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Filomeno V. Aguilar, Jr.

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## **Betting on Democracy: Electoral Ritual in the Philippine Presidential Campaign**

Filomeno V. Aguilar Jr.

*This article offers an analysis of the ritual character of Philippine elections for national positions, particularly for the presidency. It is argued that the structuring of the electoral complex is akin to a ritual, specifically, a ritualized gamble or game of chance. The cultural figuration of elections is traced to long-term historical processes. The broad insights on Filipino political culture are supported as well as expanded by data collected by the Institute of Philippine Culture (IPC), Ateneo de Manila University, from sixteen focus group discussions conducted nationwide before national elections were held on 10 May 2004.*

*KEYWORDS: ritual, elections, political culture, focus group discussion, Institute of Philippine Culture*

Elections, at their face value, are institutionalized contests for public positions. For quite some time now and in many places across the world, the outcome is believed to rest upon a mass of electors who express the people's "sovereign will." These contests are governed by formal legislation, and compliance with set procedures establishes the legitimacy of a victor's claim to the post. However, elections are more than just exercises in filling up vacancies in the state apparatus that give winning individuals a right to rule. In liberal democracies, the privilege of an individual to have a say through the ballot and the apparent equality of all individuals in doing so accords legitimacy to a social system otherwise deeply marked by social inequalities. In Gramscian terms, consent to be governed is willingly produced and the hegemony of the political-

economic order is stabilized. An internally valid election grants legitimacy not only to the winner but to the social structure as a whole. Moreover, elections can be seen as a ritualized social practice, with each election filled with ritual performances that may be engaging or off-putting depending on the sociopolitical context, the candidates running for office, the participating voters, and the audience at large. As argued in this article, the whole electoral process conforms to the structure of a ritual. In the unfolding of this ritual may be found a basis of legitimacy and consent to hegemony, in addition to, or even rather than, formal rules and procedural equality per se.

In Hanoverian England elections for members of parliament were replete with rituals, from the nomination processions to the chairing of the victor. These rituals were “secular, popular, processional events, often boisterous, noisy and musical. They were intended to put people on the streets in large numbers” (O’Gorman 1992, 82). Electoral rituals also framed a world of symbols and meanings that stood in dialectical relationship to hard social realities. Electoral reforms, such as the secret ballot, and the general embourgeoisement of society led to the decline of English ritual practices in the mid-nineteenth century. But notwithstanding the general erasure of old electoral rituals in Western liberal democracies, new electoral practices have been invented and institutionalized. Elections have remained deeply ritualistic, as evinced by the televised nomination conventions of the Democratic and Republican parties in the United States. Geertz (1983, 144–46) hints that, despite the deployment of a different set of idioms compared with ancient rulers and wielders of charisma, modern politics retains ritualism at its core, indicative of “the inherent sacredness of central authority.”

Philippine experiences suggest an alternative reading of elections. Elections can be seen as a time of tension between the sacred and the profane, the ideal and the expedient. It is a moment of inversion, but also of affirming social hierarchy. It is free, but totally constrained. It is participatory from below, yet engineered from the top. It is meaningful, yet meaningless at the same time. Amid this contradictory character, Philippine elections are hugely popular, are taken seriously, and draw very high participation rates.

This perspective is elucidated in this article, which offers an analysis of the ritual character of Philippine elections for national positions, mainly for the post of president, but also for that of vice-president and senators. The messages in these campaigns are for everyone, including nonelectors, who undergo a general feeling of mass excitement not witnessed on a daily basis. The electoral texts and structures are understandable by the general public and constitute the popular, indeed folk, culture of elections. The field is one of an internal discourse, and requires one to enter this milieu to appreciate its cultural complexity. One way of interpreting this field is to see the electoral complex as structured like a ritual, specifically, a ritualized gamble or game of chance. It is argued that this cultural figuration of elections is a product of historical processes.

The broad insights on Filipino political culture are buttressed by data collected by the Institute of Philippine Culture (IPC) of the Ateneo de Manila University from sixteen focus group discussions (FGDs) held in late March and early April 2004, during the campaign period leading up to the polls on 10 May 2004. The IPC Ateneo research involved ten FGDs in urban communities and six in rural communities, in sites spread throughout the country (IPC 2005). Some of the findings of that study are presented here. The notion of elections as a ritual process prompts concluding reflections on the nonclosure of Philippine elections, particularly in relation to May 2004.

### **Ritualized Electoral Contests**

Viewed from the perspective of Philippine history, rituals have suffused elections starting in the late nineteenth century under Spanish colonial rule when local notables gathered to “elect” the local magistrate—although, strictly speaking, it was to nominate a short list from which the Spanish governor-general made his choice of town magistrate (May 1989). During the American colonial regime, the 1906 elections for the National Assembly inaugurated the Congressional system that has been followed since then. Direct elections for the presidency commenced in 1935 under American tutelage. It should be noted that specific aspects

of the electoral system—such as the so-called Australian Ballot (with official ballots provided by the government rather than by the parties)—were introduced in the United States and its Asian colony at about the same time; and that familiarity with fraudulent practices in the U.S. gave colonial authorities in the Philippines a type of expertise to intervene in elections in a way that achieved American ends (Nakano 2004). During the postwar period, until Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law in 1972, elections dominated by two parties were held, and the parties alternated in holding the presidency. Since the return of procedural democracy after Marcos's downfall in 1986, a multiparty system has come into place. Within this constitutional framework the national elections of 2004 were held.

In the multiparty system since 1986 the specific rituals of electoral contests have not been stabilized, or perhaps it is safe to say that these rituals are in constant flux. Moreover, in the absence of genuine political parties, a different sort of coalition for national posts emerges in each election, such as the "K-4" of the administration party in 2004. The official rules of the game are also constantly shifting, based on the interests of the dominant party. The different set of contenders in each election also influences how the electoral campaign unfolds.

