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The Politics of “Public Opinion” in the Philippines

Eva-Lotta E. Hedman

Abstract: In May 2010, national elections in the Philippines saw front-runner presidential candidate Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino III win a landslide victory which set the stage for an orderly transition of power from the administration of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. This article argues that Aquino’s victory, rather than signalling a clear departure from the old ways of doing politics or the mere reproduction of established patterns of oligarchical politics, points towards a more gradual and limited change in the mobilisation of voters in the Philippines. This change, it is further argued, reflects in part the rise of “public opinion” as a social fact in Philippine politics and society in the period since the resurrection of formal democratic institutions and regular elections. The article identifies the broad parameters of the rise in polls and surveys in the Philippines, and, drawing on the critical insights of Pierre Bourdieu, examines the nature and significance of “public opinion” itself. However, the argument advanced here is a cautionary one, indicating that, while the emergence of public opinion as a social fact alters political calculations and dynamics associated with voter mobilisation, the politics of public opinion may only have limited transformative potential for democracy in the Philippines.

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Keywords: Philippines, public opinion, voter mobilisation, elections, electoral campaigns, political party system, democratisation

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Introduction

In May 2010, national elections in the Philippines saw front-runner presidential candidate Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino III win a landslide victory which set the stage for an orderly transition of power from the incumbent administration of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. To many observers, this election also signalled a larger triumph over the “guns, goons, and gold” long associated with voter mobilisation in the Philippines, with Aquino’s poll-tested popularity translated directly into presidential victory through the country’s first fully automated and computerized national ballot count. To others, the election instead confirmed the staying power of an oligarchy of old political families and patronage-based coalitions of personal allegiance and political convenience, with the son of a former president and the scion of an established dynasty resurrecting the political machine built up by his late father, Senator Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino, Jr. in the late 1960s and early 1970s and then redeployed by his mother, Corazon Aquino, in the “snap” presidential campaign of 1986. Like his mother a scion of the Cojuangco family, the new president not only inherited shares of vast landholdings and in a range of companies and commercial banks, but counted among his relatives such luminaries of the business establishment as long-time San Miguel Corporation chairman Eduardo “Danding” Cojuangco, Jr. and former Philippine Long Distance Telephone Company chairman Antonio “Tonyboy” Cojuangco, Jr. In short, from this perspective, Aquino’s victory confirms the Philippines as an essentially oligarchical democracy.

Against such standard interpretations of the 2010 elections, this paper argues that Aquino’s victory, rather than signalling a clear departure from the old ways of doing politics or the mere reproduction of established patterns of oligarchical politics, points towards a more gradual and limited change in the mobilisation of voters in the Philippines. This change, it is further argued, reflects in part the rise of “public opinion” as a social fact in Philippine politics and society in the period since the resurrection of formal democratic institutions and regular elections. In drawing analytical attention to the emergence of this new social imaginary of an opinionated *public*, the argument advanced here thus departs from much of the existing literature, which tends to posit an electorate instead largely inscribed within the constraints of clientelism, coercion or machine politics in the Philippines.

Rather than questioning the extent of such change, and whether it warrants an upgrade, as it were, from a glass half-empty to a glass half-full rating, this article focuses instead on the changing *nature* of voter mobilisation in the Philippines, and the *processes* through which they have unfolded in the quarter century separating the first and the second Aquino presidency. To that end, the present analysis takes as its point of departure already well-

established scholarly research and theoretically-informed arguments about oligarchical democracy found in the existing literature on politics and society in the Philippines, and elsewhere (Scott 1972; McCoy 1993; Sidel 1999). Having rehearsed key arguments and findings in this impressive body of scholarship which, in combination, offers a kind of baseline against which to identify and assess change, the article turns to a theoretically-informed examination into the nature and the processes of changing forms of voter mobilisation. In focusing on the nature and processes of such change, the present analysis draws on early research focused on clientelism and machine politics in the Philippines (Nowak and Snyder 1974, but also mobilises fresh insights into the shifting dynamics of voter mobilisation from the critical sociology of Pierre Bourdieu about what is commonly referred to as “public opinion” (Bourdieu 1979).

Drawing on Bourdieu and others writing in a similar vein, this article argues that an important and under-theorised aspect of the changing dynamics of voter mobilisation stems from the emergence of public opinion as a social fact, or political discourse, in the Philippines. This argument points beyond the more commonplace concern, in the Philippines and elsewhere, with the “problems” associated with “public opinion”, that tend to be of a more “technical” kind, including whether individual polls or polling outfits are sufficiently scientific in their approach (e.g., Jacobs and Shapiro 2005). As Bourdieu argued more than thirty years ago, “public opinion” is “a pure and simple *artefact* whose function is to dissimulate the fact that the state of the opinion at a given moment is a system of forces, of tensions” (Bourdieu 1979). Viewed from this perspective, polls and surveys are themselves mechanisms of re-presentations, which, through a “formally equalitarian aggregative logic,” anticipate the emergence of a certain “public” and its preferences, over and against other forms of collectives and politics rooted in conditions of deprivation, poverty and social inequality (Champagne 1990). The argument advanced here is thus a cautionary one, indicating that, while the emergence of “public opinion” as a social fact alters political calculations and dynamics associated with voter mobilisation, the politics of public opinion may only have limited transformative potential for democracy in the Philippines.

