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# The Hegemonic Work of Automated Election Technology in the Philippines

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**ABSTRACT** *This article addresses the political role of information technology in the Philippines. It uses a theoretical framework inspired by Antonio Gramsci to examine the discourse surrounding automated elections in two major daily papers, the Philippine Daily Inquirer and Business World Philippines. It argues that this discourse strengthens current conceptions of the development process by appealing to the interests not only of the dominant fraction of capital in the country today, but also to the middle class. Such operations are essential for the creation of an historic bloc capable of exercising hegemony.*

**KEY WORDS:** E-government, democracy, elections, Philippines, hegemony, information technology

Recent decades have seen the world inundated with commentary, pronouncements, and predictions about the social consequences of information technology. My aim in this article is to investigate this discourse from a political point of view, showing how this commentary reinforces the legitimacy of power relations in society. In particular I use the work of Antonio Gramsci to investigate the case of the Philippines, where I argue that the dominant discourse surrounding automated election technology serves to strengthen a particular notion of development, thereby contributing to the building of hegemonic relations between the current dominant fraction of capital and the middle class.

## **Election Automation Technology**

Election automation refers to the use of computing technology to help conduct elections. It is not a new idea. Lever machines, which require voters to push buttons to indicate their choice and then use a set of levers to record that choice on the ballot, were introduced towards the end of the nineteenth century in some US electoral districts. And punched cards have been used as ballots in US elections since the 1960s. However, given the rapid advances in computing technology over the last few decades, it is not surprising that new forms of election automation have been

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developed. One of the first improvements was the design of optically scanned ballots. These were similar to punched cards, but since they did not rely on mechanical devices they were seen as more accurate. In the 1990s, Direct Recording Devices (DREs) using either push buttons or a touch screen interface to obtain the voter's choice appeared on the market (Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project, 2001: 8-10). These machines store the voter's choice electronically and at the end of the day, when called on by election officials, tabulate and output the results. DREs are manufactured by a number of companies, but the majority of machines are produced by just two firms, Election Systems and Software, and Diebold Election Systems. Diebold claims to have sold 75,000 machines in the US alone (Diebold, 2005). DREs are at the heart of the automated elections policy of the Philippines and are at the centre of this article's efforts to show how discourse surrounding information technology performs hegemonic work. It is to the concept of hegemony that we now turn.

### **Gramsci's Notion of Hegemony**

Key to much of Gramsci's work was the notion of hegemony. Gramsci considered hegemony to be an inherently unstable process in which the ruling class in a society leads as well as dominates other classes. Hegemony was achieved through the twin processes of universalising ruling class interests as well as accommodating, to a certain extent, the interests of subordinate classes (Gramsci, 1971: 182). Much of this work was borne by the elaboration of ideologies. But ideologies for Gramsci were not systems of false consciousness designed to dupe subordinate groups into accepting exploitation. Instead an ideology consisted of a complex ensemble of discursive elements that gave rise to particular material practices and was ultimately involved in the production of subjects (Mouffe, 1979: 187-8). A class aspiring to hegemonic status would need to take this ensemble of elements and form it into a kind of glue capable of binding individuals and groups originally brought together in fractious alliance, into something much deeper and stronger – a new collective will, or historic bloc, as Gramsci calls it, capable of acting as a unified protagonist on the political stage. According to Gramsci, the task of creating usable ideologies, and therefore workable historic blocs, was situated in what he referred to as civil society (Gramsci, 1971: 12). But for all the work of civil society (which for Gramsci included schools, religious institutions, and other cultural organisations) in developing coherent ideologies capable of binding together rulers and ruled, hegemony was for Gramsci rather volatile, realising its fullest potential only when the role of the ruling class was truly progressive. This period of time was finite so that when what was previously progressive turned reactionary, hegemony decayed. The dominant group would no longer be able to represent the interests of others, and as a result the contradictions its hegemony had previously hidden would become ever more visible (Femia, 1981: 46-8). For both this reason and the generally provisional nature of the ideological elements that allow for the creation of a collective political will, ruling classes face the spectre of crisis at some point or other in time. Political struggle, that is, struggle over the institutions of civil society and the content of the ideological message they serve to transmit, then becomes the ultimate arbiter of human destiny.

The main point to be grasped from this brief summary of Gramsci's work is that a successful hegemonic class will have infused the various ideological elements it encounters, principally within the institutions of civil society, with its own perspectives and views. As far as these elements and institutions produce subjects, they will therefore reflect the needs of this hegemonic class, thus universalising its own aspirations. In the process of producing subjects, the importance of reaching out to embrace, as far as possible, the interests of other groups, is clear. Without this appeal there would be a much smaller chance that such subjects would be formed in the first place. The end result of the hegemonic process is a society capable of reproducing the conditions necessary for the continuation of the ruling group's predominance. However, as long as the society is class-based and therefore inherently exploitative, the struggle over ideology will continue and, as time passes, the hegemonic potential of the ruling class will wane. Crises sparked by war or other events will create situations where hegemony may be ruptured, but only if the opposing forces are able to seize the political initiative from the ruling class. There are no guarantees for either side.

### **Hegemony and the Concept of Development**

Much of the work of producing hegemony revolves around the infusion of ideological elements with the perspectives of the ruling class. Today, one of the most important ideological elements deployed in the quest for hegemony is the notion of development. It has been enormously influential for much of the twentieth century, but especially during the post-war era of American global hegemony (Amin, 1998) where it took on a radically enlarged role in global affairs as it became clear that the system of colonial empires that had extended the reach of capitalism in the past was in serious jeopardy (Rist, 2002: 69; Adas, 1989: 380-401).

It is development's problem-solving approach that has saved the concept from its numerous and well-documented failures to achieve its ostensible aims since that time. Development is able to work hegemonically by making possible an endless series of adjustments to the basic premise of economic growth (Porter, 1995). New problems and constraints brought to the attention of developers were progressively incorporated into development thinking, adding more steps to the path leading to development's secular version of salvation, but not eliminating the journey by any means. At the same time, as Jan Nederveern Pieterse (2001: 40) notes, the concept of "development papers over the different interests involved in economic, social and political change. 'Development' suggests the possibility of a package formula in which all these interests come to some form of crystallisation and convergence." In other words, development allows for the interests of various non-elite groups to be recognised and acted upon within the constraints of the society and economy as presently structured. At the same time, the underlying misery and deprivation that rhetoric suggests is the focus of development efforts mostly remains intact, justifying renewed efforts in the future in response to new sets of demands. The moral imperative of ending world hunger or the countless other miseries afflicting the majority of humankind makes the adoption of a new addition to the development arsenal seem the logical and right thing to do.

From the point of view of ruling classes the world over, this combination of vagueness about what development consists of, alongside the imperative for action created by the precarious position of many in the countries of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, is exactly what is needed for the creation of a historic bloc capable of exercising hegemony. Due to its ability to absorb whatever characteristics are necessary to forge a historic bloc, development is the perfect ideological element in hegemonic projects. In the next section we will see how development works as an ideological element in the latest historic bloc to emerge in the Philippines.

### **The Ramos Historic Bloc (1992-98)**

The political scientist Alexander Magno (1992: 14), in an editorial appearing soon after the 1992 Philippine presidential elections, noted that “the real surprises in the outcomes of the presidential race were the unexpectedly strong performance of Miriam Santiago, who did not have a political organisation of any significance, and the unexpectedly miserable performance of Ramon Mitra, who had the backing of the largest political party formation in the field.” He went on to conclude that:

... the large support enjoyed by both Ramos and Santiago clearly indicate a popular rejection of the old political aristocracy and a wide public quest for a new breed of political leaders chosen based on merit. The support voters have given political outsiders is, at the same instance, a vote against the insider circuit of vested interests perceived responsible for the politics of accommodation that has interfered with our nation’s progress (Magno, 1992: 15).

