


## Electoralism, Ritual Process, and Voter Rationalities in Southeast Asia



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[ *Abstract* ]

Southeast Asians participate in elections eagerly, a fact indexed by the high electoral participation rates across a range of political conditions in the region. What gives elections in Southeast Asia such high legitimacy? Using data from Indonesia and the Philippines, this article emphasizes the need to understand peoples' rationalities, which are informed by meanings generated by prevailing cultural practices. From this perspective, electoralism can be understood as a cultural phenomenon that conforms to the structure of a ritual. Despite the democratic deficit in many electoral exercises, elections share the attractiveness and fun of traditional community festivities. Voters participate in elections as a testament to membership in a community. Although they do not always transform the existing social arrangements, elections embed contradictory impulses in the same way that cockfights do. A procedure of formal democracy authored elsewhere, electoralism has been localized in Southeast Asia and invested with indigenous significance.

**Keywords:** elections, voter turnout, ritual process, festival of democracy, cockfighting

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## **I . Southeast Asians and Elections**

Southeast Asians are well acquainted with elections. From 1907 to 2001, data collated by Aurel Croissant (2002: 322 - 23) show that Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand collectively held 100 direct presidential and legislative elections.<sup>1</sup> Focusing on 1907 for the Philippines, 1918 for the Netherlands East Indies (now Indonesia), and 1933 for Siam (now Thailand), Benedict Anderson (1998: 265) argues that national-level elections were introduced “on the heels of, and [were] a clear response to, political crisis.”

But for elections to “have real policy outcomes satisfactory to substantial sections of the voting population” there need to exist a “strong state” with a “coherent civil bureaucracy capable of enforcing electorally generated policies” (ibid.: 283), a condition that is not easy to meet in Southeast Asia. Yet elections have been held in the region repeatedly, for different reasons: as a staged-managed tool for political legitimacy of authoritarian rule; as restricted competition used by the powerholders for political integration and consolidation; and as a means of open competition, usually among the elite, but also as a means for political participation (cf. Croissant 2002: 324).

“Under conditions where elections have no visible positive policy outcomes for substantial social groups,” Anderson (1998: 284) argues, “one should not be surprised to find that they are meaningful only when, under rare favourable historical circumstances, their tallies can be read as a fundamental repudiation of the rulers.” These rare occurrences include the “snap” presidential elections that Ferdinand Marcos called in 1986 (which was meant to be a staged-managed exercise that slipped out of Marcos’s grip) and the general elections in Myanmar in 1990 (the results of which the ruling military junta refused to recognize).

Nonetheless, although voters may not expect a fundamental change in state policy in most polls, Southeast Asians generally participate in elections eagerly, as evinced by the region’s

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<sup>1</sup> Croissant (2002) makes no claim that his tally is exhaustive.

comparatively high rates of citizens' electoral participation. For nineteen national legislative ("parliamentary") elections held from 1998 to 2011, Scot Schraufnagel, Michael Buehler, and Maureen Lowry-Fritz (2014: 6 - 7) have calculated voter participation based on the voting-age population (rather than on the smaller number of registered voters), yielding the following average turnout rates: 36.9 percent in Singapore, 51.8 percent in Malaysia, 65 percent in the Philippines, 69.7 percent in Thailand, and 81.9 percent in Indonesia. Conventionally, such voter turnout has been "used as a yardstick for democratic 'progress' in old and new democracies as well as in democracies 'in the making,' as Southeast Asian countries often are characterized" (ibid.: 2).

Still, a close look at data from the Asia Barometer Survey conducted between 2006 and 2007 suggests a conundrum. Large majorities in the six Southeast Asian countries surveyed supported a democratic system; yet, large majorities or pluralities among the same survey respondents also expressed support for rule by experts, rule by a military government, and rule by a powerful leader (Carlson and Turner 2008: 226 - 27). Confronted with these data, Matthew Carlson and Mark Turner (ibid.: 227) opine, "there is likely to be much conceptual fuzziness in exactly how citizens in these countries react to the process of democratization," adding that "Citizen orientations in many Southeast Asian countries are not expected to be fully crystallized."

Juliet Pietsch (2015), who has also analyzed data from the Asia Barometer Survey, including data not analyzed by Carlson and Turner (2008), finds that the economy is regarded as more important than an abstract view of democracy. "On the whole, citizens in countries that are already classified as democracies have a very instrumental view of democracy. Economic performance and the capacity to provide health and welfare are rated more highly than the more abstract concept of democracy" (Pietsch 2015: 38).

Regardless of whether people's conception of democracy is fuzzy or their approach to it is instrumental, the Asia Barometer Survey data indicate that, when it comes to elections, "there is considerable satisfaction with the right to vote" (Carlson and Turner

2008: 230). The numbers are overwhelming: “Satisfaction is highest in Cambodia (96.4 per cent), Malaysia (96.2 per cent) and Singapore (95.1 per cent) followed by Thailand (93.8 per cent), the Philippines (89.9 per cent) and Indonesia (88.7 per cent)” (ibid.). Carlson and Turner (ibid.) conclude, “The high levels of satisfaction suggest that these Southeast Asian countries easily meet minimalist definitions of democracy as far as the voting and election process is concerned.”

