

By Gemma Bagayaua-Mendoza

Naga City Mayor Jesse Robredo recalled the Brizos visiting him in the morning, three days after the May 14, 2007, election. He had just finished breakfast when the couple-residents of one of the city's urban poor resettlement sites-arrived and handed him folded pieces of campaign literature, which supporters of one of the local candidates had given them.

Paper bills amounting to 200 pesos (US\$4) were hidden in the folds of the leaflets containing the name and picture of the candidate. Also included were papers with the names, address, district number and birthdays of both Marilyn Brizo and her husband.

"They (the Brizo couple) gave me the money and told me they are not spending it because they did not vote for the candidate (in the campaign literature)," said Robredo, a recipient of the Ramon Magsaysay Award in 2000 for government service.

The incident with the Brizos could be considered proof that the campaigns to educate voters, which civil society groups have been waging in the Philippines for more than two decades, have been effective. But the fact that there are still candidates willing to shell out money to buy votes demonstrates that there is still considerable cause for concern.

The Brizos' electoral integrity may be the exception rather than the rule. In many areas in the Philippines, votes are routinely sold to the highest bidder.

Philippine election law limits campaign spending for candidates (from senators down to local officials) to three pesos (US\$0.06) per registered voter. Political parties are allowed to spend an additional five pesos (US\$0.10) per registered voter. But these rules are often ignored. The electoral process in the Philippines remains largely a money game, with the procurement of votes euphemistically referred to as "special operations," done either on a retail or wholesale basis.

In the run-up to the May 2007 elections, candidates reportedly gave voters all sorts of goodies: groceries, mobile phone cards, insurance plans, educational certificates, movie tickets and more. Others distributed cold cash-some paying as much as 1,500 pesos (US\$32) per vote.

Candidates sometimes use giveaways to generate goodwill, Robredo said. "If you are a new politician, you may not want people to think you're stingy or difficult to approach."

But in many cases these are sophisticated operations. Politicians keep databases of the voters with their names, birthdays, district numbers and other relevant information. They use creative strategies to make sure voters actually vote for the candidates that pay them. The strategies constantly evolve as watchdog groups and the media uncover and expose the cheating schemes.

In the last election, some Mindanao candidates used big cards with pictures of candidates from one of the parties to monitor voting. The cards were supposedly designed to make it easier to copy the candidates' names. Voters placed the thick cards under their ballots to help them write smoothly. But the cards actually contained a layer of carbon paper. By writing hard on the ballot on top of the card, voters left readable marks on the carbon paper. The cards were then returned to campaign leaders who, by stripping off the topmost layer, were able to read the names of the candidates for whom the votes were cast.

Filipino voters have come to expect some form of vote buying in every election. In an April 2007 survey conducted by the Social Weather Stations, nearly seven out of 10 respondents said that vote buying would "definitely happen" or "probably happen" in the May 2007 elections.

What has caught the nation's attention in recent years is the massive fraud of "wholesale" vote buying-allegedly perpetrated by the very people responsible for transmitting ballots from the district level to the national level.

In 2005, the nation plunged into political turmoil after alleged wiretapped conversations between President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and Commission on Elections (COMELEC) Commissioner Virgilio Garcillano were released to the media. The conversations supported the opposition's accusations that the administration cheated heavily in the 2004 elections.

Arroyo survived two impeachment attempts by the opposition following the scandal. In February 2006, she successfully crushed a coup attempt by military officials who purportedly conspired with the opposition to unseat her. Observers note that the administration is now on more stable political footing. However, the ghost of what became known as the "Hello Garci" controversy, named for the

election official the president allegedly spoke with in the wiretapped conversations, continues to haunt the nation.

The president survived the scandal largely through unabashed favor trading with local politicians and other power brokers, according to civil society leaders. This is evident by the quality of appointments the president has made since 2005.

“Her decisions have been more political rather than based on qualifications. She has to keep people happy to keep them at bay,” said Vince Lazatin of the Transparency and Accountability Network.

Among the so-called “political” appointments was that of Merceditas Gutierrez, the president’s former chief legal counsel and a classmate of the first gentleman, whom Arroyo appointed ombudsman in late 2005.

In 2006 Gutierrez was widely criticized by anti-corruption groups for absolving COMELEC officials after a botched election automation scheme that cost the government billions of pesos. In doing so, she went against the recommendations of Ombudsman investigators who found key election officials, including the COMELEC chair, culpable for graft regarding the deal.

With the many issues involving COMELEC’s conduct in the 2004 elections still unresolved, allegations of massive vote-buying and fraud grabbed headlines again, following the May 2007 elections. The most blatant allegedly took place in the Maguindanao province. Some 20 senatorial candidates, among them some very popular personalities, received zero votes—a fact that even the COMELEC commissioners initially considered to be “statistically improbable.”

One senator said representatives of the Maguindanao governor approached his local coordinator to offer him the 14th slot in the provincial race in exchange for four million pesos (US\$85,698). The senator asked not to be named to protect the identity of his staff in the area.

Even party list seats, supposedly designed so that marginalized groups would be represented in Congress, were not spared. Parties who vied for party list seats also reportedly bought votes wholesale, at a rate of 50 to 55 pesos (US\$1.07-US\$1.17) each.

Corruption in the electoral system has far-reaching consequences. Consider the sheer number of elective

officials: A total of 17,889 elected positions, including seats from the Senate down to municipal councilors, were at stake in the May 2007 elections. That number does not include the offices of the president, vice-president, 12 senators whose terms are not yet up and the chieftains or village councils in some 42,000 barangays (wards) all over the country.

“If they have to raise millions of pesos to buy votes, then they will have to recover that. It’s bad for everyone. That’s why I consider corrupt elections as the original sin,” said Carmelo Diola, of Barug! Pilipino (Take a Stand, Filipino!), a Cebu based anti-corruption group.

But it does not end there. “The system has multiplicative, forward and downstream effects on everything,” said Salvador Romero, professor at the Development Academy of the Philippines. This is because elected officials have a hand in either the selection or appointment of other government officials.

The president has the power to appoint more than 10,000 government officials, including members of constitutional bodies such as COMELEC, the Commission on Audit, the Civil Service Commission, the Ombudsman and the Judiciary. Senators and congressmen, as members of the Commission on Appointments, confirm cabinet appointments, as well as appointments to some of the constitutional bodies.

Similarly, provincial governors and mayors of cities and municipalities have a hand in the designation of law enforcement officials in their respective areas. “If these officials are bent on corruption, it will really spread,” Diola said.

Over the years, numerous measures created to reform the electoral system have been introduced in Congress. Two key measures, a bill to automate vote counting and another bill to reform political financing, are pending in Congress.

Unfortunately, very few are ever punished for violating election laws in the Philippines. Many of the election officials who were accused of cheating in the May 2007 elections were the same ones whose names were mentioned in the “Hello Garci” recordings. Instead of facing repercussions, a number of them were even promoted.

Any serious effort to reform the system should start with punishing those who were caught cheating, Robredo said.

