

## **PHILIPPINE ELECTIONS TAINTED DESPITE CITIZENS' WATCH**

THE Philippines held elections for its bicameral legislature as well as local government officials last May 14 under the watch of the mass media, Philippine civil society groups, and foreign monitoring teams. But the elections seem to have been tainted by allegations of disenfranchisement, ballot-box snatching, fraud and violence.

An indication of the relative independence of the mass media, whose coverage of the campaign and the elections has provided the citizenry information on the candidates and developments on both election day and after, the incidents of violence, fraud and disenfranchisement have been widely reported by the country's newspapers and broadcast networks. But as if to underline the uneasy relationship between the media and the government, the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) has ordered the media to halt the "quick counts" the TV networks were doing.

Private quick counts have been a feature of Philippine elections since the 1950s, when a citizens' groups called the National Movement for Free Elections first did its own count as an antidote to fraud. The official count in the Philippines then and now is so slow—the votes are tallied by hand as part of a complicated process that starts at the polling precincts and ends in the House of Representatives-- the official results are expected only weeks after election day. Efforts at computerization have so far foundered on allegations of corruption and overpricing, with the result that the tally is still conducted by hand by public school teachers.

Analysts say the citizen counts have become especially crucial in the 2007 elections, primarily because the results could decide whether Mrs. Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, about whose legitimacy some 70 percent of Filipinos have doubts, can be impeached later this year. Mrs. Arroyo has survived two impeachment attempts—one in 2005 and another last year, both on charges of violating the Constitution, corruption and human rights violations-- by the opposition primarily because of her control over the House of Representatives where an impeachment complaint must be submitted. (The Upper House, or Senate, would serve as the impeachment court once it receives the complaint from the House.) Her keeping control of the House after these elections would assure that a third attempt to impeach her would fail.

The Comelec order, together with a host of other decisions it has made, has been cited by opposition and other critics as unconstitutional, since it would violate the Constitutional protection the press enjoys, and as an indication as well of administration determination to cheat, as the long official count drags on.

They have reason to worry. The official Comelec count for the Senate elections as of May 17, or three days after election day, was laboriously plodding into the thousands. The TV networks' counts were already past the millions. The difference provides the window of opportunity for election operators to manipulate the count as the weeks drag on, and to subvert the people's will.

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