Ramos sought to capitalise on this reaction – shortly after his victory at the polls he elaborated *Philippines 2000*, a visionary strategy for the country which stood in “stark contrast to the narrow vision of the Cory Aquino presidency” (Rocamora, 1994: 172). It represented an attempt to forge a new historic bloc between a fraction of the capitalist class and the middle class (see below) that could guarantee capitalist accumulation while at the same time neutralising radical challenges to the social structure. During and after the time of the Ramos administration, the plan’s vision was successful; it allowed for the articulation of the interests John Sidel refers to as “Chinese” capitalists and the middle class. The following paragraphs will discuss the basic elements of this historic bloc.

#### *The Capitalist Class*

John Sidel (2000) divides the Philippine capitalist class into categories based on the relationship that an individual capitalist has with the state. There are three kinds of capitalists in this typology. The first group, the landed capitalists, are those who obtain their access to the state through the control of voters residing on or employed by the capitalist’s estate. Votes are delivered to political candidates in return for legislative favours. The second of Sidel’s categories, crony capitalists, achieve access to the state through their own personal loyalty to a politician. Access to public resources is given to the crony (usually a friend or relative) in return for keeping those resources out of the hands of the politician’s enemies. The third relationship

between capital and the state is confusingly described by Sidel as “Chinese” capitalism, falsely implying a narrow ethnic base to the category. Sidel explains that the Chinese have been associated with money or “commerce in its raw cash form” since the era of the Spaniards who enacted strict laws preventing the immigrant Chinese from engaging in agriculture or manufacturing, making commerce their only source of livelihood (Sidel, 2000: 70). “Chinese” capitalists therefore use neither land nor personal loyalty to obtain access to the state, but money itself. When necessary or useful, politicians are “bought.”

However, it is important to understand that “Chinese” capital is not confined to ethnic Chinese. Instead, the term describes a way of relating to the state that can be adopted by any capitalist, regardless of ethnic origin. Jaime Zobel de Ayala, one of the premier business leaders in the Philippines, traces his family origins back to the Spanish colonisers of the pre-American period. Yet if one is to describe his relationship to the Philippine state, he would be a “Chinese” capitalist as described by Sidel; that is, beholden to neither agricultural land nor politician for economic opportunity and success. Zobel de Ayala made the development of export-oriented industrial estates a priority throughout the Aquino years (1986-92), but it was only after the profitability of these ventures was evident that the government favoured such projects (Koike, 1993: 444). Thus, in order to avoid the confusion that a term like “Chinese” capital may induce, in the rest of this article I shall refer to the “Chinese” capitalists as “money capitalists,” which captures the essence of their relationship with the state: a process of mediation conducted by means of money, rather than land or loyalty.

The election of Corazon Aquino in 1986 appeared to herald the renewed ascendancy of the landed capitalist fraction – Aquino was a member of the Cojuangco clan, fabulously wealthy landowners from central Luzon. However, Sidel argues that it was not the landed capitalists who inherited political power but the money capitalists. Internationally, the Philippines faced the Washington Consensus which at least publicly frowned on both crony capital and the protectionist measures favoured by landed capital for the agricultural sector. Domestically, landed capital was hampered in the quest for political access. Ties between landlord and tenant had weakened over the years and the proportion of the population living in rural areas continued to decline. Furthermore, the unconditional demand of the banks and the governments of the West to repay the public debt accumulated under Marcos created a condition of permanent austerity in the government. Under such conditions, whatever fraction of capital could mobilise most efficiently its own financial resources had the advantage, thus giving the edge to financially independent money capitalists (Sidel, 2000: 77-8).

But if money capital has reduced its dependency on the state it has come to rely even more on direct foreign financing and partnerships. Whereas in the past the state was a key element in the financing plans of Filipino capital, now “Taiwanese firms, Hong-Kong based investment houses, New York mutual fund managers, and Manila stockbrokers . . . [are] . . . the key sources and brokers of capital” (Sidel, 2000: 78). In the quest for foreign capital, the Ramos administration helped money capital attract foreign partners by liberalising the economy. Average tariff levels were halved between 1991 and 1998, while the number of commodities subject to taxation continued to shrink from 439 in 1991 to 161 in 1996. In addition to reducing both the

tax rate and the number of commodities subject to taxation, legislation was passed further to open particular sectors of the economy to foreign direct investment. A reversal of the general policy orientation associated with these reforms, or even the individual reforms themselves, would be disastrous for the money fraction of capital, given its new reliance on foreign partners.

### *The Middle Class*

Erik Olin Wright (1997) describes the middle class as occupying a “contradictory” position within the class structure of any society; it shares characteristics common both to workers and capitalists. Although the middle class does not own the means of production, it does occupy supervisory positions that involve the control of other workers and their labour power. This contradictory position makes it amenable to appeals from either the capitalist class or, if they are sufficiently organised, subordinate classes. The history of the Philippines in the 1970s shows that the middle class eventually divided over whether or not to support the Marcos regime, with some approving and others taking up leadership positions in the opposition (Rivera, 2000). However, what makes the middle class a significant force in the Philippines are the strategic positions its members occupy in the society. The Philippines is a country where “an amorphous stratum of educated professionals, technicians and managerial people” has become “increasingly important in the running of the national economy” (Pinches, 1996: 106).

The successful opposition movement against Marcos in the 1980s gave the middle class a stronger, more confident voice, which as Pinches (1996: 123) notes, is increasingly self-reflective and critical of the traditional power holders in Philippine society, as was evident in the mass demonstrations of January 2001. The events of what became known as Edsa II<sup>1</sup> saw a self-confident middle class take to the streets in demonstrations directed against then President Joseph Estrada. It was primarily the middle class (alongside the organised working class and leftist groups) that attended these demonstrations, and in numbers that made Estrada and his advisors decide to abandon the presidency.<sup>2</sup> Edsa II therefore provides clear evidence of the importance of the middle class as a force to be won over to the historic bloc.

The middle class desires economic security and prosperity for itself and the country. This is to be obtained through the efforts of the individual acting out of self-interest, but within a set of moral limits. Unfettering the entrepreneurial spirit of the Filipino is thus the major preoccupation of the middle class and a key component of its self identity. Pinches (1999: 282) tells us that:

Entrepreneurial behaviour, and the upward social mobility of those who are seen to have practised it, are celebrated in numerous tales of people who have made good through hard work and business acumen. These narratives constitute much of the subject-matter of the local business magazines... and are also regularly presented in daily newspapers, television programmes, speeches at civic functions and business training courses.

