

THE LIMITS OF DEMONSTRATION ELECTIONS

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A term has been provided the phenomenon: *demonstration elections*.

At increasingly close intervals, numerous Third World dictatorships have resorted to the cynical use of the electoral process to consolidate tyranny rather than advance democracy, deodorize the institutionalization of State terror, outmaneuver the popular movements or — in the case of US client regimes— appease occasional American breastbeating on the future of democracy and the fate of human rights.

Two main factors have prompted demonstration elections: increased concern among peoples in the First World over the general deterioration of human rights conditions in the post-colonial societies and the rise of popular democratic movements in those areas under the grip of tyranny. The former reflected in a clear drift in public opinion hostile to any overt support extended by First World governments to Third World tyrannies. Inasmuch as the bloated State structures of the bureaucratic authoritarian regimes in the Third World were dependent on official development assistance from the West, the hostility of public opinion created immense pressure on the authoritarian regimes to either make substantial concessions to democracy or build a facade of democratic processes to preserve the dictatorial substance of their rule. In the second option, demonstration elections come in handy. But the increasing assertiveness of popular democratic movements at home often frustrate the effort of dictatorships at international deception, particularly if these movements develop the ability to either influence international public opinion by calling attention to the substantial facts of dictatorship or causing the deceptive tactics of dictatorships to backfire by maximizing whatever democratic space is opened by even the most cynical regime to make popular power a reality.

Authoritarianism and elections are incongruent processes. It is in the nature of authoritarianism that it liquidates competing centers of power, neutralizes the channels for dissent and resistance, and systematically depoliticizes the people. The substance of electoral exercise, on the other hand, is a free competition of political interests, forces and perspectives. Presupposed in an authentic electoral exercise is the availability of choice, of clear options for the electorate. Demonstration elections are characterized either by the clear absence of choice, the great facility with which the governing regime can conceal popular will through the very medium that is supposed to convey that will, or the sheer meaninglessness of the exercise itself (as in the case of elections for an impotent legislative assembly).

Demonstration elections have long been a handy accoutrement of the Marcos dictatorship. To provide the dictatorial regime with a constitutional mantle at its initial stage, "people's assemblies" were hastily convened early in 1973 to "ratify" a new Constitution. In the succeeding years, a series of plebiscites and referenda drew the people's "overwhelming approval" of the continuation of an ad hoc government and

the main policies it pursued. In 1978, elections for a rubber stamp legislative assembly was called pitting the government party against a dismembered, confused and terrified opposition. In 1981, with the main opposition groups boycotting, the President received "fresh mandate" for a six-year term of office. In 1984, elections were again called for a legislative assembly that shared its law-making powers with the executive branch in a situation where the President continued to wield tremendous emergency prerogatives.

In the "snap" presidential polls called for February of 1986, the limits of demonstration elections appear to have been reached.

Signs of the regime's aging have become quite perceptible. The level of discontent could not be feasibly concealed by flimsy electoral exercises. The people have become more demonstrative of their anger. International and domestic pressures have limited the area for political maneuver open to the regime. The call for presidential elections may yet prove to be the Marcos regime's last major political blunder.

The range of considerations taken by the Marcos faction leading it to call early elections is quite easy to deduce. The presidential elections shall hopefully draw a mandate for the widespread repression it needs to break the momentum of revolutionary resistance countrywide. The electoral process itself shall allow the regime a means by which to outmaneuver the mass movements that are ill-equipped to compete at the electoral arena. Given a little more time, the mass movements may develop sufficient electoral apparatuses to assert a commanding electoral presence. Elections at this time, it might have been hoped, would stir the tensions between traditional politicians and conservative anti-Marcos forces on one hand and the popular organizations and radical movements on the other. Calling the presidential elections ahead of the local polls scheduled for the middle of the year shall allow the government party greater leverage over the local political elites since the amount of support the latter may expect to receive from the government party shall depend on their ability to deliver the votes for this earlier contest. A relatively convincing electoral mandate shall also allow Marcos to relieve himself of some of the pressure now being exerted by the US government in the name of reform.

All the above considerations making early elections a favorable option for the Marcos faction build on a single, dubious proposition: that Marcos shall draw a popularly credible, internationally convincing win from this current contest.

At this writing, early in the campaign period, it has become apparent that the proposition was built on some amount of overestimation. The intended benefits for the ruling faction of this particular demonstration election may be merely chimeric.

Up to this point, the regime has succeeded in forcing the political agenda for the whole nation. This episode may mark a decisive shift in the possession of political initiative. It may be that a clever player has drawn his last card from the hole.