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THE VIRUS AND THE VOTE: SAFEGUARDING THE 2022 ELECTIONS



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The pandemic and disinformation have impacted elections around the globe more specifically in the Philippines. The importance of the government's efforts to COVID-proof the elections and the role of civil society and the media should be taken into account.

THE GLOBAL IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES

In many ways, the Philippines' upcoming elections are unsurprising. For instance, the country has scheduled to hold the elections on the second Monday of May as stated in Philippine Constitution. Based on the 1987 Philippine Constitution, unless otherwise provided by law, the regular election of the Senators and the Members of the House of Representatives shall be held on the second Monday of May.¹ Republic Act 7166 further states that a synchronized national and local election should be held once every three (3) years. It further states that President and Vice-President are elected on the same day every six (6) years.

Since the country's last election was a mid-term election held in 2019, when Filipinos next troop to the polls on election day—Monday, May 9, 2022—at the top of the ballot will be, as expected, the election of the country's next President and Vice-President.

In addition to the office of President and Vice-President, there are 18,178 other elective seats available up for grabs next year.² These include national posts, such as twelve senate seats and 63 party-list representatives. In addition, they also include local posts, including Legislative District Representatives, Governors, Mayors, and Councilors.

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THE GLOBAL IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES

While the next elections are in many ways unsurprising, the circumstances surrounding it are unique. Its uniqueness, of course, stems from none other than the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

When COVID-19 exploded onto the global scene early last year, it caused unprecedented challenges to public health and national economies. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), it has caused drastic loss of life worldwide, with global deaths from the virus now standing at just under 5 million. Furthermore, the number of confirmed cases now stands at over 244 million.³

Fearing the spread of the virus, governments worldwide went into lockdown, sending the global economy into crisis mode.⁴ These lockdowns led to the collapse of various industries, as a result economic consumption plummeted, and unemployment skyrocketed.⁵

In addition to its health and economic impacts, however, COVID-19 also impacted democracy.

According to a Freedom House report, since the coronavirus outbreak began, the condition of democracy and human rights has worsened in 80 countries, with a particularly sharp deterioration in struggling democracies and highly repressive states, according to the experts surveyed by the project.⁶

“What began as a worldwide health crisis has become part of the global crisis for democracy,” said Michael J. Abramowitz, President of Freedom House. “Governments in every part of the world have abused their powers in the name of public health, seizing the opportunity to undermine democracy and human rights.”

FIGURE 1 . ALLOCATION OF ELECTIVE SEATS FOR THE NATIONAL, LOCAL, AND BANGSAMORO AUTONOMOUS REGION IN MUSLIM MINDANAO (BARMM) PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS ON MAY 9, 2022 NATIONAL AND LOCAL ELECTIONS

ELECTIVE POSITIONS	NUMBER
President	1
Vice - President	1
Senators	12
Member, House of Representatives (Party-List Representatives)	63
Member, House of Representatives (Legislative District Representatives)	253
Governor	81
Vice - Governor	81
Members, Sangguniang Panlalawigan	782
City Mayor	146
City Vice - Mayor	146
Members, Sangguniang Panlungsod	1.650
Municipal Mayor	1.488
Municipal Vice - Mayor	1,488
Members, Sangguniang Bayan	11,908
BARMM Parliamentary Elections	
Party Representatives	40
Parliamentary District Representatives	32
Reserved Seats and Sectoral Representatives	8

SOURCE: COMMISSION ON ELECTIONS (COMELEC)

The Freedom House report stated further that many national elections were disrupted in some way by COVID-19.⁷ For example, between January and August 2020, national elections in nine countries faced frequent accusations of politicized election administration decisions.⁸ The report further stated that among the 24 countries that had a national election planned during the period under review, 22 took place. Of these 22, thirteen introduced alternative voting methods, seven countries moved dates, four changed election rules, and there were two cases where the credibility of the election results were questioned.⁹

HOLDING OF IN-PERSON ELECTIONS

Despite the many challenges facing elections, however, between February 2020 and October 2021, at least 142 countries and territories have decided to hold national or subnational elections despite concerns related to COVID-19, according to International IDEA's research.¹⁰ Unfortunately, their data also found that voter turnout declined in 58 (65%) countries included in their dataset.