Also of concern to the middle class is the image of the Philippines held by the rest of the world. The middle class suffers from something of an identity crisis when it comes

to the country's place in Southeast Asia. Starting from an economic position just behind Japan in the 1950s, the country now ranks close to the bottom. Unfavourable comparisons are frequently made between the Philippines and its neighbours, as Ramos himself noted in one of his earliest speeches as president (1993: 118-9): "I have nonetheless grown weary – as I am sure you have – of hearing our nation being described as the 'Sick Man' of our region." As a result of this criticism there has been a tendency to celebrate the one positive characteristic that separates the rest of the region from the Philippines – its vibrant democratic tradition. Pinches (1999: 283) argues that "the idea of democracy, dramatically celebrated and reasserted with the overthrow of the Marcoses in 1986, has thus become a national symbol around which many Filipinos have come to distinguish and elevate themselves and their future dragonhood, in relation to their neighbours." It is no surprise then to find, as one study has, that the middle class most considers democracy as workable in the Philippine context (Karaos, 1997: 125). However, the democratic tradition for the middle class encompasses more than regular electoral exercises; it also includes a notion of civil society (Silliman and Noble, 1998: 293). The mass demonstrations of 1986 and 2001 are for many, not only representative of Filipino democracy, but a symbol of the strength of Filipino civil society. The demonstrations have been interpreted in the Philippine press as the inspiration for the Czech people peacefully to overthrow their own authoritarian leaders in 1989 (Olivares-Cunanan, 2000), and have been declared "the greatest historical moment of this century" (Bundang, 1998). It represents a time "when Filipinos felt proud about their race" (Casino, 1997).

The notion that the Philippines has a strong civil society is enhanced by the country's record of press freedom and the significant size of the NGO community. One early estimate pegged the number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) operating in the country at 18,000 (Goertzen, 1991), but regardless of the exact size of the sector, it is large enough to warrant the existence of several umbrella groups<sup>3</sup> and a national NGO network, the Caucus of Development NGOs (CODE-NGO) to represent them (Romero and Bautista, 1995). Recent governments in the Philippines have been careful to celebrate civil society and selectively to engage with it. One scholar of the subject claims that the Philippine case represents the "most comprehensive programme of collaboration between state agencies and NGOs/P[eople's] O[rganisation]s in the developing world" (Clarke, 1998: 76). This is not surprising since the 1987 constitution, written by a convention that had 20% of its delegates from the NGO sector, enshrined the rights of civil society participation in the affairs of government directly into that document (Clarke, 1998: 73). Elements of the NGO community have also participated actively in the creation of the development plans for both the Aquino and Ramos administrations as well as helping to implement development projects. Ramos established official ties to the NGO community through the creation of the Presidential Council for Community Development (PCCD) (Clarke, 1998: 79) and the holding of regional and national summits aimed at strengthening government-NGO relations (Romero and Bautista, 1995: 189).

#### *Development Under the Ramos Historic Bloc*

The Ramos historic bloc was assembled through a combination of concrete practices and cultivation of a set of definitions of certain highly charged ideological elements



that allowed for the portrayal of these interests as something universal in scope and worthy of broad support. For reasons of space, our concern lies only with one of these elements – development. Three characteristics in particular are currently associated with the development idea: the exercise of entrepreneurial spirit, the subordination of the state to civil society (private sector and NGOs), and an openness to globalisation. Each of these characteristics appeals to the groups making up the historic bloc, asking that they support the government as it facilitates capital accumulation. The middle class can see in the current construction of development its own concern with enabling the private individual to succeed and the need to uphold what it sees as truly distinctive about the Philippines, its vibrant civil society. Money capital can find justification for their own joint venture operations in the country, and a hobbled state primarily concerned with managing the debt and liberalising the economy. Money capital can also take heart in the likelihood that a reversion to crony capitalism is less likely in a society infatuated with the notion of the entrepreneurial individual and enamoured with empowering civil society at the expense of the state. Table 1 provides a summary of the relationship between the characteristics currently ascribed to development and the interests of the Ramos historic bloc. The three characteristics of development as currently conceived in the Philippines (globalisation, entrepreneurialism and an emphasis on empowering civil society) can be discerned in a wide variety of government documents, but perhaps the best example is the visionary national plan, *Philippines 2000*, prepared by Ramos and his staff soon after taking power in 1992. In the next section, a brief survey of this plan will be presented as evidence of how mainstream development is currently defined in the Philippines.

**Table 1.** Current characteristics of development and the Ramos historic bloc

Historic bloc members & their major interests	Development characteristics		
	Global	Subordinated role for the state	Entrepreneurial
Money capital (1) economic opportunity (2) prevention of cronyism	economic opportunity – joint ventures	prevention – brake on future state-crony relationships; economic opportunity – liberalisation and joint ventures	prevention – brake on future state-crony relationships
Middle class (1) economic opportunity (2) positive national identity	economic opportunity – good jobs	positive national identity – strong democracy	positive national identity – country of entrepreneurs; economic opportunity – “small businesses for all”

*Philippines 2000: A Visionary Plan for a Future Philippines*

The plan devised by the Ramos administration stressed two things: empowerment of the people and international competitiveness. Empowerment here referred to a reliance on both private enterprise and civil society as agents of development, rather than the state. The plan declared: “Applied to economic development, however, people empowerment implies that the government should not anchor development on its own actions” (Philippines, 1993: 4). It went on to reveal who the agents of behaviour change should be: “development should proceed primarily from the economic initiatives of communities, households, firms, cooperatives, nongovernmental organisations, as expressed in well-functioning markets. Decentralisation, deregulation, reliance on the private sector, the encouragement of cooperatives, and the removal of bureaucratic hindrances and penalties to small enterprises are naturally included under empowerment. People’s empowerment implies a reliance on markets, entrepreneurship, innovation, and effort” (Philippines, 1993: 4).

The plan then elaborated its second element – international competitiveness. *Philippines 2000* claimed that an internationally competitive economy was required in order finally to end the recurrent balance of payments crisis (Philippines, 1993: 4). Competition had other advantages, for according to the plan’s authors, it “prods entrepreneurs to improve productivity, use least-cost components, newer technologies, and advanced managerial know-how.” It also supposedly helps to produce “a skilled work force imbued with a genuine work ethic” (Philippines, 1993: 5).

The plan was quick to point out that international competitiveness and “people empowerment” are complementary. The basic characteristics of what comprises successful development were therefore reinforced:

... empowerment ... brings forth a productive, innovative and inspired work force that is the most basic element in attaining international competitiveness ... [and] ... global competitiveness releases the people, especially the poor, from the tyranny of protected industries which stunt competition and prevent the generation of more employment (Philippines, 1993: 6).

The plan also noted that the strategy is constrained by the need for initiatives to be “sustainable.” Here again it emphasised the need for government to have partners in the development process. Sustainable development “means giving full play to the efforts of households, communities, firms, and nongovernmental organisations to serve as stewards of the environment” (Philippines, 1993: 6).

Taken together these plans provide evidence that the current dominant view of development is an activity rooted in entrepreneurial behaviour (the empowerment of individuals), global in nature (internationally competitive), and requiring a subordinate role for the State (reliance on the private sector). Much of the information technology discourse provides powerful support for this vision of development. Here, however, our concern lies with the role of a particular segment of this discourse – newspaper coverage of automated election technology. This discourse caters, as we shall see, primarily to the last of these characteristics, that is, it suggests that the state needs to play and can play a subordinate role to civil society.

Before examining this discourse in detail though, it is important to provide some context to the Philippine newspaper world.

### **The Print Media Industry in the Philippines**

While the Philippines lags behind many European, North American, and East Asian countries in newspaper circulation, as can be seen in Table 2, its position in Southeast Asia is better.<sup>4</sup> Japan has one of the highest rates of readership in the world (57.8 newspapers per hundred inhabitants). In comparison, the rate for the Philippines (8.2) appears small, but when set against its neighbours it is a reasonable figure, given the country's economic situation. Malaysia, a much richer country, has only double the newspaper circulation, and the figure for Thailand is slightly lower than the Philippines. Yet among the middle class, newspaper reading in the Philippines is on much more solid ground, with one study finding that approximately 90% of its middle class respondents read front page news stories and at least the headlines elsewhere in the newspaper (Bautista, 1999: 20-1). Given that the middle class is a key player in the ongoing quest for hegemony within Philippine society, an examination of this media form is still very much warranted.