Interestingly, the satisfaction rate is relatively lower in Indonesia and the Philippines, countries that in recent years Freedom House has rated as either “Free” or “Partially Free” unlike other countries in the region that have not garnered a “Free” rating at all. Cambodia, which Freedom House has rated consistently as “Not Free,” has the highest rate of satisfaction with elections—a most intriguing observation. Moreover, a majority of respondents in the countries studied (except Singapore) agreed that “people who are elected stop thinking about the public once they are elected” (ibid.: 232), indicating a popular perception of politicians as not interested in the common good. Taken at face value, the respondents seem to say, “The candidates we vote for really don’t care about us, but we are very satisfied with our right to vote.” Rather than dismissing these findings as indicating false consciousness or confusion, they compel us to take the data with all seriousness and search for an explanation.

What provides elections in Southeast Asia such high legitimacy? How do ordinary voters view elections (a perspective that evidently differs from those of academics and activists)? In seeking an explanation for this enigma, we need to delve into popular notions of elections for us to be able to comprehend the seemingly contradictory findings of the studies mentioned. We need to understand peoples’ rationalities, which are informed by the meanings generated by prevailing cultural practices. As argued in this article, elections can be understood as constituting a cultural phenomenon that conforms to the structure of a ritual, which include public spectacles that draw in and magnetize crowds. Through the entertainment they provide, elections share the attractiveness and fun of traditional community festivities. As a testament to community membership, voters participate in elections

just as they do in other community rituals. These points are made using information from historical and ethnographic studies in Indonesia and the Philippines.

## II . Elections as Ritual Process

As I have argued previously (Aguilar 1994; 2007), elections constitute a ritualized social practice, with each election filled with ritual performances involving the candidates running for office, their respective campaign teams and supporters, the voters and the general public, the state agency that oversees elections and, in recent years, traditional and new media as well as opinion polling firms. As Myrna Alejo, Maria Elena Rivera, and Noel Inocencio Valencia (1996: 77) have also observed, “An election period can be seen as an ensemble of rituals ranging from what we would call the dramaturgical rites engaged in by politicians during their campaigns to the election day itself—the grand ritual through which a political institution is renewed and conferred legitimacy.”

The ritual process occurs within a defined time. In the Philippines the official campaign period lasts forty-five days for local candidates and ninety days for national candidates. In Indonesia the official campaign period runs about three or four weeks, but actual campaigning is often restricted to Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays only, ostensibly to maintain order and avert violence.

Prior to the official start of the campaign, however, some discreet events point to the forthcoming elections. Voter registration is a crucial step in the electoral process, which is not marked by any fanfare but one in which political machinations begin to come into play. The other major event is the filing of candidacy at the office of the Philippine Commission on Elections, which is done for effect often at the last minute and staged with some fanfare, with the candidate’s arrival often accompanied by a small crowd of supporters. Beginning with the filing of candidacy, every legitimate election-related act is magnified for the immediate circle of witnesses as well as for the general public, who become vicarious spectators of election events reported in the mass media.

Taken as a whole, the campaign period conforms to the basic structure of a ritual famously analyzed by Victor Turner (1967). As soon as the campaign period begins, liminality sets in. The usual structural status of the contenders in an election is suspended; one does not know who of the candidates will win. In the meantime – the meantime defined as the formal campaign period – the candidates are neither ordinary citizens nor officeholders. Electoral candidates are betwixt and between, transitional beings in a state of ambiguity and occupying a structural position of paradox. Before the end is reached, there are many sacrificial acts – or, at least, acts that test one’s physical, social, and emotional endurance and suitability for office – that candidates must undergo.

Importantly, candidates for national positions are expected to move around the country during the campaign. They visit all the major regional capital cities, giving due importance to the local as indispensable to the national. Through these visits “down to the grassroots,” the candidates are physically seen and heard, usually in rallies; they touch the masses through handshakes and in return are touched by the people – a physical encounter that unites the candidate with the mass of electors. The national candidates’ movements around the country are akin to the “progress” of rulers of ancient realms and are extensively featured in the mass media. These visitations are often referred to as “sorties,” but a military connotation is not implied. Rather, the physical movement around the country of, say, a presidential candidate is an indispensable vote-getting strategy; it also evinces a candidate’s presidential quality and signifies a form of reconnaissance of the territory one hopes to rule.

During the campaign period in the Philippines, the ubiquitous display of placards and streamers, the plastering of candidates’ posters on posts and fences around the neighborhood, and the mass distribution of leaflets in every habitable place indicate a period of filth that goes beyond the everyday dirt of the town, city, and metropolis. Similarly, in Indonesia, elections mean that a place can be “full of party symbols and flags, often two or three flags on the same pole and several stickers on the same window” (Antlöv 2004b: 127). Since 2004, when direct presidential elections were instituted

in Indonesia so that voters choose candidates rather than parties, billboards and posters have carried images of candidates who are photographed as though they were already in power. This practice is generally replicated at the provincial, municipal, and regency levels since the start of *pilkada* or direct subnational elections in 2005, although a few candidates use informal images to convey local familiarity and local leadership (Lindsay 2009: 214 - 17). In addition to the visual, the auditory senses of voters are bombarded with campaign slogans, jingles, and political advertising.

