

President Aquino's Liberal Party coalition consolidates power in Philippine election

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The results from the May 13 midterm elections in the Philippines are still being tabulated. At stake in the election are half the seats in the Senate, as well as seats in the lower house, and gubernatorial, mayoral and local political offices. The counting for the senatorial campaigns is nearly complete, and the media has announced the winners.

The Philippine Commission on Elections (Comelec) has not yet disclosed data on voter turnout. There are 52 million registered Filipino voters. In working class and poor communities, people waited in line for two and a half hours on average in order to be able to vote.

President Aquino's Liberal Party coalition won nine of the available twelve senatorial seats, strengthening Aquino's grip on political power. It seems that his party also made substantial gains in the lower house of Congress, and retained its control over nearly half of all gubernatorial seats.

Since coming to power in 2010, President Benigno 'Noy' Aquino has consolidated power from his predecessor and rival Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. Deploying corruption charges, impeachment proceedings, and arrests, Aquino has broken much of her previously formidable base of power. While Arroyo is running for Congress from her hospital bed, where she is currently under arrest, and she seems likely to retain her seat, her network of alliances and her political party have been decimated.

Aquino carried out this consolidation of power with the support of Washington, which made repeated public declarations of its support for the 'anti-corruption' campaign, supplied evidence through the embassy, FBI and the State Department for the charges brought against Arroyo's allies, and secretly instigated the charges against her allies in the military top brass.

Washington was looking to cultivate Aquino as a key

proxy for US interests against China in the region. Arroyo had begun to shift Philippine political and diplomatic ties away from the United States and toward Beijing. The corruption scandals provided a tool for reorienting Philippine political ties back toward Washington and for implementing the Obama administration's 'pivot' to Asia. Over the past two years, Aquino has responded to Washington's machinations by leading a provocative drive against China in the South China Sea and at the summits of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The campaign against the previously powerful Arroyo and the reorientation of Philippine politics to the course of confrontation with China has shaken up previously existing alliances. Out of the debris, two coalitions emerged. The United Nationalist Alliance (UNA) formed under the joint leadership of vice president Jejomar Binay, former president Joseph Estrada, and Senate president Juan Ponce Enrile. President Aquino's Liberal Party formed its own coalition.

The Liberal Party led coalition incorporates the Nacionalista Party of Aquino's lead rival for the presidency in the 2010 elections, Manny Villar. It also includes the Nationalist People's Coalition (NPC) of Aquino's formerly estranged uncle, Danding Cojuangco. Danding was a leading crony of former dictator Ferdinand Marcos, and long-time enemy of Aquino's side of the family. But Aquino's growing power and the pressure of rapidly altering geopolitical ties overcame the decades of murder, theft and disputes over sugar plantations that lay between them.

The most remarkable feature of the election campaign has been the deafening silence of both coalitions on the most pressing issue in the region: Washington's drive to war in the Pacific. Aquino's provocative policies in

the South China Sea, in which he functioned as a proxy of US imperialist interests, have placed the Philippines on the front line of possible conflict and war.

The elections took place in the midst of the deepening global economic crisis. The Philippine economy is deeply dependent on its ties with China, the Philippines' top trading partner. Aquino's reckless policies have imperiled these ties. The objective divisions inside the ruling elite that are inflamed by these tensions did not appear in the recent election, however, partly as a result of the decimation of Arroyo's party apparatus.

The Philippine economy has also been temporarily buoyed by growth in sectors which feed off of the decomposition of the world economy. In particular, the number of migrant workers taking various forms of menial and poorly paid employment abroad has grown by several million over the past two years. This has resulted in a marked increase in remittances of funds flowing into the Philippines. Also, the Philippines has seen a dramatic growth in the number of call centers and other forms of business process outsourcing centers, whose emergence is predicated upon the transfer of jobs from countries with higher wages.

This growth has seen the Philippine Stock Exchange skyrocket over the past year and the upgrading of the country's credit rating to investment status. There is general self-satisfaction in the ruling elite of the Philippines at present, and Aquino's party's victory reflects this.

At the same time, according to data released by the Social Weather Stations group, the number of Filipinos who are in poverty and the number of those unemployed has grown markedly over the past two years—both in absolute terms and as a percentage of the population. Current youth unemployment in the Philippines is listed as 49.6 percent of the population age 18-25.

The rival United Nationalist Alliance (UNA) coalition did not constitute a serious opposition to Aquino's Liberal Party coalition. The UNA's primary aim was to establish itself as the country's lead alternative party. UNA head and current vice president Jejomar Binay is angling for the presidency in 2016 and needs to forge political alliances. He had his daughter, Nancy Binay, a woman with no political experience, run for Senate. Her candidacy was largely regarded as a

test of the political strength of the Binay dynasty, a trial run for 2016. She placed fifth.

Much of the press coverage has been dominated by the news that political newcomer Grace Poe placed first in the senatorial elections. She is the daughter of Fernando Poe Jr., who was easily the most popular movie star in Philippine history. Fernando Poe Jr. ran for president against Arroyo in 2004 and was defeated. Considerable evidence emerged in the wake of that election of cheating on the part of Arroyo. Fernando Poe Jr. died in late 2004 however.

Grace Poe's strong victory largely emerges out of a sympathy vote for her deceased father. She represents an ally of Aquino with strong anti-Arroyo tendencies.

President Aquino's cousin, Bam Aquino, won a seat in the Senate, as did real estate magnate and current senator Manny Villar's wife, Cynthia Villar. Of the twenty four seats in the Senate there are now a brother and sister; two brothers—both sons of a former president; a father and son; and a husband and wife. Two former military coup leaders, Gringo Honasan and Sonny Trillanes, were reelected on Monday as well.

Imelda Marcos seems likely to be re-elected congresswoman; her daughter Imee is poised to be re-elected governor of the northern province of Ilocos; and her son Ferdinand 'Bongbong' Marcos, Jr., is currently a senator and is also a leading candidate for president in 2016.



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