

It is important to relate the contents of this book to the findings of other election-related studies to get a bigger picture of the nature of elections and the kind of mass media the country has. The conduct of future elections, after all, will greatly depend on how policy reforms are made based on the information provided by those who have conducted thorough research. —**DANILO ARAÑA ARAO**, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF JOURNALISM, COLLEGE OF MASS COMMUNICATION, UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES DILIMAN.

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Luis V. Teodoro, ed. *Subverting the people's will: The May 10, 2004 elections*. Quezon City: Ken Inc., 2004. 137 pp.

In a country where electoral exercises often introduce contentious and dubious outcomes, post-election scenario will remain a portrait of violence, struggle and paranoia. *Subverting the people's will: The May 10, 2004 elections* sketches this observation as it exposes the veiled stories of the 2004 elections via the lenses of the Center for People Empowerment in Governance (CenPEG), a think-tank established during the height of the 2004 electoral campaign. CenPEG focuses on policy studies and research relating to political and electoral reforms with the aim of furthering the democratic interests of the people. It contends that the May 2004 election results were sabotaged by the following: system of election canvassing, the Washington's election observers' hidden agenda, the illegitimate use of force of the military and the police in subduing political dissenters, the abuse and manipulation of mass media by election candidates, the influence-peddling character of Philippine churches, the suppression of Moro People's struggle, the undermining of showbiz personalities participating in elections, the legal and structural weaknesses of the Philippine Party-List Act and the failure of the government and the public to maximize

the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in educating the public to make informed choices. All of these are encapsulated in ten critical articles written by authors who had their own share of election brouhaha. Unfortunately, their strong arguments against the *status quo* are not necessarily balanced with concrete and feasible policy alternatives. Moreso, embellishments and superfluities in their writings have the greater tendency to subvert the real elections story.

The link between the politicization of Philippine military and the winners of the electoral exercise has been a burning theme since the turbulent years of Martial Law. Obviously, Benito Lim, one of the noisy writers on this topic tends to oversimplify the matter by suggesting that military repression seems to be the prevailing norm especially during elections. Many sides have been overlooked due to the authors' fixation with the negative facet of the military institution. Lim argues that the president as the commander-in-chief of the body has the propensity to abuse his/her power in times of political crisis. But the Constitution provides that martial law can only be perpetuated if affirmed by the two chambers of the Congress. Hence, the author's recommendation to regulate the presidential authority over the military during elections is disused since there is already a legal provision serving the purpose. It must be noted that unlike in Indonesia and Burma, the Philippines has no history of military administration except during the Marcos regime. The supremacy of civilian force over the military even catapulted Estrada to Malacanang during the 1998 elections. Lim falls short on answering the corollary question on who should control the military during the election period. If there would be a major point of attack against the military, it would be its participation in the election administration. During the 2004 elections, personnel of the Philippine National Police (PNP) and Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) served as Board of Election Inspectors (BEIs) in some areas. This is exacerbated by the role of political dynasties in the operation of private armies and political mercenaries. A good snapshot of this post-election intimidation was Isabela's gubernatorial race where a polio-victim butchered the fate of a 30-year old political dynasty.

Is there a connection between the motives of American observers in 2004 elections and the preservation of Washington's interests in the country? Remollino is quick to conclude that the US is the hidden director of Philippine elections since the post-EDSA 1 period. Yet, this position is conveniently stated, lacking the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs' (NDI) reports that could have

further toughened the author's allegations. For Remollino, the NDI, which spearheaded the group of observers is affiliated with the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) which is well-recognized both for its democratization projects and support for authoritarian governments around the globe. But is this sufficient enough to provide ammunition to the claim of a US-led elections? The article's progressive thesis is pampered with historical accounts of Washington's purported involvement in installing Philippine presidents. But there is a missing historical puzzle as far as the Estrada, Ramos and Arroyo administrations are concerned. There are thin explanations and empirical justifications on how the US government interfered with the 2004 elections. It can be declared that the article presents itself as a work laden with innuendoes and conjectures. It fails to elaborate on Washington's main motivations why it should meddle with the results of the polls. Ambiguities in NED's democratic rhetoric cannot be straightforwardly tagged as a fraud, as the author assumes. NDI's 2004 report on Philippine elections not only lambasts the country's weak democratic institutions and electoral system but likewise offers feasible solutions to the country's electoral woes. These include the desynchronization of the national and local elections, re-examination of the political party system and modernization of the voting process (NDI 2004:34-37).