The campaign period is intentionally one of excess. As participants in a study on the “vote of the poor” conducted in 2004 by the Institute of Philippine Culture (IPC), Ateneo de Manila University, explained, elections signify the moment when the country is awash with money (*panagpadawat ti kuwarta; labasan ng pera*), which is also an opportunity for them to receive aid (*tulong na binibigay; pera at bigas na binibigay ng kandidato*) or earn a living (*pagkaka-perahan, pagkakakitaan*) (IPC 2005: 48 - 49). Indonesian elections are similarly a time of “money politics” (Hidayat 2009; Aspinall 2014; Aspinall et al. 2017). The IPC respondents also said that elections are a time of chaos and conflict, likening it to “a chaotic battle” (*tulad ng giyera na magulo*), a “raging war” (*isang digmaan na nag-aalab*), “an exploding bomb” (*isang bomba na pinapasabog*), and a “fatal disease” (*isang sakit na nakamamatay*) (ibid.: 56). The chaos is tolerated and accepted, and transgressions become normative. During this period, even violence and killings, especially of henchmen, are easily explainable. In Indonesia, in the first election held in 1999 after Suharto’s downfall, party supporters “took all opportunities during the campaign to display their emotions,” and in some places “groups of young men from different parties clashed with each other” (Antlöv 2004b: 127). One can argue that without excess (which may manifest differently in the two countries) Filipinos and Indonesians would not recognize the period as pertaining properly to that of an election campaign.

After the rigors of the campaign comes election day. Voters endure the tropical heat and the crowds as they queue to vote, often compounded by the confusion of locating their exact polling precincts. Under the appropriate circumstances, the end of the

voters' sacrifice is the satisfaction of casting their votes, this act being the ritual within the ritual. On the part of the candidates, the act of dropping the ballot into the ballot box is memorialized through a customary pose for the cameras. For the voters casting one's vote may involve a range of meanings, from the formal significance of the individual acting as part of a people in whom sovereignty resides to repaying a debt of gratitude to an incumbent or the officeholder's allies, expressing hope for one's favorite candidate, or even getting even with a politician by not voting for that candidate. Prior to the automation of Philippine elections in 2010, voters had to write the names of candidates on the ballot for all positions being contested; with automation, voters simply darken circles beside the candidate's name. Prior to automation, the reading of names on every ballot (known as "canvassing") was a slow and heavily guarded procedure to ensure accuracy and honesty; with automation, the number of votes garnered by each candidate is generated automatically by the machine. After the votes from all precincts are aggregated and officially announced, the period of liminality ends as the winning candidates are declared. In this sense, elections as ritual differ from the rituals analyzed by Turner in that participants in the electoral ritual always do not all end with an elevated status at the ritual's conclusion, for inevitably only the winning candidates assume office. The ritual can be seen, therefore, as a contest of weeding out other liminal beings.

Voters are key participants in this ritual process because, on election day, the aggregation of their individual votes determines, in theory, the outcome of the election. Indeed, the excessive sociality of the campaign period reaches its apogee in the isolated and solitary, and to this extent unsocial, act of voting, which Anderson (1998: 267) has described as "almost the only political act imaginable in perfect solitude, and it is completely symbolic." But the individual who casts a single vote expresses a voice, encapsulated in the Indonesian word *suara*, which is the same word for voice and vote (Lindsay 2007: 55).

The period of liminality, the campaign period, is a time out of joint, not just for the candidates but also for the voters who need to make choices and to make those choices legible by the umpires



of this contest on election day. Within this big ritual are the smaller rituals that are most evident during the campaign. As they await the end of the ritual contest, voters undergo the campaign period by participating in what is essentially a social spectacle that is replete with fun and excitement, noise and money, but also conflict and even violence, quite unlike what happens in their quotidian lives.

By arguing for viewing elections as a ritual process, I am not referring to “political ritualism” as Croissant (2002, 324) calls elections as a state-managed instrument for political legitimacy and mobilization, as in Cambodia before 1993, Indonesia between 1955 and 1999, and the Philippines from 1972 to 1986. Glenn May (1987) has also called municipal elections for the post of town magistrate (*gobernadorcillo*) in the Spanish Philippines as ritualism. However, regardless of the extent to which the state orchestrates an election, which may be a total farce, the ritual structure in an election is present.

As discussed below, elections in England used to be close analogs of contemporary elections in Southeast Asia. In time, electoral reforms, particularly the introduction of the Australian ballot (the system of secret voting in which voters mark their choice of candidates on a uniform piece of paper printed and distributed by the state), the rise of the Conservative and Liberal parties, and the general embourgeoisement of society led to the decline of overt ritual practices by the mid-nineteenth century. Notwithstanding the general erasure of old electoral rituals in Western liberal democracies, however, new electoral practices have been invented and institutionalized, and elections remain deeply ritualistic “grand social events” (Orr 2016; cf. McLeod 1999). As Clifford Geertz (1983: 144-46) suggested, despite the deployment of a different set of idioms compared with ancient rulers and wielders of charisma, modern politics retains ritualism at its core, indicative of “the inherent sacredness of central authority.”

