

POST 2010 OAV REFLECTIONS

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Partial and unofficial reports from the Commission on Elections ("Comelec") state that the voter turn-out on overseas absentee voting ("OAV") is around 24% - half of Comelec's projection of a 50% turn-out. The 2010 national elections marked the third time that the Philippines has implemented OAV. It is also the second time that OAV was conducted in a presidential election. How does it compare to the 2004 and 2007 OAV exercises?

The first time OAV was implemented in 2004, the over-all turn-out was 65% (233,092 out of 359,297 registered voters). It was generally touted as a successful exercise given the substantial participation of overseas Filipinos and the cooperation and coordination between and among Filipino communities and organizations on one hand, and the Philippine embassies/consulates, the Commission on Elections ("Comelec") and the Department of Foreign Affairs ("DFA"), on the other hand.

Of course, the 2004 OAV exercise was not a walk in the park. In fact, the exercise was plagued with a lot of problems: a short registration period (2 months only), lack of voter information and education, difficulties in registering and voting in person, restrictions on the voting rights of immigrants and dual citizens, errors in the certified list of overseas absentee voters, seafarers were unable to register and vote, a lot of wasted ballots in postal voting (28% of postal ballots were returned undelivered or invalidated), cynicism and apathy over the election exercise, etc. But having achieved a 65% turn-out, the 2004 OAV was considered over-all as a success.

In the 2007 elections, the OAV turn-out nosedived to 16.22% over-all (81,732 out of 503,896 registered voters). Most of the problems areas already identified in the 2004 OAV were also experienced in 2004: lack of voter information and education, difficulties in registering and voting in person, restriction on the voting rights of immigrants, errors in the certified list of overseas absentee voters, seafarers were unable to register and vote, a lot of wasted ballots in postal voting (30% over-all but more this time due to the expansion of coverage of postal voting), cynicism and apathy over the electoral exercise (especially in the light of the "Hello Garci" scandal), etc.

There were also several significant innovations that were implemented preparatory to the 2007 OAV for the purpose of increasing OAV registration and voter turn-out. First, a centralized "Resident Election Registration Board" was created within Comelec for the purpose of approving applications for overseas absentee voting in lieu of the the municipal/city election registration boards. Second, pre-departure registration at the POEA and at the airport was implemented that boosted the number of registered voters. Third, postal voting was implemented in more countries. Fourth, seafarers were allowed to vote at any port, unlike the 2004 exercise where they were required to indicate upon registration, where they will vote.

But why did the 2007 OAV turn-out dive to 16.22%? Many attributed the drop in voter turn-out to the fact that the 2007 elections was not a presidential elections. Their thinking was that overseas Filipinos are more interested in presidential elections and thus, it is expected that the turn-out for the 2007 OAV would be much lower compared to the 2004 elections.

A more systematic assessment conducted by Filipino organizations in Hong Kong and in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia revealed that a significant factor that contributed to the drop in voter turnout in the 2007 elections was the low level of voter education and mobilization and less coordination and cooperation between and among Filipino communities and organizations and the diplomatic posts, as compared to the 2004 OAV exercise. Many accounts of non-participation of voters due to cynicism and apathy of overseas voters after the "Hello Garci" scandal were also reported by overseas Filipino organizations.

Several innovations introduced for the 2007 OAV seemed to have backfired. While pre-departure registration in the POEA and at the airport increased the number of registered overseas absentee voters, there was no indication that these were translated into actual votes cast on-site. While seafarers were allowed to vote at almost any Post, the increase in the number of seafarers who registered and voted was minimal. While the coverage of postal voting was increased, so did the number of return to sender ballots. More than half of postal ballots were also presumed to have been received but were not cast by the overseas voters.

Going into the 2010 elections, the Comelec delisted 132,817 names from the official list of overseas absentee voters. This figure represented those who registered for the 2004 elections but failed to vote in both the 2004 and 2007 elections. There were 224,884 new registrants bringing the total number of overseas voters to 589,830 for the 2010 OAV exercise.

Again, Comelec and Congress did not deem it fit to provide a budget for voter information and education for OAV. All the other problems already identified in the 2004 and 2007 OAV were still valid for the 2010 OAV. Pre-departure registration at the POEA and at the airport was continued that increased voter registration without any plan on how to increase voter turnout. Postal voting was again implemented without addressing the problem why 30% of the postal ballots are wasted and why the postal ballots that were presumably received by the voters were not cast during the voting period. Personal registration and voting remains to be a problem. Seafarers still found it difficult to register and vote. There are still a lot of complaints concerning the accuracy of the certified list of overseas absentee voters. The Filipino immigrants' right to vote remains to be restricted (although dual citizens were now allowed to vote even without residence in the Philippines). One bright spot for the 2010 OAV was the introduction of automated counting of votes in overseas absentee voting, at least in Hong Kong and Singapore.