Governments worldwide have implemented changes to campaign and voting practices and rules to prepare for elections and ensure participation. According to IDEA, many governments are limiting traditional campaigning as part of broader COVID-19 measures. Typically, this is done by banning or reducing the number of people attending campaign events and introducing health and safety guidelines for political parties, candidates, and supporters. Research also shows that remote campaigning, such as social media, has also increased in many countries because of the restrictions.¹¹

When it comes to election day, several countries have conducted safe in-person voting with strict health precautions in place.¹²

For the South Korean Parliamentary Election in April 2020, the National Election Commission (NEC) devised safeguarding measures against COVID-19. These included the mandatory wearing of masks and gloves, temperature checks for voters, and spraying of hand sanitizer at voting sites.¹³ In addition, South Korea election officials regularly disinfected its 14,000 voting sites.¹⁴

In the case of Singapore, which also held its Parliamentary election in July 2020, it put preventative safety measures in place at polling places ahead of the elections. Similarly, voters were expected to wear masks, sanitize their hands, and use disposable gloves before handling the ballot. All in all, voters were not expected to spend any more than five minutes in the polling station.¹⁵ Furthermore, voters 65 years and older were allowed to head to the polls earlier and vote, and the number of polling stations was increased from 880 to 1,100.¹⁶

DEALING WITH DISINFORMATION

According to the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), however, the efforts of election authorities to safely secure elections during the COVID-19 pandemic could be undermined by the rampant spread of misinformation and disinformation related to COVID-19 and the elections.¹⁷

“Viral misinformation, disinformation campaigns directed by anti-democratic and opportunistic actors, and the amplification of hate speech create immediate and long-term electoral integrity challenges for democracies. Changes to election procedures due to COVID-19 could provide fertile ground for information manipulation that might disenfranchise or endanger voters. As challenges multiply, authoritarian actors looking to capitalize on confusion will continue to push narratives to undermine confidence in democratic institutions and processes,” the international Foundation said.

Furthermore, according to a study conducted by the European Parliament, “disinformation also has far-reaching implications for human rights and democratic norms worldwide. It threatens freedom of thought, the right to privacy, and the right to democratic participation and endangering a range of economic, social, and cultural rights. It also diminishes broader indicators of democratic quality, unsettling citizens’ faith in democratic institutions not only by distorting free and fair elections, but also fomenting digital violence and repression.”¹⁸

With the seen rise in remote campaigning, digital spaces such as social media are becoming key election battlegrounds as candidates try to reach voters online.¹⁹ Unfortunately, this abrupt shift has now allowed bad actors to abuse these channels.

One study, for example, found that in the United States of America, two major misinformation narratives emerged related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2020 U.S. Democratic primaries.²⁰ The first of these narratives had to do with the use of masks, “anti-mask rhetoric on popular social media platforms may adversely affect voter turnout due to health concerns and accessibility to mail-in ballot resources,” the study said.

The second crucial disinformation narrative found was the questioning of the legitimacy of mail-in ballots, despite the practice’s wide pre-pandemic adoption in several U.S. states and evidence showing that it is not prone to or affected by significant voter fraud.

This case demonstrates the damaging effect of disinformation on the democratic process. Bad actors can use disinformation to confuse voters and manipulate their behavior on election day when implemented properly. Post-election, losing candidates could also use disinformation to cast doubt on the legitimacy of the results.

UNCERTAINTIES AND THREATS TO PHILIPPINE ELECTIONS

Here in the Philippines, the official campaign period for the May 2022 National and Local elections do not start until February 8, 2022. However, political discourse in the country has palpably shifted towards the elections.