### III. Campaign Events and Entertainment

Probably cognizant of this ritual aspect, the New Order in Indonesia

staged costly legitimacy-affirming elections that it began to call in 1982 as *pesta demokrasi*, festival of democracy (Antlöv 2004a: 2; Lindsay 2007: 64). The exact translation of this term to English has been the subject of some debate. John Pemberton (1986: 4) contends that the phrase ought to be rendered as Formal Democracy Reception, because *pesta* “usually refers to formal receptions regularly tied to public ceremonies and domestic rituals,” particularly “a Javanese-Indonesian ceremonial wedding reception where guests are ushered to socially predesignated seats to act as entertained but quiet witnesses for an event executed with close to perfect predictability—as well as, perhaps, a hint of festivity.” However, Jennifer Lindsay (2007: 64) contends that a more apt translation would be “democracy party,” which has “connotations of both fun and ceremony.” During an election campaign members of the public are far from “quiet witnesses,” and they don’t have to merely “act as entertained,” as Pemberton (1986: 4) puts it, because they really are entertained. Even after the passing of the New Order *pesta demokrasi* continues to be used to refer to elections in Indonesia, Lindsay (2007: 64) argues, because it “conveys a sense of an event that is both celebratory and regulated, where there are patrons who provide generously, where people come and participate and have a sense of being a participant, and where an integral part of that sense is the partaking of the entertainment provided for them.”

Indeed, even in non-authoritarian contexts, the state regulates elections and defines its parameters, clarifying what activities are allowed or specifying those that are prohibited, all to ensure a “level playing field” where “patrons” and “the people” are enabled to play their respective roles. Entertainment is an “integral” component of this ritual process as a means to mobilize people to participate in the “festival of democracy.”

In fact, providing entertainment is an old tactic used by rulers to entice people, such as in the Spanish Philippines where, since the start of colonial rule in the late sixteenth century, the “fiesta system” was used to entice large numbers of the populace who lived in outlying areas to flock to the village or town center to take part in festivities that served to legitimize the colonial state. In his classic

*The Hispanization of the Philippines*, John Leddy Phelan (1967: 73) explained, “Not only did the fiestas provide a splendid opportunity to indoctrinate the Filipinos by the performance of religious rituals, but they also afforded the participants a welcome holiday from the drudgery of toil.” An integral part of the fiesta celebration was entertainment in the form of cockfighting, which magnetized people to the town center on Sundays, where they would attend the Catholic Mass after which they went to the cockpit to have fun. In the late nineteenth century sugar planters in colonial Negros held cockfighting on their haciendas, even if it was illegal to do so, as a means to attract and domesticate what otherwise would have been a transient and recalcitrant labor force (Aguilar 1998: 146-149).

That fun within a ritual structure is politically expedient can be seen in the manner of election campaigns for members of parliament in England in the 1780s to the 1860s. The entry of a candidate to a constituency was carefully choreographed “to arouse and display local enthusiasm,” with crowds forming a procession, together with musical accompaniment, in order to greet the candidate at some designated point outside town: “After unhorsing his carriage, they themselves would pull the candidate *into* the town, amid general acclamation” (O’Gorman 1992: 83). As Frank O’Gorman (*ibid.*: 84) points out, the “magnificence and splendour” of the arrival of candidates “were reminiscent of the magisterial royal entries into cities of earlier centuries.” During the campaign, candidates had “to court and to flatter the voters and their families” (*ibid.*: 85). Public meals and picnics spiced with entertainment were organized to woo voters. On nomination day, each candidate hosted a breakfast of huge, sometimes “epic,” proportion, after which those who ate “made their way in formal procession to the hustings” (*ibid.*:85), where speeches were made to an excited throng that displayed the party colors. The nomination day would end in “competitive parading” (*ibid.*: 89), as each candidate marched in the streets, “bedecked in the party colors and accompanied by musicians” as well as a crowd of supporters. Voting in the public square was by means of the raising of hands. After the announcement of the victorious candidates came the climax, the “chairing ritual” when the people went “out on the streets, on

display, colorful and festive,” to celebrate their new representatives by watching an elaborate and long procession that began with “magnificently dressed horsemen” followed by a band of musicians, the victorious party, and the expensively decorated chair itself on which sat the victor, followed by supporters carefully organized and ranked based on occupational groupings (ibid.: 90). Despite the substantive issues raised during the campaign, O’Gorman (ibid.: 93) contends that, in these community events, “there can be no denying the fact that participation in election rituals must primarily have been experienced by those involved as a form of entertainment.”