Against this backdrop, Comelec was hoping for a 50% turnout in the 2010 elections.

Now that the voting period for the 2010 elections is over, the over-all partial and unofficial results tend to show that the 2010 OAV turnout was around 24% (141,846 out of 589,830 registered voters). Filipinos in Hong Kong were able to post a decent 40% turnout. So did the Filipino voters in Switzerland. The voter turnout in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was around 22.4%. OAV turnout in the rest of the world hovered around 22%.

The 24% turnout in the 2010 OAV disproved the theory that the low turnout in the 2007 OAV (16.22%) was due to the fact that the 2007 elections was not a presidential elections. The 2010 elections was a presidential elections, and yet, there was only an 8% increase in turnout compared to the 2007 OAV and way below the 65% turnout for the 2004 elections. In fact, the Hong Kong turnout of 40% pulled up the worldwide average of less than 24%.

Given these results, critics and opponents of OAV will again have a field day in criticizing overseas Filipinos. Some legislators would again ask: Why are we allocating hundreds of millions to OAV when most of them do not care to vote anyway? Would it not be better if we just scrap OAV?

Given the results of the three (3) OAV exercises, there are several observations that may be made:

First, it appears that the baseline voter participation rate of overseas Filipinos may be around 16% - meaning, that in the absence of voter information and education and with minimal efforts from government and the Filipino communities and organizations abroad, 16% of registered overseas absentee voters will vote – this was the 2007 OAV experience.

Second, voter turn-out is higher in a presidential elections (2010) compared to a mid-term elections (2007) but presidential elections does not appear to be the determining factor in attaining a high voter turn-out. In fact, there was only an 8% increase in voter turn-out from 2007 to the 2010 elections.

Third, there are systemic problems within the Philippine overseas absentee voting system that disenfranchises the great majority of overseas Filipinos. Millions of Filipino immigrants do not register and vote because if they do so, they are required by law to return permanently to the Philippines within 3 years from registration as an overseas absentee voter. Failure to do so is penalized with permanent disqualification from voting, stamping of the passport with the phrase "not allowed to vote" and criminal prosecution. Millions of overseas Filipinos are undocumented workers who won't even dare enter the premises of the Philippine embassies and consulates. Seafarers still find it hard to register and vote. The requirement of registration in person and voting in person discourages many from registering and voting. Even more basic, they have limited access to the necessary information for registration and voting.

Fourth, even with a significant number of registered overseas absentee voters, there are systemic problems that prevents a higher voter turn-out. The coverage of postal voting was increased notwithstanding the fact that the problem of 30% wastage of postal ballots was not addressed. The question of why postal ballots presumably received by the registered voters were not cast during the voting period remains unanswered. Pre-departure registration at the POEA and at the airport boosts the number of registered voters without consideration on how this can be translated into actual voter turn-out. Voter information and education remains to be the lowest priority of the government – the Comelec in particular - since no budget was allotted for this purpose.

Fifth, between the low end turn-out (16.22% in 2007) and the high-end turn-out (65% in 2004) it appears that the conscious and coordinated efforts of Filipino communities and organizations abroad for the purpose of voter information and education, and for the purpose of mobilization for registration and voting together with close coordination with the Philippine embassies and consulates for the conduct of elections are the main key factors that would determine whether voter turn-out would be high or low.

And finally, the apparent growing apathy and cynicism within the ranks of overseas Filipinos on Philippine electoral exercises need to be addressed. Overseas Filipinos remain part of Philippine society and economy. A low level of participation in electoral exercises would translate into a weaker political voice for overseas Filipinos. In order to project its true strength as a sector, overseas Filipinos need to re-assess if they really can, and truly be, a global community of overseas Filipinos.

While a high OAV voter turn-out is a desirable objective, it must be remembered that the exercise of the right to vote, or not to vote, is both a political and human right. The conscious refusal to vote is a political act that must be respected. But the failure to register and vote due to causes beyond the control voter indicates the existence of problem areas that must be addressed. What is important is that the right to overseas absentee voting has been won and can be exercised. It is up to the overseas Filipinos to prove their own strength and place in Philippine society and politics.##

