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Fraud recycles the political dynasties and keeps them in power. It breeds generations of cheaters, corrupt politicians, mediocre executives, bribe takers, absenteeism in Congress. It is part of the lifeblood of bureaucrat capitalism.

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Last week, the Arroyo administration's Team Unity (TU) and the Genuine Opposition (GO) traded charges and counter-charges in connection with the latest surveys showing that fraud particularly vote-buying will take place in the coming May 14 elections. Two public opinion surveys, conducted separately on March 18-23 and April 14-17 by the Social Weather Stations (SWS), revealed that 40 percent of Filipinos expect the government to cheat in the elections while 70 percent expected vote buying to take place in their areas. TU leaders dismissed the surveys, especially the first, as fabricated accusing SWS of selling out to the anti-Arroyo opposition.

The results of the surveys should not be a surprise at all considering that elections ever since this republic was born – or even before that - have always been marred by fraud. Fraud, such as vote buying, distributing sacks of money to local politicians and poll officials, *dagdag-bawas* (vote padding and shaving), ballot snatching, fabricating election returns (ERs) and certificates of canvass (CoCs), violence and other types, takes place in any election, on all levels and by both pro- and anti-administration candidates. More stinking, however, is that it is usually the incumbent administration that commits it with all audacity and impunity.

Kontra Daya, the Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPCRV), Legal Advocacy Network for Clean Elections (LANCE), Legal Network for Truthful Elections (Lente), No Cheats and other poll watchdogs have proliferated in the aftermath of the 2004 election fraud. With a sense of disquiet but also sheer grit, they are all battle-gearred for a widespread fraud and manipulation of the elections that are expected to escalate on election day. Some of these groups have chosen to monitor the Commission on Elections (Comelec), the constitutional poll body that has a very poor trust rating.

Daunting tasks

The tasks of the poll watchers have also become more daunting as they also need to monitor partisan activities of government agencies and of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and



Philippine National Police (PNP) whose top officials were linked to the 2004 election fraud. With only a few thousand volunteers, monitoring some 400,000 polling and clustered precincts where some 48 million voters will elect candidates for 18,000 elective positions is a formidable task as far as the poll watchers are concerned.

Last April, Kontra Daya (counter-fraud) exposed the presence of a private printing firm inside the National Printing Office (NPO) manufacturing election paraphernalia including ERs and CoCs. The private firm had been cited in the 2004 election fraud for its alleged role in printing fake ERs and CoCs. The Comelec said that the NPO was allowed to enter into a lease agreement with accredited private printers for the production of election paraphernalia. But the poll watch group said the secret printing smacked of a wholesale election fraud similar to the “clean up” operation in 2004 in which up to 10,000 election returns were fabricated and switched for the authentic ERs kept at the Batasang Pambansa complex.

In the provinces which have been lorded over by political dynasties, warlords and private armies, election-related killings are mounting as do reports of early vote buying. A top Cabinet official offered P10,000 for each barangay captain to ensure a clean sweep by the TU ticket in the senatorial polls in his home province. In another case, a House leader was reported to be campaigning for his son's party-list group. Another Arroyo ally was reportedly distributing insurance policies; there were also accounts of teachers being bribed to foul up election results in favor of administration candidates.

In the congressional district and local elections - relatively insulated from the publicity glare that is currently focused on the senatorial race - flagrant violations of the omnibus election code are expected to take place. Here, days before the election bagmen travel often at night by choppers and vans to distribute payoff money in envelopes, bags and sacks to local officials and even election authorities. They end up in designated rendezvous like hotels, plush restaurants or in some remote bayside resort and dim-lit beer gardens where the recipients wait for the take with a promise to deliver the votes – authentic or otherwise.

Registration

During election, fraud already takes place at the first leg of this political exercise – the registration. In the May 2007 mid-term polls, a new scheme aims to ensure President Arroyo's stay in power in case a third impeachment is filed against her this year which means that she should be able to amass or at least equal the number of seats in the House that were mobilized to thwart the first two impeachments in 2005 and 2006. To meet this objective, Malacañang reportedly formed or is supporting at least 22 party-list groups accredited by the Comelec and technically these should have been disqualified. In a related case, two Comelec lawyers were exposed for asking P100,000 to P10 million in fees to ensure the accreditation and victory of party-list groups. Double registrations have been reported in Mindanao, with 100,000 double registrants alone found in Lanao del Sur province.

