

The High Cost of Running for Public Office in the Philippines

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Introduction

On May 9, 2022, a synchronized national and local election will occur in the Philippines. The country will vote for 18,180 elective seats from the President to municipal councilors. All elections are crucial. In the Philippines, it will determine the country's policies, programs, and quality of governance for the next six years. The 1987 constitution provides for a six-year, single term for the Office of the President. In the 2022 elections, the people will decide, in a first-past-the-post system, who the 17th president of the Republic will be. The electoral outcome of the 2022 national elections is affected by the kind of electoral system and process the Philippines has. This article has two aims. One is to explore the causes of the high cost of campaign finance which is the two-pronged problem of a lack of programmatic political parties and the persistence of political dynasties in the Philippines. The second is to illustrate the challenges faced by the Philippines' election management body tasked to provide regulatory oversight on campaign finance issues.

The Philippines continues to hold regular and free elections, meeting the minimum standards of electoral integrity. However, one lingering issue that needs to be addressed is electoral quality. The high cost of running for public office in the Philippines limits the kinds of individuals who can even entertain the idea of serving in an elected office. Coupled with the low institutionalization of political parties, access to political power is limited to the political and economic elite. As a result, selecting who can serve in elected positions draws a limited number of individuals. Moreover, public calls for some individuals to run for President are met with hesitancy, such as in Vice-President Leonor Robredo's case because of campaign finance issues.

In the 2022 elections, the frontrunner among the presidential candidates is Ferdinand Marcos Jr., Son of the country's former President, who ruled with an iron hand and extended his presidential term for 20 years with the declaration of martial law in 1972. It is not lost on the public that after 50 years since martial law was declared, the namesake of the architect of martial law might become the next President. Like many other candidates, Marcos comes from a political dynasty. These are political clans and families that control the politics at the provincial, city, and municipal levels. A 2016 study on Philippine political dynasties showed that 70% of the members of the House of Representatives came from political dynasties.¹ Their incumbency advantage includes access to state resources and dispensing of patronage. Instead of strong institutions that can deliver public goods, a cycle of dependency involves material resources dispensed by those in power to their constituents for political purposes.

National Posts	Local Posts
President	253 legislative district representatives
Vice-President	81 governors
12 Senators	81 vice governors
63 Party List Representatives	782 provincial board members
	146 city mayors
	146 city vice mayors
	1650 city councilors
	1,488 municipal mayors
	1,488 municipal vice mayors
	11,908 municipal councilors
	40 Bangsamoro Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) party representatives
	32 BARMM parliamentary district representatives
	8 BARMM reserved seats and sectoral representatives

Source: Commission on Elections (COMELEC) and Rappler News

Political Parties and the Persistence of Dynasties

With political dynasties and poor political party institutionalization, the cost of running for public office will remain inaccessible and limited to a few. According to a known Filipino political campaign strategist, it costs Php 5 billion (USD 90 million) to run for the President's office.² In 2019, on average, Senatorial candidates spent Php 190 million (USD 3.6 million) on political advertisements.³ Television campaign advertisements constitute the "air war" among candidates. Expenditure at the community level constitutes the "ground war." These include pay-offs to local community leaders to ensure support, dole-outs of goods, and money to constituents. Vote-buying continues to be a problem in the Philippines. In a country where the per capita income is USD 3,300, these costs are unimaginable and out of reach for most Filipinos, including the Philippine President. A Philippine president has a monthly salary of Php 415,728 (USD 8,000).⁴ The high cost to run for public office in the Philippines is a campaign finance issue that everyone is aware of but remains unabated.

The absence of genuine programmatic political parties drives campaign costs because there is a need to dispense patronage goods and fund a political machine.⁵ Often political parties are headed by those who can offer funding and resources to the rest of their members. Party platforms and ideals might exist ad hoc, mainly for temporary campaign purposes. Long-term party programming does not exist, and parties become dormant when not an election season. Party candidate selection is not subject to internal rules and procedures or a legal nomination process. Often, party candidate selection will revolve around allied political families and clans or allied famous personalities.

Political families and clans that control the legislative branch of government are composed of dynasties. That political dynasties occupy 70% of the seats in the House of Representatives is only part of the problem. The same political dynasties usually control local government units of the districts they represent.⁶ It is not uncommon to find the provincial governorship, the mayoral and councilor positions

occupied by members of the same family. To stay in power, a combination of personalistic politics and a political machine that thrives on giving dole-outs, both in cash and in-kind, drives the cost of running for public office. The "supply-side" of vote-buying as campaign spending is typically dynastic families who keep communities dependent on dole-outs rather than institutionalized public delivery of services.

Issues on Election Management and Regulatory Oversight

In the Philippines, the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) is the election management body tasked by the constitution to administer and adjudicate all matters related to the electoral process. It is an independent constitutional commission with a mandate to be independent and fair in overseeing the electoral contest. In 2009, a consortium of election reform groups advocated for the commission to address campaign finance issues.⁷ As a result, the COMELEC created a Campaign Finance Unit in 2012, later named Campaign Finance Office. The mandate of this office includes monitoring fund-raising and spending activities of candidates and parties, receiving the reports and statements of expenditure of candidates, developing and managing a recording system for all statements of campaign expenditure reports, publish and make available to the public the digitized information on campaign spending, determine compliance by the candidates and coordinate with other departments for the prosecution of violators, collection of fines, and imposition of perpetual disqualification.

