

Making Elections an Accountability Platform (MEAP): Explaining the Idea

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Introduction

In the past weeks, G-Watch local sites have started conducting their citizenship education sessions to make the elections an accountability platform. The said initiative aims to provide a safe and open platform for citizens, citizen groups and communities to collectively reflect on the situation of the country, reaffirm basic democratic values and processes and try to identify shared agenda in engaging the upcoming elections to get back on track on the agenda of democratic deepening in the Philippines.

MEAP also aims to be an opportunity for visioning among ordinary citizens – a collective re-claiming of our dreams and aspirations for the country and its future. Through the initiative, G-Watch sites will also help come up with key accountability campaign messages that will hopefully capture people’s sentiment to galvanize broader citizen actions by testing their crafted accountability messages during the community gatherings.”

In this piece, we discuss the thinking behind this idea and the socio-political context within which this idea becomes an imperative for action.

The Unique Significance of the 2022 Elections

The next national elections are once again just around the corner. With the COVID-19 crisis, there are a lot of uncertainties in today’s politics and governance. For sure, the 2020 polls will be very different, given the ongoing health crisis. While health threats will be a new critical concern that will change the way we campaign and vote, the continuing and worsening threats to democratic processes and values are issues that would also have to be confronted as we prepare for the 2022 elections.

As early as now, there are those floating the idea of postponing the upcoming elections. This serves the interest of those who now hold office and perpetuates the dismal state of politics and governance in the country. Fortunately, the recent plebiscite in Palawan proves that elections can still be conducted amidst the pandemic. The recent electoral exercise has provided the country with a template on how to develop health guidelines and protocols that will allow the conduct of vibrant electoral campaigning and safe voting. Doing so is a necessary step in ensuring clean, peaceful and honest elections even as the country continues to confront the COVID-19 disease that is expected to persist for several more years. The Palawan elections have also shown that citizens can be organized to push back against top-down agenda that would perpetuate concentration of power of the ruling elite.

Meanwhile, in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), there have been moves to postpone its regional elections to de-synchronize it from the national elections. Aside from the calls for extension of BARMM transition, proponents argue that the political reform of the BARMM parliamentary system can be compromised if synchronized with the

national elections (see <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1411306/poll-watchdog-wants-barmm-polls-desynchronized-from-2022-polls>).

The conduct of regular elections is the minimum requirement of democracy. Any attempt to postpone elections poses a clear danger to a country's democratic system. But beyond the conduct of elections, the quality of elections is also equally important. As a mechanism that enables citizens to assert their supremacy over the holders of power, elections are meant to: (1) serve as a platform where issues and agenda critical to ordinary people are thoroughly discussed; (2) be a venue where the program of the next government is developed; and (3) act as a mechanism for holding incumbents to account and answerable for their actions.

COVID-19 crisis as an electoral backdrop

With the pandemic is still raging on and with millions of Filipinos forced to stay indoors under one of the longest lockdowns in the world, the government's response to COVID-19 will definitely be an issue in the 2022 elections.

According to data from the World Health Organization (WHO), the Philippines has one of the highest infections in Southeast Asia, second only to Indonesia. In fact, as of July 7, 2021, the country has recorded 1,450,110 total cases, with 25,459 people perishing from the virus. Despite these figures, officials still insist that the government has performed well in addressing the crisis, spending Php2.66 trillion (or roughly US\$54 billion U.S. dollars) in 2020 for its direct response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This amount is considerably huge, accounting for 14.7% of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) for the said year.

The Department of Finance (DOF) further indicated that the Duterte administration has secured a US\$1.2 billion-loan (Php58.4 billion) for vaccine procurement, to help inoculate 70 million Filipinos by the end of 2021. Nearly half of the money came from the World Bank with US\$500 million (Php24.5 billion), followed by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) with US\$400 million (Php19.6 billion), while the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) lent US\$300 million (Php14.7 billion).

Though the government claims that it has already poured billions of pesos to address COVID-19, hunger and unemployment remain at their all-time high.

