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Democratisation & new voter mobilisation in Southeast Asia: digital democracy and voter mobilisation in the Philippines

Report

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Digital Democracy and Voter Mobilisation in the Philippines

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Despite the Philippines' status as a developing country, advanced information and communication technology (ICT) has already had a considerable impact on its political processes. While those interested in development concentrate their attention on how ICT can transmit useful information to would-be entrepreneurs, those interested in politics are interested in how it can facilitate political mobilisation in traditional and non-traditional ways. In this note, focus is placed on two important elements of ICT whose reach is widening in the Philippines: cellular phones and the internet. Both exemplify what are known as "general purpose technologies": those with variegated uses unforeseen by their original inventors. As such, these powerful ICT tools have been adapted to make them more suitable to the local vernacular.

In what follows, I will first detail how each technology has diffused in the Philippines to set the stage for analysing its potential impact on political processes. Next, I will explain how use of cellular phones and the internet demonstrate adaptability to the vagaries of political mobilisation in the Philippine context. Finally, I elaborate on how these technologies are being deployed by candidates for the 2010 presidential election. For an electoral contest in a developing country, several campaigns already feature remarkably sophisticated use of ICT.

"Let a Thousand Cell Phones Bloom"

Like in many other countries, cell phones have diffused rapidly in the Philippines. At the end of 2008, the International Telecommunications Union (ITU) estimates that the worldwide cell phone subscriber base had reached four billion, compared to a world population of 6.6 billion people. In the Philippines, there were an estimated 55 million subscribers out of a population of 90 million. Whilst individual users may have multiple subscriptions, rendering the number of subscriptions an unsatisfactory basis on which to establish how many people have cell phones (the "penetration rate"), it is nevertheless believed that 80% of the Philippine population has access to a mobile phone. Moreover, the country is widely regarded as the world's text messaging capital, with 1.39 billion messages sent daily (the equivalent of each subscriber sending 9,125 messages annually) according to leading messaging technology firm Acision. Unlike in developed countries where a minute of airtime and a text message cost nearly the same, the least expensive prepaid airtime in the Philippines costs roughly $0.10 a minute while a text message costs $0.028, making the latter's cost an attractive option. The introduction of prepaid cards in 1999 greatly facilitated the popularity of text messaging among Filipino masses, making the country unique in that the bulk of network traffic is dedicated to SMS instead of voice calls.

In infrastructure terms, the relative ubiquity of cell phones derives from a number of attributes. State-owned telecom monopolies prevalent in less developed countries (LDCs) have not been compelled to expand access to fixed lines phones as doing so is often prohibitively expensive, especially to remote rural areas. In contrast, cell phones benefit from more recent trends towards telecoms deregulation as

well as the lower cost of establishing infrastructure. Adding incremental capacity via cell phone towers and the like allows piecemeal expansion to accommodate additional subscribers in a cost-effective manner for service providers.

During Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign, political pundits widely commented on his novel utilisation of text messaging to invigorate and inform supporters. Yet, it may be surprising to those unfamiliar with global politics that text messaging had been used to much greater effect in a country whose per capita GDP is but a fraction of America's. In January of 2001, cell phone-wielding opposition forces were credited with mobilising an estimated 250,000 people to march on Epifano de los Santos Avenue (EDSA) to oust then-President Joseph "Erap" Estrada over corruption allegations. This event has been termed EDSA II in reference to the first EDSA "People Power" revolution which culminated in the ouster of Ferdinand Marcos over disputed election results in 1986. Like the first event, EDSA II benefited from the support of Radio Veritas, the Roman Catholic Church-owned AM station; the charismatic presence of the late Philippine President Corazon Aquino; and desertion by the Armed Forces of the Philippines.

Estrada's removal from office enabled then-Vice-President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo to assume the remaining three years of his presidency. Ironically, although she had risen to become the country's leader in part via cell phone activism, it almost proved to be her undoing. The Philippine constitution only allows an elected president a single term in office; as it was adjudged that she did not serve a full term yet, she contested and was subsequently declared the winner of the 2004 presidential election. However, controversy dogged this result when tapes released in 2005 featured her discussing vote tallies during the election with then-Election Commissioner Virgilio Garcillano. It transpired that her cell phone had been tapped, and the subsequent media firestorm that erupted centred on vote-rigging allegations. Reflecting cell phone pop culture, ringtone remixes featuring Arroyo asking Garcillano "Hello Garci?...

So will I still lead by 1M?" – close to the nationwide margin of victory – quickly proliferated. Arroyo subsequently apologised for a lapse of judgment in keeping contact with an election official at an inopportune time. Still, her popularity never returned to pre-"Hello Garci?" levels, even if she has managed to retain her presidency despite numerous challenges. In light of this incident, her opponents adopted the rallying cry of "Let a Thousand Cell Phones Bloom."