But 2004 marked an important change in electioneering. Since 1986 political advertising during elections had been banned. It was lifted in the 2001 senatorial elections, in anticipation of the 2004 presidential elections. The so-called Fair Elections Act now allows a "candidate or registered political party for a national elective office" a maximum of 120 minutes of television advertisements; the supposed lobbying by TV stations resulted in a decision of the Commission on Election (Comelec) that the 120 minutes maximum was applicable to each television station (Hofileña 2004, 51). Favoring the establishment, the ruling geometrically inflated the available time for political ads on TV. Thus were devised new procedures and the commodification of candidates to television viewers, TV rather than radio being the primary medium relied upon by the public. The paradigm of corporate advertising was imported to politics. "Advertising handlers regarded candidates as no different from shampoo or soap: They had to be sold to the market

through ads" (ibid., 66). Interestingly, the legalization of political advertising allowed financial transactions to surface as legitimate payments to TV corporations, replacing the illicit payments to individual media personalities of the past (ibid., 52).

The 2004 elections for the presidency—with its five candidates—was odd because, for the first time since 1986, the incumbent president was running for office, made possible by the ascension to the presidency of then Vice-President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo after President Joseph Estrada was forced out of office in January 2001. The limit of a one six-year term for the president instituted since Marcos's downfall was breached, hence Arroyo essentially started campaigning the day she assumed office extraconstitutionally, something not seen since 1986. As the incumbent, Arroyo deployed all resources at her disposal to win at all costs. She was far from popular, and her campaign was rough-going, but her savvy campaign boosted her popularity.

In this connection, political surveys as well as exit polls became a major factor in the 2004 election, particularly after the accuracy of poll predictions that Estrada would win in the 1998 elections. Surveys became a basis for soliciting campaign funds, and for losing potential donors for those who trailed behind in the numbers game. The mass media watched the survey trends closely, particularly when Arroyo began to overtake the widely popular film star, Fernando Poe Jr., dubbed "Da King" of Philippine movies. It was like a horse overtaking the frontrunner somewhere near mid-track, with all the excitement and disbelief such an event elicited. Not surprisingly, the press reported this and other aspects of the elections, as a respected media practitioner puts it, as a cockfight, a horserace, and a boxing match (Coronel 2004). Concern for television ratings amid the election campaign, with all their financial and market implications, also embedded the race within the media itself.

The *miting de avance* or final rally is an old ritual adapted to recent times; it is the meeting of a candidate held just before election day (or on the evening of the last day of the official campaign period). The speeches are conventionalized, with the usual attacks on the opposing candidate, often delivered in a manner that elicits laughter from the crowd of supporters.

But with the “scientification” of the campaign strategy that pointed to regionalized trends based on sample surveys, Arroyo decided not to hold a *miting de avance*, with a few publicized “townhall” meetings as a substitute. Political ads are now seen to have made political rallies that are very expensive redundant. The convincing evidence adduced is the way senatorial candidates who were near the bottom of the pile at the start of the campaign shoot up to the top. Mar Roxas, for instance, advertised himself as “Mr. Palengke” (Mr. Public Market), which made this then Secretary of Trade a true “man of the masses.” He was also romantically linked with a TV newscaster popular with the masses. All told, Roxas jumped from No. 17 in the mid-January survey to become the No. 1 senator in the final count (Hofileña 2004, 38–39).

Going back to the *miting de avance*, the other major contender, the actor Poe stuck to the old-style rally in the heart of the financial capital, Makati. While Arroyo’s nonrally was unusual, Poe’s holding of the *miting* in Makati was also unconventional, for such occasions are normally held at the Luneta. Two other presidential candidates, Panfilo Lacson and Raul Roco, did not hold similar rallies, but another candidate Eduardo Villanueva staged a huge event at the Luneta.

Another novel element in the 2004 national election was the participation of overseas Filipinos, made possible by two unprecedented and interrelated laws passed in 2003, one extending dual citizenship to former Filipino citizens and another stipulating that overseas Filipinos can cast their ballot as absentee voters. This event offered an interesting subplot to the election and electioneering narrative of 2004; it deserves a full story in itself, but is mentioned here only to indicate the many peculiarities of the 2004 elections.

Despite the flux and the odd occurrences that 2004 witnessed for the first time, some elements of electoral rituals can be said to be unchanging. The filing of candidacy at the last minute at the Manila office of the Comelec has often been staged with a little fanfare, as the candidate’s arrival is often accompanied by his or her crowd of supporters. Akin to the “progress” of rulers of ancient realms, candidates for national positions are expected to move around the country during the campaign, visiting all the major regional capital cities, giving due importance to the local as indispensable to the national, touching the



masses and being seen and heard. Frequently featured in the mass media, these visitations are often referred to as “sorties,” but a military connotation is not implied. Rather, the physical movement around the country of, say, a presidential candidate signifies a form of reconnaissance of the territory one hopes to rule.

During the campaign period, the ubiquitous display of placards and streamers, the wall-papering of fences with a candidate’s posters, and the mass distribution of leaflets in every habitable place indicate a period of filth that goes beyond the everyday dirt of the city and metropolis. In addition to the visual, the auditory senses are bombarded with campaign slogans, jingles, and political advertising. The campaign period—some four months in 2004—is intentionally one of excess. The chaos is tolerated and accepted, and transgressions become normative. Indeed, one can argue that without these excesses Filipinos would not recognize the period as pertaining properly to an election campaign.