This article thus seeks to offer the following contributions to existing research and publications on Philippine elections and politics. First of all, it identifies the broad parameters of the overall growth trajectory of the phenomenon commonly referred to as “public opinion” in the Philippines after Marcos. Second, it redirects attention beyond the common preoccupation with the outcomes, design and accuracy of polls and surveys, and towards a critical reflection upon the nature and significance of “public opin-

ion” itself, and, in particular, the effects of its increasing circulation and traction, as such, in Philippine politics and society. Third, it shows how, with the rise of “public opinion” as a social fact in the Philippines, it is also possible to discern an – admittedly slow and limited – effect upon voter mobilisation and, more generally, electoral campaigns. Fourth and finally, this article cautions that such effects may serve to mediate or to amplify already familiar dynamics and patterns observed in Philippine election campaigns, notably bandwagoning and political branding, and that the transformative potential of “public opinion” remains highly circumscribed and compromised in a number of ways.

The article is organised as follows: The first section identifies more long-term social and economic changes in the country, as well as the new institutional framework for electoral politics introduced with the 1987 Constitution. It argues that, even as money and machinery have remained essential elements of election campaigning and voter mobilization after the resurrection of democratic institutions and practices, established patterns of voter brokerage have thus become more attenuated and unreliable compared to pre-martial law politics. The second section turns to the rise of “public opinion” in Philippine politics and society, offering a brief introduction to the practice of polling since the resurrection of democratic institutions. The third section sketches the ebb and flow of public opinion in the context of the three presidential election campaigns to have been held between the first and the second Aquino presidency. The fourth and final section probes beyond commonplace concerns with “technical” problems of polling, or attempts at restricting the practice, and instead draws on Pierre Bourdieu, and others writing in a similar vein, to question the effect of surveys upon the very notion of “the public” and indeed, democracy.

Something Old, Something New: Voter Mobilisation in the Philippines

Democracy in the Philippines has been described variously in terms of “factionalism” and “clientelism”, “caciquism” and “bossism” but the overall pattern has been clear (Landé 1964; Scott 1972; Anderson 1988; Sidel 1999). Elected politicians have been drawn from the landowning, commercial and industrial oligarchy of the archipelago, representing its interests both directly and through delegation. Competition for political office has revolved around contestation for the spoils of state power between rival families and factions within this ruling class. Poverty and economic insecurity have combined with a highly decentralized political structure to render the majority of Filipinos susceptible to clientelist, coercive, and monetary inducements and pres-

tures during elections. Meanwhile, the prominent role of money in Philippine elections – for buying votes, bribing officials, and otherwise oiling the machinery – has created a structural imperative of fund-raising that guarantees politicians’ continuing use of state powers and resources for personal and particularistic benefit and their abiding reliance on landowners, merchants, bankers, and industrialists for financial backing. Small wonder that observers have been most impressed by the continuities in this seemingly seamless system of oligarchical democracy in the Philippines, as seen in the close attention paid to “political dynasties” that have dominated municipalities, congressional districts, and in some cases entire provinces across several generations and many decades (McCoy 1993).

Of course, efforts aimed at challenging or circumventing such established political dynamics through alternative forms of voter mobilisation are not new to the Philippines. During what may be termed “critical elections,” the mobilisation of – voluntarist, non-partisan, patriotic – national citizens campaigns for “free and fair elections” have helped to energise opposition bids for the presidency against a *continuista* incumbent with seemingly authoritarian tendencies and ambitions. Such campaigns accompanied the 1953, 1969, and 1986 elections. These “critical elections” have enjoyed a close affinity with the demonstrations of “People Power” that helped to unseat a president in 1986 and, again, in 2001 (Hedman 2001; 2006).

Since the restoration of formal democratic institutions and practices in 1986, however, the Philippines has seen a more gradual and limited transformation in the mobilisation of voters. This change is inextricably linked with the increasing circulation in Philippine politics and society of what is commonly referred to as “public opinion.” As argued in this paper, the sheer accumulation and anticipation of surveys, reflecting back to the (disaggregated) public their (aggregated) opinion, have become inextricably linked to dynamics of bandwagoning, as well as to efforts at what scholars have described as “political branding” (Pasotti 2009). Before turning to a closer analysis of the rise of public opinion *as such* in Philippine politics and society, it is useful to situate this development against the backdrop of more long-term social and economic changes in the country, as well as the new institutional framework for electoral politics introduced with the new Constitution of 1987.

First of all, it is worth recalling that in the Philippines, as elsewhere, the structural decline of patron-client relations has been linked to demographic change. Since the late 1960s, the expansion of a segment of urban poor and, in absolute terms, a growing urban middle class has anticipated an overall decline in the “integrative capacity of political machines” (Nowak and Snyder 1974: 1165; Scott 1972). With urbanization, industrialization, and eco-

conomic differentiation, the interpersonal linkages between ordinary Filipinos and the brokers of their votes became increasingly attenuated, enabling new forms of electoral and extra-electoral mobilisation in the tumultuous years leading up to the declaration of martial law in 1972. The resurrection of formal democratic institutions in the post-Marcos period, moreover, unfolded against the backdrop of a resumption of economic growth, with the spread and transformation of many urban and peri-urban landscapes across the Philippines, resurrecting the spectre of alternative social imaginaries and political possibilities to those associated with the politics of machinery and money (Hedman 2000; 2001).

