

Election Day: Philippines **By Cleo Calimbahin**

Last May 14, 2007, all Philippine public schools were converted as polling precincts for the day. As early as 6:00 a.m., public school teachers were busy preparing the classrooms, making do with what they have to turn the place into a decent voting place for an estimated 68 million voters. These same public school teachers were up till midnight the night before to receive election materials and election paraphernalia from the City Treasurer in their respective municipal halls.

I was fortunate to be in the Philippines during election season. I was both a legitimate voter and an accredited “Foreign Observer” by the Commission on Elections. My plan on Election Day was to observe the opening of the polling precinct where I was to vote then proceed to observe elections in other precincts throughout, Metro Manila.

I was in the San Juan voting precinct by 7:00 am. Voting officially begins at 7:30. The first thing I found out, the official voter’s list did not have my name. After inquiring from members of the Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PPCRV), my precinct number was found and I was able to vote. Teachers were still putting things in order but voters have started trickling in. As members of the board of election inspectors, the teachers manning the polling precinct were very helpful, even offering from their own purse, a tissue paper for voters to wipe off the excess indelible ink left on their finger. This they did not have to do. I thought about all these underpaid public teachers in the Philippines, providing an unenviable service during election-day. Many of the teachers I saw were young, in their early twenties. I asked them if this was their first time to serve as members of the Board of Election Inspectors. Most said this was their second time. Often they apologized for having the election manual right beside them as they go about the myriad procedures that come with having a completely manual election process. Observing the process was, to say the least, painful.

From San Juan, I went to Makati to meet with other members of my foreign observation team. I was temporarily part of the International Foundation for Elections Systems observation group. Our group went around Metro Manila covering mostly urban poor communities and observed how the Commission on Elections was running their Press Room during election-day.

The 2007 election was the first-time foreign observers were allowed to go inside the polling precincts and observe up-close the entire process. Our group chose several precincts in Makati, Pasay, Maharlika-Taguig and Navotas. In some cases, we received information that goons might disrupt the election process in these areas. Our group observed many election irregularities and election-day violations. Voting precincts were over-crowded with voters and party “watchers” who were there to ensure their candidate’s votes were counted. By mid-morning, these precincts were very hot, lacked proper ventilation and with no clear entrances and exits, very disorderly too. There were times when tempers rose and voices were raised when voters are unable to find their

names in the voter's list or when suspected illegal voters, voters not registered in the precinct, would try to vote for the candidate who paid for their "services." As the day wore on, the atmosphere became tense in the polling precincts. Amid this tense atmosphere, confusion, and chaos I found myself moved by the people around me. There was a man on crutches trying to get to the third floor of the school building to cast his vote. Old people slowly made their way up staircases assisted by a young relative. I witnessed how public school teachers tried their best to remain impartial and patient despite the limitations of the physical conditions they were in. Many offered me their seats when they saw that I was an accredited observer. I found myself beside "watchers" offering me their meager packed lunch. I was caught off-guard by their constant invitation to share the simple meals they had. "Kain tayo" ("let's eat"), they said as they motioned with their hand to share with me their rice and viand.

I stayed in a polling precinct in Pasay from 8:00 pm to 10:30 pm for the counting, sealing and documentation of the votes. The ballot boxes were physically brought by the teachers serving as Board of Election Inspectors in the Canvassing Area at the Cuneta Astrodome. By the time all the documents and ballot boxes were turned over, it was 3:00 a.m. The young teachers were clearly exhausted from the ordeal. These young teachers were harassed during the counting by some of the watchers and goons of local politicians. I cannot help but feel sorry for the dangerous and thankless job that they did. I congratulated the teachers for finishing their task. They smiled, sighed, and wearily walked away.

This was a typical election day in the Philippines. Elections in the Philippines need to be re-assessed. When senatorial candidates spend as much as three million dollars for their campaign in a country where forty percent of the population live on less than two dollars a day, weak institutions and systemic problems need to be addressed.

The Commission on Elections (COMELEC) is one such institution that badly needs reforms and modernization. With a top COMELEC official implicated in a 2004 election scandal involving the manipulation of votes in favor of the incumbent president and with a former chair of the COMELEC forced to go on leave due to a corruption scandal involving \$100 million dollar kickback, there is a lot of unresolved issues and unanswered questions. An impartial commission mandated to count the votes cannot afford to have all these lingering unresolved cases that cast a doubt on the integrity of elections in the Philippines.

I will never forget my election-day experience in the Philippines. I am grateful for the support given to me by the Scott Kloeck-Jenson Fellowship. The travel grant allowed me to see first-hand so many facets of Election Day in the Philippines. My analysis for my dissertation can only be informed by what I witnessed.