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Title: From the Movies to Malacañang: The Rise to Power of Philippine President Joseph Estrada

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Abstract. This article was written by Ma. Elizabeth J. Macapagal of Ateneo de Manila University, Republic of the Philippines. She brings at least three sources of expertise to her topic: formal training in the social sciences, a political intuition for the telling detail, and experiential/observational acumen and tradition as the granddaughter of former Philippine president, Diosdado Macapagal. (The article has undergone minor editing by IBPP).

The Philippines has a new president in the person of Joseph Estrada, a famous movie actor turned politician. Baptized as Jose Marcelo Ejercito, he soon adopted the name Joseph Estrada as a screen name when he entered show business. His family disapproved of his decision to enter the entertainment world and thus banned him from using his real family name. He is now fondly referred to as Erap (backwards for "pare" which roughly translates to "buddy" or "pal").

Erap entered politics during the Ferdinand Marcos era and was mayor of San Juan, a city in Metro Manila, for 17 years. He then decided to run for the national senate during the administration of Corazon Aquino. He won and was only one of 2 opposition senators during that time. In 1992, he initially ran for president but ended that quest to become the vice presidential candidate of Eduardo Cojuangco, a Marcos crony. As can happen via Philippine election procedures in which voters can "split the ticket" between presidential and vice presidential candidates, Erap won by a landslide, while Fidel V. Ramos won by a small margin as President.

Erap Estrada is, no doubt, a controversial personality. As an actor, he is perceived by some Filipinos as unbecoming to be a head of state. In terms of educational background, he is the most unprepared president the Philippines has ever had. He was kicked out of Ateneo de Manila University, one of the most prestigious high schools in the country, because he fought with an American who was said to bully his classmates. He dropped out of college during his third year as a mechanical engineering student in favor of show business. Moreover, he has no background or experience in economics or the law, unlike past presidents--except for Corazon Aquino who was elected into office under very special circumstances. In response to this criticism, he announced that he has around 30 competent advisers to guide him in presidential decision-making.

Aside from insufficient formal education, another criticism of Erap involves his vices. He is a self-confessed womanizer, although he claims that this is a thing of the past. At present, he has 3 children with his wife Dr. Loi Ejercito, but also has fathered children with 4 other women. He is reported to have fathered a two-year-old child with a college student and a three-year-old child with a movie actress. He is also known as a heavy drinker, smoker, and gambler. In fact, one presidential rival showed a videotape of Erap gambling in a casino last year. He also was under attack on account of his medical status. He's overweight and many believe that he is not healthy enough to be president.

But despite all these criticisms, the Filipino electorate chose him over 10 other candidates as the 13th President of the Philippines. He had an overwhelming margin of victory over Jose De Venecia, the anointed candidate of President Ramos. Erap got roughly 39% of the votes against De Venecia's 16%.

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According to an exit poll survey conducted by the Social Weather Stations, Erap won heavily in the lower socio-economic classes that constitute the majority of the Filipino electorate. He was second to Senator Raul Roco among the middle and upper classes.

Erap Estrada's rise to power can be significantly attributed to the impact of the media. Many political observers compare Erap Estrada with former United States president Ronald Reagan, since both were actors who eventually became the head of their nations. Probably everyone in the Philippines knows Erap from his movies which often portrayed him as a savior of the oppressed. (IBPP Note: Mr. Reagan as actor was best known for playing the Gipper--a dying football star, a suitor who never got the girl, and "the guy" on the losing end in matching wits with monkeys. He also was a spokesperson for the General Electric Company.) The first impression of Erap as a man who is for the poor and helpless seems to have stuck in the minds and hearts of the masses. This could explain why all the criticisms and complaints against him were not politically effective. The masses could not believe that the "savior of the poor" as portrayed in the movies would be a "bad" person.

Filipinos who supported Erap also seem to believe that his personal lifestyle had nothing to do with his public duties. No one has ever accused Erap of graft and corruption during his political career, and his supporters seemed to find this an essential factor in their choice for him as president. Never mind if he is a womanizer, gambler, or "goon" as long as he is honest and for the poor. And thus his slogan, "Erap para sa mahirap" (Erap for the poor), clicked.

