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Political clans are more entrenched after mid-term polls

The recycling of political dynasties was a foregone conclusion. Political dynasties, by and large, perpetuate themselves in power through elections made farcical by being undemocratic and now by an illegitimate automation process that is unable to modernize let alone democratize the public exercise that is administered by a hostile and incompetent election body.

By the Policy Study, Publication, and Advocacy
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The Filipino masses cannot expect any reform that will ameliorate the country from poverty and other extreme economic conditions in the years ahead. For any substantial reform to happen, political authority and government machineries must first be democratized whereby the people's representation in policy making is effectively ensured. This pre-condition did not happen in the recent mid-term elections. Not only did the elections allow a significant number of political clans back in power but it also led many of them to become more entrenched with more members per family winning elective positions across several territorial jurisdictions and in terms of higher posts they will occupy one month from now.

In the recent elections, several nationally-known political dynasties fielded more of their members running for different national (Senate and House) and local positions (from governor, to mayor, vice-mayor, and councilors) in several towns. These dynasties had from 8 to as many as 20 members running but none could beat the number of candidates coming from the Ampatuan clan in Maguindanao province, with 74. Opportunistically, they ran under different traditional political parties, whether administration or "opposition".

Partial results of the mid-term elections show some of the biggest gainers, led by the Binays of Makati with a new senator, congresswoman, and reelected Makati mayor aside from the incumbent vice president himself; Singsons of Ilocos Sur, nine wins (including two congressmen and one governor), no loss; Ortegas of La Union, six wins (including one congressman and one governor); Dys of Isabela, six wins, no loss (including one congressman, one

governor, and three mayors); Pinedas of Pampanga, governor, vice-governor, and councilors; Espinas of Biliran, six wins, no loss (including one congressman, one governor, one mayor); Tupases of Iloilo, seven wins out of 13, including one congressman, one vice-governor, and several councilors; Ynares of Rizal, one governor and two mayors; Dimaporos of Lanao del Norte, five wins, no loss (including two House seats, one governor, one mayor); Romualdos of Camiguin, three wins, no loss (one House seat, governor, and mayor); and Mangudadatus of Sultan Kudarat and Maguindanao, with 10 candidates so far winning out of 19 fielded (including two governors, one House seat, and several mayors and councillors). Seventy-four members of the Ampatuan clan in Maguindanao ran with 23 of them so far getting elected including the wives of three town mayors now jailed for the Nov. 2009 massacre case. Another son, Benzar, who is also detained was re-elected mayor. The richest member of the lower House, boxer-turned politician Manny Pacquiao, was also re-elected and now packs a new dynasty, with wife Jinkee as new Sarangani vice-governor and protégé, Ronnel Rivera, son of a fishing magnate, as new mayor of Gen. Santos City. The 1-2-3 punch floored the Antonino-Custodio clan of South Cotabato.

Seven members of the Aquino-Cojuangco clan in Tarlac are in public office, with Bam Aquino in the Senate aside from Benigno S. Aquino III in Malacanang. The next Senate will host two political families with two members each – the Cayetanos and Estradas. The Estradas also took two mayoralty posts – San Juan and Manila, with former president Joseph E. Estrada. The Senate seats soon to be vacated by Edgardo Angara and Manny Villar will be

occupied by son Sonny and wife Nancy, respectively. The dominance of political dynasties in the Senate has increased from 85% in the current 15th Congress to 87% in the new Senate – excluding three senators. Meanwhile, two members of the Macapagal-Arroyo family retained their seats – discredited president Gloria M. Arroyo (Pampanga) and son Dato (Camarines Sur).

A few political clans lost in all contests, including the Gordons of Olongapo, Payumos of Bataan, Dazas of Northern Samar, and Tañadas of Quezon. On the other hand, two out of five members of the Jalosjos family in Zamboanga del Norte won - a House seat and Dapitan mayor. Other dynasties cannot be counted out yet, despite some setbacks: the Garcias lost the governorship of Cebu but won one House seat and two mayoralty posts; Migz Zubiri lost his Senate bid but two other members of the Zubiri family of Butuan won the governorship and one House seat.

