

May 14 2010

Presidential Landslide Victory in Milestone Philippine Elections

LSE Ideas

By **Eva-Lotta Hedman**

The May 10th general elections marked a milestone for democracy in the Philippines. Front-runner presidential candidate Benigno 'Noynoy' Aquino has won a landslide victory, thus setting the stage for an orderly transition of power from incumbent president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. Overall, the successful introduction of a computerised vote-counting system allowed for election results to be reported with unprecedented speed and credibility.

With more than 80,000 candidates contesting some 17,000 elected offices, including the vice-presidency, half the Senate, the entire House of Representatives, and local provincial and municipal positions (governor, vice-governor, board members, mayor, vice mayor, councillors), an estimated 75 percent of registered voters in the Philippines turned out to cast their ballots. (At this writing, the turnout of Filipinos overseas is 23 percent of registered voters, up from 17 percent in the 2007 mid-term elections.) With as many as 40 percent of registered voters aged between 18-35, it is possible that as many as three million were first-time voters, prompting projections of a 'youth swing vote' in these elections.

Across the country, Filipino voters persevered through the long queues that formed at many polling stations, awaiting their turn as election officials struggled with malfunctioning machines in places, or as their fellow citizens worked out how to cast their ballots in this first ever automated election. Aquino himself reportedly had to wait for several hours before he could vote in his home province of Tarlac. Undoubtedly, the wait and the heat took its toll, and there were a few more serious incidents of election-related violence in places, notably in parts of Mindanao.

However, the overall process and outcome of the elections is a far cry from the widespread and systematic electoral fraud and violence that some observers had anticipated. Such predictions stemmed in part from the November 2009 massacre in Maguindanao Province and related fears focused on other local allies of the outgoing president who, it was thought, would fight bitterly to avoid defeat at the hands of their respective local rivals. The untested, new automated voting system and its vulnerability to technical problems and massive fraud had also fuelled speculations.

Against such concerns for the integrity of the electoral process and outcome, Philippine democracy instead appears to have passed a milestone with the 2010 elections. First of all, the 2010 general elections have claimed fewer lives due to election-related violence than previous national election years. Second, the successful introduction of an automated voting system allowed for a rapid tabulation of the votes, thus eliminating the concerns for electoral fraud during previous elections when the manual vote count required several days to deliver the final election results. Third, compared to previous elections, the strong correspondence between pre-election voter surveys and the election results lends credibility to the outcome, not least in the case of the front-runner presidential candidate Aquino. Finally, the large margin gained by Aquino vis-à-vis the runner-up in the presidential race, Joseph Estrada, invites an orderly transfer of power from the incumbent Macapagal-Arroyo administration.

This is not to argue that the elections, as successful as they were, spell a radical transformation of Philippine politics. Indeed, Aquino's rise to the presidency reflects the enduring resonance in Philippine politics of an oligarchy of old political families and established business interests. As a candidate of the Liberal Party, Aquino also enjoyed the backing of this patronage-based coalition of national and local politicians joined by webs of personal allegiance and political convenience.

The continuities are also evident in the evident staying power of entrenched local politicians and political families across the country. In northern Luzon, Imelda Marcos, widow of long-time Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos, won a congressional seat in Marcos's home province of Ilocos Norte, whilst daughter Imee Marcos has won the governorship of the province. Elsewhere in Luzon, outgoing president Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo won a congressional seat in her home province of Pampanga. The Ampatuan family, which stands accused of the massacre of 57 people in November 2009, appears to have retained a number of key local posts in Maguindanao province in central Mindanao. The Senate has likewise seen (re)election for a handful of established dynasties. This election does not signify dramatic change, but rather the continuation of slow, gradual, and limited shifts in the means of doing politics in the Philippines, rather than the ends.

Eva-Lotta Hedman is Research Fellow of the LSE IDEAS Southeast Asia Programme.

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