Candidates for both national and local positions filed their certificates of candidacy (COC) before the October 8, 2021 deadline. However, the November 15, 2021 deadline for substitution leaves an air of uncertainty on whether those that filed will be the same candidates we see on the ballots.

The COMELEC's rules say that if an initial candidate withdraws, dies, or is disqualified by final judgment, the COC can be filed by a substitute candidate by November 15, 2021. However, some politicians and parties have publicly expressed plans to substitute out “place holder candidates” before the November deadline.²¹

In addition to the uncertainty surrounding the actual national and local candidates, much like the rest of the globe where elections were held during the pandemic, there are also uncertainties and concerns with the impact of COVID-19 on the Philippine elections.

These uncertainties were key points of discussion during a virtual town hall discussion organized by the Stratbase ADR Institute entitled “Democracy Goes On: Upholding a Safe, Free, and Credible 2022 Elections in the New Normal”. During the discussion, Dr. Ador Torneo of the La Salle Institute of Governance said that “there are a lot of uncertainties because we don't know what the situation will be like in the run-up to the May 2022 elections. The pandemic affects all aspects of the elections, from registration to the campaign to the actual election day and possibly post-election. Of course, it has also posed a lot of administrative and logistical challenges for COMELEC,

for many candidates its expected, for the voters probably, and other stakeholders.”

Dr. Torneo also noted the threat of misinformation and disinformation and of limited civil society and election watchdog mobilization. He also flagged potential threats such as inadequate health measures, the politicization of vaccines and government aid, misuse and abuse of restrictions by incumbents, massive disenfranchisement, vote-buying, and challenges to legitimacy.

PREPARATIONS FOR THE 2022 ELECTIONS

All things considered; the Philippines is in a fortunate position to take lessons from the experiences of other countries in conducting elections during a pandemic.

One of the first adjustments that the COMELEC made to the usual election lead-up has been to extend the deadline for voter registration. In June, the COMELEC said that it was expecting 4.3 million first-time voters to register this year and join the existing 60 million voters.²² However, due to the continued imposition of Community Quarantine, or lockdown measures, in many areas of the country, the COMELEC had to suspend voter registration in affected areas,²³ raising concerns that the suspension might lead to a drop in registration.

To make up for these suspensions and allow more first-time voters to participate in the coming elections, the COMELEC extended the deadline for registration several times, the latest of which ended on October 30, 2021. Based on the latest number shared by the Commission on Elections with the Institute, the number of registered voters at present is already nearing 63 million.²⁴ COMELEC Director James Jimenez said that “all in all, if you are going to have 63 million registered voters locally, and 1.6 million overseas, then we are looking

at a voting population of almost 65 million voters, and that's a huge percentage of our population.”

In addition to the extension of registration, the Commission has also put strict health protocols in place. During the filing of candidacy in October, the COMELEC required those filing for President, Vice-president, Senator, Party-list positions, and their representatives at the Commission's Manila office to present negative COVID-19 test results taken no later than 24 hours before.²⁵ COMELEC personnel, party officials, and media representatives were also required to present negative tests.

In addition to the use of face masks and temperature checks, candidates were also only allowed to bring a maximum of three people with them to the event to maintain social distancing rules.

It is expected that the COMELEC will continue to enforce health protocols during the campaigning period and on election day. During the virtual event in October, Dir. Jimenez shared that the Commission would soon be releasing campaign guidelines, adding that “a lot of people will be in for some scrambling in terms of modifying how they conduct their campaigns because there will be some major changes.”

On preparations for election day, Dir. Jimenez said that the Commission recently conducted a simulation exercise to dry run the election day process. According to Jimenez, the voter will not be required to present a health declaration form, but temperature checks will still be conducted. Furthermore, a Voters Assistance Desk will be in place to help voters find their room assignments, their precinct assignments, as well as their sequence number.