The debacles suffered by some clans did not signal the end of dynastic rule. Most candidates from these clans lost their seats either to their own relatives or rivals coming from similar traditional political parties. The Dazas of Northern Samar, for instance, were trounced by the Ong family, who took the House seat, governorship, and mayoralty of Laoang town. As shown by the Marcoses, political dynasties are resilient and are able to recover their losses – and still multiply - after some time.

The country's ruling political clans once more proved their resiliency and ability to perpetuate themselves in power. In many provinces and districts, candidates from political dynasties ran unopposed. Third party coalitions tried to field their own senatorial slates but could not match the traditional advantages of the ruling political clans – family name recall, voter awareness, and resources. In many areas, local contests were decided by widespread vote buying and, in some places, by intimidation involving local dynasties and their private armies. There were also reports of automated fraud ranging from pre-shading and pre-loading of ballots, offers by local election officials to make candidates win, and unexplained long brownouts in many vote-rich provinces on election day.

As in the 2010 presidential elections, voters could not really tell who won and who lost in the recent mid-term elections. Comelec used a different approach: Chairman Sixto Brillantes, Jr. was quoted by the press as saying that the proclamation of winning senatorial candidates was

based on vote projection and not on the 100% completion of certificates of canvassing (COCs). “We rely not on the exact number of votes but on the projected number of votes [that] we anticipate,” he said. Thus, the proclamation of the 12 Senate winners was made despite the failure to electronically transmit 18,000 election returns (ERs) representing about 9M voters. And yet 9M votes can technically change the rankings in the Senate.

The credibility of the mid-term elections was tainted by Comelec's and Smartmatic's removal of major safeguards and security features of the poll automation system, the repeated non-compliance of election laws including the timely independent source code review, the PCOS machines' systematic and widespread transmission failures, the highly irregular and arbitrary decisions on the RMA, illegal CF cards and their physical transport to the NBOC, and the premature proclamation of election winners. All these are what make an election failure.

The questionable performance of the Comelec-managed poll automation was as predictable as the election process itself. The playing field was uneven from the beginning, therefore, the election could not qualify as fair and democratic reflective of the voters' sovereign will. Only an election that is fair and promotes the competition of platforms and track record and not decided by popularity and money can qualify as democratic. Moreover, the right of suffrage was violated on account of the poll automation's disabling of transparent features that would have allowed every voter to see in his own eyes how his vote is counted. The absence of the legally-mandated digital signature compromised the validity of all election returns and this alone serves as a legitimate ground for questioning the election results.

Thus, the recycling of political dynasties was a foregone conclusion. Political dynasties, by and large, perpetuate themselves in power through elections made farcical by being undemocratic and now by an illegitimate automation process that is unable to modernize let alone democratize the public exercise that is administered by a hostile and incompetent election body.

Having concluded the mid-term elections, the first priority of the country's dominant political oligarchs is to gear up for the 2016 presidential derby three years from now. The consolidation of political gains in Congress, such as the new Senate presidency, and the league of local government unit (LGU) officials will be the main agenda

of both the administration and the “opposition” bloc. As expected, the agenda for genuine social and economic reform will be sidelined no matter the economic deterioration, joblessness, and worsening poverty in the country. The representation of the poor in government has been further eclipsed by the dominance of the political dynasties whose power is now boosted by the anti-people ruling of the high court opening the Party-list system to the high and mighty.

Real development requires the distribution of wealth and an end to the concentration of wealth by the small elite. This can happen if the political system allows the distribution of power under the principle of a people-based and rights-driven government. When none exists, a country will continue to wallow in poverty and social inequities. Where oligarchies rule real development cannot take off. A classic case is the Philippines.

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