

Asian Perspectives on Public Opinion in the 21st Century: Using the Lens of Philippine Election 2016¹

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In today's plethora of social media networks, public opinion transforms individual and communal thought patterns and decisions into a teaching nexus. With a focus on the challenge of bringing citizenship education as the vital question of 21st century relationships among nations, public opinion on this pressing education matter needs to be heard as stated in UNESCO (1998) Citizenship Education for the 21st century.

The problem posed by citizenship education is how to blend complementary constructs such as the personal and social, the private and the public, and the national and the international. The problem can be alleviated by integrating human rights education in this new subject, civics education. In the Philippine experience, this subject was called values education, which became part of the basic education curriculum in 2003. This approach opens up new paths for education for peace, human rights, and democracy, and provides an avenue for each citizen to acquire an understanding of the issues of peace in the world, and the challenges of the globalization of economic, environmental, and cultural problems.

Historically, Asia, as the largest continent, has been the birthplace of civilizations and religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism (or Daoism), Jainism,

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Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, that provide foundational answers and possibilities to this task of citizenship education. In fact, such education is marked more by a conception of moral virtues and personal values than that of civic duties and public values (Lee, 2009). And the test of this education is seen in political elections following the adage that the people deserve the government they choose. When an election is held—an open arena of public opinion – each citizen is taught to understand that peace, human rights, and democracy are not words but life situations that must be discerned together with an elected leader. Every election is an actual civics education for all voters.

This essay is a brief summary of what happened in the Philippines in May 2016 which produced a Filipino President—Rodrigo Duterte, popular not only in local media but also in the ASEAN/Asian and world arena. The Asian perspectives are derived from the critique that is proposed in the exposition. All the five presidential candidates, or candidates, presented their political platforms through brief and engaging captions. The sequence follows the official ballot results from the least votes to the highest votes.

The late Senator Miriam Santiago's platform was: Jail for wrongdoers. As a presidential candidate, she was the only seasoned judicial-executive-legislative candidate—she had hopped the three branches of government. At the very start, she harped on a looming probability that, due to her deteriorating health, endorsing vice-presidential candidate Bongbong Marcos (the dictator's son) to regain power is a better option. And Marcos' rise in the election surveys made the fight for the vice presidency as important as the presidency. From the vantage point of the sitting administration—an Aquino, it would be ironic if Marcos held the second-highest government post during the 30th Anniversary of the People Power Revolution, as it would underline the failure of the “proverbial Edsa system” and how its promise was strangled by elite politics (Bello, 2016). In fact, her priority was to build new jails for the guilty PDAF (Priority Development Acceleration Fund or “pork barrel”) legislators, which was a declaration of war on all legislative candidates. She opened the “Pandora's box” of the first and only dictatorship in Philippine history and ignited a version of how the Marcos' revanchists would like to rewrite a defeated past

today. The Asian perspective applicable here is history. A lasting peace has to follow history's unperturbed way; history is the ally of peace. As martial law has destroyed Filipino sensibilities of democracy brought in by the colonial Americans, the War in the Pacific in the 1940s likewise was also an annexed world war of the West. Moreover, not a few Asian nations have been colonies of the West since the discovery of the New World after the Renaissance period. Until today, this political past has opened Asian people to undue economic abuse and exploitation and the source of conflicts in the region. This is far from Asia's traditional roots of a peaceful region.

Vice-President's Jejomar Binay's electoral platform was: Decisive Leadership. Unfortunately, his pending plunder and graft cases put two pillars of Peace, i.e., Truth and Justice in question. Since being appointed as OIC (Officer-in-charge) of Makati in 1986 (after EDSA People Power), Binay never lost in any of the past nine local elections. His political strategy rests on realignment as gauged by the proliferation of sister-cities/municipalities with the premier city of Makati. This gave new richer opportunities and a bright potential for power. The objective of this is victory at the polls and that this power has to be shared with no one (Lumauig, 2016). The real problem here is discrimination—he, his wife, and his children have alternately held power in the executive and legislative arena for almost four decades (his wife was a one-term former mayor, his lawyer-daughter is the sitting Makati mayor, his eldest daughter is a sitting senator, while his only son was the recent former mayor, suspended for graft). Immediately, after his term of office as VP, he filed bail to prepare his long battle for the court cases. The Asian perspective applicable here is politics. Realignment and discrimination are enemies of democracy. Eventually, political power destroys the perpetrators themselves whether they take the form of monarchies, federal states, dependent territories, and which are present in the region. Asia needs a return to the basic family orientation to be relevant in the 21st century; this provides for the other two pillars of peace to thrive, i.e., Freedom and Charity. These are the treasured gifts of Asians for the future.