Analogous elements of colorful, musical, boisterous, and entertaining election rituals are found in Southeast Asia. In the Philippines the campaign jingle of national candidates is an old mainstay of elections, with Ramon Magsaysay, who ran for president in 1953, said to have essayed the practice of crafting campaign jingles.<sup>2</sup> In Indonesia the *pawai* or motorized parades are a central feature of the campaign for national positions.<sup>3</sup> Lindsay (2007: 59) describes these parades as involving many young men riding motorbikes, “with the mufflers removed so to make as much noise as they can revving the bikes to a rhythmic pattern,” as well as decorated trucks and buses, but especially “open transport” so that political supporters attired in the party’s color are visible and easily heard when they shout the party’s slogans. Interestingly, participants receive free t-shirts and “petrol money,” but they are not forbidden from joining the parades of other parties (ibid.: 59). Because the *pawai* draws from the tradition of community parades and religious festivities, Lindsay (ibid.: 60) argues that “The election campaign has adopted this festive custom that has both a secular national and a religious association and made it into a particular display of physical mass support.” The parade participants have fun, and the public that watches this spectacle also derive entertainment, even as they become recipients of political messages.

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<sup>2</sup> “Mambo Magsaysay” was one of the most memorable campaign jingles in the postwar period. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4uzEQkojDJc>. (Accessed March 29, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> For a motorized parade in Indonesia, see [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bZga\\_ke\\_ttk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bZga_ke_ttk). (Accessed March 23, 2017).

There are also motorcades in the Philippines, but these are not as elaborate as those in Indonesia. More often, a vehicle with a loudspeaker will go around a neighborhood blaring out messages or songs to promote a particular candidate. People do not necessarily stand on the street and watch, except perhaps when the passing motorcade carries a presidential candidate, who together with the candidate's aides dispenses goodies—baller bands being a recent, popular item—to the people by the roadside. Although less elaborate than the *pawai* in Indonesia, the motorized campaign in the Philippines is similar to the Indonesian practice in terms of the level of noise, which exceeds levels observed on a normal day. As one participant in the IPC (2005: 56) study on the “vote of the poor,” when asked to think of analogies for elections, said that it is like “a blaring radio” (*tulad ng radyo na maingay*). Other participants in the IPC study used metaphors that capture the sense of elections as a festivity: a rural female compared elections to “a wedding with so much food and people asking for money” (*kasalan na may karakanan, haragadan kwarta ang mga tao*), while an urban male compared elections to the local *sinulog* festival that draws and pulls together a dense crowd (*pareha ug sinulog daghan kaayo ang mga tawo nga mudugok*) (ibid.: 53 - 54).

Campaign events are occasions for the high visibility of people, who form a crowd of spectators and participants whose density become emblematic of elections. In the Philippines crowds are mobilized to attend campaign rallies that visualize the candidate's numerical strength not only to those present but also to those who view images of these rallies through television. The crowd as show of strength can be used to convince non-committed electors to vote for particular candidates. The crowd itself is largely partisan, but there can be curious observers and onlookers. Usually held at nighttime, these rallies feature not only the candidates' political speeches but also the performances of stars, celebrities, and other entertainers who sing and dance to amuse the crowd. Candidates also sing with these professional performers, but candidates can perform by themselves also, usually to the delight of the crowd, regardless of the quality of the performance. As one urban male respondent in the IPC (2005: 54) study said, elections are like “a

drama that involves numerous dramatic performers and artists" (*Usa ka drama, nga daghan ug dramaturgo o artista*).

The most important political rally is the *miting de avance*, a term that conjoins the English word "meeting" with the Spanish "de avance" (advance), which is held at the conclusion of the campaign period, followed by a weekend of no campaigning, leading to election day, usually a Monday. For national candidates, the *miting de avance* is held in a politically significant location, since these events are broadcast live over television. As in any campaign rally, the speeches are conventionalized, with the usual attacks on the opposing candidate, often delivered in a manner that elicits laughter from the mass of supporters. But the event must also provide entertainment through performances. In the Philippines, this practice is replicated at the local level, even to the level of the village. Although at a much-reduced scale, the *miting de avance* held in the village center has a "festive air," akin to the village fiesta (Alejo et al. 1996: 32 - 33). In one instance observed by Alejo et al. (ibid.: 36), the event "was more of a musical extravaganza with some 'political ads' thrown in between each number than a serious political rally with song numbers thrown in between each politician's speech." There was "even a singing contest" (ibid.:36). This *miting de avance* was attended by the incumbent congressman whose arrival resonated with the entry of a candidate to an English constituency in the nineteenth century, this time with a band playing "a rousing campaign ditty" as the politician waded through the crowd, "shaking the hands of those near him and waving his hands at those standing at a distance"; "amid the cheers and the applause, the emcee called out to the crowd to chant" the congressman's name as he made his way to the stage (ibid.: 37).

Indonesian presidential campaign rallies have an intentionally festive atmosphere akin to the traditional night fair, the *pasar malam* (Lindsay 2007: 63) Thus, although rallies are held in the daytime, they resonate with the fair. The crowd is partisan, composed of the party's male supporters who flock to the event to be entertained. In this light, according to Lindsay (ibid.: 61), "performances have been a constant feature of campaign rallies from the beginning of the national elections until the present."