Ten years since its creation, the campaign finance office of the COMELEC has not curbed the two-pronged problem in campaign finance, high campaign expenditure, and transparency in campaign contribution. First, where do candidates get their funds for the exorbitant campaign spending? Even with the law that puts a cap on election expenditure for candidates, candidates often under-declared their campaign expenses. There is also no cap on the amount candidates receive from individuals or companies as campaign contributions. In addition, COMELEC suffers from capacity issues to properly enforce campaign finance rules. Part of the challenge is to ensure that COMELEC's campaign finance office has the experts to monitor, audit, and investigate campaign finance reports filed by candidates. In addition, the commission needs to hire accounting and certified fraud examiners to provide oversight and enforcement effectively.

The problem of campaign finance was front and center in one of the public presidential candidate debates. Manila Mayor Francisco Domagoso Moreno, who is running for President, admitted that he kept 50 million pesos (USD 1 million) of unspent campaign funds in 2016 when he tried but failed to win a Senate seat.⁸ While Moreno did not break any campaign finance rules, it still goes against campaign finance principles. Campaign finance is supposed to promote fair political competition by monitoring expenditures and contributions to control and temper money's influence over policies and politics.⁹

A country's election management body should lead in all matters related to the electoral process. With the highly personality-driven politics in the Philippines, the way to win elections is to use a political machine that has a robust clientelistic relationship with the candidate. An exchange of money, favors, or goods for votes ensues. The lack of disclosure on funding sources, campaign spending, and types of campaign spending is problematic given new modes of campaign spending on the digital platform. In the 2016 and the 2022 elections, candidates have been using social media for negative campaigning. Some candidates allegedly fund troll farms to sow disinformation through social media against rival candidates. Election management bodies need to enforce rules and guidelines in a highly contested electoral arena.

Conclusion

High campaign spending at the national and local elections co-exists with other persistent political problems in the Philippines. Poor party development and dynastic domination of political families persist due to the incumbency advantage that provides continuous access to state resources. Instead of delivering public goods, dynastic families continue to create a dependent relationship with their constituents. Access to state resources will remain unabated, and corruption will prevail if oversight institutions are weakened and unable to deliver their mandate.

A silver lining and hopeful sign that belatedly evolved in the 2022 election campaign is the volunteerism that became apparent in the campaign of Vice-President Leni Robredo. Robredo was hesitant to run for higher office because she was aware of the need to generate campaign funds. Supporters of Robredo donated campaign materials, provided food and transportation for campaign sorties, and with their resources, spent on feeding programs in poor urban and rural communities. While it might include business establishments, these supporters are often from middle-income families and individuals. Campaign rallies of Robredo are well attended, with artists lending their time and talent for free to show support and solidarity. The level of volunteerism by the Robredo supporters is unprecedented in Philippine politics.

One implication to consider is the future of democracy in the region. According to the Freedom House Report 2022, autocratic norms and alliances are happening globally.¹⁰ Autocratic alliances can take the form of campaign finance assistance to a presidential candidate without a substantial reform or democratic agenda. In addition, some Philippine analysts have suggested the possibility of external resource mobilization with some presidential candidates receiving money from other governments in exchange for influence and the protection of their interests.¹¹ All the more pressing is the need to build a strong campaign finance unit within the election commission to address campaign finance issues, review existing laws, and effectively provide oversight on campaign expenditures and contributions.

¹ Jemma Purdey, Teresa S Encarnacion Tadem & Eduardo C Tadem. 2016. Political dynasties in the Philippines, South East Asia Research, 24:3, 328-340, DOI: 10.1177/0967828X16659730

² See ANC Interview of Lito Banayo. July 14, 2021. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=edXoN3C7QHQ>

³ See <https://www.rappler.com/nation/elections/233081-senate-candidates-statement-contributions-expenses/>

⁴ Source: <https://www.dbm.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Manual-on-PCC-Chapter-5.pdf>

⁵ For more: <https://th.boell.org/en/2021/10/28/coalitions-and-candidates-2022-philippine-elections>

⁶ Jemma Purdey, Teresa S Encarnacion Tadem & Eduardo C Tadem. 2016. Political dynasties in the Philippines, South East Asia Research, 24:3, 328-340, DOI: 10.1177/0967828X16659730

⁷ See: <https://pcij.org/article/3302/pcij-pera-at-pulitika-launch-br2-books-on-money-politics-3>

⁸ <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2022/01/23/2155872/moreno-admits-keeping-p50-million-excess-campaign-funds-2016>

⁹ See: <https://aceproject.org/ace-en/focus/campaign-finance/onePage>

¹⁰ For more: https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/FIW_2022_PDF_Booklet_Digital_Final_Web.pdf

¹¹ See: <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/politics/article/3169385/philippine-presidential-election-envoy-says-china-has-no>