The industry is concentrated in Manila, with 105 of the 559 publications (newspapers, comics, and magazines) listed in the 2000 edition of the *Philippine Media Factbook* (2000) having their headquarters in the National Capital Region. The 12 broadsheets produced in Manila in 2000 were nationally distributed, and with the exception of *Kabayan*, written in English. The industry also has a large number of tabloid publications, mostly written in Filipino, but with a number of English papers as well. While the tabloid circulation figures are significantly higher than for the broadsheets, they mostly report the activities of entertainment celebrities, rather than economic or technological news, so they are excluded from further analysis here.

There are no censorship laws in the Philippines, and the government does not involve itself in the operation of the papers. A free press is one of the guarantees enshrined in the constitution. The result is that the Philippine press is one of the most open in Asia. However, like mass media everywhere, it is owned by a handful of

**Table 2.** Newspaper circulation, selected countries, 1996

Country	Newspaper circulation/100 people
Japan	57.8
Sweden	44.5
United States	21.2
Malaysia	16.3
Canada	15.8
<b>Philippines</b>	<b>8.2</b>
Thailand	6.4
China (PRC)	4.2
Vietnam	0.4

Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics (1999).

powerful individuals and corporations who use their media assets directly to advance their own interests. Sheila Coronel, a researcher and journalist for the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, notes that the various owners are involved in the operation of their papers to differing degrees. At one pole sits Emilio Yap, owner of the *Manila Bulletin*, who is involved in the day-to-day operations of the paper, favouring his friends in business and government and portraying his enemies in unflattering ways. The *Manila Times*, at one time owned by the Gokongwei family, has a more divided control structure in which editors consider the process of news selection an ongoing conflict; they win some battles for journalistic integrity and lose others to the family's business or political interests. This paper, according to Coronel, sits in the middle of the spectrum. At the far end of the scale are papers whose owners tend not to interfere with their editors. Coronel argues that this lack of interference is due to the more diversified business holdings of the owners of these papers (Coronel, 1999: 10-11). Both the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* and *Business World* fall into this last category. They have reputations as sources of liberal and independent journalism; if there is any anti-hegemonic dissent in the media, it is likely to be found on the pages of these newspapers. For this reason they have been chosen to support the claim that the dominant discourse surrounding e-government in the Philippines matches the vision of development championed by the Ramos historic bloc. The following paragraphs present some of the background of these two publications.

### *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*

This paper, now one of the largest in the country, began operations in the last year of the Marcos dictatorship (1985), at a time when people were seeking new sources of information from alternative media, or as it was locally known, the “mosquito press.” Its founder, Eugenia Apostol, was the editor of *Mr. & Ms.*, a periodical that grew famous for its criticism of the regime and its coverage of the Aquino murder in 1983. However, unlike its predecessor, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* had lacklustre readership figures until Marcos announced that he would hold elections. The elections and the “People Power” revolution of the following year established a connection in the minds of many Filipinos between independent reporting and the young daily newspaper, a characteristic that it managed to keep during the Aquino years when it was among the very few media enterprises that publicly refused to support Aquino's endorsement of a continued American military presence on Philippine soil (Smith, 2000: 233-8). During the Estrada administration, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* was again called upon to assert its independence as the President threatened to have his friends in the advertising industry pull their support from the paper because of its unfavourable coverage of his government. As a result, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* is still considered by many to be the most independent English language daily in the country (Coronel, 1999: 12).

### *Business World*

*Business World* is considered the top business newspaper in the Philippines. Its record stretches back to its 1967 debut as *Business Day*. It is considered a liberal

paper: during the Marcos dictatorship its editor and owner, Raul Locsin, was detained for criticising the regime (Smith, 2000: 114). Unlike the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, which has been involved in a number of widely publicised incidents that have tested its independent image, *Business World* has remained out of the political spotlight since the revival of democratic institutions in the country. That the paper may still be considered liberal and relatively independent in its views is attested to by the decision of its editors to publish regular opinion pieces from such prominent leftist figures as Teddy Casino, the secretary-general of the multi-sectoral group Bayan (Bagong Alyansang Makabayan or New Patriotic Alliance), and Argee Guevarra, a leader of Sanlakas, another broad democratic grouping of the left.

### **Automated Election Technology in the Philippines**

We are now in a position to discuss the role played by the coverage of automated elections in helping to define development in ways that make possible the articulation of a historic bloc between money capitalists and the middle class. This coverage overwhelmingly supports the current dominant definition of development by seemingly providing a concrete example of how one requirement for its successful operation is already available. The discourse surrounding automated elections is presented as un-problematically transferring control of the state to “ordinary” Filipinos through electoral reform.

Such an appeal is important because of the value attached to elections by many Filipinos. Table 3 provides data on voter turnout for recent Filipino Congressional electoral contests. While higher than in many developed countries, these numbers are even more impressive considering the complexity of the voting process. Ballots in the Philippines are long, complicated documents. They include choices for 12 senators, a representative, a governor, a vice governor, party list member, and during presidential elections, the post of president and vice-president. Not only are the number of positions numerous, but the voter must write by hand the names of each choice in the appropriate blank space, rather than writing a mark beside a pre-printed name. To add to the inconvenience of the system, voting stations are only open from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Among the middle class, elections are especially important as indicators of civic virtue. Anna-Marie Karaos, in a survey of attitudes towards democracy and citizenship among inhabitants of Metro Manila, found that the middle class had the

**Table 3.** Voter turnout for congressional elections, 1987 to 2001

Year	Voters/Registered voters (%)	Voters/Voting age population (%)
1987	90.0	78.2
1992	70.6	65.3
1995	70.7	68.4
1998	78.7	66.8
2001	81.1	64.7

Source: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance at <http://www.idea.int/vt/index.cfm>

highest voter turnout in the 1992 elections, with 88% of her sample voting in that election. Yet, the same survey discovered that the middle class is aware of the flaws of the current electoral system, with 47% disagreeing with the statement that “those who deserve to be leaders win” (Karaos, 1997: 126).

It cannot be doubted that the electoral system has flaws. Although the 2004 presidential elections have been described as the bloodiest in two decades, with 117 people killed for election-related reasons during the campaign period, election violence is a chronic problem in the country (Rivera, 2004; Papa, 2004). Added to the problem of violence is fraud. This takes numerous forms, including payment for individual votes, padding electoral lists with the names of recently deceased voters or voters from other districts, and altering local tally lists in favour of a candidate after the votes have been counted at the local level (Mogato, 2001). Given this less than perfect situation, the emphasis that the middle class places on a strong civil society as a positive marker of Filipino identity, and its concern with the electoral process as one indicator of that strength, it is no surprise that the use of information technology to improve that process is seen as an attractive proposition. Such attempts at improvement have a relatively long history in the country.

The Philippine government adopted automated elections as a policy objective in the summer of 1994, when a Congressional bill authorised the Commission for Elections (Comelec) to explore, demonstrate, and implement a computerised election system for the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM). Since the elections for the leadership of the ARMM were scheduled for September 1996, Comelec had roughly two years to prepare. The idea was to automate only the counting of ballots. Voters at the precinct level would mark their ballots as usual, but at the end of the day these would be delivered to a machine at the municipal level that would count them, print its calculations as an auditing tool, and store everything on a floppy disk. These outputs would then be sent for consolidation at the provincial level. The ensuing elections and the automation itself were deemed a success, although it was noted that transportation issues needed to be addressed, especially since the machines had trouble counting wet or damp ballots (Silva, 1996a).