### **Elections and the Ritual Structure of a Gambling Match**

Despite the instabilities of specific ritual acts, the 2004 national elections conformed to the general notion of an election as itself a protracted ritual process. Elections can be said to conform to the basic structure of a ritual famously discussed by Victor Turner (1967). This ritual structure, I believe, is capable of encapsulating “ancient” sentiments despite the “modernity” of elections. As soon as the campaign period begins, liminality sets in. The usual structural status of the contenders in an election is suspended; one does not know who of the candidates would be victorious. In the meantime, they are neither ordinary citizens nor confirmed officeholders for the term being contested. Election candidates are betwixt and between, transitional beings in a state of ambiguity and occupying a structural position of paradox. Before the end is reached there are many sacrificial acts—or, at least, acts that test one’s physical and emotional endurance—that candidates must undergo. However, unlike the rituals analyzed by Turner, participants in the electoral ritual do not all end with an elevated status at the ritual’s conclusion, for inevitably only the winning candidate assumes office. The ritual is therefore a contest of weeding out other liminal beings.

The campaigning and sacrifices end just before election day, but the ritual is not over yet. The act of casting one's vote is the ritual within the ritual, with the customary pose for the cameras before dropping one's ballot in the box. The canvassing of votes is a complicated process that, also subject to its own rituals, follows stipulated procedures supposedly to minimize fraud. The period of liminality ends only with the declaration of the winning candidate.

The ritual structure of elections is akin to that of a game of chance. Elsewhere (Aguilar 1994, 1998), I have argued—and will rehearse some of it here—that the electoral contest is intimately related to the notion of gambling, both as a game and as a worldview, a cultural formation that emerged in response to the exigencies of colonial rule. In the wake of the Spanish conquest in the late sixteenth century, the natives felt trapped between two colliding spirit-worlds, the indigenous and the Hispanic, compelling them to navigate between two worlds. Spanish hegemony placed natives in the underdog position. Amid this power collision and cultural entrapment, natives cultivated a gambling worldview that sought to appease the demands of both worlds while hoping that, while doing so, one would not be caught by the other. It was a form of wagering upon the odds of power. If one was pinned down so that the equal appeasement of both realms was not possible, it became a case of sheer bad luck. Otherwise, the natives moved back and forth between the overlapping worlds of the indigenous and the colonial, submitting to and concomitantly subverting colonial domination. This strategy of simultaneous avoidance/acceptance was graphically encoded in the various forms of gambling that flourished under Spanish colonial rule, foremost of which was the cockfight—*bulang*, *sabong*, or *juego de gallos*—which the colonial state used deliberately to attract natives to the center.

In the cockpit, the rule has been that only cocks of more-or-less equal prowess (with an even fighting chance) are matched in any fight, and that opposing bets are equalized before the fight can begin. This assumption of parity is reserved for the liminal period that starts from the matching of fowls and into the fight, when the idea of superiority/hierarchy is both affirmed and disbelieved, only to be confirmed after

the fight. Despite their liminal status, one cock is invariably perceived as the superior one, while the other is seen as the underdog.

In cockfighting the native could be entertained by what was essentially a cosmic battle, for the cocks were seen as standing for an otherworldly realm. One of the birds would be identified with the colonizer, while the other with the native. Thus, as noted by many observers in the nineteenth century, the shouting in the cockpit would be ecstatic whenever the underdog won—and the same behavior holds true to the present, as if to say that the poor and subjugated also have a chance. The cockpit's message is contradictory. On one hand, hierarchy and dominance are omnipresent as the outcome validated the native concept of power being the rule of the mighty, who must be spiritually favored. On the other hand, the cockfight allows for the inversion of hierarchy in society. It even allows the underdogs of society to bet on and champion the underdog. In the cockpit, history and social structure can be momentarily suspended and phenomenologically forgotten, even as ultimately history is made and the social structure is reaffirmed.

At the conclusion of a cockfight, the winner must be generous with his winnings by sharing *balato*, token portions of the bounty that are distributed to one's circle of supporters and other proximate individuals. An integral aspect of winning in a cockfight or other games of chance, the *balato* is founded on the belief that one's luck (*swerte*) brings victory, and to share this luck augments future chances of winning. In contrast, being stingy invites bad luck. Thus, the *balato* is not meant to be a leveling mechanism but a recirculation of luck and the reinscription of all within the world of gambling.

With the historically formed mindset of a gambler, Filipinos have responded to political elections—particularly to the two-party system that prevailed for the most part of the twentieth century—as if it were a cockfight. Elections encapsulate and demonstrate the gambling worldview. It is evinced linguistically by the term used to refer to one's preferred candidate as one's *manok* or cock. Evidently, the elector does not possess the fighting cock but, like the spectator in a cockpit, can place a bet on a candidate and hope that the wager will be multiplied several times over with the cock's victory in the form of generous *balato*. Not

coincidentally, in distinctively Philippine English, candidates are called "bets." Also indicative is the provision in the Election Code that, in case of a tie, the winning candidate is determined by the casting of lots.

In recent years, contenders for the presidency have become known as "presidentiables," probably indicating the time when, just after the downfall of Marcos, it was not clear who could possibly be a replacement for such a strongman. Since no one seemed to match the talent, prowess, and everything else about Marcos, the search for who could possibly become president led to the invention of the word "presidentiable." Thus elections have generated two uniquely Philippine English words. Presidentiables are bets on which one can place a wager.

### **People Power and the Multiparty System**

In presidential elections in the postwar and prior to the martial law period, the binary opposition between the two major candidates was strongly evocative of the cockfight: an equal match, a source of entertainment, a cosmic battle between mighty men. The playing field was level, the outcome sort of unpredictable, as suggested by the alternating cycle of winning and losing between the two major contending political parties. The pattern was cut in 1969 when Marcos became the first incumbent president to be reelected.

