

Electoral Experiment Flounders

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The Partido ng Bayan-Alliance for New Politics (PnB-ANP) coalition was virtually wiped off the board in the May 11 elections. In the senatorial race, the PnB-ANP was outpolled not only by the Lakas ng Bayan (Laban) and the rightist Grand Alliance for Democracy (GAD) but also by the pro-Marcos Kilusang Bagong Lipunan (KBL). Of more than a hundred candidates fielded by the left-wing coalition in the congressional districts, only one has so far been proclaimed winner.

The debacle that greeted the legal Left's participation in the electoral process invited a profound reexamination of the options available to the militant progressive groups and tendencies. The outcome of the last polls drew strong criticism ranging from the very decision to participate in the electoral arena to the manner the campaign was carried out by the main Left forces in an unfamiliar terrain.

Most of the progressive groups, including those outside the national democratic circuit, agree with the PnB-ANP's decision to participate in the legislative elections at both the national and district levels. It was, in a sense, a forced option. Non-participation would have allowed the rightist and pro-establishment parties to gain an uncontested hegemony over the electoral terrain. It would have reinforced the prejudiced impression that the forces of the Left are hostile to formal democratic processes.

It is the manner in which the national democratic circuit participated that has been the focus of criticism.

The PnB-ANP's decision to participate appears to have been hurriedly taken. There is no indication that the matter of participation in the electoral process was thoroughly considered way ahead of the campaign period. There is no evidence that the popular organizations of the main Left tendency were prepared beforehand for electoral struggle.

It appears that the PnB-ANP's participation in the May exercise did not have a clear set of political objectives to guide electoral engagement. Its campaign strategy, on hindsight, was premised on too many naive assumptions. Little attention was paid to the problems of converting electoral participation into a means for building broad alliances and fully mobilizing mass bases.

For some reason, PnB-ANP strategists assumed a ready voting base of at least two million. For still vaguer reasons, these strategists presumed that all the campaign should do is to double that voting base in order to win the elections. The

organized forces were expected to draw in one additional sympathetic voter each in order to achieve a doubling of the electoral base. When the final tallies came in, all the PnB-ANP senatorial candidates could muster were roughly one million votes. The weakest of the winning candidates polled seven million votes. The PnB-ANP's calculations were wide off the mark.

Guided by their strange mathematics, PnB-ANP strategists fielded a senatorial slate composed of candidates narrowly identified with the national democrats. This "exclusivist" ticket burdened the PnB-ANP campaign with the national democrats' earlier unpopular political decisions such as the boycott of the "snap" presidential elections and the "no" campaign against the new Constitution. The same "exclusivism" led the PnB-ANP to neglect united front development by fielding their own candidates against other progressive candidates in the congressional districts causing the division of the sympathetic votes and the victory of conservative politicians.

Participation in the last elections would have been more fruitful for the Left if it was set in the perspective of long-term electoral engagement. The campaign strategy ought to have been consciously designed to build broad electoral alliances in the localities, to develop grassroots mechanisms for popular electoral engagement and to immediately deny the rightists opportunities for building their political formations.

The campaign ought to have directed the main blow at the rightist coalitions as a step towards establishing the left as the most viable pole of opposition to the present arrangement. Instead, the PnB-ANP campaign directed its offensive prematurely at the Cory coalition. This put the Left electoral campaign on the path of the landslide and allowed the rightists coalitions to poll better than the progressives.

The May 11 elections provided an opportunity for the old elite and the traditional political clans to reestablish their dominance in the electoral process. The conservative outcome of the last electoral contest is partly due to the theoretical and practical weaknesses of the progressive forces.

The forces of the Left in the aftermath of a disastrous electoral experiment now find themselves in a dilemmatic situation. A political coalition with increasingly conservative tendencies has been popularly mandated. The community of progressive groups, mainly because of their own inadequacies, appear to have been pushed by recent events towards the political margins.