The Internet and Political Mobilisation

Diffusion of internet access is not as widespread as that of the cell phone in the Philippines. This situation is largely due to cost reasons. The ITU estimates that there are less than one million Filipino broadband subscribers. Still, overall internet access is more widespread due to the proliferation of internet cafes and kiosks charging for access on a time-limited basis. Once these more popular forms of access are accounted for, an estimated 24 million Filipinos use the internet – a penetration rate of 26.7%.

In contrast to cell phones, this smaller user base circumscribes the internet's potential for political mobilisation. Nevertheless, the relatively low cost of developing and distributing online content makes it an attractive medium. While political jokes proliferate via either cell phones or e-mail messages – such as "Erap jokes" poking fun at ex-President Estrada's perceived lack of sophistication during his term in office – other uses are more specific to the internet. In particular, Filipinos are becoming avid users of social networking sites. While online market research firm Comscore estimates that the Philippines has only 1,233,620 registered Facebook users – a penetration rate of 1.37% – Facebook, unlike in the rest of the world, is not the country's most popular social networking site. Rather, far more Filipino users are signed up to Facebook's predecessor, Friendster. Friendster preceded the likes of MySpace and Facebook, which were respectively oriented towards musicians and college students. Reflecting the relative technological savvy of Filipino users, Friendster was able to make early inroads into Philippine cyberspace

that it has yet to relinquish. 10.7 million out of 58 million worldwide Friendster users are Filipino, establishing the country as the world's largest user of this social network. Unlike MySpace and Facebook, Friendster has more specifically catered to the Philippine market by offering an interface in the native language, Tagalog.

In addition to social networks, older generation internet communication media such as e-mail subscriber lists have been utilised for political mobilisation. More recently, Twitter, the so-called "microblogging" site that limits transmissions to 140 characters, is also in vogue among the web-savvy. Meanwhile, uploading YouTube is a cost-free way of making viewpoints and campaign material available online in video format.

ICT and the 2010 Elections

In the current election cycle, Philippine presidential campaigns have, to varying degrees, attempted to use cell phones and the internet to propagate their campaign messages. In contrast to the largely spontaneous use of cell phones during the Estrada ouster and the attempted Arroyo removal, these campaigns have tried to create targeted marketing messages. The following table enumerates which platforms the most Web-savvy presidential candidates have enlisted for their efforts:

	Email	Facebook	Friendster	Twitter*	Online Donations	YouTube	Others
Noynoy Aquino		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Multiply
Dick Gordon	Yes	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes	SMS
Jamby Madrigal		Yes		Yes		Yes	Scribe (Villar docs)
Gilbert Teodoro		Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes	MySpace
Manny Villar	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes		Yes	Multiply

*Twitter messages can be accessed via SMS at users' expense

It bears noting that merely using certain technologies is no guarantee of parity in terms of reach. For instance, far and away the leaders in terms of attracting Facebook followers are current front-runners Noynoy Aquino and Manny Villar who each have over 500,000 "fans." Interconnectivity is another important consideration in deploying these technologies as they are often deployed in tandem. For instance, Facebook can host YouTube clips, while Twitter messages or "tweets" can link to virtually any webpage. The important point is that despite using a variety of platforms, handlers need to ensure that they send a consistent message tied to the campaign imagery they wish to create both online and offline. Among marketers, this effort falls under the rubric of integrated marketing communications or IMC. It can be as simple as Noynoy Aquino using yellow, the colour associated with his parents, in campaign paraphernalia. IMC thus requires a modicum of coordination—from flyers to hoardings, TV advertisements and websites.

The lack of online options for fundraising with few of the most web-savvy candidates having such features requires additional mention. Whereas online donations have made an impact in the two most recent US presidential elections, the same does not hold in the Philippines. In contrast to highly financialised America where a vast majority of citizens have credit cards or PayPal accounts, this is not the case in the Philippines where use of financial products is still not very widespread. Keeping in mind the inexpensive nature of establishing a web presence – sending e-mail, building social networking pages, and uploading YouTube clips for free – the paucity of candidates sending campaign messages by SMS is attributable to it being a costlier option in comparison to web-centric means of mass communication. Still, supporters keen on receiving their candidates' messages via cell phone can do so via Twitter, albeit at their own expense. While the internet may not yet reach as many voters as traditional media like radio and television, its appeal lies in its relative cost-effectiveness and broadening reach, as demonstrated by its ubiquity among current campaigns.

Looking Forward, Looking Back

Effective deployment of ICT by the present candidates is clearly dependent on the diffusion of these technologies in the general population. Given the broad array of ICT platforms being used, the Philippine example may have transferable implications for political marketing in other LDC contexts as to what does and does not work. More ominously, the recent history of Philippine politics in which ICT (particularly cell phones) have played a key role suggests that their real impact may be in the election's aftermath as opposed to its run-up. Just as the open-ended nature of ICT can benefit candidates when properly harnessed during election campaigns, so ICT can turn against them when the spotlight moves away from the polls. The court of public opinion that ICT lends itself to has often played as much if not a more decisive role in contemporary Philippine politics than formal elections. In this respect, ICT is a quintessentially double-edged sword. ■

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