Since political parties had no significant ideological differences, turn-coats proliferated, a social fact that would be popularly known since 1986 as *balimbing*. Elite political gamblers jockeyed for positions relative to the "bets" and the promised balato in case of victory. People wagered their bets on the candidate who was expected to distribute the spoils. For the ordinary supporter or campaign volunteer, a valuable balato could come in the form of a job in the state bureaucracy. Vote buying was like an advanced balato, while contributing to the electoral campaign fund entitled a business entity to enormous postelection advantages. Like the cockfight, electoral politics was not meant or seen as transforming social hierarchies. Indeed, with an electorate that was largely rural, many were coerced or intimidated by patronage networks or by thugs to vote according to the demands of social hierarchy. For many, elections were a gamble that allowed a few people to end up in

a different structural location from where even bigger gambles could be waged.

By the cockpit's rule of equal match, the elections held under the Marcos dictatorship were a sham precisely because Marcos had no credible opponent, a "holdup fight" in cockfighting argot. Nevertheless, Marcos himself was a genuine and shrewd gambler who tested his fate to the limit. He enjoyed a high margin of credibility—until the moment the "superior powers" were seen to have irrevocably withdrawn their favor, until Marcos's magic itself had vanished. Thus, Marcos could not forever be without a challenger who would seek to restore, especially for the old elite whom he deprived of the arena, *their* conditions of fair play vis-à-vis the state apparatus.

Marcos's biggest and most miscalculated gamble was the decision to hold the "snap" election in 1986. It had no legal basis, but was intended to assert to the United States that he remained the legitimate ruler. After many years, the country had its first credible match involving two worthy contenders. Marcos was the "red" cock fighting against the "yellow" hen that was Cory Aquino. Obviously, the latter was the favorite underdog, and many citizens made a concerted effort to prevent a fraudulent result. When it became apparent that the election had been stolen (in conjunction with a complex set of other factors, not least being the intervention of political entrepreneurs), the extreme frustration over an imminent underdog victory fuelled the popular sentiment that crystallized into People Power. The spectators in the cockpit, as it were, became so fed up that they left the bleachers and mobbed the arena, hence becoming primary participants in an unprecedented gamble.

The Philippine Constitution promulgated in 1987 was largely designed as a return to the electoral politics prior to the martial law period. But it had one important new feature: a multiparty system. Thus, when the presidential election of 1992 was held, the first under this system, there were eight presidential candidates. Voters found it extremely confusing. Financiers were forced to hedge their bets by giving financial support to more than one candidate. The election was akin to a *carambola*, a rare kind of fight with many cocks released into the pit at the same time, with the lone survivor winning; the victorious

cock owner collects all bets and takes home all the dead roosters. But somehow the playing field was narrowed to two candidates—at least in the minds of many voters and in the discourse of newspaper columnists and radio commentators. The winner in 1992 was Fidel Ramos. Since then, two more presidential elections have been held, one in 1998, won by Estrada, and another in 2004, won by Arroyo. In all these contests the multiplicity of presidential aspirants attested to the political fragmentation of Philippine elites.

It should be noted that elections under the multiparty system have been held in a context that diverged significantly from that of the premartial law years. As a rule, as already mentioned, the incumbent president is not entitled to run for reelection due to the constitutional limit of one six-year term. The election for national positions also occurs simultaneously with that for regional, district, and city/municipal positions, in a contest for over 17,000 seats, requiring a voter to fill a ballot with a long list of names. Simultaneous national and local elections overload the capacity of political machineries, and often results in local party bosses paying more attention to local than national candidates. Moreover, demographic change and urbanization have increased the ratio of urban to rural voters, with the proportions now roughly equal. The role of rural patronage systems has been diminished as a result. Although techniques of intimidation in urban areas are being invented and reinvented, the fearsome days of rural elections are found only in some places labeled as “hot spots.” Since vigilance of the citizenry reaped its rewards in 1986, a heightened level of vigilance and active participation has become evident in the polls.

These contests have also become extremely expensive affairs, requiring enormous and mainly illicit financial contributions from corporate sponsors and other bettors, and the consequently huge payback required once winners are installed in office. In 1998 the campaign spending of each of the main presidential candidates was said to have ranged from P1.5 billion to P3 billion. In 2004 the estimates ranged from a low of P5 billion to a high of P10 billion, with about P750 million to as much as P1.25 billion being spent on political advertising in the mass media (Hofileña 2004, 6).

## Metaphors of the Poor

The IPC Ateneo study conducted just before the 10 May 2004 national and local election provided empirical support to the view that electoral contests are regarded by people as an analogue of a cockfight and, in general, of a gambling match. But the FGD data enrich this view by illuminating the ideational and pragmatic tensions inherent in elections. The sections that follow present selected data from that study of sixteen focus group discussions involving ordinary Filipinos belonging to poor urban and rural communities.

