



HOW MIGRANTS ARE SAVING DEMOCRACY IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

Johanna O. Zulueta, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Faculty of Sociology
Toyo University

The Study

- This is an exploratory study of how Filipinos in Japan continue to play an important part in nation-building, and in the maintenance of democracy in the homeland by participating in political campaigns and overseas voting.
- In particular, this study, looks at Filipino supporters of opposition leader, Maria Leonor “Leni” Robredo, the former Vice President of the Philippines, when she ran against current President (and former Senator) Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. (the late dictator president’s son)

The Study

- This presentation is based on the author's observation and participation in the campaign, her membership and participation in 2 volunteer groups (Team Leni Robredo Japan and Solid-Leni Kiko Global), participation in online meetings and events as well as informal conversations with the people involved, particularly overseas Filipinos in Japan.
- The campaign ran from October 2021 to early May 2022
- This exploratory study aims to contribute to existing literature on migrants' political activities, transnational activities, and role in democratic nation-building

Migrants and Democracy

- Migrants as a political constituency
 - Source of votes, campaign funds, electoral mobilization (Burgess 2020)
- Participation of migrants in domestic politics to improve the quality of democracy back in their homeland
 - But then, in some cases, they can also contribute to democratic backsliding (Burgess 2020)
- Remittances (both economic and social) can have a democratizing effect on migrants' home countries (Escriba-Folch, et.al. 2021)
 - Economic remittances and development
 - Financing of grassroots projects, protest movements, political opposition
 - Social remittances (Levitt 1998) and transmission of (democratic) values

Migrants and Democracy

- “States make diasporas and diasporas make states” (Burgess 2020: 17)
 - Migrants’ membership in the political community of the home country through extraterritorial citizenship rights, such as dual citizenship, overseas voting, among others
- Migrants’ political orientation can be dependent on the host country’s reception towards migrants (Burgess 2020)
 - Policies, labor market in the host country, density of migrant community, attitude of the host population (Burgess 2020)
 - Level of integration in the host country
 - Japan: low levels of integration as compared to traditional migration countries (US, Australia, Canada); low rates (and difficulty) of naturalization

Short Background on Filipino Migration

- Pre-1970s Migration
 - Mostly to Hawaii and the U.S. mainland (farmers, navy personnel, nurses)
 - 1903: Filipino students (“*pensionados*”)
 - 1906-1934: Migration mostly to California and Hawaii
 - Hawaii: work on plantations
 - California: San Diego
 - Filipino migration to Japan
 - 1930s: students, jazz musicians, boxers (Suzuki 1997)
 - Immediate post war years: U.S. base workers (Yu-Jose 2002; Zulueta 2020)