Prior to the pandemic, for example, the Philippines' 2019 unemployment rate was 5.1%, with 2.3 million Filipinos out of work. Just a year later and after almost nine months of continuous lockdown, the number of unemployed people doubled to 4.5 million by the end of 2020, with the unemployment rate jumping to 10.3%. There was a slight improvement during the first month of the current year, when unemployment went down to 8.7% or 4 million people. But this was merely a momentary spell, for by the following February, the unemployment rate climbed to 8.8% as those without work increased to 4.2 million people.

The problem of unemployment has been made even worse by increasing commodity prices,

especially by the rising cost of clothing and foodstuff. At the beginning of the crisis in 2019, the country had an inflation rate of 2.48%, climbing slightly to 2.6% by the end of 2020. But in January 2021, the inflation rate leaped to 4.2%, which then increased to 4.7% the following month.

Unsurprisingly, the combined burden of inflation and unemployment has worsened the hunger situation in the Philippines. In its 2020 fourth quarter survey, polling group Social Weather Stations (SWS) pegged the country's hunger incidence at 16%, with 4 million families claiming that they experienced involuntary hunger at least once in the past three months. Though these numbers were considerably lower than the 30.7% hunger rate of the previous quarter (which comprise 7.6 million people), SWS also announced in December that 62% of Filipinos believe that their quality of life has actually gotten worse during the last twelve months.

Worsening corruption in a health crisis

Unfortunately, even in the midst of a global pandemic, government corruption remains unabated. Just last September, officials from the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) were admonished in the Senate for allegedly purchasing millions of personal protective equipment (PPEs) at overpriced rates. According to records, standard PPEs typically cost between Php1,200 to Php1,500 (US\$24 - US\$30) per unit, but the equipment that DBM bought were between Php1,700 to Php2,000 (US\$34 - US\$40) per unit. This means that the procurements were probably overpriced by at least Php200 per unit or Php1 billion (US\$20 million) in total.

There was also an allegation from whistleblower Thorrsson Montes Keith that several top officials of the Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (Philhealth), including its President and CEO, Ricardo Morales, had stolen Php15 billion of public funds using various fraudulent schemes. Morales denied the allegation, though he eventually resigned from his post, citing his worsening health situation.

The government's reputation has also been undermined by continuing delays in the release of hazard pay of health workers, prompting several hospital employees to hold a protest action in front of the Department of Health (DOH) central office last December 7.

Apart from its failure to address corruption, the government has also been remiss in its responsibility to effectively deliver financial assistance to those affected by the pandemic.

Government failures in COVID-19 response as a campaign issue

On March 24, 2020, President Rodrigo Duterte signed into law the Bayanihan to Heal as One Act, mandating the government to "provide emergency subsidy to around eighteen (18) million low income households" (Sec. 4.c). For this reason, the Duterte administration allocated Php100.9 billion (US\$2 billion) called the Social Amelioration Program (SAP), which was to be distributed by the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD).

But based on the monitoring efforts of Government Watch (G-Watch), the distribution of SAP has

been marked by numerous problems, including extreme delays and allegations of non-compliance to standards. In addition, there has been no functioning mechanism for transparency, participation and accountability; and the hotlines that were provided by DSWD were hardly functioning.

Though the Bayanihan to Heal as One Act stipulates that the President has to submit monthly reports to Congress, the information that have been provided were far from adequate. And when the law was extended for another two months, Duterte simply ceased sending reports altogether.

The administration chose this option even though the first tranche of SAP distribution was only completed late that month, while the payout for the second tranche only began a week before the law was scheduled to lapse. Hence, from July to October, there was no official consolidated report on how the emergency aid was disbursed and used by the government.

In fact, Duterte only resumed sending his reports on 3 November--nearly two months after signing the Bayanihan to Recover as One Act on 11 September. But unlike the weekly reporting under Bayanihan 1, the new measure called Bayanihan 2 only requires monthly reports from the President. Despite this more lenient provision, the President still failed to submit his report for October, while the information contained in the succeeding reports were paltry at best. This gesture of the President has severe ramifications, since it practically turned the Social Amelioration Program into a black box.

