, have silenced most of his earlier detractors who were skeptical about his ability to be his own man. In any case, the official ceremony of Lee Hsien Loong's assumption of the PMO was rather a nonevent for Singaporeans.

Furthermore, the line up of the new cabinet was disappointing. All but one member of Goh's cabinet, including Lee Kuan Yew, was retained. Contrary to public anticipations and speculations for a change of generations and a new team, it is the same old team with, by now, four generations of politicians in cabinet: Lee Kuan Yew as a generation himself, Goh's generation of late fifties and early sixties, Lee Hsien Loong's cohort who entered politics early in Goh's term as PM, now in their late forties and early fifties, and those in early to mid-forties who are in their first term in political office. This line-up clearly reflects the abiding conservatism of the long-ruling People's Action Party (PAP) government in emphasizing stability and continuity.

The PAP government is not given to fanfare. It dislikes shocks to the social body. It is proud of its handling of the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic in 2003. The resident population in Singapore had shown that it was willing and able to work with the government's lead, which included many procedures of self-monitoring of possible contagion to curb the epidemic within a three-month period. The government reads this episode as evidence of national solidarity, as evidence of the long and anxiously awaited emergence of a national community. The economy is recovering from the 1997 Asian crisis and prolonged global recession and is expected to grow by about nine percent in 2004. Having successfully controlled political dissent in the past four decades, there are no political challenges in sight. Such auspicious times are a good time to enact the change of PMO, without any sound or fury.

Some minor changes in the line-up should be noted as they reflect the changing conditions of local, regional and global conditions. First, changes in the names of a couple of ministries signaled emerging areas requiring explicit representation and concern. The Ministry of Environment is now Ministry of Environment and Water Resources. This reflects Singapore's determination to become self-sufficient in water in the future and to rid itself of dependency on Malaysia; a dependency which had been a constant source of tension between the two neighbors. With focused efforts in water management, which included building of new reservoirs, construction of desalination plants and recycling waste water, dependency has been reduced incrementally and Singapore expects to be self-sufficient by the time one of the current contracts with Malaysia expires sometime after 2010. The politics of water is likely to be of decreasing saliency in Malaysia-Singapore relations.

The Ministry of Community Development and Sports is now Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports headed by a new Acting Minister, Dr. Vivian Balakrishnan, who at forty-two is the youngest member of the Cabinet. The new focus on youth reflects not only the changing national demographics but also the changed social and cultural conditions. Individuals born after 1965, the year Singapore became an independent city-state, now constitute the bulk of the citizenry. Most have grown up during the rapid economic expansion decades of the 1970s and 1980s. This means that they have benefited greatly from the expansion of education opportunities and massive, society-wide improvements of material life; they are thus better

educated, with elevated aspirations. Singapore's economy has reached a high level of capitalist maturity when structural unemployment and widening income inequalities become permanent features, and where competition for the next step up the development ladder is increasingly keen and arduous. The younger generations, although better educated and skilled, are nevertheless faced with different set of economic challenges, particularly uncertain employment opportunities and stabilities. The potential mismatch of effort and aspiration and economic well-being of the younger generation thus warrants ministerial attention.

Second, it should be noted that the office of one of the two new Deputy Prime Ministers is occupied by the Coordinating Minister of Homeland Security, Dr. Tony Tan who will retire in June 2005, and be replaced by Wong Kan Seng who has long served as the Minister of Home Affairs. That the Minister of Home Affairs, supposedly with wealth of experience in dealing with domestic security concerns, will either double-up as or be promoted to Deputy Prime Minister reflects the government's perception of the changes in domestic security conditions after the 9/11 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York, subsequent bombing in Bali and, finally, the discovery of underground terrorist cells of Muslim fundamentalists in different parts of Southeast Asia including *Jemaah Islamiyah* (Islamic Community) in Singapore.

Ex-PM Goh Chok Tong has been appointed Senior Minister. He also took over the office of the Chairman of the Monetary Authority of Singapore, Singapore's central bank, from ex-Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew who is retained in the cabinet in a new office called Minister Mentor. This is a rather unfortunate choice of title because it has unwittingly, symbolically infantilized the rest of the cabinet as grown men who still need to be guided, pushing the limit of the idea of patriarchal or patrimonial state, a father-knows-best top-down government. This undoubtedly intensifies the stubborn beliefs of many political observers that the Senior Lee still has to give his assent to all government policies, regardless of what he says about his distance from the day-to-day operations of the government.