During the New Order local performers were hired to entertain the crowd during the campaign, but the ruling Golkar also sought “the affiliation of ‘big name’ or ‘star’ performers . . . to endorse its message of development” (ibid.: 61). After the fall of Suharto in 1998, performing artists have continued to participate in rally events, except that they can lend their services to any event without having to endorse any party (ibid.: 62)—a freedom not quite evident in the Philippines, where performance and endorsement are seen as going hand in hand. Village-level rallies as part of a national campaign also feature hours of entertainment. A rally may start “with a *joget* performance, an immensely popular form of entertainment in which one or two professional female dancers invite selected people from among the onlookers to come to the stage and dance opposite them,” or it may feature a drama performance, “the immensely popular *Cupak Grantang*,” or an abbreviated version of a *wayang* with the indispensable clowns whose performances are “spontaneous and adapted to suit local circumstances” and who speak about elections in allegorical terms (Cederroth 2004: 92 - 93, 98 - 99). However, in local-level direct elections (*pilkada*), there may not be “the money or clout to hire big-name national performers or celebrities from Jakarta” (Lindsay 2009: 217), leaving local candidates to become the main entertainers.

In Indonesia “lively, loud and often overtly sensual performances” have been a feature of rallies, akin to fair and wedding receptions (Lindsay 2007: 63). However, “Given the heated national-level debate in Indonesia about performance, female movement, and dress, and given the increasing power of the Islamic religious right to determine moral standards and enforce them, often through intimidation and violence, these days the choice of performance for any public event is increasingly sensitive” (Lindsay 2009: 219). Thus, some performances have become overtly Islamic, exhorting the public to piety and good behavior. One campaign strategy is for candidates to sponsor Quran readings, “which draw attention away from performance as entertainment, and instead highlight the performance of public piety” (ibid.: 220). Although overt religiosity is not a campaign strategy in the Philippines, there is a limit to “dirty dancing” in campaign rallies—with a politician,

Francis Tolentino, failing to get into the senatorial lineup of a major party in the 2016 elections for sponsoring sexy dancers in a pre-election event that was not even a public rally (*Philippine Daily Inquirer* 2015).

Indonesia offers the interesting case of candidates for president and vice-president performing in a serious talent show on television by singing or reading poetry. In June 2004, these candidates performed and were subjected to the critical scrutiny of a jury composed of professional performers. “Ostensibly, this was to soften their image, to help them relate to the public at a human level, but their competition *as* performers became quite serious” (Lindsay 2007: 67). The following month, “on 4 July, less than 12 hours before the polls opened,” several presidential and vice-presidential candidates appeared in a national program and “were asked to sing, perform and tell stories about themselves” (ibid.: 67). Except for one candidate, they all sang Indonesian pop songs. In between these performances, two presidential debates took place on two different dates. In the Philippines, national candidates acting as serious performers on national television is unheard of, their best performance limited to presidential debates.

During the campaign, the range of entertaining performances by candidates as liminal beings do not invert social relationships, but they nonetheless signify that candidates are one with the people who love to sing and dance and who wish to be entertained. To their great delight, they could be entertained by someone who would otherwise not perform such an act in daily life. Once in office, the winning candidates are still expected to be in touch with the people, but no longer to entertain them. The campaign is the singular moment when there is a subtle reversal of social roles, in which aspirants to power symbolically demote themselves to the level of the ordinary citizen in an attempt to catch their vote.

Through various forms of entertainment and the mobilization of human bodies and frenetic energy, elections are able to draw people’s attention, ushering them to participate in a societal ritual that they may not have joined were it devoid of these attractions.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> In Thailand, “entertainment” was banned after 2001 when the Thai Rat Thai won



Indeed, the ritual is not limited to the electors, but everyone in society participates in this process. During the campaign the messages are intended for the general public, supporters and non-supporters, voters and non-voters, who are all caught up in a generalized atmosphere of excitement. Beyond the overt messages, members of the general public comprehend the electoral texts and structures from their own perspective. An internal discourse can be deciphered if one enters the milieu of ordinary voters as a way of unlocking the electoral ritual's cultural complexity. One possible interpretation from an emic standpoint is to see elections as a ritual structure akin to a gamble or a game of chance.

#### **IV. Elections as Cockfighting and Game of Chance**

Elsewhere I have argued (Aguilar 1994; 1998)—and I rehearse it here —that the electoral contest is intimately related to the notion of gambling, both as a game and as a worldview, a cultural formation that emerged in response to the exigencies of colonial rule. In the wake of the Spanish conquest of the Philippines in the late sixteenth century, the natives felt trapped between two colliding spirit-worlds, the indigenous and the Hispanic, compelling them to navigate between these two worlds. Spanish hegemony placed natives in the underdog position. Amid this power collision and cultural entrapment, natives cultivated a gambling worldview that sought to appease both worlds while hoping that, while they acquiesced to the dictates of one spirit-world, they would not be caught by the other spirit realm. The historical circumstance called for a wagering upon the odds of power. If one was found out and pinned down so that the equal appeasement of both realms was not possible, it was seen as a case of sheer bad luck. Otherwise the natives moved back and forth between the overlapping worlds of the indigenous and the colonial, submitting to colonial domination while concomitantly

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the majority of seats in parliament and the opposition contended it happened because of vote buying. Thanet (2017) explains that the ban is imposed on the night before the election and on election day itself as a means to curb the ferrying of voters to one place for a meal and entertainment, after which they are bussed to the polling stations.

subverting it. This strategy of simultaneous avoidance and acceptance was graphically encoded in the various forms of gambling that flourished under Spanish colonial rule, foremost of which was the cockfight—*bulang*, *sabong*, or *juego de gallos*—which the colonial state intentionally deployed to attract natives to the colonial center.