### A Time of Extremes

The FGD participants generally held idealistic notions of leadership, comparing elected leaders to righteous parents, for instance, but the topic of elections elicited overwhelmingly negative responses. The poor see elections as marking an unusual time in the life of the nation, a period of excess as indicated earlier. But more than just the physical dirt and the bombardment of the senses, ordinary Filipinos point to the undesirable character traits that become preponderant at this time. Elections for them signify a time of discord, pretense, mudslinging, gambling, and opportunism. It is a time when the level of violence increases; it is a time of war and intimidation, according to some youth. The poor are aware of the tricks deployed during elections, and they see through the strategies of politicians. It is a time for choosing leaders, but it is also an ugly time. They recognize that it is a time when the poor benefit from the increased money and goods in circulation—the advanced *balato*, as it were. In their words, elections signify a time of:

*Pera at bigas na binibigay ng mga kandidato* [Cash and rice given away by candidates] (rural female)

*Masisira na naman ang relasyon ng mga tao. Halimbawa, magkakaaway ang magkapatid.* [Social relations will be strained. For example, even siblings engage in a fight.] (urban male)

*Maraming nabubuhay na patay* [Many dead are brought back to life]—flying voters. (urban male)

*Nagpapabango; sinasamantala ang panahon, naglalabas ng mga pondo para sa mga projects* [Candidates make themselves “smell good”; they take advantage of the occasion and release public funds to support projects] (youth)

*Takutan* [A time of threats] (youth)

*Dayaan na naman!* [Cheating time again] (youth)

*Giyera, may gulo* [War, the peace is disturbed] (youth)

*Kumukuha ng mga goons ang mga kandidato*  
[Candidates hire goons] (urban male)

### Metaphors for Elections

The metaphors of participants concerning elections indicate a certain worldview that colors their participation in this political exercise. It is also a sensibility that enables them to survive the uncertainties and overcome the deceitfulness of this process. A recurrent theme refers to elections as a game of chance, a race, and, for those in rural areas, a cockfight. As in any other game with which people are familiar, cheating becomes almost inevitable. As the participants put it, elections are like:

*Parang laro na may nananalo at natatalo*  
[A game with winners and losers] (rural female)

*Pareha ug sugal adunay makadaug, aduna usay mapilde*  
[A gamble where some will win and others will lose] (urban male)

*Isang magulo at maruming laro*  
[A chaotic and dirty game] (urban male)

*Katulad ng baraha, may patay at buhay*  
[A card game, some alive, others dead] (urban male)

*Garong sarong bolang na nagpipili nin pupustaban*  
[A cockfight, and one must choose (a cock) to place a bet] (rural male)

*Murag sabong nay mapildi ug magdaog*  
[A cockfight with winners and losers] (rural female)



*Isang boxing na maraming nasusuntok na kandidato* [A boxing match where many candidates receive blows] (youth)

*Isang chess game na malalaman lang kung sino ang panalo sa huling tira* [A game of chess where the winner can be known only at the last move] (youth)

*Isang karera ng kabayo na may siguradong mananalo* [A horserace that will surely have a winner] (youth)

*Isang lotto na maaaring maging mayaman ang mananalo* [A lotto where the winner can become very rich] (youth)

The element of deception is captured in metaphors that allude to courtship, during which sweet words and grand promises abound.

*Garo sa sarong pag-ilusyon na tuga sanag tuga* [A courtship with endless promises] (rural male)

*Murag dalaga nga diin magpiniliay* [A woman who has to choose among many suitors] (rural male)

The courtship metaphors are indicative of social inversion during the liminal period of the campaign. They suggest that, for once, the poor are being courted by the rich, who find themselves in the exceptional position of being on the asking, rather than receiving, end. But they are also fully cognizant that courtship is an idealized moment, when extravagant promises are made, only for these to be forgotten later.

Closely allied to the courtship metaphor of elections is that of a fashion show or beauty contest, when people make a show of themselves that highlight the external façade but conceal the real character of people, particularly the candidates:

*Isang fashion show na ang mga pulitiko ay nagpapaganda ng anyo* [A fashion show involving politicians who prettify themselves] (youth)

*Paguwapuhan, pasiklaban* [A race for the most handsome, a time for showing off] (youth)

Other metaphors, most of which come from the youth, speak of the conflicts, filth, noise, disease, and dishonesty of elections:

*Tulad ng isang basura na dapat linisin; dapat pumili ng pinuno na gagawa ng pagbabago* [Filthy garbage that needs to be cleaned; there is need to choose a leader who can introduce change] (urban male)

*Isang sakit na nakamamatay* [An illness that can be fatal] (youth)

*Isang Orocan na plastic* [A plastic container] (youth)

*Tulad ng radyo na maingay* [A noisy radio] (youth)

But other metaphors, although not frequently mentioned, refer to the festive atmosphere of elections, reminding us of the European analogue of elections as a carnival:

*Pareha ug sinulog daghan kaayo ang mga tawo nga mudugok* [Like the *sinulog* festival that draws so many people (spectators)] (urban male)

*Usa ka drama, nga daghan ug dramaturgo o artista* [A drama that involves many performers and artists] (urban male)

In sum, the metaphors the poor use for elections suggest the element of spectatorship. A possible exception is the courtship metaphor, in which the focus is on the electorate that is being wooed and must decide based on the unreliable and eventually empty words of suitor-candidates. In most cases, elections are viewed as a gamble, a game of chance, among politicians whom the poor watch and observe, and, on occasion, from whom they obtain some benefit. But the public's role as spectators is far from being passive, for there is active engagement. Whether movie personalities are running for office or not, elections that simulate a cockpit, racetrack, or card game are inherently a form of entertainment. The entertainment is active and participatory, for the non-active option would be for the public to leave the cockpit, racetrack, or betting station altogether. The people appear bent on staying on inside the ring.

### Participation in Elections

What is fascinating about the poor's attitude toward elections is that, despite its flaws, the whole process is regarded as legitimate. Most of the FGD participants said they would vote on election day, 10 May

2004. They consider casting one's ballot as an obligation, even if by law it is not mandatory. This sense of duty is pervasive, and is associated with a notion of citizenship in a "civilized" human polity.

