

Electoral processes and governance in the philippines politics essay



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The first election in the Philippines was held in May 1898 under American rule. 112 years later, there are many parts of the country where elections are characterized with private armies, violence and massive cheating. The failure of the electoral system to conduct fair and clean elections and the massive electoral fraud hinder the purpose of elections to recruit honest and accountable politicians and to integrate society. Also, the legitimacy of the elected government is weak. Politicians therefore need to garner support from patrons and oligarchs to finance electoral campaigns and to organize voter support. Once elected, they return by giving access to government resources and appointing key allies in the bureaucracy. Among citizens, a widespread view that elected governments coming to power from corrupt electoral procedures does not truly represent their interests. As a result, it is difficult to push for reforms because of weaker government and institutions and stronger vested interests.

History

The Philippines was under Spanish rule for more than 300 years. Under this era, the country was ruled by friars and appointed Spanish officials. In 1898, the Philippines declared independence and established the first republic in Asia. In the same year, the Treaty of Paris was signed where control of the Philippines was transferred from Spain to the United States. The Americans introduced democracy, elections and democratic institutions. As a result, the features of the Philippine constitution, legislation, political parties and elections are modeled after the US.

Under the US colonial period, Philippine politics was characterized between the interaction of US colonial officers and Filipino politicians. The Americans indirectly control the country by manipulating Filipino politicians to enact American policies. As a result, electoral campaigns did not provide an avenue for public participation. Rather, it was reflective of negotiations between national politicians and provincial elites (Teehankee, 2002).

The Philippine commonwealth was established in the 1935 constitution. The constitution provided a presidential form of government with a unicameral National assembly. An amendment in 1940 changed it to a bicameral legislative assembly made of the House of Representatives (lower house) and Senate (upper house).

When US colonial rule ended, they left a weak central government and power was fragmented among the provinces with varying degrees. Wealth and power through political connections had overshadowed productivity and programs for national development. Electoral results were not competitive because of the ability of landed elites to control electoral outcomes.

Elections for local positions like the lower house allowed landed elites to merge and strengthen their power as showed by their ability to prevent the passage of land reforms (Teehankee, 2002).

Elections during the Marcos regime

Marcos declared Martial Law in 1972. Elections were suspended in the first 6 years and a new constitution was also established. Marcos changed the Philippine Congress with an Interim National Assembly. An Interim National Legislature (Interim Batasang Pambasa or IBP) was enacted instead because <https://assignbuster.com/electoral-processes-and-governance-in-the-philippines-politics-essay/>

of amendments to the 1971 constitution. An election was held in 1978 to fill positions for the IBP. Marcos dominated the elections with his New Society Movement party (KBL) because opposing groups created parties that focused on regions rather than the national legislature.

The Marcos regime managed to give legitimacy to its regime through the conduct of elections. However, there was massive electoral fraud and manipulation of institutions. For example, Marcos allowed “ block voting system” wherein a vote for the party translates to vote for the whole electoral slate. This was a tremendous advantage for the KBL because they had the resources to finance a nationwide electoral campaign. Also, it was easier to tamper ballots and commit fraud.

During Marcos’ term, he tried to centralize power on himself and break the patronage system. He appointed officials not based on merit or patronage but on loyalty to him. He also siphoned the state’s resources and distributed it to himself and to his cronies. For his critics, he used violence and force. Media companies were closed or under heavy government control. One of his major critics, Benigno Aquino Jr., was assassinated in August 1983. In May 1985, Marcos announced Snap elections to prove or gain political legitimacy. The former elites managed to organize the opposition under Aquino’s widow, Corazon Aquino who came from a landed family. The Commission on Elections announced Marcos as the winner in spite of massive cheating. On the other hand, the National Citizens’ Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL) an election watchdog announced Corazon Aquino as the president based on their quick count. Marcos’ dictatorship ended in 1986 through the People Power Revolution. In addition to the military and political

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figures, the Church was involved in calling and mobilizing people to participate. Marcos and his family eventually fled to Hawaii and Corazon Aquino was sworn as the 11th President of the Philippines.

