

## NEDA HOLDS SYMPOSIUM ON ELECTION VIOLENCE



DG Romulo L. Neri



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Stronger electoral reforms, greater efforts in voters education, abolition of political dynasties and mobilization of citizens as middle forces during elections were among the recommendations of a recent multisectoral symposium on “Putting a Stop to Election Violence.”

Electoral reforms include the automation of the electoral process or adoption of similar technology that would eradicate fraud, amendment of the election code and the putting up of electoral colleges in selected areas to ensure transparent and honest voting.

This symposium was jointly sponsored by the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA), the Supreme Court, and the Commission on Human Rights (CHR), with funding assistance from the Hanns Seidel Foundation. It aimed to identify the causes of election violence and suggest how this could be minimized.

Speakers presented the causes of election violence from various perspectives. They included: Prof. Cristina J. Montiel who presented the social aspects; Prof. Nestor T. Castro, on the cultural background; Prof. Joel Rocamora, on the political causes; and Datu Zamzamin Ampatuan and Prof. Taha M. Basman on electoral processes in Muslim Mindanao.

### Forms of Election Violence

Violence during elections is not a new phenomenon in the Philippines. The first election, held during the first Philippine Republic during the closing years of the Spanish

*NEDA is undertaking this initiative because there is a big connection between political stability and economic progress. Where there is free and untrammled exercise of the right to vote freely, there is also a greater sense of confidence and empowerment among the people.*

- Socioeconomic Planning Secretary Romulo L. Neri

Regime, is remembered not only as the country’s first exercise of democratic freedom but also for the execution of revolutionary Andres Bonifacio for political reasons.

Today, election violence comes in various faces – from the burning of a polling precinct in Batangas to the assassination of a gubernatorial bet in Kalinga and candidates for various elective positions in Abra, Nueva Ecija, and elsewhere.

Professor Montiel of the Ateneo De Manila University categorized election related violence as direct or indirect/systemic and usually happen during the different stages of the election process: preformal campaign; formal campaign; the election day; canvassing until proclamation; and after proclamation.

Direct violence comes in the form of physical harm or threats. Professor Montiel says the act is dramatic and the victim and the aggressor can be traced.

Indirect or systemic violence, on the other hand, is about social injustice. It denigrates the fairness of the electoral process to favor a candidate or a group over another. The act is usually invisible to the naked eye and the victim is not a particular person but the entire “social fabric.”

Dr. Rocamora of the Institute of Popular Democracy described election violence as a direct result of the existing political setup. “We engage in violence because our politics provides rewards, and there is bearable risk of punishment. Politicians and business people contract violence because it is all too often, the least costly way to achieve their goals,” he said.

## Cultural Roots of Violence

For his part, Professor Castro of the University of the Philippines suggests that looking into the prevailing Philippine culture would lead to an understanding of this enduring phenomenon.

*Philippine Ethnic Landscape.* The country has at least 106 ethnic groups, 171 languages, and is home to Roman Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam, animism among other religions. This shows a heterogeneous composition that indicates the diversity of the voters.

*Social Structure.* Having strong kinship ties is the hallmark of Filipino culture. Filipinos consider the family as the basic unit of society and observe a bilateral extended kinship wherein a person is related both to the mother and father sides of the family. This basic relationship extends outside the family to the so-called *compradazgo* or ritual kinship which leads to *pagkukumpare* or *pagkukumare*.

These relationships form the core of social solidarity when observed in the home. Ironically, these same social relationships lead to destructive dilemmas when practiced in politics.

*Culture and Practice.* Filipinos have a personalistic world view. Relationships are based on persons, personalities, and personal relationships not on professional relations. This may have led to the country's personality oriented politics wherein the individual is highlighted instead of his platform.

*Christian Principles.* Equivalence and solidarity are two concepts that deal with group membership. According to Professor Castro, these may lead to in-group loyalty wherein an offense against a family member is considered an offense against oneself. Thus, it becomes the duty of an individual to retaliate in behalf of the family or his social group.

Another is the reciprocity principle which requires that every service receives a return. Filipinos may view this as *utang na loob*. Though by and large a good trait, Professor Castro explains that this concept may fabricate a system of patronage if applied in politics.

## Politics in Muslim Mindanao

According to Professor Basman, guns, goons, and gold are considered as status symbols in Mindanao. And with introduction of the Internal Revenue Allotment (IRA), elective officials are now richer and more powerful than the traditional leaders such as sultans. This is one of the main reasons for the sudden scramble to get a political position in Mindanao, he explained.



Workgroups discussed the problem of election-related violence and suggested possible actions to control the phenomenon.

There are also cultural and religious practices in Mindanao that could be exploited by ill-meaning politicians. These include the *Kandori* (a large banquet) and *Sadaka* (charity giving) which may be used by candidates to induce votes.

The practice of wearing the *hijab*, or veil, among conservative Muslim women can also be misused especially when the wearers may not be marked by indelible ink out of respect to their religion. Professor Basman relates that some political candidates take advantage of this by recruiting them as flying voters.

Another practice which could cause violence during elections include lingering *rido* or family feuds. When left unresolved, these feuds could explode into violent confrontations during elections, especially when members of the warring families run for public office.

Pragmatically speaking, Professor Basman says violent elections in Mindanao also occur because of the following: (a) the presence of the opportunity to commit fraud; (b) lax implementation of the law; (c) the gaining acceptability of election fraud as normal part of the electoral process; (d) the proliferation of arms and armed groups in the communities; (e) absence of infrastructure that makes communities inaccessible to law enforcement authorities; (f) the subservience of ordinary folks to the desire of powerful but corrupt leaders for fear for their lives; (g) costly and slow litigation of election cases; (h) the poverty of the people which makes them easy preys of the political vultures; and (i) the over-enthusiasm of the candidates due to the scarcity of job opportunities in the Muslim communities.

For his part, Datu Zamzamin Ampatuan suggested that the democratic election concept has not yet been well-absorbed in some parts of Mindanao, particularly for groups who have long been observing the traditional style of government. It may take a while for the people to fully appreciate the idea of electing their public officials, he said.

*“We realize that there is really the need to build and modernize Philippine institutions as the political killings and violence are just the tip of the iceberg. We cannot have a modern people that show their best foot forward in the world and yet our institutions are primitive. We have to do something about it.”*

- Secretary Neri