

Philippine president fails to obtain a clear mandate in national elections

By Keith Morgan and Peter Symonds
19 May 2001

Vote counting in the May 14 national elections in the Philippines will probably not be finalised for more than a week. But it is already clear that President Gloria Arroyo has failed to register the ringing electoral victory she needed to legitimise her ouster of former president Joseph Estrada earlier in the year. At stake in the poll are 13 out of 24 Senate seats, all 208 seats in the House of Representatives and over 17,000 posts at the regional and municipal level, including governors and mayors.

The main focus of attention has been on the Senate where Arroyo is seeking to establish a firm majority to push through her program of privatisation and economic restructuring. Throughout the week, the result has seesawed between seven and eight seats for her government's Peoples Power Coalition (PPC), with the remainder going to the opposition Force of the Masses (PnM) and an independent with strong links to Estrada.

According to the latest semi-official “quick count” by the National Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL), Arroyo can expect at best an 8-4-1 outcome in her favour. This would leave the president short of the nine or 10 seats that she wanted to ensure the Senate was under government control. The loyalties of the 11 senators whose seats were not contested in this election are unclear. But during the crucial Senate vote on January 16 that effectively ended impeachment proceedings against Estrada, six supported the blocking of key evidence against Estrada.

The election outcome also undermines Arroyo's claim to have been swept to office by a mass popular movement—the so-called People Power demonstrations that followed the January 16 vote. In reality, the protests, which were organised by former president Cory Aquino and Cardinal Jaime Sin and largely middle class in composition, provided a convenient pretext for the removal of Estrada by sections of big business, the military and the political establishment concerned at his failure to implement market reforms and halt the country's deteriorating economic position.

A number of political commentators have noted the “class divide” in the election. An editorial in the pro-Arroyo

Philippine Inquirer said: “What seems emerging from the early election returns are signs that the nation is deeply, and dangerously polarised.”

Sections of the middle class supported Arroyo—an US-educated economist, daughter of a former president and wife of a wealthy businessman. Layers of the urban and rural poor were expected to vote for Estrada's candidates. In the 1998 presidential election, Estrada, who is just as much a big business politician as Arroyo, campaigned on the basis of the slogan “Erap [buddy] for the poor” and traded on his career as a film star playing tough guy roles.

Two weeks before the vote, the Arroyo administration was shaken by substantial protests of Manila's poor following Estrada's arrest on corruption charges. When tens of thousands of demonstrators converged on the presidential palace on May 1, Arroyo reacted by claiming that the opposition was attempting a coup, then declared “a state of rebellion” and ordered the arrest of key opposition senators on charges of conspiracy.

Faced with criticism of her anti-democratic actions, the president was forced to back off. She ended the “state of rebellion” and allowed the opposition candidates to campaign even though the conspiracy charges still stand. “It's time to move on,” Arroyo told reporters. “It's time to start the healing process.” She also attempted to woo the votes of the poor by visiting some of Manila's sprawling shanties.

On May 10, Arroyo, clad in a pair of jeans and speaking in vernacular Filipino, ventured into Manila's notorious “Smokey Mountain” shantytown, where thousands of slum dwellers eke out a living sifting through a huge nearby garbage dump. She told a gathering of several hundred people, “I've heard your grievances,” and then presented a cheque to a local women's group. But according to a *Reuters* report, the reception was “lukewarm” even though a well-known television comedian chaired the proceedings and tried to coax the crowd to applaud the president enthusiastically. When she made a trip to the area in early April, Arroyo was booed and individuals slammed their

doors in her face.

Voter turnout—estimated to be up to 85 percent of the 30 million eligible voters—has been one of the highest in Philippine history. As one commentator, Nelson Navarro told *Reuters*, “The more turnout there is, it's bad news for the president. It means more rural voters voting, which means more votes for the opposition.” As rural votes from the more than 7,000 islands that comprise the Philippines are expected to be tallied later, it could also mean a further slide in support for Arroyo.

The bitterly fought character of the election was also evidenced by the greater than usual level of violence. According to an official police count, more than 100 people have been killed in election-related incidents, making the poll the bloodiest since the snap elections called by dictator Ferdinand Marcos in 1986. Among the more prominent figures killed were Tanauan City Mayor Cesar Platon, who was shot dead while campaigning for Batangas governor, and Quezon representative, Marcial Punzalan Jr. Punzalan who was also shot.

The Alliance of Concerned Teachers (ACT) has branded the poll as the “worst elections ever” and is demanding that the Electoral Commission (Comelec) pay the 700,000 teachers who act as electoral staff. Already accounts of widespread ballot rigging and vote stealing have flooded in from the provinces.

NAMFREL is considering legal action against electoral commissioner Luzviminda Tancangco, saying he is responsible for the confusion at Monday's polls because he failed to computerise the list of voters. According to NAMFREL chairman Jose Concepcion, “substantial” numbers of people were left off the lists and thus robbed of the right to vote. Comelec has admitted that hundreds of thousands of voters' names were missing from the rolls and that in some districts and provinces a revote would be necessary.

Both sides have seized on the voting irregularities, rioting and violence to accuse the other of rigging the ballot. According to one account, rival teams of politicians have been racing across the country in helicopters attempting to gather evidence where their opponents have been most active. Neither side, however, can claim to have clean hands. Voting rigging, electoral bribes, intimidation and murder are an integral part of what is presented as democracy in the Philippines.

Ever since formal independence from the US in 1946, Philippine politics has been dominated by two main rival groups of wealthy families, which are connected to big business interests and large landed estates. Today these factions are, broadly speaking, represented by the Arroyo and Estrada political camps. Particularly in the rural areas,

the power, influence and financial clout of various “clans” and local warlords is wielded to ensure that their political representatives are assured of victory. Lacking any basic policy differences, the rival groups resort to bribes and violence as the means of dealing with opponents and defending their turf.

The *Philippines Daily Inquirer* noted: “Political families in Northern and Central Luzon appeared headed for a firmer grip on local politics as their candidates posted a strong showing at the polls... The Marcoses in Ilocos Norte, the Singsons in Ilocos Sur, the Ortegas in La Union, the Dys in Isabela and Josons in Nueva Ecija appeared headed for victory.” While the newspaper concentrated on Arroyo's opponents, a similar list could also be drawn up for her supporters.

In the aftermath of Monday's vote, Arroyo claimed that the elections had been free and fair and showed a vibrant democracy at work. “The Philippines is open for business,” she said, making a pitch to international investors and the financial markets for support. Despite the president's upbeat comments, the stockmarket fell slightly the day after the election and has seen little subsequent activity as investors await the outcome of the protracted count.

They are unlikely to get any solace from the final result, however. Arroyo's failure to win a convincing victory will only lead to further political instability. Moreover, in the short-term, several of the opposition senators likely to win a seat—Juan Ponce Enrile, Gregorio Honasan and former police chief Panfilo Lacson—face charges of conspiracy for their alleged role in the May 1 “coup” against the president. Any attempt to drag these senators through the courts will provoke further protests and unrest.

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