The most commonly expressed concern before the installation of PM Lee Hsien Loong was whether he would revert to the austere, even authoritarian, ways of his father. However, this is an unwarranted and unnecessary worry. Quite independent of PM Lee's personality, the political attitude of the Singapore citizenry has been transformed by

the fourteen years of Goh's presence. Hewing from humble background, Goh displayed genuine understanding of the majority of the population, what in local parlance is known as the public housing estate heartland. This accounts for many of the economic redistributive schemes that he had put in place during his political leadership. His people-friendly personality that is now canonized as the style of his government has, I believe, changed the citizen's expectation of the government's attitude towards consultation and responses to the ground. It is this changed expectation of the population towards government that is, to me, the best guarantee to counter any tendency of the government returning to austere and authoritarian ways of the past.

The fears of the new PM being less people-friendly largely melted away on the night of August 22 when he delivered his first National Rally Speech, annually the most important speech to the nation. His presentation impressed even the seasoned PAP critics. He connected easily with the audience even on television soon after he began his three-hour long speech which assesses the present conditions and future possibilities for Singaporeans of different social strata. His command of three of the four official languages—Malay, Mandarin and English—puts his father's and Goh's linguistic abilities in the shadows. The ease with the three languages won him admirers and respect. Unlike his predecessors, especially his father, who were wont to use statistics in their annual report to the nation, the new PM dispensed with all complex data sets and tables; instead he read out letters from individuals, cited instances of personal experiences and specific cases of hardships or unreasonable demands from his meet-the-people sessions at the constituency level. Apparently, in his instruction to the various ministries for input in the speech, he asked specifically for personal stories rather than complex statistics. In each of these instances, he showed how things could be otherwise, how government bureaucracies might have been too rigid and rules unreasonable, and finally, how things can and must change. It looks like his style would be closer to that of Goh Chok Tong than that of his father.

Beyond the style of self-presentation, the substance of his speech contained several ground breaking policy changes that "shocked," positively, the citizenry. Among the changes are reversals of two long stubbornly-held civil service policies that have become increasingly unreasonable and unacceptable to the working population. First, the government will finally recognize gender equality and provide equal benefits for all employees and their families, instead of restricting such

benefits to male civil servants only. This has been a long standing grievance of female civil servants and feminist groups. Second, in self-admission to his own long standing opposition to a five-day work week for civil servants, he has reversed the policy and all government departments will go on rational, flexible five-day work week, so that the convenience of public service on Saturdays will not be jeopardized. Significantly, these changes are undertaken as part of a package of policy changes within a generalized concern for the steadily declining birth rate among Singaporeans. Nevertheless, these changes are instantly popular with the population and marks well the beginning of a new regime.

On the political front, some constraints on public forums are removed; all indoor collective activities no longer require government permits issued by the police. This would include theater performances, public forums and conferences. This, of course, does not amount to total freedom of making public speeches, as stated in the constitution. Nor does it guarantee that private conversations and discussion will find the public media space to become public opinions. There is still a long way to go in the realization of freedom of expression.

The overall consequence of the three-hour long speech is to leave the political opposition and critics with little to say other than “We will be watching,” to make sure that the promises are carried out.

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Elections for the House of Councilors were held in July. Half of the councilors are regularly elected every three years, a system that differs from the elections for the House of Representatives which can be called any time by the Prime Minister. Elections for the House of Councilors are useful measurements of the pulse of the body politic, as they register public views, expectations, and discontents in a more or less straightforward way.

In the July elections, the results were ambiguous in their significance and implications. The Liberal Democratic Party (LDP)—which has been in power since 1993—obtained 49 seats, losing two seats that it had held before the election. Its coalition partner *Komei* (literally,

“Fair and Clean”) Party, which is the political arm of the powerful Buddhist sect *Soka Gakkai* (Society for the Creation of Value), obtained 11 seats. The rival Democratic Party obtained 50 seats. Two other small opposition parties—the Communists and the Social Democrats—obtained four and two seats, respectively.

In other words, while LDP certainly did not meet its own expectations and win the elections, its loss was not significant enough to force Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi to step down. The Democratic Party gained significantly in the election, not at the expense, however, of the LDP and its *Komei* Party coalition partner, but rather at the expense of the Communist Party and the Social Democratic Party.

Pundits have generally interpreted this election as signaling a loss of popularity for Koizumi, even though Koizumi’s popularity still helped pull in votes from the urban constituencies. This election is also believed to signify the decisive role of the *Komei* Party in holding the votes that either makes or breaks LDP control of the House of Councilors. Finally, the July election is seen as heralding the emergence of the Democratic Party as a credible alternative to the ruling coalition.

It is true that public support for Koizumi’s cabinet has declined from 76 percent in 2001 to 45 percent in 2004. This is largely due to public disillusionment with Koizumi’s reformist agenda (the war in Iraq and, for that matter, any foreign affairs issue, hardly affected the voting behavior of the Japanese public in this election). In 2001, 42 percent of the public hoped that Koizumi would succeed in his agenda of reforming the bloated and inefficient postal service (which also functions as a huge retail bank and insurance company), the nearly bankrupt pension scheme, and the overly ambitious and cost-ineffective highway construction agency. Now, 70 percent of the public believe that Koizumi has not and will not be able to deliver on his stated reforms.

