

Fear of election failure in the Philippines dominates lead up to Monday's voting

Joseph Santolan
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On Monday, May 10, the Philippines will hold general elections. Positions at every level of government, from local community board member to the presidency, are being contested. Presidential candidate Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino leads in election survey results, with almost twice the support of his nearest political rivals. The next president of the Philippines will be compelled to deal with the emerging crisis in the Philippine sovereign debt and the demands from international finance capital to service that debt.

Both the pageantry and the violence of the election season are inescapable. Bombastic campaign jingles play incessantly on every corner. Stainless steel jeeps, covered in posters, streamers and banners, travel through crowded shantytowns and remote barrios, with worn-out amplifiers strapped to the roof blaring remakes of tunes by Lady Gaga or Tom Jones. The nearly unintelligible lyrics promise integrity, change and an end to poverty.

Two thirds of all the higher offices in the Philippines are being fought over by only one hundred families. Politics are an incestuous, oligarchic affair. Of the nine candidates for presidency this election year, six share close family ties. Rival families, and rivals within families, squabble to ensure access to the political largesse that they can then deploy through pork barrel legislation and political appointments.

Candidates for community, local or regional offices line up behind one or another of the local oligarchs, prominently displaying their affiliations. It is at this level that the violence of politics is most felt. Rival candidates are gunned down; activists disappear and are not seen again. Local candidates openly purchase the votes of the poorest sections of the population, at the average rate in rural areas of several hundred pesos per vote.

Noynoy Aquino was a political non-entity one year ago. A senator from the prominent and rapacious Cojuangco family, he is a bland and uninteresting man. He would have served a term, perhaps two, before retiring, unremembered, to his family's hacienda. Then his mother, Corazon Aquino, died. The mass media and political groups of all stripes rushed to honor the former president as a martyr to democracy. That

she ran an incompetent and often brutal administration, riven and immobilised by competing class interests, and seven times undermined by military coup attempts, was forgotten. She joined her husband Ninoy, assassinated in 1983 during the Marcos dictatorship, in the petty Valhalla of posthumous, manufactured political heroes.

Noynoy cynically seized upon his mother's new sainthood with both hands. He announced his candidacy for presidency. His campaign has been singly oriented to getting the public to identify him with his parents. The faces of his parents are prominently displayed in all his election paraphernalia.

Noynoy has dedicated a substantial portion of his campaign to courting the upper middle and upper class income brackets. Expensive Lucerne watches in garish yellow, with Ninoy and Cory printed on the face, sell in high-end malls throughout the country. Ninoy's trademark glasses have been reprinted as an avatar of Noynoy's campaign on expensive polo shirts. The slogan “I am Ninoy” is printed on athletic apparel worn by the wealthy in the evening jogs through the expensive commercial areas of Fort Bonifacio and the secluded residential streets of Forbes Park. A Pulse Asia survey conducted April 25 found that 45 percent of the top three income brackets backed Noynoy. His nearest rival for the elite vote received only 16 percent from these income brackets.

Noynoy has two main political rivals for the presidency: Manny Villar, a real estate baron and long time senator, and Joseph “Erap” Estrada, aged movie actor and ousted former president of the Philippines. Both Villar and Estrada have fought, with outlandish millenarian promises and populist slogans, for the vote of the lower classes. Between the two of them, they have split the lower class vote. Estrada edged out Villar in the most recent election survey, with 20 percent of the vote.

Whoever wins the office of the president will have to deal with the problem of the massive sovereign debt—the Philippines has a 57 percent debt to GDP ratio—and with the demands of international finance capital to service this debt.

The vacuous populist slogans that have been bandied about for the past year will vanish. In their stead will be the compulsion to slash social spending and increase government revenue for the payment of debt. This past week, the International Monetary Fund called for the next president to cut corporate income tax by at least 5 percent and to raise the regressive Value Added Tax (VAT) from 12 to 15 percent.

Dominating press coverage of the elections is the fear of what is being called a “failure of elections”. The Philippine Commission on Elections (Comelec) has undertaken the automation of the voting process. This automation has been bid out for 8 billion pesos (\$US175 million) to a private multinational corporation, Smartmatic. Speculation has been rampant for months that the automation process would somehow fail, or would provide a technological cover for electoral fraud on the part of the current administration.

These fears grew greatly when two days ago, in a test run for the elections, the ballot counting scanners failed to work properly. Smartmatic claimed that the failure was the result of improperly formatted memory cards and that it would be fixed before the elections. Several candidates called for the postponement of elections by two weeks. Noynoy argued for the elections to go ahead but with a backup manual recount. Comelec has only made preparations for a manual count of 30 percent of the vote.

From the disputes in ruling circles and in the press, it is clear that the bourgeoisie is terrified of an election that fails to give the stamp of legitimacy to the victor. Three of the last four presidential elections in the Philippines have had major disputes over fraud, most notoriously president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo’s machinations in the 2004 election. Articles have been written, political speeches made, constitutional consultants interviewed, all discussing what would occur in the event that the elections failed to clearly establish political succession. A month ago, the deputy presidential spokesperson, when asked precisely this question, responded that a military junta would take over and appoint a new president. Arroyo responded to public outcry over this statement by saying that it was an error on the part of her spokesperson. It was widely seen as part of an attempt by the fiercely unpopular Arroyo to stay in power.

All the speculation, rumors and threats of a military junta or of “people power” revolutions indicate the level of fear and paranoia on the part of the bourgeoisie. They need a stable political environment to maintain their economic interests and to protect the Philippines’ debt rating. With news of the failure of the test election, the Philippine stock exchange plunged, taking the sharpest single-day drop in 10 months, and the peso depreciated substantially.

The bourgeoisie is sharply divided by competing interests.

These interests manifest themselves in politics and each presidential candidate represents certain segments of the local bourgeoisie. The candidates also reflect the bitter rivalries of international capital. Noynoy clearly enjoys the backing of the US-aligned Philippine stock exchange; Villar, the real estate and infrastructural capital oriented toward China. The bourgeoisie and their political proxies cannot unite to ensure a stable and legitimate transition, much as they may long for it. Driven by their competing interests they will fight, tooth and nail, to gain power.

Politically impotent to guarantee a stable transition, the bourgeoisie turns to the heavens. Yesterday, rival political candidates, the red capped archbishop of Manila, and the chairman of the Commission on Elections gathered to beseech God for “honest, orderly, and peaceful elections,” reduced to the stomach-turning acronym HOPE.

Four battalions, thousands of soldiers, ominously flooded into the city, ostensibly to join the prayer rally, but they will stay in Manila until after the elections are complete.

The front organisations of the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines were not to be left out. They gathered, “hand-in-hand” with “concerned leaders” according to the press release of Bayan Muna, at the National Shrine of our Mother of Perpetual Help, “as a community of faithful imploring divine guidance and HOPE”.

These elections expose yet again the chicanery and grotesque machinations of the ruling classes in their struggle to maintain political power. Mitre-headed clerics, vapid and corrupt politicians, and military thugs stand united with the Maoist front organisations in calling for aid of an imaginary being to preserve the status quo.

The Philippine working class cannot look to the sullen and silent heavens, nor can they trust in the threadbare populist shibboleths of bourgeois politicians. They must forge their own political party, and join in the international struggle for socialism.



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