Second, shifts in the political party and voting system in the Philippines have followed changes to the electoral rules in the post-Marcos period enacted since the new Philippine Constitution of 1987. The new electoral rules introduced with the resurrection of formal democratic institutions spelled the end of the two-party system and the associated zero-sum logic of Philippine elections that prevailed from Independence in 1946 to martial law in 1972, when the Liberal and Nacionalista machines alternated in power without serious challenges from third parties. As the new rules put in place since 1987 abolished the pre-martial law system of limiting party representation on boards of election inspectors and canvassers to the incumbent administration and dominant opposition parties, they eliminated the party disciplining effects upon candidates whose Liberal or Nacionalista affiliation offered much-needed influence over the ballot-counting process on election day.

This adjustment in the electoral rules refigured a shift to multi-party electoral competition that has characterised Philippine politics and society in the post-authoritarian period. This shift, in turn, has opened up new possibilities for a more variegated and “flexible” array of political parties and coalitions to field candidates in the contestation for an unprecedented number of elected seats at municipal, provincial, and national level. Local candidates for municipal and congressional offices now strike deals with the national campaign managers of senatorial and presidential candidates from across multiple party divides, without fear that betraying formal party affiliations might jeopardize their influence over local vote-counting on election day. With this greater flexibility has come increasing unreliability of vote-brokering arrangements and uncertainty of electoral outcomes, with the old multi-tiered party-based system of machine mobilization considerably undermined.

Third, in class terms, the configuration of elected representatives has changed in tandem with the expansion and differentiation of the Philippine economy over the past several decades. At the local level, empires built on large landholdings, control over agricultural processing, and other forms of

control over the workings of the rural economy have become dwarfed by national and international agro-business interests, foreign and Manila-based mining companies, and large-scale banking, construction, and real-estate concerns radiating out of the national capital. Municipal mayors and provincial governors from around the archipelago have joined congressmen in establishing residences in Metro Manila and in diversifying the geographical reach and sectoral breadth of their business interests far beyond the localities they ostensibly serve but often use in part as vote banks to help leverage business deals far from their offices in municipal halls and provincial capitols.

Meanwhile, at the national level, the diversification of major conglomerates across economic sectors and their spread across the archipelago has anticipated new forms of brokerage to replace the pre-martial law pattern of more direct representation of “the Sugar Bloc” and other national economic interests. Today, the owners of the largest conglomerates in the Philippines lend support to a diverse range of corporate lawyers, veteran machine politicians, and celebrities in the – nationally elected – Senate in exchange for assistance in winning favourable treatment by regulatory and tax authorities, privileged access to state concessions and contracts, and other advantages. A similar dynamic has also been evident in the House of Representatives, with the country’s leading magnates bankrolling clusters of candidates in a given election, as well as lobbying campaigns on specific pieces of legislation during sessions of Congress. As suggested elsewhere, this pattern of brokerage indicates a shift in the relationship between the spheres of business and politics, allowing for a new cast of candidates to “take the money and run” (Sidel 1998).

Overall, then, even as money and machinery have remained essential elements of election campaigning and voter mobilization, the something of the old “glue” that cemented pre-martial law politics has come unstuck. Previously effective forms of vote brokerage have become more attenuated and unreliable, with monetary inducements failing to guarantee loyalty. Established patterns of interest representation have become more indirect, diffuse, and ad hoc.

The Rise of Public Opinion in Philippine Politics and Society

It is in the wider context of such social, economic and institutional change that “public opinion” has gained greater circulation as political discourse and social fact in Philippine politics and society, with the popularity and poll ratings of candidates – rather than the construction and maintenance of

machines – viewed as an increasingly effective and decisive mode of voter mobilisation. This trend is perhaps most evident in the close correspondence between pre-election surveys and the performance of presidential contenders at the polls in the 2010 elections. However, the rise of public opinion has also come to influence the process of election campaigning itself, as seen in the floating and junking of candidates, the party-switching of politicians, and the unravelling of coalitions, all developments noted by informed observers of the presidential elections of May 2010.

The issue of public opinion and whether it plays a role in Philippine elections had been of some interest to scholars already in the pre-martial law era (Meadows 1963). Surveys on presidential elections were attempted by Philippine academic researchers and print media in the 1950s and 1960s, but these were comparatively few, isolated and limited in scope. While election surveys thus date back to the 1950s in the Philippines, they remained largely confidential and unpublished (Abad and Ramirez 2008). Such surveys were conducted in some urban areas in the 1953, 1961 and 1965 presidential elections, for example, by a marketing research company called Robot Statistics, founded by an American, George Cohen, and identified as the first and, initially, the only, such outfit in business in the country. By the 1970s, marketing and opinion research was expanding in the Philippines, and a number of new such outfits backed the foundation of MORES, or the Marketing & Opinion Research Society of the Philippines in 1977.