And yet Koizumi’s popularity still helped the LDP obtain urban votes. In 1995 and 1998, the LDP obtained 27 percent and 25 percent of votes, respectively, in the proportional representative elections, while in 2001, LDP obtained 39 percent and this year, 30 percent. Koizumi’s popularity was instrumental in LDP victory in the last two elections.

The *Komei* Party which carries about 9 million votes helped LDP secure 14 out of 27 one-man constituency seats. Without *Komei* support, LDP would not have obtained more than seven seats.

The Democratic Party fared well in part because it obtained 56 percent of votes cast by non-partisan voters, while LDP only got 26 percent. The Democratic Party has made inroads into rural constituencies, obtaining 13 seats out of 27 one-man constituencies.

Despite Democratic Party gains, the ruling coalition still maintains a lead in both Houses. With the *Komei* Party remaining a loyal coalition partner of the LDP, it is unlikely that the Democratic Party can come to power in the near future. Barring any scandals and given the lack of a credible challenger who can court urban voters, Koizumi is likely to retain his hold over the reins of government.

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The implications of the general elections in the fourteenth Parliament will take time to sink in. Not merely because the verdict took most by surprise—victors, losers and observers. The incumbent regime, a right-of-centre coalition headed by the Hindu nationalist *Bharatiya Janata Party* (Indian People's Party [BJP]) in power for the previous six years, was confident about returning to power. So were most analysts, if pre-poll opinion surveys and forecasts are anything to go by. The main opposition party, the Congress, down to 114 in a house of 542, was widely expected to slip below the three-figure mark. Not only had it been out of power since 1996, it seemed handicapped by a weak organisation, a lack of clarity about what issues to focus on and, above all, a leader who consistently enjoyed ratings far below those of Prime Minister Vajpayee. Central to Sonia Gandhi's handicap was the issue of her "foreign origins," continuing unease with public speaking and a lacklustre record in Parliament as leader of the opposition.

The elections returned an unexpected verdict. Not only did the incumbent coalition's (National Democratic Alliance [NDA]) control of seats nosedived from 300 in the dissolved house to 189, the BJP itself suffered a humiliating reversal, losing 44 seats to slip from 182 to 138. Even as the Congress-led alliance (United Progressive Alliance [UPA]) emerged as the largest grouping in Parliament (219), more surprisingly the Congress emerged as the single largest party, edging out the BJP to finish with 145. Assured of the support of the Left Front with 61 seats, it successfully laid claim to form the next government.

Once again, a Congress Prime Minister is heading the government, a coalition with external support of the Left parties.

Unlike the rest of South Asia, elections in India are relatively smooth and peaceful with losing parties rarely challenging the legitimacy of the process, despite the fierceness with which the contest takes place. Most analysts see in the exercise a relative absence of violence and a voter turnout close to 55 percent, the strength and durability of Indian electoral democracy. Without undermining this impressive record, it needs to be underscored that multi-party contests under a first-past-the-post system imply that winning candidates and parties rarely enjoy majority support. Equally crucial is the fact that the country rarely demonstrates a common electoral trend—different parties/coalitions winning elections in different states (provinces). What we get is a mixed verdict with no party (or even pre-poll alliance) managing a clear majority. India is a “rainbow of parties” country and our electoral results reflect that. In this sense, the elections of 2004 were no different.

Nevertheless, to read the results as reflecting another routine election would be an error, and not merely because of the unanticipated nature of the verdict. But first, we need to underscore what the verdict is not. First, as indicated earlier, the results do not reflect an unambiguous mandate. It is crucial to remember that the coalition now in power (Congress-led United Progressive Alliance with external support from the Left parties) enjoys a narrow margin in Parliament. The Congress bested the BJP by a mere 7 seats (145 to 138) and enjoys a small edge in the percentage of popular votes. Not only do the BJP and its allies control a fair number of state assemblies but did much better than the Congress/UPA in many regions. Thus, more than the Congress winning the elections, a fairer assessment is that the BJP/NDA lost.

Second, it is not one party but a coalition that is now governing the country. And unlike the Left front which can claim ideological and programmatic coherence, the UPA is made up of disparate constituents bound together partly by their love for power and partly an opposition to the BJP. At one level, this is a truer reflection of the plural nature of the economy and society. Nevertheless, the challenge to governance thrown up by a mixed verdict, in turn demanding a coalition, remain formidable. It is unclear as to how stable and long-lasting the current arrangement will be since the ruling coalition consists of parties both with a wide but thin support nationally (the Congress) and others with

a concentrated social and spatial spread (regional parties). The ruling coalition has thus been forced to adopt a common minimum programme, a somewhat uneasy arrangement between divergent ideological/programmatic tendencies.