With the fraud machinery of the administration under close watch by citizens' groups, the state's coercive apparatus – the military and police – have been fielded as early as late last year to ensure the administration victory while pre-empting the progressive party-list bloc from regaining or adding seats in Congress. Government troops were deployed in 27 barangays of the NCR harassing residents not to vote for Bayan Muna and its allied party-list groups. For the same objectives, militarization including the setting up of more checkpoints has been stepped up in Mindanao particularly in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) thus setting the stage for what is feared to be massive fraud in the region. In early elections last week, soldiers were ordered to vote for administration candidates and pro-Arroyo party-list groups. A move to paralyze the GO campaign

machinery has been hatched with the police ordered to arrest Makati Mayor Jejomar Binay, president of the United Opposition (UNO) purportedly on the basis of a preventive suspension order issued by the Ombudsman. Earlier, BM Rep. Satur Ocampo was arrested and jailed by the police for two weeks on trumped-up criminal charges while the phone of former President Corazon Aquino, who had earlier called for Arroyo's resignation, was wiretapped.

Under Arroyo, the infrastructure of fraud has been well-entrenched apparently with the complicity of the President's allies in Congress, government agencies, local government executives, members of Comelec as well as loyalist forces in the AFP and PNP. It is this same infrastructure that was mobilized in defending Arroyo from impeachment complaints, in ensuring presidential survival amid clamors for her removal and in conducting repressive measures against the anti-Arroyo opposition camp, military rebels, militant groups and progressive party-lists. It is also the same infrastructure that backed Arroyo's agenda for constitutional change. The machinery of fraud is intrinsically linked with the contingency of presidential power.

Fraud is here to stay and it has grown far worse election after election. Reforms that would make the Comelec an independent, neutral and effective poll body have not been instituted. Reforms demanded by poll watchers and reform-minded political parties include democratizing the composition of the commission by including representatives of marginal sectors, making procedures for the whole electoral exercise transparent and ensuring the commission's independence and neutrality.

Political dynasties

Fraud is an endemic disease that has been institutionalized by a political system – the government, executive and legislative structures, political parties – that remains dominated by political dynasties. Fraud has been part of elite and patronage politics. There are about 250 political dynasties that dominate the political system, whose members occupy the country's major elective as well as appointive positions from the national, congressional down to the provincial and local levels. These are the same families who belong to the country's economic elite, some of them acting as rulemakers or patrons of politicians who conspire together to amass greater economic power. About 160 of the members of the House under the 13th Congress come from political dynasties; and there is at least one dynasty in each of the country's provinces. One wonders how a tiny elite representing only about 0.000016 percent of the country's 15 million families is able to work for the interests the Filipino masses who wallow in poverty, unemployment and human deprivation.

Fraud is corruption – it is corruption committed in the

guise of a democratic exercise. Manipulation of election results requires money which is sourced not only from the politician's own pocket but also from business, contractors, government funds, jueteng, drugs and other illegal operations. It is this fraud machinery that has increasingly determined the results of elections, and it makes election a sham. Even if farcical, elections are important to the elite to give legitimacy to their rule.

Fraud recycles the political dynasties and keeps them in power. It breeds generations of cheaters and manipulators, corrupt politicians, mediocre executives, bribe takers, absenteeism in Congress. It is part of the lifeblood of bureaucrat capitalism.

Fraud may be used to prolong patronage politics and keep family dynasties and crooked politicians in power. But it is leaving the state greatly weakened and the myth of democracy shattered. It generates cynicism among the people, true. But it also gives them a collective consciousness that sham elections and elite government are one and the same, and that fair and democratic elections can only take place under a truly democratic government.

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CenPEG is a public policy center set up shortly before the May 2004 elections to help promote people empowerment in governance and democratic representation of the marginalized poor in an elitist and patronage-driven electoral and political system. It conducts research/policy study, education and trainings on governance and people empowerment. To pursue its programs in research and education-training, CenPEG taps a wide pool of political analysts, public policy experts and academic scholars for their expertise and experience in public governance as well as in grassroots empowerment.