However, public opinion as political discourse in Philippine politics and society is a phenomenon that began to emerge only in the context of the deepening crisis and mounting opposition that marked the late authoritarian period. This is perhaps best illustrated with reference to the Social Weather Station (SWS), which was founded as early as August 1985 and remains among the Philippines' foremost public opinion survey outfits to date (e.g., Abad and Ramirez 2008). Unlike marketing research business organisations, the SWS is a non-profit institute that aims to conduct social surveys and survey-based social science research with an aim to further education, awareness and analysis of social problems in the Philippines. The SWS undertakes commissioned but not proprietary or confidential surveys, and the uses of survey data and findings cannot be permanently suppressed by research sponsors. While it may allow for data and research findings that result from commissioned surveys on highly sensitive topics to be temporarily embargoed, for a period of up to three years, the SWS regularly reports on its data and findings to the mass media, and also issues the quarterly Social Weather Survey (Mangahas 2009).

Having captured something of the zeitgeist of the late Marcos era, with its one-million signature petition drive to draft Corazon C. Aquino as the

opposition presidential candidate in 1986, its national citizens’ campaign for free and fair elections, and its spectacular People Power finale, the Social Weather Station has continued to develop and expand its production of survey-based national statistics on public opinion in the Philippines, thus becoming a fixture in the period since the restoration of democracy. In the first regular presidential elections to be held after martial law, for example, the SWS introduced so-called “exit polls” to the Philippines in 1992 when surveying voters upon their return home after voting, rather than outside poll centres, for ABS-CBN, the leading national television network in the country. Such exit polls have been conducted nationally since the 1995 interim elections, with an aim to announce results within 24 hours, compared to a period of up to two weeks typically required for the official tabulation of votes.

With the proliferation of political contenders, parties and coalitions in the post-authoritarian period, the practice of “polling” has also gained increasing traction, as seen in the number and frequency of public opinion surveys conducted for wider dissemination by an expanding field of specialist outfits such as the SWS, the break-away Pulse Asia, and others, but also by media networks across the Philippines.¹ Moreover, the commissioning of such surveys by individual candidates and their campaign managers, as well as by incumbent administrations, has also become widespread. This institutionalisation of “polling” as a familiar and widespread practice has encouraged developments in political marketing and “political branding” by candidates and their handlers, while producing bandwagoning effects among local politicians eager for affiliation with those presidential and senatorial candidates most likely to win national office (e.g., Tabunda, Fonbuena, and Rufo 2008; cf. Pasotti 2009).

Indeed, in the wider context of multiple parties and candidates for office without political platforms or programmes of any real distinction, the apparition of an opinionated public in survey after survey is worthy of note as a phenomenon in its own right. That is, aside from the specific content of any one survey, public opinion polling has emerged as an institutionalised practice in the Philippines, an established social fact. As already noted, the sheer increase in surveys is ample testimony to this reality (Chua 2004). Beyond the increasing number and frequency of surveys, moreover, there is mounting evidence of considerable media interest in and political controversy over the “reported findings” of surveys, focused on the facts and figures of specific polls, but also, importantly, on the very claims to profes-

1 One recent observer identified the following as key among the major ‘legitimate polling firms’ in the Philippines: SWS, Pulse Asia, StatPolls, The Center, Ibon Foundation, Asia Research Organisation. Sureta 2009: 3.

sional objectivity and scientific method that lie at the heart of the production of public opinion for public consumption. As the accumulation and anticipation of surveys have achieved both momentum and continuous reproduction and circulation, the significance of public opinion *as such* thus extends well beyond the (instrumental) uses and abuses of surveys to encompass (structural) effects of a different order in Philippine politics and society.

In terms of Philippine elections, such effects have come to shape the life-cycle of political campaigns in decisive ways. As noted above, for example, the early testing of the mood of Filipino voters by “floating” possible contenders for elected office has become a well established practice prior to the official start of an election campaign period, as seen in late 2009 with the rise of “Noynoy” Aquino in the aftermath of his mother’s funeral. As suggested by public opinion polls focused on national elections, there is a strong correlation between those who top the often crowded field of would-be contenders in early pre-election surveys and those who actually proceed to file for candidacy and to run for elected office in the official campaign period. The growing practice of would-be-candidates and their handlers commissioning their own surveys has also revealed an acute appreciation of the significance of public opinion *polls* for influencing the prospects of any given election campaign, by establishing candidates as genuinely “bankable” in the eyes of prospective supporters. Underlining the importance of survey results four weeks before the elections to financial backers, for example, one veteran political analyst noted that a candidate who fares poorly in such surveys “may be deprived of funding”.² The bandwagoning effect of polling, in other words, may set into motion the logic of a self-fulfilling prophecy, as public opinion combines with money and machinery to determine election results, but the ebb and flow of public opinion appear genuinely difficult to predict or to manage.

