

Violence in the Philippines as election approaches

Joseph Santolan
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Less than two weeks remain before interim elections are held in the Philippines on May 13. At stake are seats in political office ranging from membership in local government council to governorships and seats in the congress and Senate.

Elections in the Philippines are a spectacle of pomp, pageantry, and bloody violence. The strings of state power are held in the hands of political dynasties, landed clans whose scions occupy the seats of governance. Each dynasty maintains its hold on power, and thus on the coffers of the state, through coercive force.

Private armies, squads of hired goons sometimes numbering as many as 400 people, enforce the interests of each dynasty. They are heavily armed with AR-18s, M-16s, handguns and grenades. These weapons are ubiquitous in the Philippines, openly carried and displayed.

The murder of political rivals by these private armies, or by freelance mercenaries, is routine. Last week, 12 people were shot dead and 10 more wounded in the province of Lanao del Norte on the island of Mindanao, during an ambush carried out on the campaign of a local mayoral candidate. The death toll from officially documented election related violence is over 70 people.

The Philippine National Police issued a statement cheering the fact that this death toll represented a 50 percent reduction over the previous election. One can account for this decline in deaths by pointing out that the previous election was a presidential election, and the stakes were thus higher. And there are 10 days left.

The country is currently under a 150-day gun ban. The carrying of any firearm is illegal during the entire election season. Police and military mount check points throughout the countryside, stopping motorcyclists and other vehicles to inspect for arms. The landlord

politicos, in their campaign caravans of SUVs with bulletproof, tinted glass, are waved past each checkpoint with a deferential nod and a salute.

For the last week of the election campaign, not only are firearms banned—so is alcohol. The purchase, sale and consumption of any intoxicating beverage is prohibited during election week. While the police may enforce this law at a barrio *inuman*, the drinking event of the poor and working class, there will be no such intrusion at the campaign soirees in the mansions of Forbes Park.

The political dynasties do not simply gain office through violence. They buy it as well. The May 13 elections will see vote-buying and vote-rigging on a massive scale. Prices vary from region to region, but the current going rate averages 400 pesos per vote—the equivalent of \$US10 in cash stuffed in a cheap envelope.

It is not merely rival politicians and their supporters, or bystanders caught in the crossfire, who are killed. Journalists are deliberately targeted. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) published their 2013 Impunity Index on May 2. The Philippines ranked third worst in the world, behind Iraq and Somalia. The index records the number cases of journalists murdered in which no one is prosecuted for the crime.

In the past two weeks, one Philippine journalist has been murdered over election coverage and another survived a murder attempt. In 2009, 32 journalists were killed in a single massacre. Since that time three witnesses, scheduled to testify against the head of the Ampatuan political dynasty who allegedly ordered the killing, were murdered. One of these had their limbs hacked off as a warning to other potential witnesses.

The Philippine National Police has announced that it will increase its police force over the next two weeks

by 30,000. The Philippine military has stated that it will increase the deployment of its forces as well—although they did not give a figure. These deployments heighten the likelihood of violence and of a manipulated election. The uniformed men with their M16s outside each polling station are the naked face of class rule, they provide no protection to the great mass of Filipinos.

A large portion of the private militias of the political dynasties is, in fact, composed of off-duty and retired police officers and military personnel.

The political party in the Philippines is the personal vehicle of a political dynasty. They have no defined platform, they rarely even have a political slogan. These parties then enter into alliances with other parties and form coalitions. There are two coalitions vying for power in the 2013—the Liberal Party (LP) Coalition and the United Nationalist Alliance (UNA). Both of them declare that they are against corruption and are “pro-poor”, but in office will unscrupulously exploit their power to advance their cronies.

As Filipino voters go to the polls on May 13, they do so under deeply worsening social conditions. A Social Weather Station survey released on May 3 revealed that the Philippines has a current unemployment rate of 25.4 percent of the population over 18. Unemployment among women averages 35.7 percent. Youth unemployment, defined as those from ages 18–25 who are without a job and are seeking employment, is 49.6 percent.



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