*May kasabihan na ang hindi bumoto, walang karapatang magreklamo*  
[There is a saying that someone who does not vote has no right to complain] (urban male)

Despite the negative image of elections, they are important because voting is an obligation of each person (urban female)

*Tungod kay kung dili ta mobotar, dili kita tawo sa gobyerno, mura tag tagalasang* [Because if we do not vote, we are not people of government. We are like men of the jungle] (rural female)

The poor consider elections as the opportunity to remove from office the politicians in whom they have lost confidence, and to put into office those whom they prefer to be their leaders. No other mechanism can be imagined as providing this mechanism of change. Moreover, the change in officeholders is not merely for the moment, for many realize the broad and long-term implications of elections. They know that when they cast their ballots the future of the country is at stake.

*Dito nakasalalay ang kinabukasan ng mga mamamayan*  
[On it depends the future of the people] (youth)

*Kinabanglan kay nag-agad sa atong boto ang kaugma-on sa atong nasud*  
[It is important because the future of the nation depends on us voters] (urban male)

*Tsansa upang matanggal ang tiwaling lider*  
[Opportunity to remove a crooked leader] (rural female)

*Para mailuklok ang mabuting kandidato*  
[To place a good leader] (rural female)

The futility of elections was expressed by a handful of the participants. An urban youth notes the futility of the whole exercise, while an urban female participant laments that their candidate (possibly referring

to Estrada) is maligned and unseated “even if he won fairly.” The urban female’s comment does not condemn elections per se, but it is an expression of dismay that a legitimate electoral outcome is overruled and disregarded. Her desire is for the rules of the game to be respected.

This negative view of elections, however, is not the dominant mode of thinking among the FGD participants. Most consider their participation in elections as meaningful, and as an opportunity to effect change. This idealism remains despite the recognition that the electoral process is extremely flawed.

### The Reliability of Election Results

In response to the question of whether or not the results of elections are reliable and trustworthy, a few of the FGD participants did not hesitate to say that the results are reliable, expressing absolute faith in the process. Most participants, however, qualify their comments. A common view is that the results of local elections are reliable (which may explain why their examples of good leaders are usually drawn from among local officials). The outcomes of national elections, however, are far from trustworthy. The poor recognize that national posts are highly contested, hence the recourse to massive cheating in national polls. “Sa national marami ang kalokohan” (Much foolishness occurs at the national level), as an urban male participant puts it. However, despite the fraud, there appears to be a resignation to the reality of cheating in elections, which some consider as inevitable in, or even endemic to, Philippine life:

### If the Candidate One Voted for Loses

In case one’s candidate loses in the election, the participants say they will feel sad, disappointed, and dismayed—*matamlay*, *malungkot*—but will eventually come to terms with the results. Again, there is a feeling of resignation—*wala ka nang magagawa*—either because none can be done about the cheating or because the majority’s preference must be accepted.

Some participants will adopt a wait-and-see attitude based on the performance of the candidate who wins the election, regardless of

how elected. Perhaps, they say, they may still benefit from the person who wins:

*Ogma man giraray ta matabang man giraray sinda samo* [We will still be happy because they will still help us] (rural male)

*Para mayong ribok, tapos halaton na lang ang saiyang nanginibohan sa torno niya* [To avoid trouble, we will just wait for the winner's accomplishments in office] (rural female)

A few, however, say it will be very difficult for them to accept the loss of their candidate.

The element of chance pervades elections, from the campaign to the actual vote, and even to how the actual winner performs in office. The poor are acutely aware of systematic electoral fraud, but the resignation seems to ensue from a pragmatic attitude: "you win some, you lose some." After all, for many of them, their life chances will not be substantially altered by elections.

## The Selection of Candidates

### Influential Factors in Choice of Candidate

The participants in the study were asked about the factors they consider as affecting their choice of candidates. The most important sources of influence they themselves acknowledged are:

- Media
- *Pamilya* (Family)
- *Simbahan* (Church)
- *Partido pulitikal* (Political party)
- *Sarili lang/walang nakakaimpluwensiya* (Self, no outside influence)
- Surveys

### The Media and Sources of Information

To arrive at an informed choice, the participants recognize the mass media as playing a most crucial role. Only among rural participants do

the media not figure as the most important source of influence; to them, the family and the church are the more important influences.

The urban participants, including the youth, widely recognize the need to gain access to information. They rely on the mass media to provide trustworthy information about the candidates, and on television to show images of candidates as a means of getting to know them. They also recognize the value of the mass media in providing information about candidates even prior to the campaign period, such as the accomplishment of incumbents or what bills they have proposed in Congress.

While participants obtain information from newspapers, radio, and television, the youth also rely on text messages and the Internet. Across all groups, however, *tsismis* (gossip) was mentioned as a source of information. Discussions (*pakikisalamuha*) with other persons, be they kin or nonkin, are likewise sources of information. Urban participants also look at leaflets, advertisements, and campaign streamers to gain information about candidates.

It is interesting that the poor analyze the images projected by candidates, whether they are heard over the radio or seen on television, to gauge the character (*ugali*) of a person. For instance, rural women try to observe how a candidate speaks, noting especially if the person “speaks with respect.” Rural males also assess a candidate’s manner of speaking; they gaze at the candidate’s face for clues on character, and observe how that individual stands up, walks, and deals with people. Urban participants similarly obtain clues about character by observing the manner of speaking and the person’s physical appearance.

*Sa pananalita malalaman mo kung mabait o magaling* [One can know if a person is kind or capable based on how they talk] (youth)

*Sa reaksyon niya sa mga tao habang nangangampanya* [In a candidate’s reaction to people during the campaign] (youth)

Although some youth say they cannot know a candidate’s character because “*hindi kami* (we are not) psychologists,” many claim that they can glean a person’s character from the manner of speaking and responding to questions during an interview or a debate. They also study the temper of a candidate.