The Ebb and Flow of “Public Opinion” in Three Presidential Elections

Against this backdrop, the three presidential elections in the period between the first and the second Aquino presidency provide instructive glimpses of both the power and the limitations of “public opinion” since the resurrection of democratic institutions in the Philippines. In 1992, for example, the first presidential election since the fall of Marcos saw anti-graft and corruption crusader Miriam Defensor-Santiago launch an electoral campaign

2 Antonio “TonyGat” Gatmaitan, cited in Chua 2004: 3.

characterised by unprecedented reformist zeal and appeal, directed especially at younger generations of voters who had begun to come of age in the post-authoritarian era (Defensor-Santiago 1991). Having been forced to found her own electoral vehicle, the People’s Reform Party, and lacking real financial backing or an established political machine, she called on university students to campaign house-to-house in support of her presidential bid, and to serve as her vote-watchers at precinct level on election day.

As her campaign picked up momentum, Defensor-Santiago eventually caught up with the incumbent administration’s anointed candidate, (Ret.) General Fidel V. Ramos, in a SWS survey conducted in April 1992. Despite all the considerable advantages and resources enjoyed by Ramos’ campaign compared to that of Defensor-Santiago, he recovered only a very slight lead in the final such pre-election poll conducted a few days prior to election day on 11 May 1992. The early random canvassing of votes per province put Defensor-Santiago firmly in the lead for the first five days after the elections, and she placed first among presidential candidates in Metro Manila, and other regions with large voter populations.

Only as the votes began to trickle in from more distant regions of the archipelago, like Ramos’ vote-rich home province of Pangasinan, his vice-presidential candidate’s populous home province of Cebu, and the troubled provinces of Muslim Mindanao, where much skulduggery and wholesale vote-rigging were reported, did Defensor-Santiago fall to second place behind Ramos, who claimed victory and assumed the presidency later that year. Allegations of wholesale election fraud, and broader claims of advantages enjoyed thanks to the incumbent Aquino administration’s support, raised serious questions regarding the accuracy, integrity, and legitimacy of Ramos’ electoral victory. Indeed, Defensor-Santiago launched an election protest that was eventually heard by the Supreme Court (Defensor-Santiago 1994). But with Defensor-Santiago’s anti-corruption zeal viewed with some discomfort in many quarters, the continuity and conservative style represented by Ramos, and his role as a retired military officer in defeating a series of coup attempts in the late 1980s, muted criticisms that a travesty of democracy had been allowed to unfold in the first presidential turnover since the forced ouster of Marcos in 1986.

In the second post-Marcos presidential elections of 1998, by contrast, the popular, pseudo-populist appeal of opposition candidate and action-movie star Joseph “Erap” Estrada succeeded in captivating the electorate and capturing the presidency with a landslide victory in 1998. Having won election first to the vice-presidency in 1992 and then the presidency in 1998 with the largest vote margins in Philippine history, Estrada’s campaigns seemed to confirm the seamless working of public opinion polls as self-

fulfilling prophecies. Millions of Filipino voters responded enthusiastically to Estrada's avowed identification with the poor – “*Erap para sa Mahirap*” – and the “masses” – “*Partido ng Masa*” and were keen to identify themselves with a self-described “underdog” winner-in-the-making. Meanwhile, machine politicians and businessmen eager for inclusion and access in the impending Estrada administration likewise bandwagoned *en masse* onto the Joseph E. Estrada for President (JEEP) campaign (Hedman 2001).

Yet the same pseudo-populist appeal which had helped to elevate Estrada to the presidency with the support of millions of ordinary Filipino voters also inspired scepticism and suspicion among the urban middle class, the Catholic Church hierarchy, and the business establishment whose interests had been serviced much more discreetly and effectively under the preceding administrations of Aquino and Ramos. As with Miriam Defensor-Santiago, the short-circuiting of the established route to presidential power through direct popular appeal to voters by a “wild-card” candidate clearly carried dangers of its own, and once in office, the action-film star Estrada's personal excesses, abuses of office, and aggressive flaunting of freedom from the established constraints of oligarchical democracy offended sensibilities and, less than two years into his presidential term, inspired journalistic exposés, urban middle-class protest campaigns, and congressional investigations and in due course impeachment proceedings. With Estrada allies obstructing confirmation of impeachment in the Senate, in early 2001, the “court of public opinion” shifted venue to the streets of the national capital, where a repeat performance of the “People Power Revolution” of 1986 eventually forced Estrada out of office, allowing his vice-president, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, to assume the presidency in his stead (Landé 2001). Subsequent protests organized by backers of the ousted president and attended by many urban poor Estrada enthusiasts were driven from the streets of Metro Manila and derided as “rent-a-crowd” mob riots. “People Power”, it seemed, was allowed to stand in not only for constitutional procedure but also for “public opinion” per se, even as surveys continued to demonstrate abiding, if diminished, popular support for Estrada across the country (Hedman 2003).

