

Editorial: Protecting the vote

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FREE AND HONEST.. The fight to make the 2016 elections truly reflective of the people’s will is now waged on social media. Stakeholders must also go online to monitor, balance and counter political agenda that does not prioritize public welfare. **(File Foto)**

THE 30th anniversary of the EDSA People Power Revolution highlighted the mobilization of Marcos survivors and activists who oppose the vice-presidential bid of the former strongman’s son, Sen. Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr.

According to Elias O. Baquero’s Feb. 28 report in Sun.Star Cebu, the Anti-Bongbong Coalition (ABC), which recently held a general assembly in Cebu, said it was also fighting systematic attempts to rewrite Philippine history through portrayals of martial law as beneficial to society.

The ABC is one of the civil society groups adamant about educating millennials, who are most vulnerable to historical revisionism, on the importance of fighting for democracy and human rights, an indelible lesson from the Marcos years.

Educating voters

Fighting for democracy does not only mean countering historical revisionism. One of the most lasting impressions left by martial law was the importance of citizens' participation in protecting the vote.

Long before the "Hello, Garci" scandal embroiled President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo in the political crisis arising from her alleged rigging of the 2004 national elections, President Ferdinand Marcos set a path of infamy by using the dirty tactics of "guns, goons and gold" to rig the elections to his favor, starting with the 1969 national polls where he "won" re-election.

Since that time until the 1986 Snap Elections, when Marcos and his Kilusang Bagong Lipunan (KBL) vice-presidential running mate Arturo Tolentino were declared victorious over opposition flag-bearers Corazon C. Aquino and Salvador H. Laurel, violence, vote-buying and fraud marred the exercise of right of suffrage in the country.

However, despite the high personal cost of holding a true and fair election, many citizens went up against electoral fraud. The National Citizens' Movement for Free Elections (Namfrel) and its counterpart, the Cebu Citizens Involvement and Maturation for People Empowerment and Liberation (C-Cimpel), led the grassroots movement to advocate and undertake non-partisan election monitoring in a bid to break the hold of guns, goons and gold over the elections.

The Namfrel was the election watchdog that exposed the fraud orchestrated by Marcos during the 1986 Snap Elections.

The EDSA People Power Revolution also yielded an important insight: dictatorship is not the only threat derailing elections. Until the present, civil society leads in undertaking voters' literacy. Partnerships between religious groups, academe, civic organizations, media and other stakeholders take on the important role of education: helping voters discern the qualities needed in the leaders they will elect, and guiding them on how to ensure that elections will be "free, orderly and honest."

New media stake

The elections have dramatically transformed in the age of social media. The popularity of social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and YouTube among Filipinos, with an estimated 48 million actively using the sites, underscores the need for vigilance in monitoring the use of social media during elections.

In another article on Feb. 28, Sun.Star Cebu's Baquero reported that the Commission on Elections (Comelec) is not yet monitoring social media campaigning, unlike traditional activities.

New media etiquette emphasizes freedom of expression and, corollary to this, self-regulation. However, netizens and other election watchdogs must be vigilant how social media can be manipulated to serve the interests of politicians.

The ABC and other anti-Marcos activists have already sounded off the alert about the social media attempts of Marcos apologists to whitewash martial law as benefiting the country. While the high cost of martial law cannot be forgotten by survivors, the millennial generation, who are also digital natives that depend on social media for their information and other communication needs, is vulnerable to historical revisionism.

Taking electoral monitoring to the digital portal doesn't just require vigilance in monitoring social media messages but also activism in using the new media, with its better mechanisms for real-time engagement and interactivity. For instance, the C-Cimpel has a Facebook page that can be visited by citizens and the media for inquiries about the elections.

While the Comelec has to create regulations on the use of social media for electoral campaign, netizens and other stakeholders should contribute to online voters' literacy, digital self-regulation, and the dissemination of alternative messages balancing the different candidates' political agenda proliferating on the web.

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<http://www.sunstar.com.ph/cebu/opinion/2016/02/28/editorial-protecting-vote-459796>

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