In the cockpit, the rule has been that only cocks of more-or-less equal prowess (with an even fighting chance) are matched in any fight, and that opposing bets are equalized before the fight can begin. This assumption of parity is reserved for the liminal period that starts from the matching of fowls and into the fight, when the idea of superiority/hierarchy is both affirmed and disbelieved, only to be confirmed after the fight. Despite their liminal status, one cock is invariably perceived as the superior one, while the other is seen as the underdog. Spectators wager on either of the fighting fowls.

In cockfighting the native could be entertained by what was essentially a cosmic battle, for the cocks were seen as standing for an otherworldly realm: either the indigenous or the Hispanic spirit-world. At the same time, the birds could be identified with concrete individuals: either the colonizer or the colonized native. The principle of identification with cocks is well established: “To anyone who has been in Bali any length of time, the deep psychological identification of men with their cocks is unmistakable,” observed Geertz (1973: 417), adding that “The double entendre here is deliberate.” Within this masculinist perspective, the fowls stood for social realities. Thus, as many commentators in the nineteenth-century colonial Philippines stated, ecstatic shouting rocked the cockpit whenever the underdog won—and the same behavior holds true to the present, as if to say that the poor, the subjugated, and the underdogs in society also have a fighting chance in life. The cockpit’s message is contradictory. On the one hand, hierarchy and dominance are omnipresent as the outcome validated the native concept of power being the rule of those favored by the spirit-world and therefore of the mighty. On the other hand, the cockfight allows for the transient inversion of social hierarchy, even permitting the underdogs of society to bet on and champion one who represents them—and win. In the cockpit, history and social structure can be

momentarily suspended, even as ultimately the social structure is reaffirmed.

At the conclusion of a cockfight, the winner must be generous with one's winnings by sharing *balato*, token portions of the bounty that are distributed to one's circle of supporters and other proximate individuals. An essential aspect of winning in a cockfight or other games of chance, the *balato* is founded on the belief that one's luck (*swerte*) brings victory, and to share this luck augments future chances of winning. In contrast, being stingy invites bad luck. Thus, the *balato* is not meant to be a leveling mechanism but a recirculation of luck and the re-inscription of all within the world of gambling.

With the historically formed mindset of a gambler, which has permeated different games of chance, Filipinos have responded to political elections as if it were a cockfight. After all, under Spanish rule Filipinos were introduced to municipal elections, which invariably began with the *sorteo* (lottery) to identify twelve notables who would select two to three nominees whose names would be sent to the governor-general, who selected the town magistrate from this short list (May 1987: 33). From the outset elections were a dicey affair—and, given numerous local factions, “tended to be hard-fought” (ibid.: 45). Today elections encapsulate and demonstrate the gambling worldview, even as elections are entertainment while allowing a voter to wager on a candidate. Just as cocks represent the bettor, so do candidates represent the voter. In Bali, according to Geertz (1973: 418), people compare a whole range of tussles to cockfighting: “Court trials, wars, political contests, inheritance disputes, and street arguments are all compared to cockfights.” The word for cock, *sabung*, is used metaphorically to mean, among other possible terms, “political candidate” (ibid.: 418). In the Philippines, elections as cockfighting is evinced linguistically by the term used to refer to one's preferred candidate as one's *manok* or cock. Not coincidentally, in distinctively Philippine English, a candidate in an election is known as a “bet.”

Evidently the elector does not possess the fighting cock but, like the spectator in a cockpit, can place a bet on and identify with

a candidate. The bettor-voter can also hope that the wager will be multiplied several times over with the cock's victory, in the form of generous *balato* and other benefits from the winning candidate that one supports. If the bettor is from the capitalist class, the benefits of a winning wager can mean tremendous business opportunities. For a supporter or campaign volunteer, a valuable *balato* can come in the form of a job within the state bureaucracy. One can also think of the money and other goods given to voters during the campaign as an advanced form of *balato*, a beneficence suitable for a candidate who aspires to the high status of an elected official.

Like a cockfight, electoral politics however is usually not meant to transform the social structure, except when the cockfight becomes the vehicle for a larger wager, such as upsetting strongman Marcos at his own game in the snap elections of 1986. Indeed, there always remains the possibility that the underdog can win a cockfight, embedding contradictions in analogous ways as elections do, prompting Anderson (1998: 266) to characterize electoralism as Janus-faced. Most elections, however, are, like cockfights, a "dramatization of status concerns,"<sup>5</sup> "like playing with fire only not getting burned," articulating themes of "death, masculinity, rage, pride, loss, beneficence, chance—and, ordering them into an encompassing structure" (Geertz 1973: 37, 440, 443).