Against this backdrop, the third post-Marcos presidential elections held in 2004 stand out for their confirmation of this implicit repudiation of the effective supremacy of “public opinion.” The 2004 presidential elections, after all, witnessed the seemingly inexplicable failure of Philippine cinema's all-time great, “FPJ” (Fernando Poe, Jr.), to translate his long-standing and nation-wide iconic star status into presidential victory, much as his long-time friend and fellow action-film hero Estrada had done in 1998. As in 1992, the presidential election was instead won by the candidate of the incumbent

administration, in this case the seated president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, who unlike her predecessors was free to extend her term for another six years thanks to her extra-electoral ascent to presidential office in 2001 (Gloria, Tabunda, and Fonbuena 2004). As in 1992, the outcome of the presidential elections in 2004 was accompanied by allegations of wholesale electoral fraud, in this case vividly evidenced in congressional and court proceedings featuring Commission of Elections officials clearly operating in cahoots with the President. As in 1992, the losing opposition presidential candidate in 2004 filed an election protest with the Supreme Court, which eventually dismissed the case and allowed for Macapagal-Arroyo to serve out the remainder of her term (Hutchcroft 2008).

Overall, then, the post-Marcos period has witnessed recurring efforts at voter mobilisation which, in different ways and with varying success, have sought to circumvent the established routes to presidential office through incumbent administration patronage and the accumulation of massive campaign “war chests” and nation-wide political machines. On the one hand, in two out of three presidential contests during this period (1992, 2004), the electoral campaigns to elect Miriam Defensor-Santiago and Ferdinand Poe Jr., suggested themselves as significant instances of such alternative forms of voter mobilisation. At the same time, they failed to translate the widespread support – for “Miriam” in 1992 and for “FPJ” in 2004 – into final victory at the polls in the face of incumbent administrations fully committed to support for insider candidates, President Aquino’s anointed successor Ramos in the first instance, and the seated president Macapagal-Arroyo herself in the second. On the other hand, the winning presidential campaign of Joseph Estrada succeeded in mobilising voters in ways irreducible to machine or money politics in 1998, with the incumbent Ramos administration torn between rival claimants to succession and thus unable to finesse a manufactured electoral victory for a credible alternative candidate. Yet Estrada’s unprecedented popular presidential campaign victory in 1998 proved problematic in ways which prefigured his forced ouster by extra-electoral, and extra-constitutional, means in early 2001.

Public Opinion and the Politics of Recognition

Unsurprisingly, it was in the wake of the unprecedented popularity – and populism – of Estrada’s election campaign that the most concerted attack against the practice, as well as the foremost practitioner, of election surveys in the Philippines, was launched. As Estrada’s lead in the public opinion polls was followed by his landslide victory in 1998, a number of privileged speeches from the Senate floor began targeting “surveys in general and the

SWS in particular” (Mangahas 2007: 7). By 2000, a number of Philippine senators, including (former) unsuccessful presidential and vice-presidential contenders in the 1998 elections, had proposed to amend a bill, the Fair Election Act, initially aimed to lift election advertising in the media, in such ways as to incorporate a ban on election surveys. The bill was passed by Congress, and subsequently signed by President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, in February 2001, despite efforts to stop it by the Social Weather Station, as well as the Marketing and Opinion Research Society of the Philippines. In April of the same year, the SWS and the newspaper *Manila Standard* petitioned the Supreme Court, which subsequently ruled the ban on publication of surveys 15 days before national elections, and 7 days before local elections, a violation of the freedom of expression, and thus unconstitutional (*Social Weather Stations v Comelec*, GR No. 147571, 5 May 2001). Despite this Supreme Court ruling, the same ban resurfaced in the new Rules and Regulations by the Commission on Elections (Comelec) during the 2007 interim elections, prompting further controversy and protest to focus on the uses and abuses of public opinion surveys in Philippine politics and society.

The move to ban pre-election surveys described above differs in important respects from the more commonplace concern, in the Philippines and elsewhere, with the “problems” associated with “public opinion”, that tend to be of a more “technical” kind, including whether individual polls or polling outfits are sufficiently scientific in their approach, thus inviting similarly technical solutions aimed at improving the design, execution and reliability of surveys (e.g., Jacobs and Shapiro 2005). Instead, attempts to restrict the very dissemination of survey results attest, however implicitly, to the rise of public opinion as a social fact and the related uncertainties and anxieties about its broader impact in the context of the Philippines. In as far as such attacks on surveys tend to focus on election campaigns, they also point towards a particular concern about the staying power of money and machinery. More generally, such efforts to thwart the practices and institutions that aim to (re)present to the public its own (collective) opinions through polls and surveys suggest that the new social imaginary of “public opinion” is one which can neither be safely ignored, nor seamlessly controlled, by candidates for elected office or their election campaign managers in the Philippines.

Beyond the focus on technical problems and solutions associated with polling, or the attempts at restricting the practice itself, the rise of “public opinion,” as a phenomenon in its own right, appears in a very different light, as do its purported effects, when viewed through the critical lens of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, and others writing in a similar vein. As argued by Bourdieu more than thirty years ago, “public opinion” is “a pure and simple *artefact* whose function is to dissimulate the fact that the state of

the opinion at a given moment is a system of forces, of tensions” (Bourdieu 1979). Polls and surveys, it has been argued, are thus instruments “not of political knowledge but of political action,” whose deployment inherently devalues other forms of collective action – strikes, protests, social movements – and rests on a “formally equalitarian aggregative logic” that ignores and obscures the profound realities of deprivation, poverty, and social inequality in countries such as the Philippines (Wacquant 2004; Champagne 1990).