Everything seemed set for an expansion of the automation programme. Comelec urged both the Senate and House of Representatives speedily to pass enabling legislation for nation-wide coverage of the 1998 presidential elections (Santillan, 1997a). The House of Representatives heeded the call, but the more independent minded Senate ignored Comelec entreaties, with the Senate Constitutional Amendments and Revision of Laws Committee voting against automation. This committee, chaired by Miriam Defensor-Santiago, an opposition member of the Senate and former presidential candidate who had accused Ramos of cheating in the 1998 elections, was adamantly opposed to automation, believing it would merely enable new forms of electoral fraud. Defensor argued that another Senate oversight committee had found that the counting machines used in the ARMM could not detect valid from spurious ballots and that ballot counting was much slower than the machine’s advertised rate of 150 ballots per minute (Jabal and Santillan, 1997).

With influential groups such as the National Citizens’ Movement for Free Elections (Namfrel) and the powerful establishment religious figure Cardinal Sin weighing in with their support for computerisation (Santillan, 1997c), the fight for

automation was not over. By the end of the year, the Senate passed a bill authorising an automated election system for national-level posts (the president, vice-president, Senate and party-list representatives). Elections for local posts (representatives, provincial governors and mayors) would remain manual affairs. Comelec was given until 10 February, 1998 to produce plans for the election. If none were presented by that time, the entire election would be conducted manually (Santos and Santillan, 1997a). A day after the Senate's deliberations, a compromise was reached with the House of Representatives. Automated elections would be held in the ARMM even if the February deadline was not met. This concession meant that a final bill could be signed into law (Santos and Santillan, 1997b).

Comelec by now had developed reservations about the automation process. It no longer believed that it had enough time to automate any part of the election on a national basis. It had asked for a year and had been given little less than three months to prepare a plan. Furthermore, its budget for the 1998 election, 6 billion pesos, was not approved by Congress (Santos, 1997). In the end we are told in one report ("Poll body junks nationwide automated vote counting," *Business World*, 10 February 1998) that the electoral body voted five to two against automating the 1998 election except in ARMM.

The next target for automation was the 2001 congressional election. In the meantime, the recently elected Estrada administration appointed new Comelec members with different and expanded ideas about what the automation of national elections should entail. The chief protagonist in much of the ensuing debate was Luzviminda Tancangco, a public administration professor from the University of the Philippines who specialised in election systems. In her vision of electoral modernisation, the automated counting of ballots was no longer the only or even the main element of the programme. Tancangco wanted to build an entirely new database of voters, while at the same time issuing voter identification cards carrying both a photograph and a fingerprint, hoping to reduce election fraud by ensuring that each voter could vote only once per election. Further impediments to fraud included the mapping of each precinct through geographical information system technology and assignment of voters to precincts well before the election date. Finally, the transmission of electoral results would no longer depend on vehicles carrying election tallies to provincial or national centres, making them vulnerable to hijacking, but would instead be done electronically. The expense of such a system quickly created huge difficulties.

In the summer of 2000 Congress officially cut Comelec's budget by over 50%. Faced with this severe fiscal crunch, the election body decided to compromise. It would continue Tancangco's plans to develop the advanced voter database, now referred to as the Voter Registration and Identification System (VRIS), while scaling back attempts to automate ballot counting over the entire country (Manalang, 2000a). Somewhat later, it decided to continue its development of the electronic transmission project, now called Electronic Data Capture and Transmission (EDCT) (Silva, 2000b). These decisions were to provoke much anguish and anger over the coming years.

Namfrel was opposed to the Comelec plan from the beginning. It argued that nation-wide automation of ballot counting was not only the essential element in the programme but the only legal basis for it. In Namfrel's opinion, the law which

Congress had passed years ago authorising Comelec to automate the elections was clear in calling for automated ballot counting, but not a re-worked database or novel methods of results transmission (Manalang, 2000b). It also argued that the 1998 list was fair, and that since the major forms of electoral fraud took place during the count rather than the actual voting, cleansing of the list was not essential (Doronila, 2000).

Further voices of dissent were not slow in making themselves heard, especially after it was announced that the lowest bid for Tancangco's VRIS project was 6.58 billion pesos over five years by Photokina Marketing Corporation (Lacuarta, 2000). It was suggested that the bidding process was tainted, with Guia Gomez, the mother of one of President Estrada's sons, linked to the winning company (Lacuarta and Calanor-Carvajal, 2000). Business and technology groups such as the Information Technology Federation of the Philippines, Makati Business Club, Bishops-Businessmen Conference, Philippine Computer Society, the Philippine Chamber of Commerce and Industry, the Philippine Exporters Confederation, Employers Confederation, Management Association of the Philippines, and the Financial Executives Institute of the Philippines, all lined up behind Namfrel's initial opposition to the VRIS (Silva, 2000c; Silva, 2000d).

A decision by the Department of Budget in late 2000 to cancel the VRIS project contract was helpful to those opposed to Comelec's view of election modernisation. The Department ruled that Comelec was not authorised by Congress to enter into agreements lasting more than one year. But it also decided to cancel, for the time being, any further automation attempts (Donato and Lacuarta, 2001). The 2001 congressional election joined the growing list of elections that were meant to be computerised but were not. It also turned out to be the most violent and fraud-ridden election held in the Philippines since the end of the Marcos regime (Mogato, 2001), prompting Namfrel to seek Tancangco's impeachment. They wanted the one person they believed lay at the root of the automation fiasco removed from office. While they did not meet with success – the House Committee on Justice in the end ruled their complaint “insufficient of substance” (Lagman, 2002) – the tide temporarily shifted in their favour. Although Tancangco and Comelec initially continued to define automation policy in terms of cleaning the voter list and counting ballots (Rivera, 2002a; Rivera, 2002b), the views of Namfrel began to be reflected in policy towards the end of 2002 and the beginning of 2003, perhaps due to the emphasis that President Macapagal-Arroyo placed on having a smooth presidential election in 2004 (Lema and Sto. Domingo, 2003). As part of this change in policy, Comelec agreed to launch a bidding process for ballot counting machines and, although the process was delayed by about a month, in late April 2003 MegaPacific consortium was awarded the bid. As a result 2,700 machines were ordered from MegaPacific's Korean partner, SK. Yet even then a number of information technology organisations in the country protested the winning bid. They argued that MegaPacific's machine had never been tested in a real election and that during its three trial runs in the Philippines it experienced technical difficulties, not to mention that its need to be connected to a separate PC made it vulnerable to tampering (Oliva, 2003). Opposition was so strong that the Information Technology Foundation of the Philippines and eight private petitioners took Comelec to court over the bid. In early 2004, the Supreme Court found that the contract with



MegaPacific was void due to technical irregularities, which were on such a scale that the justices of the court considered the contract a threat to Philippine democracy (Tubeza, 2004). The decision of the court was given only a few months before the 2004 elections, making it impossible for Comelec to automate them. Yet hope for automated elections has not waned – far from it. In her inaugural address, Macapagal-Arroyo again pledged fully computerised elections: “Elections will no longer raise a single doubt about their integrity. The electoral process will be completely computerized” (Macapagal-Arroyo, 2004).

