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Parties and Accountability in the Philippines

Gabriella R. Montinola

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Parties and Accountability in the Philippines*

Gabriella R. Montinola (bio)

On 11 May 1998, in the second set of general elections since Philippine democracy was restored in 1986, 28 million voters went to the polls to

choose a president, a vice-president, 12 senators, over 200 members of the House of Representatives, and more than 17,000 local officials. It would not be difficult to portray these elections as something of a circus, and the Philippine and Western media did not fail to capture their peculiar moments. Two politicians serving life sentences campaigned for high office from prison—and won. Many professional actors and athletes with little or no political experience ran for office. One successful candidate for the Senate, a basketball star, promised anxious followers that, if elected, he would not allow his senatorial duties to interfere with his game. Another victorious senatorial candidate took a starring role in a television situation comedy to heighten his public profile.

The 11 candidates for president included Imelda Marcos, widow of Ferdinand Marcos, who ruled the Philippines as a dictator from 1972 to 1986. Mrs. Marcos, who was convicted of corruption in 1993 but has since been free on bail and engaged in an interminable appeals process, offered the voters an especially enticing inducement. She promised that, if elected, she would spend her late husband's money—an ill-gotten fortune that Mrs. Marcos has spent over a decade denying she possesses—on bolstering the nation's economy. In the end, however, the presidential contest was won handily by Joseph "Erap" Estrada, a former actor who had served as vice-president under outgoing president Fidel Ramos. **[End Page 126]**

Despite its less elevated moments, the campaign culminated in the freest, fairest, and least violent election in Philippine history, defying widespread expectations of extensive fraud and bloodletting. Given the system of vote-counting, in which votes from over 174,000 precincts are recorded and tallied by hand, ample room for cheating exists. *Dagdag-bawas* ("add-subtract"), a method popular among wealthy candidates that involves bribing electoral commission workers engaged in tallying votes at the provincial level as the results slowly make their way from the local precincts to Manila, was expected to mar the 1998 election. But the high correlation between the official vote count of the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) and the counts of such reputable nongovernmental

organizations (NGOs) as the National Citizens' Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL), which carried out parallel vote tabulations, and Social Weather Stations (SWS), which conducted exit polling, indicates that fraud was not as extensive as in past contests.¹ Political violence also dropped to a historic low, with the number of political murders falling substantially below the level posted in the 1995 midterm elections. The relatively successful conduct of the May 1998 vote owes much to the vigilance of the media, NGOs such as NAMFREL and SWS, and groups of concerned citizens engaged in poll-watching. It was also due to the strong commitment of President Ramos to open and peaceful balloting.

The Elections as a Turning Point

Voting patterns in 1998 represented a substantial (and potentially momentous) departure from those of the past. The Philippines is inhabited by some nine major geographically concentrated ethnolinguistic groups (as well as numerous smaller groupings), and candidates have traditionally crafted their electoral alliances along explicitly ethnolinguistic lines.² Victorious presidential candidate Estrada, however, targeted the lower classes nationwide. He vowed to narrow the yawning gap between rich and poor. His campaign posters were emblazoned with a memorable rhyme that encapsulated his campaign message perfectly: "*Erap para sa mahirap*" ("Erap is for the poor"). Unlike his main opponents, Estrada neither spoke English well nor possessed any technocratic, legal, or military expertise. The "Robin Hood" roles he played in his long career as a film star enhanced his image as a friend of the poor. Estrada's strategy proved devastatingly effective. He captured 40 percent in a field of 11 candidates (see [Table](#) on the following page). SWS exit polls show that he received overwhelming support among the poor. Raul Roco, the haughty self-styled technocrat who finished third with 14 percent, outpolled Estrada among the upper and middle classes...



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2715 North Charles Street
Baltimore, Maryland, USA 21218
+1 (410) 516-6989
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