Local candidates are scrutinized at closer range than candidates for national positions. Participants directly observe the behavior of local candidates during meetings, and even during seminars and graduation ceremonies when these individuals are invited to speak.

### Adequacy of Information

Although the participants rank media as the most influential factor in their choice of candidates, the information to which most have access is considered inadequate, particularly on candidates running for national positions. There is a desire to know candidates up-close, and listen to them talk. As a young person said, "Although it is next to impossible, we prefer to personally interview the candidates." To an urban male, actually listening to the candidate is very important: "dapat marinig magsalita, kahit nababasa ang mga plataporma" (Even if we can read about their platform, we need to hear them speak).

### Surveys

As a source of influence on the choice of candidate, surveys represent a primarily urban phenomenon. For some, surveys indicate how one should vote in relation to preventing another candidate from winning office. In a situation where several candidates are vying for the same office such as the presidency, voters choose not necessarily the best candidate in their opinion but the one that would prevent a detested candidate from emerging victorious. In arriving at these odds, surveys can serve as a useful guide. In this respect poor voters are no different from middle class voters, who resorted to this strategy in regard to the bitterly contested presidential contest in 2004.

Other participants look to surveys so they can vote as part of the biggest bloc of voters, and thereby feel good that they are on the winning side. Surveys also provide information on the underdog, and allow one to vote for "someone who is behind (in the ranking) in order that that particular candidate can gain a lead" (urban female).

Nonetheless, for most of the participants and across all groups, the definitive answer is that surveys are irrelevant in their choice of candi-

date. This trend is shown in the rather low overall ranking of surveys as a source of voting influence. There are, in general, two main reasons for the relative unimportance of surveys. The first is that surveys are distrusted:

*Maaari iyan ay paninira lamang* [(A candidate's poor showing in surveys) may be a demolition job only] (rural female)

Even in a cockfight, the winner is still undetermined. (rural male)

The last statement is evocative of the liminality of the campaign—if even in a cockfight one will not really know the outcome until the very end, how could surveys “know” the electoral outcome?

The other reason pertains to the conviction that voters will choose candidates according to their criteria, and will not allow themselves to be swayed by statistics. Many value their individual vote, seeing it as making a difference in the overall chances at victory of their respective candidates. Participants, for example, insist that they will vote for candidates based on qualifications and track record, regardless of what the surveys say.

*Sayang din ang boto kung ibibigay lang sa iba na hindi gusto* [It will be a waste to give my vote to someone else I don't like] (youth)

*Iboboto ang karapatdapat para sa akin at di makikinig sa iba* [I will vote for whom I think is the deserving candidate and I won't listen to others] (youth)

The relative unimportance of surveys among the poor raises the question: Are surveys significant primarily to the middle and upper classes? The answers will probably vary, depending on the exact configuration of each election. Still, in the game of life, one can say that perhaps the rich are used to winning, while the poor are accustomed to losing. It would be ironic if, “as losers,” the poor turn out to be the more principled voters when compared with the highly educated middle and upper classes.



## Confusing Elections

Many participants are of the view that the then forthcoming elections on 10 May 2004 are rather confusing, mainly because there are many candidates vying for the same position and multiple positions to fill. As many put it, “nakakalito dahil masyadong maraming kandidato.”

The confusion is also related to the lack of trustworthy information about the candidates. The spread of black propaganda leaves a voter with no basis for making a good decision. In the words of a rural female participant, “Maraming paninira ang lumalabas sa mga kandidato, hindi mo alam kung ano ang totoo” (There’s too much mudslinging going on, and one can’t know which one is true).

The buying of votes also causes confusion. Traditionally, the acceptance of money from a candidate imposes an obligation on the part of the voter to repay the act by voting for that candidate. But, as will be mentioned shortly, many religious leaders are encouraging people to accept the money but vote according to their conscience, thus creating some sort of dilemma for voters.

The other source of confusion pertains to the conduct of the elections itself, such as whether it will be computerized or not, and whether they have properly complied with the procedural requirements for registration and validation. This apprehension expresses a keen desire to vote on election day.

## Vote-buying

All the participants in the study agree that vote-buying is not right. There is a sense that the public ultimately loses from vote-buying. The money given out to buy votes, they say, will later on be recuperated by a winner from public funds, fuelling corruption of a magnitude exceeding the money used to buy votes.

*Hindi tama na mamigay, kasi kapag nanalo babawiin din ito, baka mas malaki pa* [It’s not right to give money, because if they win they’ll take it back, involving even larger sums] (urban male)

*Dai, magkakaigwa nin korapto* [No, it will lead to corruption] (rural male)

*Dai, mas ngana an babawion* [No, they will take back much more in return] (rural female)

A handful will absolutely not accept money. One urban male participant even equated vote-buying to the commodification of the voter's personhood.

*Mali, kasi parang binibili ang pagkatao mo* [It's wrong, because it's like they're buying your humanity] (urban male)

However, most participants say they will accept money but will vote according to their own preferences, on condition that no checks on their actual vote are made. If there is a way of finding out how they will actually vote (such as through a "carbon copy" of the ballot), then they will not accept money. It is a case of outwitting the other: "utakan lang iyan" (youth). Those who will accept a candidate's money feel justified because the money is said to come from the people anyway.

*Yung perang pinamumudmod nila ay galing din sa tao* [The money they're doling out to people comes from the people in the first place] (urban male)

Despite the relatively low rank of the Catholic Church as an acknowledged source of influence on the choice of candidate, it is evident that years of advocacy by many church officials and leaders not to be intimidated by vote-buying and to vote according to their conscience despite the acceptance of money have evidently born fruit in this pervasive thinking among the participants.