### **Imagining Election Technology**

It is widely conceded in the press that although the country has a vibrant democratic tradition, electoral fraud occurs at an unacceptable level and has done so for some time. There is also a growing consensus that its mode of operation is changing from straightforward bribery or intimidation of the individual voter to the wholesale manipulation of results at a provincial or regional level (*dagdag-bawas*). To these problems the press coverage of the poll automation issue presents a general consensus that a technical solution – the computerisation of all or parts of the election process – is possible and the best available course of action.<sup>5</sup> The extensive and overwhelmingly positive coverage of election automation in the pages of both the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* and *Business World*, despite ten years in which journalists had ample time to study the issue and discover its drawbacks, suggests that there exists a powerful association between the technology and the ideal of a democratic, subordinate state. As one reporter notes, “computerizing elections seems such a ‘motherhood’ issue. Whoever would be against it? Is there anyone, much less a government official, who would say he or she doesn’t believe in automating our electoral system?” (Jimenez-David, 2003). This almost universal acceptance of the necessity for electoral automation helps strengthen the current historic bloc. While acknowledging middle class interest in seeing the Philippines as democratic, it does not jeopardise the interests of money capital. An alternative solution to the Philippines’ electoral problem would be a redistribution of economic and political resources in order to minimise bribery and other forms of electoral manipulation. But this would either require a strong state or even stronger civil society not necessarily committed to policies of economic liberalisation, and likely in direct opposition to the interests of money capital.

The automation drama involves a number of actors. There is Namfrel, the citizen watch-dog of Philippine elections, and Comelec, the official state organ responsible for running them. Namfrel’s position on the poll automation issue has been quite consistent. It wants counting machines; anything else is extra and not necessary, according to either the law or technical rationality. Comelec’s position has wavered, depending on its chairman at the time. The opposing view therefore really belongs to Tancangco, who was consistent in her position during her term as Comelec commissioner.<sup>6</sup> She wanted mapping and identification machines. Counting machines for her were a desirable feature, but their introduction would not do much to deal with the electoral problem as she defined it – cheating through manipulation of the voters’ list. But both sides are clearly in favour of poll automation, the only unresolved issue is the form it should take.

In the press, however, this issue takes on menacing proportions – disaster will result if computerisation is not achieved before the next election. Namfrel chair, Jose Concepcion Jr., was quoted as predicting a failure of the 2001 elections, given the slow pace of Comelec automation (Oliva, 2000), while Bill Luz, the Secretary-General of the organisation, warned readers that failure to automate will leave “the country in a serious bind” while affecting the credibility of the administration and the performance of the economy. His solution, “let’s do another Edsa,” clearly underlines the gravity he wished to attach to the situation in his attempt to evoke the spirit of people power that toppled the Marcos dictatorship (Silva, 2000a).

Poll automation assumes an overwhelming importance for the future of the country both by virtue of the invisibility of alternatives and by the unwarranted claims made on behalf of the technology. In one article (*Business World*, 29 November 2002), Mega Data Corporation’s Botong Pinoy (Voting Filipino) is lauded as a “better, faster and more efficient technology” that can “modernize the country’s obsolete voting system” and which is “easily implemented.” We are told that with Botong Pinoy “the country can bid goodbye to illegal voting practices and say hello to honest and clean elections,” all courtesy of the machine’s biometric matching and voice synthesis technology:

A computer checks if the voter is registered to vote in that specific precinct, not by presenting an ID card, but by scanning the voter’s face and comparing this data with the facial biometric database stored in the system... Upon confirmation, the system allows the person to vote and guides him or her through the voting process in Filipino, English, or any local dialect prevalent in the region where the precinct is located. For those who cannot read or write, the computer will even talk to the person using voice prompts.

In this account, Botong Pinoy appears tested and proven, requiring only “political will” for its successful deployment in the Philippines. There is little discussion of the cost of the system, which would likely be prohibitive given the size of the government’s budget. Neither is there a critical discussion of the key technology involved – biometrics using facial features as an identifier, a technology that does not have a proven track record in real-world situations.<sup>7</sup> Despite this, the system is treated as a “black box” that “can be easily implemented.” Given that the package includes not only relatively undeveloped biometric technology, but also a complicated user interface, the “black box” assumption is extremely dubious.<sup>8</sup> Yet the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* contains many similar stories, including the following:

The quickest count conceivable, and the most secure, is where the citizen’s vote is counted as it is cast. Perhaps the voting booths of the future, in addition to their cardboard privacy features, will be equipped with cell phones that automatically transmit each vote, along with voter identification, directly to Comelec national headquarters. Counted once and for all, just seconds after it is cast, each vote stands a greater chance of being tallied as intended by the voter. A second innovation some would suggest for such a futuristic Filipino polling booth, is that a picture of the voter casting the vote be taken and recorded with the vote, as a deterrent verification feature. The next generation of cell phones

on the market already have just such advanced capabilities. The technology for this already exists and is even ubiquitous. The common automatic teller machine (ATM) and the networks that run them are one example of efficient, secure systems that could be adapted for election purposes... (Bocobo, 2001).

The article makes no reference to the disadvantages of this technology despite the very real problem of maintaining the secrecy of the ballot in a situation where a photo is taken and transmitted along with a digital ballot over an inherently insecure wireless network. Instead, poll automation is again depicted as a technology that can deliver on the promises of its proponents: the elimination or substantial reduction of election fraud; faster, more convenient elections for all; and a renewed sense of national pride. In the following paragraphs each of these attributes will be examined in turn.

On numerous occasions, automation is claimed to reduce or eliminate corruption. Jose Concepcion of Namfrel emphatically declares: "it's nearly impossible to cheat using computerised vote-counting machines. In a manual environment, cheating can easily be committed but not in an automated environment" (Santillan, 1997d). The *Philippine Daily Inquirer* journalist, Amando Doronila (2000) states:

It has been demonstrated in other democratic electoral systems that automation...reduces opportunities for cheating because of less human intervention...based on the experience of other election count systems, automation can eliminate fraud in reading the ballot, recording the precinct results and consolidating the municipal and provincial tallies or totals.

Expressing a similar view, Solita Collas-Monsod (2003a) finds a "consensus" that automated counting of canvassing "is a crucial element in the quest for good governance" with many attendant benefits:

It makes the "cadena" – and other systems which corrupt politicians use to ensure the voters they buy cannot renege on their promise – impossible to operate (ballots can no longer be folded and concealed), it eliminates human "error" in the reading and counting of ballots, and it relegates wholesale cheating – the "dagdag-bawas" operations at the municipal and provincial canvassing level – to the dustbin of history.

The claim that poll automation can either eliminate or substantially reduce incidents of election manipulation is based on the notion that reducing the degree of human contact with the voting process reduces fraud. However, that automation reduces human contact with the voting process is a dubious assumption. The labour required to create, install, maintain and repair, if necessary, the required software and hardware is not factored into these calculations, yet these activities constitute significant human intervention, and therefore opportunities for fraud.

Faster election returns are another attribute commonly associated with election automation. The notion that automation can speed up the election process is uncontested, yet the one evaluative report on Philippine experiences with this technology (the ARMM congressional elections of 1996) found that the machines counted ballots

at a slower pace than predicted (Jabal and Santillan, 1997). Furthermore, there is no information available on how the technology would scale in terms of speed if used at a national level. Malfunctioning equipment, electrical failures, or any number of other technical problems could slow down the overall process of counting ballots. These problems are invisible to the press, who present the technology as fast and reliable. The opinion of Namfrel head, Gus Lagman, that Filipinos could look forward to “official results in just two days” if only “Comelec fulfills its duty to fully automate the electoral process” (Plaza, 2001a) appears in the press without contradiction or criticism. In a more conservative account from a Comelec source, the 45 days it took to declare Ramos the victor in the 1992 elections is contrasted to a hypothetical automated election where “the result . . . can be finalised and be made official in three weeks” (Santillan, 1997b). This statement is also treated unproblematically.

