

THE LIMITS OF OLIGARCHIC POWER: BEYOND THE 2010 ELECTIONS

*"Organization is the weapon of the weak in their struggle with the strong."
Robert Michels, Political Parties*

By the Policy Study, Publication, and Advocacy (PSPA)
Center for People Empowerment in Governance (CenPEG)
April 26, 2010

They say that elections in our country are like the game of musical chairs. In reality, however, elections are contests exclusively for the elites and their families who will later use their political positions of power for private gain for themselves and their affluent families. They are exercises for the oligarchy in sharing political power among their coterie of the elite. While more than 70 percent of our people are poor, more than 80 percent of the elected representatives in Congress and presidency belong to the exclusive multimillionaires' club, based on their own declared assets and liabilities.

Factions of the oligarchy and bureaucrat capitalists have maintained their power by manipulating the poor and powerless especially during electoral contests. They have used the poor as their tiradors or hitmen in their contention for limited seats of political power at the national and local level.

But no matter how much they pretend to come from the ranks of the poor, or to project themselves as "makamasa," especially in their electoral propaganda, one can see how they have gained from their positions of political power.

Can the oligarchy nationalize and expropriate land and private property under the auspices of a genuine agrarian reform law as Cuban President Fidel Castro did in May 1959 when he led by the example in implementing Cuba's sweeping Agrarian Reform Law by first nationalizing his own family's sprawling hacienda in Biran, eastern Cuba?

Validation

The coming Philippine elections are further validating the long-held truism that:

- ♦The elections are basically contests for the elite and economically powerful.
- ♦The major political parties running for national positions are basically money machines, and convenient alliances of political clans and dynasties, and are not based on real genuine, consistent party principles or platforms.
- ♦Politics is still very personality-oriented.

But these characteristics of Philippine electoral politics are also the limitations of oligarchic power. These limitations are on the following grounds:

- ♦Oligarchic power thrives on the low awareness of the people and the divisions among the non-elites. Once the people become socially-aware and organize, they challenge the very foundations of elite rule.
 - ♦Oligarchic monopoly of state power can never be expected to deliver policies and services for the vast majority of the poor and oppressed.
 - ♦Oligarchic power limits the exercise of true political democracy and the realization of social justice.
 - ♦Oligarchic power reduces the democratizing economic benefits that may come from economic growth. The economic pie and GNP/GDP may grow each year, but only a tiny speck of the population will corner this added wealth for themselves and benefit from it.

The real hope

This is why the hope is not in the electoral struggle per se. The real hope lies in deepening the processes of democratization, in strengthening and widening the grassroots citizens' movements which can act as an effective countervailing force against the economic, political and military domination of the oligarchy - both foreign and local. Thus, elections at the national and local levels should not be a mere contest among the factions of the elites and bureaucrat capitalists, among whom we are often limited to choose from. The real struggle is between the continued oligarchic rule and the exploited/oppressed toiling masses.

And real power is not also in state power per se. Real power is in an empowered citizens' grassroots movement seeking to wrest control of economic and political power from the oligarchs. The role of people's movements in their engagement with the elite-driven state is not just to provide an effective check and balance in the state, or to share a token of that state power. Their role is to develop alternative local and national leaders for the emergence of a genuine political party of the non-elite to challenge oligarchic power. For this, it may be necessary to unify the country's diverse progressive and left-of-center forces behind a coherent political program.

What therefore, are the tasks at hand for people's organizations and social movements which are participating in the coming political exercise?

- ◆Use the whole electoral exercise to expose the bankruptcy of oligarchic power and corrupt oligarchic politics that only reinforce if not legitimize the monopoly of political and economic

power of the few. And we should show to the electorate whose consciousness we are raising that we are the genuine people's alternative to the corrupt patronage politics of the oligarchy.

- ◆Show by example that "New Politics" and "Politics of Change" is always a principled one; it must maintain its high moral ground and should never imitate the practices of corrupt traditional politicians and the parties of the elite, just to get positions of power. It should not be used by any faction of the old or nouveau riche oligarchy in their bid for power. To do so is to act like a hatchet person of one oppressor against another. We should avoid riding on the discredited political machines of the elites which are fueled merely by money and patronage. How we win, is how we will govern.
- ◆Maximize the election to raise the level of consciousness of the people, to make and develop new contacts in all provinces and regions, and to organize and further broaden and strengthen people's organizations. Special focus and more serious work should be given to our engagement with local government units (LGUs) for consolidating grassroots political power.

The greater tragedy of oligarchic power and politics is if the hoi polloi -- the poor victims themselves -- fight and kill one another while the exploiting classes playfully swap musical chairs in an elite game we call elections.

(This issue analysis was written by Prof. Roland Simbulan, Senior Fellow of CenPEG, centennial professor and former Faculty Regent of the University of the Philippines system.)

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