Apart from vote-buying, Metro Manila participants identify additional sources of pressure on how they are to vote. Some employers or managers are threatening their workers that they will lose their jobs if they will not vote for the candidate preferred by their superiors at work. Other employers adopt more subtle techniques, such as conducting a "survey" of the workforce. In the latter case, workers tell management what the latter wants to hear.

Apart from such intimidation, violence and thuggery were not major issues for the FGD participants, a result that is perhaps a function of the relatively safe areas chosen for this study. So-called “hot spots” are identified in every election. But for national positions fraud has become a complex and sophisticated game of manipulating results from behind the scenes through schemes such as *dagdag-bawas* (shaving off votes from one candidate to pad the votes of another). These are said to involve huge pay-offs for election officials at various levels. Such wholesale fraud has minimized the crudest forms of violence, along with other factors discussed earlier that spell changes in the conduct of elections.

### **What the IPC Ateneo Data Say**

To summarize, data from the IPC Ateneo study indicate that elections are widely viewed as a game of chance, a gamble, although it is also seen in other ways involving a similar element of spectatorship. Such views are not peculiar to the poor. Viewing elections as a game of chance allows voters to undergo the campaign period—a moment of liminality—with serious engagement as well as a healthy dose of fun and skepticism. It also helps them to come to terms with election outcomes without, in a sense, losing hope in the system. Any game of chance entails risks—there are only two possibilities for one’s candidate: either win or lose. And every game of chance involves cheating. The poor are resigned to such realities of life. Hence, regardless of the outcome, life will go on.

Ordinary voters are fully cognizant of the deception and trickery involved in electoral contests, particularly for national positions. Despite all of its flaws, elections are regarded as the only means to change elected leaders and to seat new ones. Indeed, most of the poor regard their participation in elections as a duty, suggesting an appreciation of their role as citizens in a nation-state. People see the ballot as crucial to a political system that calls itself democratic.

Voters can be said, therefore, to approach elections with a profound feeling of ambivalence. To most of them, elections are the only legitimate means to effect change, and its outcome must be respected. In

case the outcome is not to their liking, there is a feeling of resignation among poor voters who feel their room for efficacious action is severely limited. But there is also a pervasive sense that the outcome is the outcome, and it must come to pass. Everyone has played his or her role in the game and, excepting the original People Power in 1986, the people are prepared to abide by the results. That is how the game is played, and one must not be a sore loser. Thus, they recognize the imperfections of the electoral process, and still remain willing participants. The notion of a game of chance captures the feeling of belief in and ambivalence toward an accepted social practice that has an innate entertainment value, an inherent validity, and the unavoidable cheats, risks, and twists of fortune.

Interestingly, most are not swayed by survey results, despite the political elite's increasing preference for the scientification of elections. The poor loathe empty promises and commonly see vote-buying as wrong and improper. But, given their material needs, they will also take advantage of the money and goods that circulate widely at this time, if they can somehow escape the consequences. But they would really like to elect someone whom they know has the traits of a good leader, especially one with vision, intelligence, and a heart for the poor. But how are they to "know" the candidates? Try them like shampoo or soap?

The conflicts in society at election time are mirrored at various levels of society. Yet elections are also a time of momentary inversion. The poor are fully aware that the electoral campaign period is a time of inversion and excess. But they are also realistic enough to know that elections are not meant to change and overhaul the social structure. They cast their votes as a duty and as integral members of the body politic, but are also full participants in the process of gambling on candidates, hoping for change, and then moving on.

### **The 2004 Elections: Closure by Death?**

But how do people collectively move on after elections? Elsewhere elections achieve proper closure when the losing candidate ritualistically concedes to the winning candidate and accepts the so-called people's mandate based on simple arithmetic. Also to effect closure are norma-

tive statements made that, after all of the acrimony of the campaign, the people of opposing sides will have to live together, and must therefore bury their differences. In the Philippines, this ritual closure is hard to come by.

Nonclosure of the electoral ritual has become acute in the Philippine multiparty system, an inevitable feature of which is that whoever wins the presidential contest will not be the choice of a majority of the electors. The multiplicity of candidates fragments the vote, and the winner has at best a (tenuous) plurality. Only in the case of Estrada's victory in 1998 was the outcome not subject to a dispute. But the seeming closure did not last for long. As people say, "Look what they did to him." The winning margin of Ramos in 1992 was perilously small, although eventually he governed with legitimacy because he held a firm grip on power and was widely perceived to have performed well in office. In the 2004 election Arroyo's margin over Poe was rather slim—just over a million votes, with the official tally showing Arroyo received 12,905,808 votes against Poe's 11,782,232. A case was filed in court to protest the results, attesting to the old adage that no one ever loses a Philippine election: the loser always cries, "I was cheated!"

The death of Poe on 14 December 2004 from natural causes would seem to have put the case to rest, only because the main complainant is gone. However, his innumerable loyal followers refuse to accept the legitimacy of Arroyo as president. Since her husband's death, Susan Roces has also become a political voice. Overall, however, the passing of Poe has given the 2004 national election some sort of closure. Still an air of liminality lingers, with endless talk of disenchantment with Arroyo and of ousting her from power. The ritual is finished, but the ritual continues.

## Note

This article is based on a paper presented at a conference-workshop on "Political Elections as Popular Culture," organized by the Asian Research Institute, National University of Singapore, 17 to 19 February 2005. I thank the conference participants for their comments and questions. The papers in that conference, including a somewhat expanded version of this article, will appear in a book edited by Chua

Beng Huat. Events since the revelation of the “Garci tapes” in early June 2005 have raised serious doubts about Arroyo’s electoral victory, turning the “air of liminality” mentioned at the end of the article into a generalized state of liminality that has stalemated the whole country, as this issue goes to press.

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