Yet, there are at least three significant differences between the Congress-led UPA and the BJP-led NDA now in opposition. The first represents what analyst Sunil Khilnani characterizes as “retrieving the idea of India.” The six years of BJP-NDA rule witnessed an unusual assault on the “plural” and “secular” character of Indian state and society. A Hindu majoritarian thrust, in particular in education and culture, had created immense strain in a tenuous intercommunity relationship. Though India is no stranger to Hindu-Muslim violence, the state-supported/sponsored violence against the Muslim community in the western state of Gujarat in 2002 created wounds which have yet to heal. More unusual was the campaign and violence against the Christian community, accusing it of engaging in religious conversion. The current verdict in part is against this majoritarian/authoritarian tendency with minority communities almost all over the country voting against the BJP-NDA. We, thus, have been granted a respite from socially divisive politics; another chance to repair and nurture our plural social ethos. A failure on this front can lead to a resumption of societal violence.

A second tendency relates to the ongoing debate on the nature of economic reforms, what in common parlance is called the neoliberal consensus on liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation. It is no one’s claim that this policy thrust was a gift of the BJP-NDA; India embarked on a reform pathway back in 1991. The party in power at the time was the Congress.

Assessments of the impact of reforms differ with critics accusing the process of both being too slow and limited and too radical. There is also little consensus on what impact the policy shift has had on rates of growth, reduction of poverty and interpersonal and interregional inequalities. Nevertheless, most assessments have it that the growth rates have picked up, poverty estimates show a decline and foreign exchange reserves have witnessed a major boost. It is also widely accepted that both the manufacturing and services sector are today more globally competitive.

Yet, it is also difficult to deny that much of the reform process, which the NDA regime continued and deepened, has resulted in a worsening of equity, both interpersonal and interregional. More

significantly, the last decade experienced major neglect of rural areas, both farm and non-farm, and thereby made more precarious the situation of both the rural and urban poor. It is instructive that provincial regimes and parties most strongly identified with the reforms process have suffered an electoral setback. However, to read into this a mandate against reforms, even more revert to a regime of planning and controls, would be a mistake. In all likelihood, the intimations from the ground as reflected in voting patterns are to “humanize” the reforms, attend to the political task of creating a support base for needed changes, and focus more on sectors affecting the livelihoods of the poor instead of foregrounding macro and corporate concerns.

A third major shift relates to India’s perception of itself as a regional/global power and thus its relationships not only with its neighbours but with the current dominant global power, the United States. It was under the BJP-NDA that India both declared itself a formal nuclear weapons state and moved away from the earlier policy of non-alignment to strike a closer, strategic (including military) relationship with the US. Its relationship with Pakistan, though improving of late, experienced major lows (the Kargil War); with Bangladesh, it remains tense; and there is little improvement with either Sri Lanka or Nepal. Fortunately, with China and Burma there have been some efforts at normalisation. Though Indian elections are rarely about foreign policy, the enthusiasm with which the earlier government extended support to the US administration particularly after 9/11, refusing even to criticise the bombing of Afghanistan or the subsequent invasion of Iraq, alienated many voters. The new Congress-UPA government is expected to engage in course correction—in particular, maintain a safe distance from the US and Israel while continuing the rapprochement with its neighbours.

All these three represent healthy course corrections—combating the socially deleterious effects of a majoritarian and intolerant politics, in particular, win back the confidence of ethnic and religious minorities; redirecting reforms towards agriculture and rural areas with special emphasis on employment generation and livelihoods; and cutting back on militarisation and regional power hegemony.

While all these are cause for legitimate cheer, it would be shortsighted to ignore the strains in the system. If the early years of independent India were characterized by a single party dominance, what political scientist Rajni Kothari called the Congress System from

the late 1960s onwards, we have seen the steady growth of regional and ethnic parties winning elections in different provinces and over time acquiring a greater salience in the centre. The declining support for national parties has ushered in an era of coalition politics, far more difficult to manage than single party governments.

Accompanying this tendency has been a greater frequency of elections (just the last decade has seen five regime changes—1991, 1996, 1997, 1998, and 2004) and a dramatic increase in the number of incumbents, across parties, losing elections. Should this be seen as reflecting a more demanding electorate, voting out individuals and parties failing to meet their promises? Or is this a reflection of the bankruptcy of populist politics, of parties geared exclusively as election machines making increasingly extravagant promises (or generating fears) in order to acquire power? It is insufficiently appreciated that unless our political class reforms itself and our democracy goes beyond ensuring regular elections to equally attend to governance issues, the extant cynicism against politicians and parties may turn against politics itself. In this lie seeds of authoritarianism which, if realized, would lead to greater tragedy.

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