For its part, DSWD has yet to release its comprehensive report on the second tranche of SAP distribution, which (according to G-Watchers on the ground) has not yet been completed to this day. At the same time, the Commission on Audit (COA) had also pledged to look into the disbursement of the COVID-19 funds, but no findings have so far been released.

It can be argued that the country continues to survive in spite of the pandemic due largely to the noteworthy performance of many local government units (LGUs). Local governments have, in fact, stepped up in filling the gaps on the immediate relief needed by their constituents as the national government imposed a lockdown in March 2020; in setting up containment and contact tracing mechanisms; and in providing healthcare. This year, with the slow and controversial efforts of the national government on the country's vaccination campaign, numerous LGUs have put it upon themselves to secure vaccine deals for their localities. Yet, LGU vaccination efforts continue to be hampered by unnecessarily tight controls by the national government that is slow in giving necessary guidance and approvals to LGUs for the vaccination.

Growing state repressive measures could make elections violent, dirty and unfree

Despite the pandemic, the Duterte government continues to prioritize the security agenda, particularly the anti-insurgency and anti-drug campaigns. This has resulted in the continuing human rights crisis and fast degradation of the rule of law in the country.

In July 2020, Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported that “‘drug war’ killings intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, as did unnecessary arrests.” HRW accounted a 50% increase in drug war killings in the early period of the pandemic. HRW also noted that “attacks by the police, military, and unidentified gunmen on leftist activists, community and Indigenous leaders, human rights defenders, and journalists also increased during the year” with a total of 120 activists killed since President Duterte became president (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/01/13/philippines-drug-war-killings-rise-during-pandemic>).

Freedom House’s Freedom in the World 2021 report concurs the worsening situation of human rights in the Philippines. Rating the Philippines “partly free,” the report says, “Impunity remains the norm for violent crimes against activists and journalists, and President Rodrigo Duterte’s war on drugs since 2016 has led to thousands of extrajudicial killings.”

The counter-insurgency program of the government is being handled by the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC). Activated in December 2018 under Executive Order 70, the NTF-ELCAC even became stronger during the pandemic with the budget for 2021 amounting to Php 19.1 billion (US\$382 million). According to official documents, the banner program of the NTF-ELCAC is the Barangay Development Program (BDP), “a package of socioeconomic development programs earmarked for areas cleared of communist infestation.” Php20 million (US\$400,000) is said to be distributed to each of barangays under the BDP. This is deemed as “the general’s pork.” In 2020, the BDP had a whopping Php16.4 billion (US\$328,000) said to be allocated to 197 local government units. A huge chunk of which (Php 4.3 billion or US\$86 million) went to Davao City where President Duterte’s daughter is mayor. (see <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/mapped-davao-wins-big-national-task-force-end-local-communist-armed-conflict-barangay-program>).

Some senators have asked for a probe on the NTF-ELCAC in a Senate resolution, accusing it of being improperly used for red-tagging and cracking down on dissent. The Senate resolution also pointed out the need to review the performance of the program and audit how its funds are being utilized (see <https://www.rappler.com/nation/senators-seek-probe-ntf-elcac-budget>).

There is fear that the counter-insurgency campaigns led by well-oiled NTF-ELCAC will be used in the elections, particularly in consolidating power of the ruling power. It is in light of this that civil society must be activated to ensure that the elections remain fair and honest.

Turning elections into an accountability platform

The dismal performance of the national government in handling the COVID-19 crisis is going to be the backdrop of the 2022 elections. It has to be. The 2022 elections will also be critical in reaffirming many democratic values that has been under threat for the past years, such as inviolability of human rights, the rule of law, and the principle that a public office is public trust since all power emanates from the people.

