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Is Villar Buying the Presidency?

SACRAMENTO, CALIF., Feb. 09 (PinoyGlobal) - The official start of the 2010 elections has just begun and presidential candidate Sen. Manny Villar has already spent more than P540 million of his own money in television and radio advertising. That is just for starters.

Villar is pursuing his dream of becoming President with steely determination backed by a war chest reputed to be around P7 billion. His wife, Congresswoman Cynthia Villar, once said that “they have never lost an election and they certainly have no intention of losing this one.” Does that mean that Villar is going to “buy the presidency” at any cost if that’s what it would take to win?

With a net worth of US\$940 million (P43 billion), Villar has what it takes to buy the presidency. He can spend another P10 billion on top of the P7 billion and it wouldn’t hurt him a bit. He can buy television and radio advertisement slots as well as billboards along major highways in every province and that would make him a popular household name just like “Coke” and “Pepsi.”

It is no wonder then that the latest poll surveys show Villar and Sen. Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino III in statistical dead heat. And if the elections were held today, the race would end in a photo finish.

One thing that the poll surveys proved is that advertising works. Selling one’s self is no different from selling a product. Saturate the market with advertisement and, rest

assured, the product will sell.

But marketing is only one aspect of winning an election, particularly in the Philippines. In addition to marketing, there are several factors that would determine the outcome of the elections. But let’s talk about the three most important factors: organization, command votes and, most importantly, lots and lots of money.

Political machine

Villar has transformed the Nacionalista Party (NP) into the most efficient political machine in the country today. By having himself elected as the party’s President, he retains total control of the party’s political machinery. Needless to say, Villar spent a lot of money to build a well-oiled political machine. The NP announced a few weeks ago that it will organize a million-strong volunteer force to make sure that his votes are “protected” during the elections. But it’s not cheap to maintain an efficient volunteer organization. The volunteers have to be housed, fed, trained, transported, and paid, if necessary. Assuming that Villar is going to spend at least P1,000 per volunteer, his total cost for maintaining the volunteer force would be a minimum of P1 billion. That’s a lot of moolah.

Command votes

“Command vote” is a key element in politics in the Philippines where political patronage is a way of life. A case in

point is the command vote of the Iglesia Ni Cristo (INC) where the church's Supreme Leader requires the church members to vote for a particular candidate as a "manifestation of religious unity." It is no wonder then that a majority of politicians do what they can to get the endorsement of the Supreme Leader.

Another influential religious leader is Pastor Apollo C. Quiboloy, the founder of the Kingdom of Jesus Christ which is reputed to have six million members. A few days ago, politicians trekked to Pastor Q's annual thanksgiving event to seek his "blessings." Three presidential candidates -- Manny Villar, Gilbert Teodoro, and Bro. Eddie Villanueva -- were among those who paid homage to Pastor Q.

In addition to religious leaders, warlords and political dynasties also wield political power in their bailiwicks. There are about 65 political dynasties in the country and countless warlords of which a large number are in Mindanao. Defense Secretary Norberto Gonzales has reported that there are 132 private armies controlled by warlords and political leaders. Whoever gets the support of these warlords and political leaders would have an edge in winning the presidency. But it would also cost a lot of money.

Buying the presidency

To run a successful presidential campaign requires a huge war chest, anywhere from P2 billion to 5 billion. A good portion of that would be used to pay the warlords and political dynasties to get their command votes. In addition, vote-buying is also prevalent in presidential campaigns where money is paid directly to voters through the candidates' ground operatives.

And to make sure that the candidates' votes aren't "stolen" during the canvassing, Commission on Elections (Comelec) officials are bribed to manipulate the numbers. The most common election-cheating system is "dagdag-bawas" (add-subtract) where numbers are manipulated in favor of candidates who pay the price. The notorious "Hello Garci" election cheating scandal which allegedly favored President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo to win the 2004 elections was an example of "dagdag-bawas" election cheating involving the

collusion of Comelec officials. Without their "cooperation," this form of cheating couldn't happen.

Villar-Arroyo unholy alliance

The other day, columnist Rey Arcilla in his column, "Ominous," wrote: "Text message of the week, the veracity of which I do not guarantee: 'Now the cat's out of the bag... Manny Villar is the secret candidate of GMA... Mike Arroyo himself met with Villar at the house of Mike Defensor last Jan. 7... Villar secretly agreed to make GMA as Speaker of the House and protect her should Villar win the presidency... Villar agreed to GMA's offer of massive logistical support in GMA's commissioners in the Comelec who will assure Villar's victory.'" This would lend credence to Noynoy's apprehension that Villar and Gloria have formed an "unholy alliance."

I believe this to be true because Gloria's anointed candidate, Gilbert "Gibo" Teodoro, is having a hard time getting popular support. With an anemic 5% rating in recent poll surveys, there is no way that Gibo could overcome Noynoy or Villar. And with Villar's surge in the surveys, it makes sense that Gloria would abandon Teodoro's "sinking ship" and throw her support -- albeit secretly -- and resources behind Villar.

Liberal Party campaign manager, Florencio Abad Jr., hit the nail on the head when he said, "With the 2010 presidential election shaping up as a two-horse race between Villar and Aquino, it is inevitable that Ms Arroyo will throw her lot with Villar." With Gloria getting solidly behind Villar, the prospect of a repeat of the massive election cheating in 2004 engineered by the "Garci boys" is very real. Most of the "Garci boys" are still in the Comelec, most of whom were promoted to more powerful positions as "rewards" for their invaluable service to Gloria in 2004.

Cynthia Villar's vow that "they have no intention of losing this one" could be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Unless a strong "moral force" emerges in the next 90 days prior to the elections, the regime of Gloria could extend under a plutocratic Villar presidency.