A tense election campaign in the Philippines

Joseph Santolan
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May 10, 2010, is election day in the Philippines. A drought grips the Philippines and the heat is intense. Political candidates are running tepid campaigns, mouthing vacuous slogans to disillusioned voters about a prosperous future and ending poverty. Beneath the surface, however, the country's worsening economic crisis is fuelling sharp rivalry between the various factions of the ruling elite.

The presidential race is particularly fierce because the winner, as in the United States, will form the new administration and can distribute government largesse to his or her patrons and supporters. There are eight presidential candidates, but only two serious contenders: Manny Villar and Benigno 'Noynoy' Aquino.

Villar is a billionaire. Throughout his political career, he has made much of the purported poverty of his youth. Whatever the truth to his claims, Villar married into a rich political family and used their wealth and political contacts to become a real estate baron. He became a politician and, first as congressman and then as senator, wrote government contracts to benefit his landholdings and appropriated public land.

Villar's campaign has grossly outspent those of his political rivals. He runs under the slogan of "Sipag at Tiyaga," claiming that "diligence and perseverance" will lift the Philippines out of poverty. His campaign is flashy and shallow; slick advertising and saccharine jingles recycle the most threadbare of populist slogans: Manny Villar will "end poverty". In reality, Villar, like all the other candidates, is committed to drastic cuts to public spending that will impact most heavily on the poor.

Investors in real estate have been engaged in furious speculation in the development of malls and condominiums. There are an extraordinary number of malls in the Philippines, with more continually being developed. A large portion of the consumer spending upon which these malls depend is funded by the remittances of overseas Filipino workers. High-rise condominiums are likewise being built at staggering pace. Most of these condominiums cater to the very wealthy. The remainder are vertical tenements, relocating workers away from sprawling urban shantytowns and freeing more land for acquisition by the wealthy.

Infrastructural development must necessarily accompany this real estate speculation. Light rail transit, highways, communication networks—these projects are being built by government-funded private contractors. Much of the money flowing into Philippine real estate and infrastructure comes from China, which has a powerful interest in Philippine politics, both for economic and strategic reasons.

China-oriented, real estate based capital is what Manny Villar represents. He has a hostile relationship with the Makati Business Club, an organisation that represents the interests of businesses invested in the stock exchange and more aligned with the US, the former colonial power in the Philippines. The international tensions between Beijing and Washington are thus reflected in the competing sections of Philippine capital and their respective political parties in the election campaign.

Aquino's son Noynoy

Noynoy Aquino, the son of former President Corazon Aquino, decided to enter the presidential race after his mother's death. There was a massive, historically uninformed, outpouring of grief at the passing of Corazon Aquino in August 2009. She was falsely depicted as a political saint and a fierce opponent of dictatorship. Noynoy, a man without charisma or charm, has attempted to appropriate his mother's halo. He functions as the representative for the US-oriented sections of the bourgeoisie. The Makati Business Club enthusiastically supports him. The official business district is festooned with the yellow streamers that have been the Aquino family emblem for decades.

Aquino is running a campaign against "corruption". He has not clarified what corruption means, but has declared repeatedly that if there were no corruption, there would be no poverty. Behind the shibboleth lurk several ideas. Aquino is attacking the corruption of the outgoing administration of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, who is known as GMA and is profoundly unpopular. Blaming corruption for every economic problem also allows Aquino to obscure his real agenda, which, like Villar, is to slash social spending, privatise and impose new taxes on working people.

Aquino initially promised that he would not raise taxes. But he reneged under pressure from the Makati Business Club, which is well aware that the elimination of corruption—even assuming such a task were possible—will not end the country's economic troubles. The Philippines barely managed to stay out of recession last year through government stimulus measures. Now the resulting public debt must now be serviced and finance capital is demanding austerity measures. Aquino has reassured his business backers that he will impose new taxes—almost certainly a hike in the regressive and highly unpopular Value Added Tax (VAT)—if his anti-corruption measures fail.

Aquino, like his mother, belongs to the Cojuangco family that owns Hacienda Luisita, a vast sugar plantation in central Luzon. Portions of this hacienda have now been transformed into factories and Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) centres. There has been an outcry for land reform of the sugar estates for decades. But Cory Aquino, as president, refused to redistribute the sugar haciendas and Noynoy has stubbornly avoided the issue of his family's landholdings.

