

Transcript

I'm Larry Garber, and I was involved in the Philippines elections, starting in 1985. I observed a series of elections that took place between 1986 and 1988, wrote about it, and then went back to the Philippines in 2016. But I'm going to focus in this recording on the 1986 snap election, which in many ways was an inflection point, not only for the Philippines, but for those who are and have been involved, in election work overseas during the past four decades.

Why was the Philippines election in 1986 so significant? First, it came about as a snap election. It wasn't per the constitutional requirement of the time, but President Marcos, who had been in power by then for almost 20 years declared, actually on US television, that he was going to hold a snap election, which he scheduled for February 7th, 1986. In response to a question by one of the ABC correspondents, he said: 'yes, I will be inviting international observers for this election.'

International observation at this time was in, I would say, its infancy. I had become involved in 1984, when I was retained to write a handbook on international election observation, which was published in September 1984 [by the International Human Rights Law Group]. Actually, 40 years ago.

We [the Law Group] had organized a few small-scale observation efforts and, in the process of doing so, I had come to meet Brian Atwood, who had recently taken over as the head of the National Democratic Institute (NDI). I tried to convince him to work with us and collaborate with the Human Rights [Law] Group that I was involved with in observing elections. Brian said at the time that this wasn't going to be an area of focus for NDI. When Marcos announced the election and everyone in the United States was becoming fixated on the importance and significance of this election, he had a change of mind. Together with the Republican counterpart to NDI, he agreed to do a pre-election mission, which would then determine whether they would do an international election mission, and he recruited me to be the election consultant expert for the National Democratic Institute team.

So we went in January of 1986 to the Philippines for a pre-election mission and identified many of the problems that had existed previously with Philippine elections and clearly were going to be problems in the 1986 snap election. When we came back, Brian and his counterpart testified before Congress and we decided, with encouragement from the State Department, to organize a large-scale international Election Observer Mission.

We recruited 44 individuals, both from the United States and other countries. The delegation was led by Miguel Pastrana, who had been a previous President in Colombia, and John Hume, who was the leader then of the Social Democratic Labor Party in Northern Ireland and went on later to win a Nobel Peace Prize. This was [] the first large-scale election observation mission that I was involved in. In [several] ways, it [] set the tone for how these would be conducted in the future.

I and colleagues from both NDI and NRI [later the International Republican Institute or IRI] went out to the Philippines a couple of weeks before February 7th to identify the places where we would send observers (the Philippines is a very [geographically] dispersed country) and what issues they would be looking at.

It's important to remember, as I said, that Marcos was running for the election to sustain his time in power. He had been in power since 1965 and had declared martial law in 1974. He was clearly unpopular with many groups in the country but still was viewed as the dominant political figure.

The opposition initially was divided in terms of different parties putting forward candidates, but ultimately agreed to have an election with Corazon Aquino as the Presidential candidate and Salvador Laurel as the Vice-Presidential candidate. It was a merger of two of the leading factions amongst the political opposition. Aquino was the widow of Benigno Aquino, who had been an opposition leader to Marcos and then had been exiled. When he returned to the Philippines in 1983, he was assassinated on the [airport] tarmac, and she had, in a sense, assumed his legacy, but was an untested political figure. She had never really played a role in Philippine politics, whereas Laurel had been sort of a traditional politician, but agreed, in the name of unity, to step aside as the Presidential candidate and to run as Aquino's vice-presidential candidate.

The election playing field was [] heavily tilted in the direction of Marcos in terms of the control of the election commission, in terms of control of the media, and the military were also widely viewed as supportive of Marcos. Although, there had been rumblings that we were aware of [regarding] reformist groups in the military that believed Marcos's time was up.

The election took place as planned on February 7th. We had observers around the country and immediately began hearing of problems. I should add here that that one of the things we discovered on the pre-election mission proved critical for the Philippine election, but also has led to an innovation that I think we [] have utilized since then, was this nonpartisan election monitoring group, which was called in the Philippines NAMFREL.

They were organizing volunteers to be present at polling stations throughout the country. The organization was headed by a prominent Philippine businessman and a leading bishop in the Catholic Church, and by election day they had mobilized approximately half a million volunteers and had deployed them throughout the country. They became the major point of contact for the international observers when they were going to visit polling sites and would listen to reports that they had prepared. It became evident that there were significant problems in terms of delayed opening, of polling sites, denial of people voting, and allegations of vote buying, but we still were hopeful that the elections would lead to a legitimate [] [and] credible result.