Viewed from this perspective, the rise of public opinion can be more readily seen to have coincided, at the outset, with the emergence of a new form of political action in the Philippines. This new political activism was directed, not merely at Marcos’ ailing dictatorship, but also, importantly, against the labour strikes, student protests and peasant movements that surfaced in the factories, the campuses, and the haciendas of the country, precisely at a time when the Communist Party of the Philippines, and its armed wing, the New People’s Army, emerged the single largest such organisation (in opposition, not in control, of state power) anywhere in the world. Long before the institutionalisation of “public opinion” through polls and surveys after the resurrection of democracy, it was this struggle for “hearts and minds” that unleashed the “will of the people” into Philippine political discourse, as seen in the high-profile campaigns to collect one million signatures on a petition for Cory Aquino to run for president in 1985, to organise as many volunteers for Namfrel (National Movement for Free Elections) in 1985-86, and, finally, to oust an authoritarian regime by means of People Power in February 1986.

Indeed, it is perhaps worth recalling, however briefly, that the mother of all attempts at “floating” a candidacy in the Philippines dates back a full quarter-century to 1985, when a popular drive to collect one million signatures in support of then housewife and widow Corazon “Cory” Aquino not only catapulted her into the “snap” presidential race against Marcos, but also served to generate tremendous momentum for her campaign. A similar drive also accompanied the presidential bid of the next generation of the Aquino family nearly twenty-five years later, but Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino III’s candidacy probably owed more to the timing of his mother’s death in August 2009, less than a year before the 2010 elections. With hundreds of thousands of Filipinos lining the funeral cortege for his mother “Cory”, and millions more joining in the virtual spectacle, “Noynoy” was thus yanked out of relative senatorial obscurity and thrust into the lead role in a larger meta-narrative of family and nation, the Aquinos and the Philippines, dating back to his father’s imprisonment and exile in the 1970s and assassination in Manila in 1983.

At first glance, it may appear that the funeral corteges and petition drives which helped to jump-start the presidential campaigns of two generations of Aquinos, a full quarter-century apart, remain a thing apart from the rise of public opinion as political discourse. Indeed, in the case of “Cory”, the public spectacle that propelled her into popular consciousness coincided with the first appearance of the Philippines’ foremost polling institution, the Social Weather Station (SWS) in 1985 and thus pre-dated the wider circulation of public opinion as political discourse under post-Marcos conditions of democratic elections. By contrast, public opinion surveys had already become firmly established aspects of Philippine election campaigns by 2010, when Noynoy’s successful presidential candidacy was acclaimed as something of a foundational moment and unique repertoire in the rise of public opinion in the Philippines

However, in each case, the ostensibly private state of mourning for a departed family member and the highly individuated act of signing a petition, were accompanied by large-scale and widely publicised displays of sympathy and support. In each case, the spectacle of grief at the loss of a national figure associated with victimhood – whether assassination at the hands of Marcos in 1983 or repeated attempted coups by the military in the late 1980s – spoke of aspirations to a higher form of personal sacrifice and public morality than the machinations of what has been described and decried as mere *pulitika* (Ileto 1985). Simultaneously public and collective, such displays have reflected popular sentiments back onto participants and observers alike, thus pointing to a deep structural affinity with the less spectacular and more institutionalised practice of “polling.” The institutionalisation of this practice has proceeded apace, slowly, gradually and to limited effect, in the intervening years between the first and second Aquino presidency.

Conclusions

As Southeast Asia entered the twenty-first century, the procedures and practices associated with democracy had become established social facts in many parts of the region. At the same time, however, the actual political dynamics and lived experiences of such ostensibly democratic developments have often remained at striking odds with the principles and promises of liberal democracy. Indeed, democratisation in Southeast Asia, as elsewhere, has seen mounting “democratic deficits” and even authoritarian relapses in the past decade, as noted by many observers.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, the optimism evident in much scholarship and political commentary focused on democratisation in the region has also

given way to rather more weary, even cynical, assessments of the political parties, party systems, and electoral processes found in parts of the region today (e.g., Mietzner 2007; Montinola 1999; Ockey 1994; Tan 2006). By contrast with the proliferation of writings on the celebrated role of the middle class, civil society, social movements and political oppositions for processes of democratisation in the region, and elsewhere, the subsequent turn to studying electoral procedures and related practices reflects a preoccupation with institutional design and implementation for democratic consolidation (MacIntyre 2003; Andrews and Montinola 2004; Hicken 2009). It also suggests a snug fit with an internationally sponsored democratisation industry underwriting a range of (quantifiable) measures aimed at strengthening “good governance” in Southeast Asia, and elsewhere (World Bank 1997; UNDP 2002; IDEA 2007).

Beyond simply mirroring new “realities” in the region, this institutionalist shift in the study and promotion of democracy also points to a wider pattern in the production of knowledge about electoral processes, political parties and party systems. While the institutional frameworks and designs associated with elections in (formerly) industrial democracies have been the subject of studies for more than half a century, in recent decades, this sub-field of political science has become increasingly technical with advances in game theory and mathematical modelling. As a result of the increased focus upon the technologies of aggregating votes and building party systems, and the possibilities for improving upon these, however, the society and politics within which parties and elections are embedded in Southeast Asia, as elsewhere, have tended to disappear from view.