As far as the Philippine churches that participated in the 2004 elections are concerned, there is a vague line separating the secular from the sacred. Debunking the myth of "church vote," Torres probes the political participation of the Roman Catholic Church and other major religious groups since the post-EDSA period. He concludes that there is a danger that lies in the "intentions of the church in joining politics" (68). Endorsements by church leaders only reinforce the regressive politics of personalities and patronage—an unholy strategy. However, as far as the presidential ticket of Bro. Eddie Villanueva is concerned, the paper overlooks several details. Villanueva's decision to run for presidency was an overnight decision, barely five months before the elections. The lack of political machinery to sustain a national campaign and the brief preparations greatly diminished the already dim probability to win the elections. *Bangon Pilipinas'* (Arise Philippines) presidential defeat can be a function of spiritual, practical and political factors. As revealed by Torres in his article, evangelical Christians' resistance to political endorsement is high (70.86 percent), confirming the notion that "bloc voting" in the group is far-fetched. Interestingly, Brother Eddie's candidacy was a departure from the usual role of the evangelical churches in politics since majority of the country's evangelical

churches has maintained an “apolitical culture” for more than a century. Theologian and social scientist Melba Maggay explains that the Filipinos’ hunger for “righteous governance” has made the mixing of religion and politics in Villanueva’s ticket appealing. But there are irreconcilable “ambiguities in his candidacy mounted from a pulpit because the line between prophesying and politicking gets obscured” (Maggay 2004). Indeed, personal political conviction can be mistaken for the voice of God. Given that reality, Maggay recommends that religious leaders should focus more on helping their congregations to become more discerning about the state of the nation and assist them to evaluate how their faith can create a better society.

The book interestingly offers a platform for grievances and self-aggrandizement. The defeat of the party-list *Suara Bangsamoro* (Voice of the Moro People) engendered the debate on whether the so-called left-wing, radical party-list groups like *Suara* could be given an opportunity to participate on the political stage through parliamentary means. Long before the May 10 polls, the partylist has been the target of political annihilation through the black propaganda campaigns allegedly instigated by the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) which failed to prove that the group was indeed responsible for the spate of bombings in Mindanao. *Suara*’s plight revealed that electoral reforms must incorporate the destruction of ties between local and national leaders who often conspire to further their political agenda. The writings of Amirah Lidasan, one of the group’s nominees, and Lualhati Abreu reveal the tone of desperation:

The experience of the *Suara Bangsamoro* party list is a lesson for the Moro people. Their aspirations cannot be realized through parliamentary struggle...The 2004 national elections have demonstrated to the Bangsa Moro that there is no place in the national government for the recognition of their struggle for self-determination (81, 82).

Colmenares boasts of the achievements of party-list *Bayan Muna* (People First) in transforming the contours and trajectory of the country’s party-list system (with special reference to its animosity with the rival group *Akbayan!* Citizens’ Action Party [Akbayan]). *Bayan Muna* impugns the flaws of the Party-List Act (RA 7941) to the delayed implementation of the automated electoral system which the party deems as a reliable means to eradicate the prospects of *dagdag-bawas* (vote padding and shaving). Three contentious issues are put forth: the COMELEC’s power to accredit party-list organizations which is prone to horse-trading, the three-seat per party-list policy and the two percent

threshold needed to secure a seat in Congress. The author privileges these areas for obvious reasons: *Bayan Muna*'s supporters are increasing and there is a need to devise means to avoid wastage of party's votes during elections. Alternative computation systems presented by the author on how to compute party-list votes look brilliant in this regard. This is equally a response to the lowering of the base figure by the COMELEC whenever party-list organizations are disqualified. The lowering of base figure has been the grand tactic of losing party-lists in getting seats in the House. They file disqualification charges against others to lower the base figure.