NAMFREL, I mean the other big innovation present, was that NAMFREL had created this procedure called "Operation Quick Count", which was designed to transmit the vote totals faster than the election commission, and had set up a big platform in Manila, the capital, where they were going to show all the results that they had received in real-time. This was a real revolutionary act for the Philippines because it often took several days for the official results to be processed. During that time, there were concerns that they [the results] would be manipulated.

So the results came in through NAMFREL, with Aquino leading, and the official results inevitably came in with Marcos leading. The upshot of that was that at some point a number of the election official workers, the people who the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) hired to be the computer inputters, walked off because they claimed that they were receiving instructions to manipulate the vote count.

We, as international observers and others, basically denounced the process and created this groundswell of opinion both in the Philippines and outside the Philippines, that this was just not a credible election process. When the team went back to Washington, [the delegation] reported to various officials at the State Department. At the time President Reagan was in the White House, but it wasn't clear what was going to happen after the elections because you had these conflicting results that had been announced by the COMELEC and by NAMFREL.

On February 20 second, I believe, about 2 weeks after the election day, a mutiny was initiated by the reformist military soldiers that I mentioned earlier. It eventually drew the support of both the Minister of Defense and the Chief of Staff of the military, who basically were holed up in two [military] bases in Manila.

To prevent Marcos from organizing the military that was still loyal to him from attacking the bases, hundreds of thousands of Filipinos merged onto the streets to surround these two bases. This was the origin of the 'People's Power' [revolution] in the Philippines, a term that has then been used in many other contexts.

With the people in the street, and there seeming to be a stalemate, President Reagan, through Senator Laxalt [of Nevada], contacted Marcos and said, 'the gig is up, and we will allow you to take exile in the United States'. A few days later, he [Marcos] left for Hawaii and Aquino became the President, based on that she had won the election according to these unofficial results. She immediately set forward a whole reform process to reform the Constitution and there were legislative and municipal elections that took place within a year or year-and-a-half of her assumption of power.

I'll just conclude with several of the important lessons that we, as outsiders, took from the Philippines, and actually would use when we were consulting in other countries with activists who [were] looking to [] use an electoral process to challenge an entrenched regime:

The first was to participate. There had been a tradition of boycotting elections, but we thought, based on what we saw in the Philippines, that you can mobilize, even under difficult martial-law-like circumstances, an effective opposition and obtain the groundswell of the population.

The second is that it's critical for an opposition, if it's going to challenge the incumbent electorally, to unite. Again, what I described earlier between Aquino and Laurel was [] sort of the prototype for this.

The third is to establish a nonpartisan election monitoring group. NAMFREL became the model for these groups that have now emerged in countries around the globe. There's now actually a formal declaration that was generated by a group of domestic election monitors that has probably 50, 60, 70 signatories from around the globe.

The fourth is to use these parallel vote tabulations. NAMFREL, as I said, called it "Operation Quick Count", but it was an effort to collect results from the entire population or all the polling sites in the Philippines, which [are] in excess of 100,000. Later, in other countries, came the use of these parallel vote tabulations, relying on sampling of a number of the polling sites and then projecting results from that. The idea of having an independent vote count has proven absolutely critical in a number of places.

The fifth is to use whatever media opportunities you have, including the limited time you're given on the official media, but also to use other media that will allow the opposition access in an effective manner. In the Philippines, the church radio was a particularly effective means for the opposition to communicate with the voters.

The last is international observers. I mean, this was a critical example of international observers observing an election and [] criticizing publicly the way it was conducted, basically stating publicly that the results that were being reported by the Commission on Elections were not credible. Today this may [not] seem like [] a major development, but at the time it was. The

fact that the US government relied on the reports of the international observers was what ended up moving Reagan from a position of general support for Marcos to criticism and to, ultimately, urge his removal.

The Philippines has been in that sense a model for a number of countries in Europe and Africa, Latin America. When I was with NDI in the late 1980s and 1990s, we would bring people from the Philippines to places like Chile, Panama, Poland, Bulgaria, and Zambia, to help us inform the populations there about how to use some of these techniques that I've mentioned effectively in an election context.

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