For the few who are closely associated with the winning candidate, elections are a gamble that allows them to secure a different structural location from where even bigger gambles can be waged. But for the rest, as one ordinary voter puts it, "Life goes on after the elections" (Alejo et al. 1996: 52). In the cockpit one moves on with the dead cock; in elections, one feels sorry for the loss and for one's candidate (*manok*) who spent heaps of money, but one must accept the result and not be a sore loser: "sport *lang*" (be a sport) (IPC 2005: 64 - 65). However, despite the possibility of loss and the victory of someone who is unsympathetic to one's plight, one does not abstain from the vote. As one informant in the IPC study (ibid.: 58) said, "Because if we do not vote, we are not people

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<sup>5</sup> On the pervasiveness of status contests in the precolonial Philippines, even on such matters as competitive feasting, see Junker (2000).

of the government; we are like people of the jungle” (*Tungod kay kung dili ta mobotar, dili kita tawo sa gobyerno, mura tag tagalasang*). To live in community, one participates in the social drama, the game of chance that entralls political society, with all the risks entailed. In Anderson’s (1998: 266) incisive observation, even when elections are hardly free or competitive, the right to vote and its exercise in elections have been “understood as the most signal emblem of full citizenship in the modern age,” conveying “legal *status* and entitlement.”

Many Filipinos consciously draw the analogy between elections and gambling. In the IPC (2005: 52) study, a recurring theme among the study’s participants is the depiction of elections as a game of chance, a race, and a cockfight. As in other games with which people are familiar, cheating is regarded as almost inevitable. Below are some of the informants’ responses:

*Parang laro na may nananalo at natatalo* (Like a game with winners and losers) [rural female]

*Pareha ug sugal adunay makadaug, aduna usay mapilde* (Like a game or gamble, where some will win and others will lose) [urban male]

*Isang magulo at maruming laro* (Like a chaotic and dirty game) [urban male]

*Katulad ng baraha, may patay at buhay* (Like a card game, some are alive, while others are dead) [urban male]

*Garong sarong bolang na nagpipili nin pupustahan* (Like a cockfight, and one must choose [a cock] on which to place a bet) [rural male]

*Murag sabong nay mapildi ug magdaog* (Like a cockfight with winners and losers) [rural female]

*Isang chess game na malalaman lang kung sino ang panalo sa hulung tira* (A game of chess where the winner can be known only at the last move) [youth]

*Isang karera ng kabayo na may siguradong mananalo* (A horserace that will surely have a winner) [youth]

The metaphors ordinary voters use to describe elections suggest the element of spectatorship, but also participation. Many view elections as a gamble, a game of chance, among politicians who the people watch and observe and on occasion from whom

they obtain some benefit. But the public's role as spectators is far from passive, for there is active engagement: after all, come election day, one must choose a cock that one puts a bet on. But regardless of the actual candidates, elections that simulate a cockpit, a racetrack, or a card game are inherently a form of entertainment. The entertainment is active and participatory, for the option to disengage would mean that voters leave the cockpit, racetrack, or betting station altogether. For the most part, given the high election participation rates, the people are bent on staying on inside the ring, asserting their legal standing and political entitlement.

## **V. Conclusion**

The quantitative survey data reviewed at the start of this article posed a dilemma. Given either a hazy or instrumental view of democracy, survey respondents in Southeast Asia say they are very satisfied with the right to vote—and indeed come out in droves during elections—yet most of them say that the candidates they vote for do not really care about the people. What then is the basis of the legitimacy of elections? The answer, as argued in this article, may be found in how people regard elections as a ritual process, the very structure of which can captivate people's interest as they simultaneously observe and participate in it. Elections tap into a primal need for building and sustaining community through ritual, despite the excesses of the campaign period. At the same time, elections as ritual offer forms of entertainment that distinctively summon up the meanings of other and older culturally meaningful community celebrations and festivities and forms of entertainment, particularly cockfighting. As ritual process, elections offer the thrill of seeing one's "bet" win, but also the possible disappointment of losing—all part and parcel of social life and its various status competitions. Elections can thus be understood as multilayered phenomena that draw meanings from prevailing cultural practices. A procedure of formal democracy authored elsewhere and subsequently imported into various Southeast Asian contexts of electoralism, elections have been localized and invested with indigenous significance.

Although they do not always transform the extant social arrangements, elections embed contradictory impulses in the same way that cockfights do. But even when the odds favor the establishment, people participate in elections to assert membership in the political community. Even when there is the risk that one's vote may not be counted, people still take the opportunity to express their individual voices through the ballot. Although the winning candidate may not genuinely represent them, yet people participate in elections not just for any actual or expected benefits but also, and even more importantly, in order to make a statement about society. In other words, one votes because one is a member of organized society—just as one participates in community events and rituals to indicate membership in the group. A voter may be cynical, inured to the cheating and fraud during elections, but one does not stay away from the polls because doing so means opting out of society. Ultimately, the Southeast Asian voter's participation in elections is a vote for sociality.

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