Elections Post-Marcos

During Aquino's term, a new constitution was enacted to return to a bicameral legislature and to limit the power of the presidency. For example, a president cannot run for presidency again. Media and press were free and democratic institutions were restored [Bello, 1988]. However, landed elites returned to power after the fall of Marcos and dominated the lower house. The pre-Marcos patronage system was back again. As a result, the Aquino administration failed to effectively conduct Agrarian reform.

Aquino was succeeded by Fidel Ramos, a military general in 1992. Ramos attempted to push for political reforms. After all, he had the strong support of the military. However, it was hard to push for reforms because of a weak party system and stronger congress (Hutchcroft and Rocamora, 2003). The Congress was filled with representatives from the same political families. Only 54 representatives had no close relative in politics compared to 145 belonging to political families. At least 64 were children of political figures, 23 had spouses and 46 had siblings active in politics. At the end of Ramos' term, a plan to shift to parliamentary system was exposed by the media. These changes would have allowed Ramos to extend his term after 1998. It was heavily opposed by the Catholic Church and former President Aquino for fear that the term extension would be used to serve political agendas (Rocamora, 1988).

Estrada's Rise and Fall

Estrada was sworn into office in 1998 amidst the Asian Financial Crisis. Unlike previous presidents, Estrada was a movie actor so he was popular among the masses who were tired of traditional politicians. His electoral campaign focused on the poor and the aversion of the masses against typical politicians provided victory to Estrada rather than depending on local elites for voter support. However, Estrada's promised populist policies and anti-poverty programs never took place (Fabella, 2007). Instead, the benefits were given to Estrada's families and cronies. The fall of Estrada started with his involvement in Jueteng, an illegal gambling game popular among the poor. To sustain operation, protection money is paid among protectors who are usually in the local government or in the police. Estrada tried to legalize Jueteng through the Philippine Amusement and Gaming Corporation, a government agency that oversees legal gambling activities. If legalized, the protection money will be centralized to the government and franchise holders. Local operators and receivers of Jueteng money will be out of the picture. Luis "Chavit" Singson, a governor and rumored Jueteng operator could not accept such outcome because the franchise for his area was not given to him. Chavit exposed Estrada's involvement to Jueteng which led to an impeachment case. Public uproar started when the senate which was dominated by Estrada's allies refused to open the second envelope which was thought to contain strong evidence against Estrada. People went to the streets again and People Power II occurred which led to the downfall of Estrada.

Arroyo Administration

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Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo (GMA) took over the presidency after Estrada's downfall. While finishing Estrada's term, she experienced the "Oakwood Mutiny" and "Jose Pidal" scandal where a bank account containing US\$8 million was allegedly owned by her husband. The money was supposedly a payment to then senator Arroyo to prevent her from running for presidency in the 1998 elections. Ignacio "Iggy" Arroyo, the brother of Arroyo's husband announced his ownership of the controversial bank account. He faced tax evasion charges which were eventually ruled out due to legal technicalities. The scandal died and was later elected as congressman. After finishing Estrada's term, Arroyo ran for presidency in spite of her prior announcement that she would not. She won by a slim margin of 1 million votes against Fernando Poe Jr., a movie actor and presidential candidate of the opposition. Arroyo was accused of electoral fraud and Poe filed an electoral protest. The congress mooted the electoral protest because of Poe's death. However, it heavily weakened Arroyo's legitimacy because she used state resources to fund her electoral campaign. Another strong attack against Arroyo's presidency came from leaked tapes of her talking to Comelec Commissioner Virgilio Garcilliano which the media named as "Hello Garci" scandal. The leaked tape featured a woman's voice similar to Arroyo asking for one million votes and an assurance of victory. In the beginning, the Malacanang palace denied the issue but was later retracted. Arroyo admitted and apologized in front of national television. She insisted that there was no cheating and she just wanted to protect her votes. Arroyo successfully finished her term in 2010 but not without challenges and controversies. She ran for lower congress in 2010 and won.

Discussion

The weakness of the electoral process could bring problems of legitimacy and weak position of the central government to push for reforms. The fragility of the electoral process could be traced from the failure of state agencies to be independent and enforce the rule of law.