The evocation of national pride in conjunction with election automation is a final attribute of the press coverage. As Michael Adas (1989) has documented, technological achievement has long been a major determinant in assessing the status of different societies in the eyes of the West, a criterion that was thoroughly absorbed into the world-view of most post-colonial elites as technologies such as dams, nuclear power plants and national airlines became symbols of independence and modernity. While not at the same level of grandeur as dams, airlines, or nuclear power stations, election automation is a new technological symbol of the modern nation. The need to embrace automated election technology is therefore made more urgent, not only by the general assumption that it will work as claimed and deliver significant benefits, but because the manual Philippine system is seen as a relic of the past and a sign that the country is failing to keep up with the times. President Macapagal-Arroyo is quoted by the press as wanting “to bring our electoral process into the 21st century” (Visto, 2001), while a number of journalists refer to the current voting process as a product of the “Jurassic age” (Silva, 1996b). Automated elections are also associated with modernity: “Why is it, when tourists can visit a space station and Nasa can operate a vehicle on Mars by remote control from Earth, that we have an electoral system that is actually slower and less efficient than that we had 50 years ago? More people is one answer. No new technology is another. We still have an electoral system voters of the 16th century would recognize” (Barican, 2001).

Unfavourable comparisons between the Philippines and other countries are also used (*Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 7 June 2001; 23 January 2003) to emphasise the pressing need to automate elections:

Just last Sunday, Peru, a developing Third World country beset with politics as turbulent as ours, held its presidential election after the departure of the autocratic and corrupt President Alberto Fujimori. By Tuesday, two days after the polls, the world knew about the victory of Alejandro Toledo in the run-off against former President Alan Garcia.

Modern democracies have computerized their counting process and many developing countries, including those in equatorial Africa, have modernized their electoral counting systems. On the other hand, despite our boast about being an experienced democracy, our election counting process still remains in the era of the carabao-drawn sled.

Automation becomes a matter of national pride when other developing countries, whether viewed as the Philippines' democratic peers or, as in equatorial Africa, generally considered "backward," are seen as aggressively adopting this technology. The message is that the Philippines must keep up with the rest of the international community or risk losing face. Automated elections become a symbol of progressive nationhood in the "information age;" a technology of civilisational importance to the country as a whole.

### **Dissenting Views**

Coverage of election automation is generally optimistic and uncritical, especially in regard to the technology itself, but a few dissenting voices were heard in the early years of the debate. They were given impetus by the activities of Senator Miriam Defensor-Santiago who was deeply concerned about the technology and its potential for new forms of cheating. It must be remembered that Defensor was the implacable foe of President Ramos, a supporter of the technology through his appointments to Comelec and ties to Namfrel. Defensor's accusation that Ramos cheated in the manual count of the 1992 elections coloured her perception of the administration's eagerness to automate future contests. She, along with others in the opposition, believed that Ramos and his followers were trying to manipulate the electoral process using information technology. *Business World* reported their concern:

Committee chair Senator Miriam Defensor Santiago, during a hearing, said computerizing elections will only lead to a new form of dagdag-bawas or the padding of election returns. "We should not rush towards computerized elections because the machines will make even more difficult the documentation of irregularities and fraud," she said . . . The oversight committee reported the counting machines used in that election fell short of expectations in terms of speed, accuracy, and integrity. It said contrary to the claims of the Comelec that a counting machine can count votes at the rate of 150 ballots per minute, the machines used last year only counted an average of 10 to 25 ballots per minute. The oversight committee also found out that the counting machines were not error-proof. Moreover, the computerization of the counting and canvassing of votes failed to keep the elections clean. The scanner of the machine cannot identify a "fake" ballot from a genuine one . . . Ms. Santiago said unless the Comelec comes up with safeguards, it will be "extremely dangerous" to computerize the elections. "Without safeguards, the use of electronic technology will lead to massive fraud, not by voters or candidates, but by systems programmers and elections officers," she said (Jabal and Santillan, 1997).

Yet this perspective received limited attention, and it vanished quickly after the Senate reached agreement over the terms of the automation process in late 1997. Defensor herself then declared that automation would "ensure a cleaner and honest elections in 1998" (Santos and Santillan, 1997a). In the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, some dissent is visible beyond this date. But it is not widespread by any means, being

confined to the following passage (*Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 24 May 2001), worth quoting in full due to its rarity:

I have to chuckle whenever I hear Namfrel Chair Jose Concepcion hollering about the need to computerize our elections. Why, he asks, can't we do it like in the United States, where voters shade in their choices on a ballot which is inserted into a machine that automatically registers the votes and sends it to central processing units for tallying? I have no doubts we do need to computerize certain procedures, but I think it's dangerous to think we can solve all our election problems, particularly fraud, through computers alone. . . . So, you may argue, let's computerize these procedures so we won't have all these problems. I'm not sure. Computerization can actually amplify those problems, especially election fraud. We've already seen some shifts in the dagdag-bawas tactics during the last election. Instead of bribing individual voters, politicians have been taken to targeting canvassers instead, who can alter a few thousand votes at a time. With computerization, you could have wholesale tampering that may be more difficult to detect. . . . There are other possible major disasters. Namfrel should know – several times their computers stopped functioning because it didn't have enough computer memory. And let's not forget the hackers. . . . I'm not saying we shouldn't computerize. By all means, let's move on with computerizing the voters' lists, and some of the procedures. But let's be realistic as well, and take all the necessary precautions. . . . Let's call a spade a spade. So many of our problems this last election are rooted in corruption and incompetence. Given such systemic problems, if and when we do computerize, be prepared for a new crop of problems: invalid ballots that will probably drive the computers berserk, flying diskettes, self-destructing hard disks, maybe even voting viruses.

However, this dissent does not challenge the prevailing notion that computerisation should be a priority of the government; it suggests only that it is a partial solution. Although a more realistic assessment of the technology's potential, it does not entertain the possibility that poll automation may not be the best and certainly not the only solution to the problems affecting Philippine elections.

### **An Alternative Assessment of Automated Elections**

Although *Philippine Daily Inquirer* and *Business World* agree that election automation technology is workable and key to electoral reform, this does not mean that those who argue opposing positions are non-existent or difficult to find. In the United States, for example, a number of computer scientists have raised alarms over the use of automated election technologies since the early 1990s. One of the most prolific of these writers is Rebecca Mercuri, a faculty member in the Department of Computer Science at Bryn Mawr College in Pennsylvania. On the topic of election automation she writes: "Despite manufacturers' statements to the contrary, it is beyond the scope of present computer science and engineering principles to design a fully electronic, self-auditing voting system that sufficiently guarantees that all ballots are recorded and tallied in accordance with the voters' intentions"

(Mercuri, 2002: 48). She argues that this is due to the essentially unsolvable problem “of making certain that computer-based products do not contain unknown additional features.” To this end she approvingly quotes Ken Thompson, co-inventor of Unix. Two decades ago he wrote: “You can’t trust code that you did not totally create yourself. No amount of source-level verification or scrutiny will protect you from using untrusted code. A well-installed microcode bug will be almost impossible to detect” (quoted in Mercuri, 2002: 48).

