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Survival Of The Cheatest

SACRAMENTO, CALIF., May 11 (PinoyGlobal) - With President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's approval ratings plummeting like balls of fire into the Pacific Ocean, presidential wannabes are sprinting to the starting line of the 2010 presidential derby. Assuming that Gloria is not going to declare martial law -- which a lot of people say she might -- it's going to be rough and tumble politics in a crowded field.

Election cheating has been around since the Philippines adapted the democratic system of government after gaining independence from Uncle Sam in 1946. In my column, "It's 'Open Season' Again" (January 26, 2007), I said: "I remember in the 1950's, the term 'flying voter' became the buzzword during elections. A 'flying voter' is a person who has the ability to 'fly' -- like a bird -- from one precinct to another to vote for the same candidate; thus, giving the candidate a numerical edge over his opponent. Mathematically, whoever has the most 'flying voters' would have a better chance of winning."

In some instances, candidates provide some sort of "home service," that is, they would send someone to your house and have you fill out the ballot in favor of their candidates. In some cases, ballot boxes were hijacked and replaced with ballot boxes containing ballots favoring certain candidates. And in other cases, particularly in remote barrios, armed goons were used to intimidate the voters to vote for their candidates. It was not uncommon for a precinct to show 100% vote for a certain candidate. Another method used was vote-buying. The poor were always fair game. The three G's -- guns, goons and gold -- were the most effective way to win an election. As someone once said, "There were

no losers in an election, only the winners and those who were cheated."

After the People Power Revolution of 1986, a new system of election cheating evolved. Known as "dagdag-bawas" -- add and subtract -- it involves a cunning method of tallying the votes by adding a number of votes to a candidate and subtracting the exact number of votes from his or her opponent. However, this kind of cheating involves the collusion of Commission on Elections (COMELEC) officials.

During the presidential elections in 2004, the celebrated "Hello Garci" election cheating was exposed. It was alleged that the taped wiretapped conversations between President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and COMELEC official Virgilio "Garci" Garcillano were proof that fraud was committed to rig the election results in favor of Gloria's reelection.

Impeachment was filed in Congress against Gloria. However, Gloria survived the impeachment. But the "Hello Garci" scandal cracked COMELEC's façade as an independent government body.

It was also during the 2004 elections that another scandal surfaced -- the P1.7 billion bidding scam of the Automated Election System (AES) awarded to Mega Pacific Consortium. It was alleged that three COMELEC officials -- then Chairman Benjamin Abalos and members Florentino Tuazon and Resurreccion Borra -- were involved in the anomaly. Corruption charges were filed against them in the Ombudsman's Office but the Ombudsman, to date, has not made any progress in its investigation. However, the

Supreme Court ruled the contract null and void due to irregularities in the bidding process.

This year, COMELEC is once again pursuing the automation project. However, with the 2010 elections just a year away, COMELEC has yet to award the whopping P11.3 billion AES contract. Recently, the bidding process hit a snag when the seven consortiums vying for the contract failed the eligibility requirements. I wonder what the “eligibility requirements” included? A “padrino” perhaps?

According to Rick Bahague, the National Coordinator of the Computer Professionals’ Union (CPU), “The initial result of CPU’s investigation in the bidding process of COMELEC revealed that the COMELEC is dealing with questionable and unreliable vendors.” He said, “The COMELEC is even more subjected to a triple degree of difficulty to win the trust of Filipino people especially on its effort to automate the national election in 2010.”

But COMELEC officials said that the situation is not hopeless and that a contract could be negotiated with a provider as a “last recourse” to install 80,000 automation machines in time for the 2010 elections.

And this is where the problems would begin. First, a “negotiated contract” implies a “sole bid process” in which only one bidder is selected. This reminds me of the controversial ZTE-NBN contract exposed by Jun Lozada. A “negotiated contract” circumvents the competitive “multiple bid process” in which two or more bidders would compete for the contract primarily based on a low-bid rule. And since there is no competition, a “negotiated contract” is vulnerable to overbidding. Oftentimes overbidding is done in order to accommodate under-the-table commissions -- or “tongpats”

-- to influence peddlers and corrupt government officials. In the end, the “negotiated contract” could increase the contract amount to as much as twice its cost.

The second -- and more serious -- problem would be the integrity and accuracy of AES. In a press release issued by CPU, it says: “Cheating and fraud in the 2010 election will be swift and simple for the likes of ‘Garci’ through the automated election system (AES) the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) is striving to implement. In 2010, ‘Garci’ will return and will be more sophisticated in his cheating schemes with his expertise in computer technology. ‘Garci’ will operate far better than the fraud he performed last 2004 national election.”

Indeed, if AES is going to be hastily implemented in 2010, an electronic “dagdag-bawas” cheating scheme which might have been surreptitiously programmed in the system will virtually be impossible to detect. There would not be enough time to fully test the system and incorporate all the necessary verification and security routines in the system to ensure that data integrity is maintained. As computer professionals would say, “Garbage In, Garbage Out,” the system is only as good as the input. It is said that most computer systems work, it’s people who don’t make them work. And that is the danger of a computer system that doesn’t have all the bells and whistles installed to prevent it from being tampered.

If COMELEC pushes through with AES in 2010, the next President may not necessarily be the fittest, but the cheatest. Indeed, the 2010 elections could very well be the survival of the cheatest.