Senator Grace Poe's platform was: *Gobyernong may Puso (Governing with a Heart)*. In recent election history, she has garnered the highest number of votes—20.3 million, as Top 1 senator since 1988, a neophyte candidate and an Independent. Her fairy-tale story line became part of the Supreme Court's script as she was declared qualified to run, with a vote of 9-6, on the legality behind her citizenship and residency qualifications. But the real election issue faced by Senator Poe revolved on her decision to acquire American citizenship, even if only for a few years, which leads to the second issue—on experience. Being President requires serious intention, competence and trustworthiness. Experience is vital in running any organization, especially in government. Moreover, no Independent presidential candidate has ever won a national election in Philippine history, even in the worst conditions, like in the 1986 snap election. She has not turned the tide of Philippine partisan politics. She is now in the Senate to finish her next 3-year term, and the Supreme Court belatedly ruled that her citizenship and residency qualifications are binding. Experience is a must. The Asian Perspective applicable here is economy. The 50th anniversary of the ASEAN integration in 2017, as a local part of Asia, is a challenge to experience the real extent of integration. The China-India Experience as the leading Asian economies can serve as a benchmark for development in the region. Before the discovery of the New World, a vibrant Asia dictated the world economy; after 500 years, the pendulum of economic change turns back to where it started.

Senator Mar Roxas' electoral platform was: *Sustain daang matuwid (Straight Road)*. Applying epistemological realism, Philippines is an archipelago composed of 7,107 islands; so daang matuwid (straight road) does not assume a historical/ethnological sense; we need bridges—7,106 to “connect” our islands. Sociologically, Filipinos think cyclically (by connections) not linearly (by chronology). Thus, even the bamboo—a national symbol, is never perfectly straight—it bends but never breaks. He must have learned that the Aquino administration's 4Ps (the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino—Alleviating the Filipino Family Program) was a big and sure help for our poor to cross even one step over the poverty line. As argued by a columnist (David, 2015), the mantra “if there's no corrupt, there are no

poor” of President Noynoy in June 2010 was not congruent with the UN study of August 2012 which counters it “if there’s no poor, good governance takes care of itself.” What is glaring in more recent analyses is that higher wealth and economy of a country lead to a better society, which is the path, that ASEAN integration is threading to at present. The Asian Perspective applicable here is geography—human and physical. Transparent governance is the prize, not price, of growth; poverty, in all its forms, is the culprit to society’s woes. While Asia is witness to the still glaring disparity between the rich and the poor, educational reforms and strong partnerships (ASEAN experience) provide Asians with more opportunities to better life conditions. Connections, in varied and multiple ways, are keys to Asian growth.

And last but not the least, Mayor Duterte’s platform was: I deliver on promises. Mayor Duterte, of the largest city of Davao, is an ambivalent, publicly-boastful politician con criminal (as he publicly proclaims—if necessity warrants, a President must be ready to die or allow judicial killing as leverage to lawlessness). If the 2016 election was a card game, he was the Joker card. First, he allowed the Commission on Elections to decide on his fate as a candidate after months of playing with the media about whether he would or would not file his Certificate Of Candidacy. Second, as the country’s first-ever president from Mindanao (the second largest and southernmost major island in the Philippines), we have not heard anything enthusiastic that change has come from “that part of the country”—in fact, the terrorist group Abu Sayyaf has not abated its presence in Mindanao. A third and disturbing question is his promise to rid the country of corruption, crime and illegal drugs in three to six months whereas he is in power for six years. And this is where President Duterte thrives—he is blown away by the “euphoric” change built from the age-long premise that Mindanao is the “Land of Promise.” So he excites with his bags of surprises through impromptu speeches, controversial pronouncements and banter of “crass remarks.” Then a lame excuse or apology turns the issue favorable to his side. Among the presidentiables, his message was a direct invitation for an engaged risk with a calculated success. The positive outcome of the preliminary talks with the leaders of the

Filipino Communists (Communist Party of the Philippines, CPP- New People Army, NPA) brings the risk factor to a manageable level after previous efforts in the last two administrations. However, the issue of Extra-Judicial Killings (EJK) of drug addicts/pushers/criminals covers the success of the “war on drugs” as lawlessness and disrespect of human rights. For Duterte, these things need to happen as long as the almost 16 million Filipinos who voted for him do not cry foul. But how can these things happen? He presents both risk and success in cold facts. His message is the same story of what an ordinary overseas Filipino worker (OFW) goes through in leaving a wife, family and friends for a job abroad—risk one’s security to have a bit of success in life—the bitter for the better. The Asian Perspective applicable here is cultural. As the largest continent, risk and success, which every family goes through, go hand in hand. We Filipinos face an unclear future, like our leader. But if we don’t face this reality we may miss the opportunity for the promise of real change. Likewise, Asia as the center of the 21st century must allow a new breed of leaders to thrive, leaders who can deliver on real promises—coming from ordinary dreams and hopes. As a promise, we hope that this risk may eventually become our enduring success.

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