To maintain social distancing, the COMELEC will be capping the number of voters who can vote at one time. The Commission also plans to place plastic barriers to separate voting stations.

The COMELEC will also be setting up emergency-accessible polling places (EAPP). The EAPP is where senior citizens, persons with disabilities, and heavily pregnant women can be able to vote while minimizing exposure to other voters.

The Commission is also refurbishing the vote counting machines (VCMs). The use of VCMs has been hailed for increasing the transparency and reliability of election results in the country.²⁶ Pulse Asia survey data shows that after the 2019 midterm elections, 87% of Filipinos noted their satisfaction with the automated polling system. Moreover, 91% stated that they would like to see automated voting continue in future elections. In addition, 94% of respondents stated that the use of the VCM was easy as well.²⁷

Placed in the context of the pandemic, the VCMs serve the additional function of reducing the time voters spend in precincts and reduce interactions among voters and election officials.

Nevertheless, concerns remain on the use of automated elections. These concerns likely stem from instances of the unauthorized alteration of the script in 2016 and unexpected news blackout on the night of the elections in 2019. To build trust and increase the legitimacy of these machines, the Commission is also in the middle of the local source code review process. The review offers civil society groups and technology professionals several opportunities to review every aspect of the automated election system.

The Commission has also approved the use of digital signatures of the electoral board members. These signatures help certify that the electoral returns transmitted to the canvassing center are the same votes sent by the VCMs. In addition, the move guards against phony or pre-filled ballots, thus contributing to fraud prevention.

FIGURE 2 . CONTINUED USE OF AUTOMATED VOTING IN FUTURE ELECTIONS
(JULY 2016 AND JUNE 2019)

Base: Those who voted in the May 2016/ May 2019 elections	
Would you like to see automated voting continued in future elections or not?	
	RP
UB June 2019	
Yes	91
No	7
Don't Know	2
UB July 2016	
Yes	89
No	9
Don't Know	2

SOURCE: PULSE ASIA

COMBATTING DISINFORMATION

Like what is happening worldwide, people are concerned about the impact disinformation may have on the Philippine elections. However, its impact may be amplified by Filipinos' high internet usage.

According to We Are Social and Hootsuite, Filipinos spend an average of 4 hours and 15 minutes every day on social media and top the global usage rankings for the 6th straight year spending almost 11 hours per day online.²⁸

The amount of time Filipinos spend online also increases the chances of being exposed to or encountering disinformation. The Philippines has even been labeled “patient zero” for digital disinformation.²⁹ A study conducted by De La Salle professor Jason Cabañes found that

disinformation operations in the Philippines have been on an upward trend over recent years.

Furthermore, in 2020, Facebook took down fake accounts and pages for “coordinated inauthentic behavior.” Facebook explains that people behind these activities coordinate with one another and use fake accounts as a central part of their operations to mislead people about who they are and what they are doing.

However, when it did, Facebook traced one of the networks back to the Philippine Government. The company traced 57 accounts, 31 pages, and 20 Instagram accounts back to the Philippine Military and Police. Altogether, these accounts had over 276,000 followers on Facebook and 55,000 on Instagram.

More recently, it was also reported that the Facebook pages of some Filipino politicians had fake followers.³⁰ According to the report, a social media user using an online tool called SparkToro showed that 47.4% of Ferdinand Marcos Jr's (@bongbongmarcos) Facebook page followers were fake. Ferdinand Marcos Jr., the son of Dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr., will be running for President in 2022. Other Presidential candidates were also found to have a relatively high number of fake followers. The report included Ping Lacson (@iampinglacson) with 37.5% fake followers and Manny Pacquiao (@mannypacquiao), with 32.6% fake followers.