The masses also seem to have identified with Erap--again because of his movies. In fact, many Filipinos believe that he is also "poor." He is not perceived as distant and cold--traits that are associated with the elite, educated, and traditional politicians. With Erap, the masses feel that they can approach him easily, that he will listen when they tell him their needs. Perhaps the Filipino people have realized that they want a leader who is like them, and it seems that Erap is this person.

When the surveys prior to the elections continued to show that Erap would win, a "bandwagon effect" began to develop. It was no surprise that come election day, many voters abandoned their original candidates and opted to vote for the winner. And so the Philippines, on the centennial year of its declaration of independence, will have Joseph Estrada as its leader.

A few days after the elections, Erap began to make controversial announcements just like in his campaign. Among them were his choices for cabinet members--mostly his political supporters. He chose people from virtually the entire political spectrum--from the leftists and nationalists to the capitalists, military, and extreme rightists. This gesture reflects Erap's sense of "utang na loob" (debt of gratitude), a common Filipino trait. It is his way of thanking his supporters by giving them positions of power. However, it will be interesting to see how many of these initial appointees will stay in power. Now that Erap has repaid his debts, there is no reason for him not to fire his appointees if they do not perform well.

And with his "utang na loob" comes another very controversial Issue: Erap's decision to allow former President Marcos to be buried in the Libingan ng mga Bayani (Burial of Heroes). For many years, Marcos' body has been preserved (with wax) in his hometown of Ilocos. His family, particularly his wife Imelda, has insisted that he must be buried in the Libingan ng mga Bayani. But this request was not granted by the past two presidents, Corazon Aquino and Fidel Ramos.

It is said that Erap owes a lot to the Marcos family. He became a politician during the Marcos era and has continued to be known as a Marcos "loyalist." When Imelda Marcos withdrew from the presidential race and supported Estrada, many believed that a political concession was forged between the two leaders. And so Estrada announced that Marcos would be buried this July in the Libingan ng mga Bayani. To many Filipinos, it is a grave insult to bury a dictator and oppressor in the very same place where heroes and soldiers are laid to rest. But for Estrada, it apparently is time to bury the past and to forgive and forget. His cabinet appointees have been silent about the issue, afraid that Erap might change his mind in appointing them to power. Some have spoken in favor of Erap's decision--acts that have disappointed many Filipinos because these appointees are the same people who were victims of the Marcos oppression. On the other hand, it is not surprising that they would conform to their leader and prefer to remain in power.

This decision has certainly divided the nation. There have been rallies and demonstrations all over Metro Manila intended to convince Erap to change his mind. Marcos loyalists have also been on the streets to assert their position. At the moment, the Marcos family has decided to postpone the burial as a response to the outcry of so many Filipinos. Erap initially remained firm on his decision but now it seems that he is looking for a way out. He wants to show that he has political will by not changing his mind, but--on the other hand--he also cannot ignore public sentiment on the issue.

The Philippines' new president certainly has many crises to face. It will be interesting to see how Erap will handle the presidency in the next six years. It will certainly be an exciting and entertaining era for Philippine politics. (See Austin, T. (1995). Filipino self-help and peacemaking strategies: A view from the Mindanao hinterland. *Human Organization*, 54, 10-19; Carandang, M.L. (1989). Stresses and coping strategies of Filipino families in a sociopolitical crisis. *International Psychologist*, 29, 75-82; Gonzalez-Intal, A.M. (1991). Relative deprivation theory and collective political violence in the Philippines. *Philippine Journal of Psychology*, 24, 22-38; Guanzon-Lapena, Ma. A., Church, T.A., Carlota, A.J., & Katigbak, M.S. (1998). Indigenous personality measures: Philippine examples. *Journal of Cross Cultural Psychology*, 29, 249-270; Montiel, C.J. (1997). Citizen-based peacemaking in a protracted war: Two Philippine cases. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 3, 115-134; Montiel, C.J. (1995). Social psychological dimensions of political conflict resolution in the Philippines. *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology*, 1, 149-159.) (Keywords: Elections, Estrada, Personality, Philippines.)