The Commission on Elections (Comelec) is an independent constitutional body that manages the elections and “ is mandated to give life and meaning to the basic principle that sovereignty resides in the people and all government authority emanates from them”. Through the years, the commission has been involved in electoral scandals, has failed to strictly enforce electoral laws and has been accused of siding with the administration. In 1986 SNAP Elections, the Comelec announced former President Ferdinand Marcos as president in spite of massive electoral fraud. Another incident was the 2004 “ Hello Garci” controversy under Arroyo’s term. In 2006, the Supreme Court nullified the contract for the automation of the canvassing and counting of ballots between the COMELEC and Mega Pacific eSolutions Inc because the law and bidding rules were not followed. In 2007, the then Chairman Benjamin Abalos was involved in the ZTE-National Broadband Network deal where he was said to pocket in millions (USD) if the project was pushed through. The controversy eventually led to his resignation. The Comelec also fall shorts to provide fast and reliable solutions for electoral process because of huge costs and bribery in the courts. The poor track record and lack of credibility of the Comelec prove its inability to enforce the rules which influences the conduct of Philippine politics.

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The Comelec also failed to ensure a level playing field in the electoral process because of weak law enforcement. Winning became dependent on money, force and violence and not on programs and platforms. The growing costs of campaign expenses deter effective participation. Those who run are rich or have wealthy financiers. This provides an incentive for corruption to recoup the costs of electoral campaign and return favors from supporters. Also, it can result to political dynasties. The current president, Benigno Aquino III and his defeated running mate Sen. Manuel Roxas II both came from influential political families namely the Cojuangco-Aquino and Araneta-Roxas-Fores clans. Their reported campaigns for the 2010 elections cost P440 million and P280 million respectively. Antonio Cojuangco, Aquino's second cousin and a rich businessman, reportedly donated P100 million in his campaign. However, their election finances estimate were very much in doubt and were said to be much higher because they used television and radio in their electoral campaign which were very expensive. Former President Gloria Arroyo also came from a political clan and was a daughter of a former president. Her sons were congressmen during her term. In addition to financial support, politicians also seek the endorsement of organizations such as the Makati Business Club, Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) and the Iglesia ni Cristo (INC). The first is sought for their campaign contributions. The CBCP and INC are religious organizations and are believed to command influence on voters. For example, INC is believed to vote as a block and is estimated to deliver 5-8 million votes. In addition to money and endorsements, Philippine elections are filled with election related violence. The latest of which that brought the Philippines to the international arena was the Maguindanao Massacre which killed 57 people.

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Once elected, the core strength of the president is from his appointing power and control over government funds. The benefits received from supporters during the campaign are paid in return through endowment of huge government contracts and positions in key government agencies. Appointed officials could also appoint their staff. This kind of system results to a far reaching and deep source of patronage. As a result, the government has a weaker capacity to push for reforms because it has to satisfy vested interests. An example would be Estrada. The legalization of Jueteng will bring huge sums of money to the government or to his allies. However, because Chavit was left out of the picture triggered his downfall. Corazon Aquino could have successfully pushed for agrarian reform because of the momentum during her presidency. The law for agrarian reform was passed but has failed to translate into results because it was against the interest of the landed elites in congress.

Conclusion

The Philippines has a lot to improve in its conduct of elections. Because the electoral process is easily manipulated through money and violence, the politicians elected have most of time always been the same – from political clans or landed elites. It also deters participation from new leaders and it does not become representative of the people. The presidents that have passed post-Marcos have cronies, friends or allies to satisfy. As a result, the Philippines have been left behind by her neighbors in the road to Economic growth.

A step to improve the electoral process, the Philippines had its first electronic voting system in 2010. Although electoral fraud still exist which critics argue are harder to trace and easier to do, it is still a step forward compared to manual canvassing from the local precinct station to the Congress.

There is also a pressing need to improve civil service. This includes putting deserving people in the job because of merit and competency and not connections. This implies that the central government must reduce its appointment of officials and start paying government employees well.

It is also important to strengthen the independence of the Judiciary system and the Ombudsman. In the Philippines, the chief magistrates of the Supreme Court are appointed by the president so there is a conflict of interest in times when the president who appointed them is accused. Resolution on electoral disputes should be fast and credible.

Lastly, the public should demand more accountability from the Comelec and politicians themselves. In spite of the shortcomings of the electoral process, it is still better to exercise their right to vote.