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An ex-film star and ex-president

Also running for president is Joseph “Erap” Estrada, former president and former movie star. He won the 1998 election on the basis of the slogan “Erap for the poor” and a populist appeal based on his film roles as a gritty fighter for the underdog. He fell out of favour with sections of local and international capital after his administration stalled on pro-market reform, ran up a substantial budget deficit and favoured close business cronies connected to the Marcos regime. He became the target of a protracted brawl over corruption allegations and was eventually ousted in a constitutional coup in 2001, which placed his rival and vice president, Arroyo, in office.

That Estrada is standing at all is remarkable enough. Jailed and finally convicted by a special court on corruption charges in 2007, he was pardoned by Arroyo and freed. For Arroyo, it was a means of putting an end to the longstanding question of her own legitimacy after the 2001 coup. An Estrada victory would almost certainly provoke a political crisis as the Philippine constitution bars anyone from two presidential terms.

More astonishing is that Estrada has been joined in the campaign by Sanlakas—one of the breakaways from the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). In 2001, Sanlakas, the CPP and virtually all the various ex-left groups played a vital political role in falsely promoting the anti-Estrada movement—known as People’s Power II or Edsa II—as a genuine movement of working people. Estrada was portrayed as the devil incarnate, while Arroyo was presented as the saviour of democracy and the poor. In fact, Estrada’s ouster was an anti-democratic manoeuvre backed by sections of business and the military, with the blessing of the Supreme Court and the thin veneer of largely middle-class protests drummed up by the various Maoist factions.

Now, J.V. Bautista, head of Sanlakas, is running for the senate on Estrada’s ticket. He has publicly stated that he regrets his participation in Edsa II, and that Estrada should have been allowed to remain in power. For sheer cynicism, the move by Sanlakas is only on par with the rival, ex-radical outfits, all of which have lined up behind one or other wealthy, bourgeois presidential candidate. The CPP has joined up with Villar. Another CPP-breakaway, Akbayan, is in the Aquino camp. The entire “left” fraternity in the Philippines has integrated itself into the political establishment, functioning as advisers and cheerleaders for one or other faction of the ruling class.

Estrada’s campaign has taken away a section of the poor vote, which would otherwise support Villar. Villar trails Aquino in most polls by an amount approximately equal to the support for Estrada. Villar has secretly appealed to Estrada’s campaign, asking him to drop out of the race. Mike Velarde, leader of the Catholic Charismatic group El Shaddai and a prominent real estate baron, carried Villar’s offer to buy out Estrada’s campaign, which Estrada exposed in the Philippine press. There is, however, widespread speculation that Estrada may be leveraging a deal to drop out from the race at the last minute, thereby transferring his supporters to Villar.

Arroyo’s party has given its support to Gilberto Teodoro, known as Gibo. There is no widespread popular dislike for Gibo himself, who is generally presented in the media as affable and intelligent. However, the backing of the Arroyo administration is the political kiss of death. When one factors in the statistical margin of error, Gibo’s support is zero percent. Arroyo has given faint support to Teodoro, but even this half-hearted backing has been enough to sink his campaign.

Arroyo is fiercely unpopular. Upon assuming office, she immediately commenced an assault upon the living standards of the working class and the remaining social programs funded by the Philippine state. To enforce these measures, her administration cracked down on unions and political opposition. Journalists and members of radical groups were murdered with alarming regularity. The military was given free rein in its counter-insurgency operations, and paramilitary organisations were given legal sanction.

Allegations of corruption involving the Arroyo administration are widespread, including rigged contractual bidding, huge payoffs and nepotism. Her victory in the 2004 presidential election was widely believed to be the product of electoral fraud after a tape was released of a conversation between her and a senior electoral official about rigging the results. In 2005, she survived a concerted campaign for impeachment over vote rigging and corruption scandals involving her family members.

Despite her unpopularity, Arroyo is running for congress, having forced her son to drop out of the running so that she would have a congressional seat available for her. Her party has already declared that upon election, they will make her speaker of the house. This would give her political immunity from prosecution for any of her alleged crimes as president.

The elections are still over a month away but the political situation is extremely tense. The ruling elites are well aware that they need a clear winner to form a solid administration in order to slash public spending and impose new taxes on working people in line with the demands of global capital. But the economic crisis driving this assault has also intensified rivalries in the discredited political establishment and between presidential candidates, who rest in turn on the services of various ex-left groups to try to present a populist image. Far from a credible government, the election is likely to produce further political turmoil.

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