The Philippines is a case in point. On the one hand, the importation of game theory and mathematical modelling has made some recent inroads into the study of Philippine political parties and systems (Montinola 1999; MacIntyre 2003; Hicken 2009). On the other hand, it remains unclear what, if anything, such studies add to existing empirical research and theory on the nature and direction of political dynamics and social change in the Philippines over the past quarter-century since the fall of the Marcos dictatorship in February 1986. Indeed, the conceptualisation of political parties, systems, and elections as (technical) problems in need of (technical) solutions serves to produce a cumulative effect akin to the “end of history” prophesized to follow in the wake of liberal democracy. However, the “travails of democracy” are hardly a thing of the past in the Philippines, or elsewhere (Therborn 1979), and the role and significance of “politics” and “society” therein demand more, not less, careful and critical analysis, as argued in this essay.

Overall, as suggested by the succession of presidential contests in the Philippines in the post-Marcos era, at least two key constraining conditions

have worked against the realisation of the transformative potential of “public opinion” as it come to complement – and compete with – the reconstituted and reconfigured system of money and machine politics in the country. On the one hand, electoral fraud and undue advantages enjoyed by candidates strongly favoured by incumbent administrations have served to delimit the scope for “something new” to register in the canvassing of votes during elections, as seen in 1992 and 2004. In this regard, the changes in electoral rules and the pattern of brokerage described above have also encouraged electoral fraud of a wholesale rather than “mere” retail variety in the canvassing of votes across the archipelago (Tancangco 1992). Little surprise then, that the introduction of a relatively untested automated vote count in the 2010 elections was viewed with great concern among many Filipinos. According to one national survey, almost half of respondents (47%) agreed that “[t]he machines that will be used to count the votes in the 2010 election can easily be sabotaged in order to fake the election results” (SWS October 24-27, 2009).

On the other hand, the 2001 mid-term ouster of a sitting president who had won election through unprecedented direct popular – and pseudo-populist – appeal to ordinary voters across the country represented a new, unconstitutional precedent against the future inroads of “something new” in Philippine politics and society. As opposition politicians, corporate executives, and Catholic clergy returned to the parliament of the streets with calls for “civil society” to support the “moral crusade” against Estrada, “People Power” spelled the unceremonious and unprecedented end to a Philippine presidency in mid-term. Having first changed the course of history in 1986, by helping to prevent Marcos from sanitising his long-term authoritarian rule through a fraudulent election victory, “People Power” regained circulation as political discourse, no longer merely part of the repertoire of protest against the conduct and outcome of elections, but also against an incumbent president whose election by the broad mass of the Filipino people was established beyond a shadow of a doubt. Whether “the end justified the means,” as argued by some in the aftermath of Estrada’s ouster, this turn of events presented a departure from the constitutionally prescribed procedures for presidential succession. As such, it also left a set of arguably unfortunate lessons and precedents as far as further democratization in the Philippines is concerned.

As suggested in the pages above, the post-Marcos period offers a rather mixed picture in terms of new forms of voter mobilisation and, not least, the effects thereof for shrinking what has been referred to as the “democratic deficit” in the Philippines (Hutchcroft and Rocamora 2003). As argued above, underlying changes in the human geography of voters, the institu-

tional framework for elections, and the interests of the business class have helped to expand the possibilities for new forms of voter mobilisation in the country. At the same time, such possibilities and the promise they hold for further democratisation in the Philippines have continued to struggle against not only the old, familiar politics of clientelism, coercion and capital, but also against the more recent permutations of certain kinds of wholesale electoral fraud. While typically associated with progress and change, and, indeed, with “new citizens-cum-voters”, “People Power,” as an – perhaps all too – familiar repertoire of protest, may also have emerged as part of the obstacles to further democratization in the Philippines.

As for the new forms of voter mobilisation themselves, the May 2010 presidential victory of Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino III also signals the limited transformative potential associated with the politics of “public opinion”. Unsurprisingly, the nature of such change reflects, in key respects, broader patterns in Philippine politics, as shown above. However, the limits to the transformative potential of “public opinion” also stem from the very deployment of polls and surveys, with their formally equalitarian aggregative logic, and concomitant devaluation of other forms of collective action and solidarities. “When used as a gauge of ‘public opinion’ [...] polls not only miss the mark but shift the target,” and, thus, it has been argued, “offer at best a naïve and narrow view of democracy” (Salmon and Glasser 1995: 449). In the context of the Philippines, this shifting of the target and narrowing of the view of democracy first came into its own during the widespread popular mobilisation surrounding the rise of the first Aquino presidency. With a second Aquino elected president of the country, “public opinion” may have emerged as social fact in Philippine politics and society, but for all the countless quality of life surveys and political polls conducted in the past quarter-century on a pluralistic one-person, one-vote basis, it is difficult to dismiss the charge levelled by critics that the practice of polling serves to obscure profound realities of deprivation, poverty, and social inequality in the country today.

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