VOTER EDUCATION

Media and information literacy are recognized as essential elements for empowering audiences and combating election-related disinformation.³¹ Speaking on the role of civil society in voter education, Ona Caritos of LENTE (Legal Network for Truthful Elections) said that with so many Filipinos online, voter education must adapt to platforms and types of content that appeal to Filipinos. Caritos also pushed to expand the coverage of voter education topics to less discussed but equally important topics of campaign finances and governance, political dynasties, and identifying and combating misinformation/disinformation.³²

Furthermore, Cariitos also highlighted voter education activities on these COMELEC's new election protocols and health guidelines. "These new protocols would enable all of us to be safe when we vote in the elections next year and at the same time prevent disenfranchisement," she added.

Mildred Ople of Youth Leadership for Democracy (YouthLed) also highlighted the important role Filipino youth, which comprises 52% of the country's voting population, plays in combating disinformation.³³

According to YouthLed, "the high youth registration turnout especially in this time of pandemic, can be partly credited to the various social movements lalo na yung mga present online and because of the grasp of present technology and digital media, the youth can easily navigate information online. That means two things: they create a lot of content, and they consume a lot of content."

Ople also highlighted the need to combat disinformation by empowering schools and communities and emphasized the importance of critical thought and debate to discuss solutions, programs, and policies that matter to young people.

MEDIA AND EXPRESSION

Another critical component to combating disinformation is the free press and the freedom of expression. However, in the Philippines, the press and freedom of expression are under attack.

A recent survey from the Social Weather Stations (SWS) illustrates how many Filipinos are afraid to criticize the government. According to the survey, 45 percent of adult Filipinos believe it was dangerous to publish or broadcast stories critical of the Duterte administration.³⁴ The survey also showed that 28% were undecided on the matter while only 25 percent disagreed.

The Philippines has also been slipping in the Reporters Without Borders' (RSF) World Press Freedom Index. For the fourth consecutive year, the Philippines has dropped in the index, ranking at 138th out of 180.³⁵ RSF cited the closure of the country's biggest TV network, ABS-CBN, the online harassment campaigns against journalists orchestrated by pro-Duterte troll armies, and the "red-tagging" of media professionals as reasons for the country's ranking drop.

As we move closer to the elections, the weakened state of Philippine institutions has allowed bad actors to use disinformation to gain electoral support. According to Prof. Danilo Arao of the University of the Philippines, "some of the candidates are actually engaged in historical denialism. They are rebranding themselves so that what happened in the past would stay in the past, even if the past is still unresolved."³⁶

Arao emphasized further, however, that from a media perspective, "there is a need for responsible gatekeeping, and perhaps, even more, responsible and critical journalism so that what happened in 2016 will not happen again."

VOTING WISELY

Indeed, the May 2022 elections are chock-full of unique challenges. Top of mind for many are the necessary changes and preparations needed to ensure that voters can troop to the polls safely next year amidst pandemic and continuous lockdowns. The threat of disinformation to confuse and manipulate voters is another.

While public health and disinformation dominate headlines and news feeds, Filipino voters must also think long and hard about who they'll be voting for as we move closer to the elections.

According to Mardi Mapa-Suplido of policy research and advocacy center INCITEGov, their studies showed that the "majority of our participants from diverse classes and political backgrounds, want a leader with a mix of cognitive and emotional intelligence – dapat matalino at madiskarte to anticipate and find solutions to the country's problems, pero sana may malasakit at puso rin, capable of empathizing with the plight of our people."³⁷ "They looked for simple and authentic leaders because those traits for them indicated solidarity with the poor," she added.

FIGURE 3 . PULSE ASIA SURVEY: MOST IMPORTANT TRAITS OR CHARACTERISTICS THAT A NATIONAL CANDIDATE SHOULD POSSESS

(JUNE 7, 2016, 2021)

Traits or Characteristics	RP
Has Concern for the poor, pro-poor	48
Not corrupt	47
Trustworthy and honest	37
Has a good platform and can give solutions to problems of the country	32
Fights anomalies in government	25
Untarnished name and reputation	22
Hs good leadership skills	22
Fulfills promises	21
Can defend Philippine territory against China	18
Strong political will	15
Approachable	13
Others	0.2

Q: At this time, which of the following are the most important traits or characteristics to have for whoever is running for a national position in our government? You may choose up to three traits. You also mention others not included in this list.