Other computer scientists in the US share these concerns. Some have banded together to form the Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project, which aims to assess the reliability and effectiveness of electronic voting technology. Although the group tends to look favourably on the future prospects of the technology (at least in the United States), one of its studies concluded that of all voting technologies presently used in the United States (paper ballot, lever machines, optically scanned ballots, punched cards and direct recording electronic devices or DREs), the DREs have the “highest average rates of spoiled, uncounted, and unmarked ballots,” suggesting that claims of infallibility or even marked improvement over traditional systems (with the exception of punched cards which scored equally high in terms of improperly counted votes) are hardly objective (Caltech/MIT Voting Technology Project, 2001: 2). Concerns about automated election technology are found beyond the academic world. Bruce Schneier of Counterpane Internet Security worries that systems are vulnerable without a paper ballot:

Computerized voting machines, whether they have keyboard and screen or a touch screen ATM-like interface, could easily make things worse. You have to trust the computer to record the votes properly, tabulate the votes properly and keep accurate records. You can’t go back to the paper ballots and try to figure out what the voter wanted to do. . . . My suggestion is an ATM-style computer voting machine, but one that also prints out a paper ballot. The voter checks the paper ballot for accuracy, and then drops it into a sealed ballot box. The paper ballots are the “official” votes and can be used for recounts, and the computer provides a quick initial tally. Even this system is not as easy to design and implement as it sounds. The computer would need to be treated like safety- and mission-critical systems: fault tolerant, redundant, carefully analyzed code. Adding the printer adds problems; it’s yet another part to fail. And these machines will only be used once a year, making it even harder to get right (Schneier, 2000).

These alternative accounts of the value and risk of automated elections suggest that the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* and *Business World* greatly exaggerate the ability of information technology to guarantee fair elections, and do so in the face of readily available counter-factual evidence. The result is that the press establishes a clear link between the empowerment of civil society and information technology through the strengthening of a basic democratic institution: the electoral system. The positive portrayal of information technology in this area of electoral reform helps reinforce the current conception of development by presenting a vision of a strong civil society firmly in control of the state. The basic interest of the middle class in seeing a positive image of the Philippines around the world is thereby acknowledged. The Philippines,

through election automation, is to achieve what many other Asian nations at present cannot: a working democracy perfected by the latest in technology. At the same time, the interests of money capital are protected, because election automation does not represent an attack on the root causes of the Philippines' electoral malaise, that is, the fraud that accompanies much electoral activity. This malaise stems from the great disparities in wealth and influence that make it possible for some, and necessary for others, to participate in the market for votes or other forms of illegal electoral activity. In this regard, the repeated failure to automate elections may work in favour of the technology's hegemonic potential much more than would be the case if it were implemented. The reality of automated elections might actually shatter the myth that these technologies can solve the country's electoral problems without creating new ones of their own, thereby exposing the need for deeper reform.

## **Conclusion**

The discourse surrounding automated elections clearly links technology to the empowerment of civil society. The claims made for poll automation suggest that it represents a solution for the Philippines' perennial electoral problem – cheating – that, if implemented, would ensure that all votes are counted quickly and accurately. Yet while civil society is championed by technology in this account, the nature of the link between the two is such that civil society is effectively constrained in ways beneficial to the ruling class. Election automation acknowledges, and to a certain extent, addresses the concern of the middle class to develop a positive national identity, but it does not address the economic disparity that underwrites much of the fraud taking place at election time and which, in order to be overcome, would require a radical adjustment in the expectations of the ruling class. Despite these limitations, the nature of these accounts contribute to the construction of the Ramos historic bloc. Money capitalists and the middle class do benefit from the emphasis development now places on the operation of civil society. For money capital, the pre-eminence of civil society ensures that the state will continue to be weak; it will be unlikely to reverse policies championing liberalisation and deregulation, and powerless to advance the fortunes of crony and landlord capital. Political power in the Philippines will be based not on loyalty or the ownership of a particular asset, but on the direct mediation of money. The middle class benefits from the association of civil society with development through the acknowledgement of its concern over the lack of a positive national identity. Filipinos are to be known, not for the Marcos dictatorship or his wife's collection of shoes, but as a people deeply committed, despite the odds, to democracy and the realisation of the "people's" will through the latest in information technology.

## **Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> EDSA I is the name now used to describe the mass demonstrations that led to the fall of Marcos in 1986. Both EDSA I and II are named after the Manila street on which the events took place.
- <sup>2</sup> The demonstrations took place on a regular basis between November 2000 and January 2001 in Manila and other urban centres around the country. In Manila, their size varied from between 50,000 and 100,000 people (Longid, 2000; Williamson, 2001; Rubrico, 2001b).



<sup>3</sup> For example, Convergence for a Community-Centered Area Development, Congress for People's Agrarian Reform, and Green Forum – Philippines.

<sup>4</sup> Note that the circulation figures for the Philippines are not particularly accurate. However, they are the best currently available.

<sup>5</sup> In the vast majority of press accounts other solutions are given short shrift, if considered at all. The only exception found is the following paragraph of one article: "Political science professor Temario Rivera . . . told *Business World* that while '(computerization) is a step in the right direction, it addresses only a small portion of the fundamental process underlying our electoral process.' Mr. Rivera said election-related issues should be addressed such as the social and political inequalities of political groups, and the assurance of the voter's right to vote by providing an accurate and transparent voter's list. He suggested that the government, from the executive to the legislative, seriously consider the progressive electoral reforms pending in Congress. 'There is no determined attempt by both the executive and the legislators to really push through with a progressive agenda of reforms.'" But this article ended with a rather different viewpoint on the issue by Ding Tanjuatco, the author of the election modernization bill of 1994: "If it would cost us even P1 billion, I would say it is worth the expense because that is the nature of elections and (that is) what is (needed) to preserve a democratic society" (Silva, 1996b).

<sup>6</sup> Tancango retired from Comelec in February 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Unlike conventional password technologies, biometric matching does not lend itself to simple yes or no decisions regarding the identity of the user. Biometric systems match a representation or sample of a user's fingerprint, iris pattern, or facial image, not an exact replica. At the heart of the process lies an algorithm that takes this sample and compares it to a database of registered users, making a decision about whether the sample matches one of the records in that database. Making that decision requires a tolerance for error and part of the design process for biometric technology is determining what that error threshold will be. Typically the rate of false negatives and positives for iris scans, for example, is around one in a 100 matches. For systems dealing with small numbers of people that may be acceptable, but expand to the scale of millions of citizens, such as is the case in national elections, and the stage is set for a great deal of confusion and delay. Further complicating matters is the inevitable trade-off between false negatives (people who are rejected when they should have been accepted) and false positives (people accepted when they should have been rejected). That is, if you make your decision threshold very high, the number of false positives will decline, but at the same time, the number of false negatives will increase (Bolte, 2002: 2730).

<sup>8</sup> In a study of the Diebold voting machine, a team of researchers at the University of Maryland, found that 3% of people participating in an exit poll after the 2002 Congressional elections experienced technical difficulties using the machine, while 9% had to ask for assistance using it. Figures on the need for assistance, if broken down by education and frequency of computer use revealed that the numbers seeking help jumped significantly the lower the level of education of the voter and the more infrequently they used computers in their life. In the Philippines both of these characteristics are likely to be true for large numbers of voters. Many people, especially in rural areas, have very little, if any contact with computers, and education levels are also highly variable (Centre for American Politics and Citizenship, 2002).

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