The 2022 poll has to be turned into an accountability platform that holds the incumbent to account. This is indeed a tall order as studies like Yoko Kasuya in the book *Presidential Bandwagon* (2008) states that patronage and personality – and not performance – are the main basis for voting of



Filipinos. Yet, not taking any action will only perpetuate bad governance where the accountability relationship between the government and citizens is weak and non-existent.

One approach to strengthen the accountability dimension of elections is to extend pre- and post-election accountability efforts to the campaign and electoral exercise, treating them as part of a continuum. Though challenged and weak, there have been numerous efforts holding the COVID-19 response of the Philippines to account. G-Watch notes some of the earlier citizen accountability efforts: <https://www.g-watch.org/think-piece/citizen-accountability-efforts-integral-part-philippines-covid-19-response>. Bayanihan 1 required the Executive to report to Congress and there have also been investigation in the Senate and the House of Representatives, with several senators calling out the government for its bad handling of COVID-19. Despite attacks, the media continue to be prolific in unearthing information about government actions and inactions in responding to the pandemic.

The term ‘Accountability Politics’ is coined by scholar-activist Jonathan Fox to provide an encompassing and integrated framework for accountability that recognizes the centrality of contestation and conflict in holding power to account. Accountability politics “encompasses the full range of public spheres within which actors determine whether and how to hold power-holders to account for their decisions” (Fox 2007: 32). Characterized by the use of multiple

strategies across scale, the notion of accountability politics involves “challenging who is accountable to whom, as clients become citizens and bureaucrats become public servants” (ibid.: 1-2). It is also meant to address the main limitation of social accountability “since the concept is not designed to get inside the state (or) at the processes that mediate the impact of external pressure on actual institutional behavior” (ibid.: 33).

G-Watch has been using the term ‘accountability continuum’ in its past voters’ education programs to refer to how the different accountability mechanisms are supposed to be connected - that accountability efforts in governance should be linked to elections as an accountability mechanism and to be connected to post-elections governance. Halloran (2015) uses the concept of ‘accountability ecosystem,’ which “encompasses the diversity of formal and informal paths toward and influences on real accountability. This includes formal state processes that are vertical, for example between citizens and their representatives via periodic elections, and horizontal through state checks and balances, such as legislative oversight of executive power and official state accountability institutions.”

G-Watch citizenship education campaign for 2022 elections

Government Watch (G-Watch) is an independent citizen action and research for accountability that aims to contribute in the deepening of democracy through political reform and citizen empowerment. G-Watch has had two decades of experience in citizen monitoring and action research on transparency, participation and accountability.

G-Watch has always been engaging elections as part of its holistic and integrated approach to accountability. G-Watch has conducted various research on electoral and political party reform. In its past electoral engagement, it held agenda-setting consultations, voters education seminars and fact-checking initiatives. It has also been studying the role of citizen movements in elections. In 2012, G-Watch’s sister program



in the Ateneo School of Government, Political Democracy and Reforms (PODER), released a book

looking into how social movements have utilized the elections to advance pro-people reform agenda (see <https://www.g-watch.org/resources/political-democracy-and-reforms-poder-studies/infusing-reform-elections-post-martial-law-philippines>).

Recently, G-Watch released a think piece on how the recent referendum in Palawan showed how citizens can draw the line to thwart attempted power-grab of elites through multi-level citizen campaigns. The citizens of Palawan were organized and activated through clear advocacy calls that reveal the ill-intent of the ruling elite on their policy move to divide Palawan. This points to the importance of messages that capture the essence of an accountability campaign (see <https://www.g-watch.org/think-piece/one-palawan-lang-national-significance-palawan-plebiscite>).

G-Watch views the upcoming polls in 2022 as an extremely important terrain that has to be engaged, and that would complement other accountability efforts that are being undertaken before, after, beyond and in-between elections. G-Watch is undertaking MEAP, a series of citizenship education sessions in communities and cities all over the country, to turn the 2022 elections as an accountability platform crucial to protecting and advancing democracy.

Filipinos must hold their leaders to account, and they can do so by making sure that they will wield the ballot with the other powers and responsibilities they hold as citizens in a democracy.

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