SOURCE: STRATBASE ADR INSTITUTE/PULSE ASIA

A Pulse Asia survey commissioned by Stratbase ADR Institute gives us more insight into the traits Filipinos look for in national candidates. According to the survey, “has concern for the poor, pro-poor,” “not corrupt,” and “Trustworthy and honest” are characteristics Filipino voters want their chosen candidate to have.

The Stratbase ADR Institute also commissioned a survey question asking which national candidates should have clear solutions if elected. For this survey, “controlling inflation,” “increasing the pay of workers,” and “creating more jobs” were the top three answers. This perhaps reflects the economic challenges that many now face because of the pandemic.

According to Prof. Dindo Manhit, President of Stratbase ADR Institute, the results for both survey questions show that “the issue of trust and corruption seem to be very important, and it’s what our voters want. And it’s something that I hope candidates get to be focused on.”³⁸

FIGURE 4 . NATIONAL ISSUES A NATIONAL CANDIDATE SHOULD HAVE CLEAR SOLUTIONS IF ELECTED IN THE COMING 2022 ELECTIONS

National Issues	RP
Controlling inflation	63
Increasing the pay of workers	53
Creating more jobs	45
Fighting graft and corruption in government	41
Reducing the poverty of many Filipinos	30
Fighting Criminality	23
Defending the integrity of Philippine Territory against foreigners	22
Addressing the problem of COVID-19 and other health problems	21

Q: What national issues should a candidate running for a national position have clear solutions if elected in the coming 2022 elections? You may choose up to three issues. You may also mention others not included in the list.

SOURCE: STRATBASE ADR INSTITUTE/PULSE ASIA

Referring to data presented earlier in the paper on trust in the results of the 2019 elections, Prof. Manhit also stated that “Key to that is finding trust. From 74% to 84% in terms of BIG trust, in terms of election results. So we see that legitimacy and how they value automated elections. We’ve always argued in our Institute that those who attack automated elections want to go back to the old dagdag bawas era.”

CONCLUSION

The Philippines is entering a unique period in its history, with its first-ever nationwide elections conducted in the middle of a pandemic next year. This election will also be held amidst a wave of populism and disinformation. Hence, all sectors play a role in ensuring the 2022 national and local elections are free, fair, credible, and safe.

The government must continue the necessary preparations to COVID-proof the polls. Preparation, however, does not just mean on-the-day implementation of health protocols such as those now being readied by the COMELEC. In addition, the government must step up its pandemic response measures by testing, tracing, treating, and vaccinating more Filipinos to create a safer environment for voters and volunteers alike by the time May 2022 comes around.

Furthermore, driven by passionate civil society groups, voter education must continue to grow to include a broader set of election-related topics. Filipino youth play an important role in all this. Not only are many of them first-time voters eager to have their voices heard, but they are also in an ideal position to combat disinformation. Moreover, their familiarity with technology and platforms will allow them to create content that resonates on today's social media platforms.

Media as well plays a critical role in the 2022 elections. Though the freedom of expression and the press are under attack, there continues to be a need for more responsible and critical journalism.

Lastly, while the 2022 elections may be unique in many ways, one thing that remains the same is that Filipinos must cast their votes wisely—to choose leaders who will uphold the rule of law, be responsive to public needs and issues, and stand for integrity, transparency, and accountability. The work for deepening democracy continues, and we all have a part to play in it. May we remember this as we move towards the 2022 elections, and may we ensure that democracy goes on.

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³⁷ Mardi Mapa-Suplido. Panel Discussion. Democracy Goes On: Upholding a Safe, Free, and Credible 2022 Elections in the New Normal. Stratbase ADR Institute Virtual Round Table.

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