Another contentious area of the party-list system concerns the representatives of the so-called marginalized sectors. Colmenares sidelined the reforms on truly bringing the marginalized into the political stage, transforming the dynamics of the margins and the whole electoral system. It must be remembered that *Bayan* vehemently opposed the idea that party-list nominees should have the same economic status as their beneficiaries. Majority of small sectors have local outlooks that make them hard to recognize issues on a national scale. Hence, they always need a middle class or elite brokers to transmit their concerns to the national government. This trend must be re-examined since the truly marginalized are not organized and most of the party-list nominees belong to the elite class.

The star-studded elections can be perceived both as a threat to Philippine politics and as a democratization improvement. It can be a warning since major political positions are now occupied by the more inexperienced leaders. The lack of political platform and emergence of "showbizocracy" are telltale signs of regression from the real meaning of intelligent policy-making. On one hand, the "celebritification" of the country's politics is an indictment of the inefficient old politics which continues to prey on the vulnerabilities of the citizens. Alternative politicians from broadcast media and movie industry have been perceived as viable alternatives to the corrupt and insensitive *trapos* (traditional politicians). Through the years, media personalities have maintained sufficient political capital to influence the people. Garduce and Corpuz believe that showbiz personalities can be a potent force in transforming the political landscape of the country. Nevertheless, the authors' recommendations on fulfilling this end can be paradoxical and incongruous to their goals. First, the artists' linking with mass-based movements will not necessarily eliminate the socioeconomic chasm between the affluent showbiz personalities and the underprivileged "*masa*" (masses). Their relationship can easily translate

from an altruistic “for-entertainment” association to an opportunistic bonding. Second, active advocacy for the sake of the public has become a political ritual during election periods. There is no guarantee that showbiz people will sustain their efforts to support public issues since they have their own private interests to defend. In fact, they can mobilize themselves to become a new breed of political lobbyists. Thirdly, the proposal for artists to sever their ties with media oligarchs is akin to choosing between a life of misery and luxury. Showbiz people could not surely sustain their fame without their masters’ fortune.

Discussions on the role of the media and the information and communication technologies (ICTs) are instructive. Arao not only sets off the discourse on the abuse and misuse of media freedom but likewise highlights how the commitment to truth of media firms have been diluted by the corporatization and malfeasance in journalism and broadcast reporting. One consequent evidence was the emphasis given by the media on the glitz and glamour of the campaign parades and sorties, overlooking the development agenda of the presidential candidates. The Philippine media is considered as the most free in Asia but this distinction is being undermined by the umbilical ties of major television networks—the Big 2 (ABS-CBN and GMA)—to politicians. There is a dearth of research linking the diminishing effectiveness of media to its alleged corporatization. Arao’s effort complements the study accomplished by Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, in 2004 revealing the rampant yellow journalism during election period (Florentino-Hofilena 2004).

Carranza-Paraa explores how the underutilization of ICTs during the 2004 elections not only deprived the public of information essential to scrutinize the candidates’ platform and government agenda but also magnified the current digital divide in the country. A content analysis of Internet websites of the 2004 presidential candidates revealed the weak impact of information and communication technologies (ICTs) on the attitude of country’s voters. Although all the presidential candidates utilized e-mails, e-groups, e-news, short messaging system (SMS or text technology) and other digital applications to solicit support, majority of voters depended more on the broadcast media for information. This increased the prospects for skewed media information influencing the voters’ candidate preference. Maximizing the use of the Internet technology during elections, must be done with caution. This is because computer automation can still be dominated by the elites who have access to the technology.

All articles gravitate toward Teodoro's proposition that the 2004 elections was "far from a period of change but rather a period of restoration of elite-based and elite-monopolized politics"(4). This makes the book devoid of novel insights, just updates on the voluminous literature on the predatory nature of the country's politics oiled by the three Gs (guns, goons and gold). Answers to basic questions are vaguely answered and needs deciphering: what and who defines the people's will? Do we really get the government we deserve? Filipinos often take solace from the notion that things will normalize after the elections. But dreams and wishes do not always coincide with the reality. The author's presentation of the disheartening face of the 2004 elections has its primary purpose: to stir the collective angst and frustrations of the people with the aim of gathering a critical mass of social actors who can positively transform the country's politics. This has been the grand strategy of indefatigable utopian revolutionaries. —RONALD MOLMISA, UNIVERSITY RESEARCH ASSOCIATE, THIRD WORLD STUDIES CENTER, COLLEGE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND PHILOSOPHY, UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES DILIMAN.

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