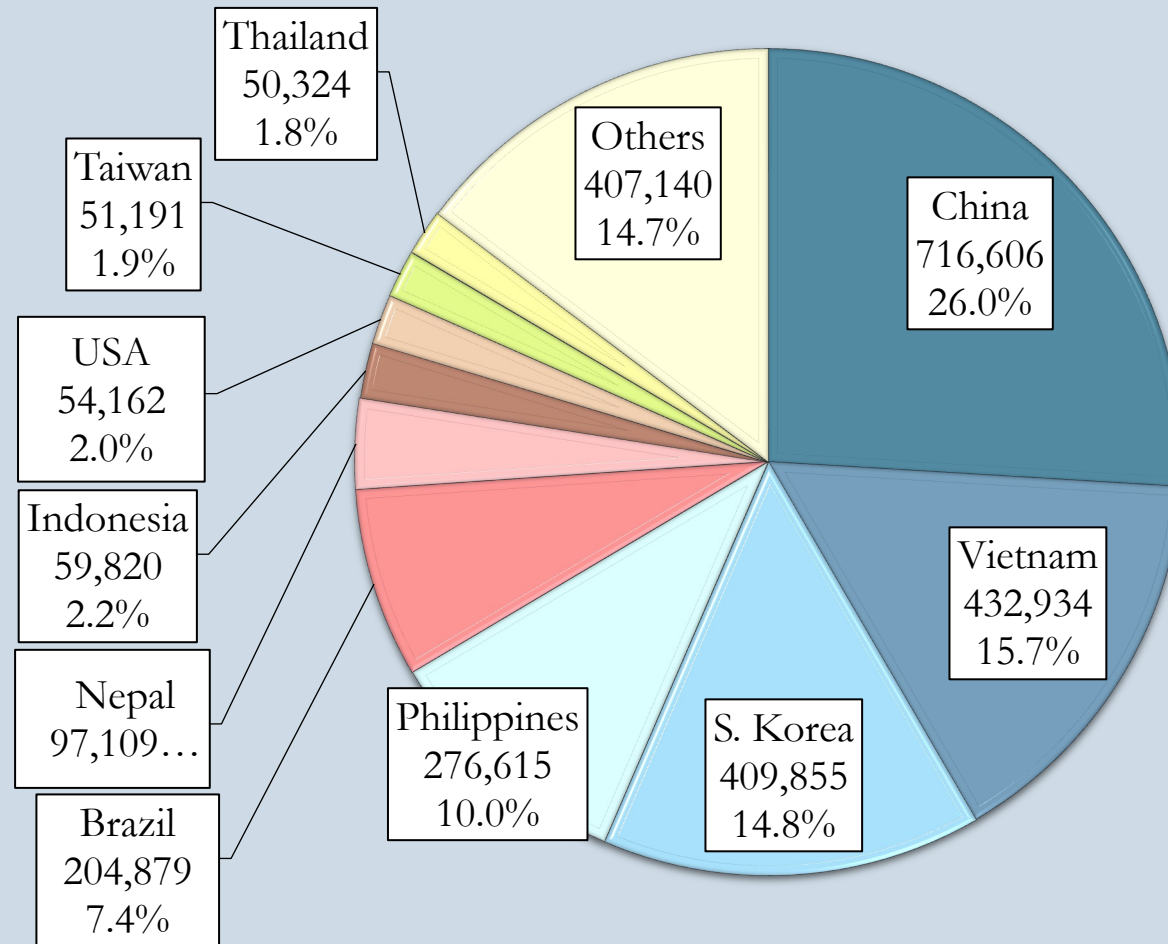
Short Background on Filipino Migration

- Post 1970s Migration
 - The Philippines as an out-migration country; migration was seen as a stopgap measure
 - Marcos government passed the Labor Code of the Philippines in 1974 (Asis 2006)
 - Middle East, Asia, Europe, Americas
 - Migration was thought of to be temporary but demand for labor increased in receiving countries, fueling migration
 - Japan: Bubble Economy
 - Migration of women on entertainer visas (興行ビザ) as overseas performing artists (OPA) = feminization of migration
 - Marriage migrants (rural brides)

Short Background on Filipino Migration

- At present, the Philippines is known to be a labor exporting country, a “labor brokerage state” (Rodriguez 2010)
- Discourse on overseas Filipino workers as “new heroes” (“*bagong bayani*”) during Corazon Aquino’s (1986-1992) time
 - Overseas Contract Workers (OCWs) to Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs)
 - Nationalism is “accomplished through one’s departure from the nation-state” (Rodriguez 2010)
- Overseas Voting Law in 2003
- Dual Citizenship Bill in 2004

Foreign Population in Japan by the end of 2021 (MOJ data)



Filipinos in Japan

- There are currently 276,615 Filipinos in Japan as of year-end of 2021 (4th largest foreign population) (MOJ Data); mostly mid- to long-term residents
 - Permanent residents (永住者): 135,300
 - Technical Intern Trainee (技能実習): 23,186
 - Engineer/Specialist in Humanities/International Services (技術・人文知識・国際業務): 7,784
 - Foreign Student (留学): 1,600
 - Long-term Resident (定住者): 54,946
 - Dependent/Family stay (家族滞在): 3,732
 - Spouse or child of a Japanese (日本人の配偶者等): 25,538
 - Designated activities (特定活動): 7,777
 - Others (その他): 16,702

The Rise of the Philippine Strongman in 2016

- Election of Duterte in 2016 who ruled with an “iron fist”
- Philippines as a strong democracy in SEA, but the election of Duterte posed a threat to liberal democracy and its institutions
 - Drug war, repression of media
- Duterte as an illiberal, populist leader whose support mainly came from the elite and the middle-class (unlike former President Estrada, a former actor, who won the presidency in 1998, whose support base is the masses) (Thompson 2016)
- Duterte won the overseas vote in 2016, with Robredo coming in 3rd as Vice President (Marcos Jr. won the overseas vote in 2016) (Abad 2021)

The Overseas Filipino Vote

- According to data from the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) from 2007-2019, actual turnout per region did not even reach half of the number of registered voters (Abad 2021)
 - The highest number of voter turnout was 42.2% among those in the Asia-Pacific region in 2016
 - Top countries with the highest number of voters: China (Hong Kong), Saudi Arabia, Singapore, United Arab Emirates, United States of America

The Overseas Filipino Vote

- In 2022, COMELEC data below show a large number of registered voters, but actual voter turnout was just less than half of the number of actual voters
- Incidences of disenfranchised overseas voters (did not receive ballots in the mail, names were not on registry list, etc.)

| | NUMBER OF REGISTERED VOTERS | NUMBER OF VOTERS WHO ACTUALLY VOTED | VOTERS' TURNOUT (%) |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|------------------------|
| OVERSEAS AUTOMATED VOTING | 1,622,982 | 626,576 | 38.61 |
| OVERSEAS MANUAL VOTING | 70,831 | 36,612 | 51.69 |

Elections During a Pandemic

- Candidates for the national elections in May 2022 and nostalgia for another strongman rule
 - Marcos Jr. for President and Sara Duterte for Vice President
 - Marcos was seen to continue his father's "Golden Years"; Duterte was considered to continue her father's work
- Popularity of Marcos and Duterte among overseas Filipinos
 - Rise and prevalence of misinformation through social media (overseas Filipinos mainly consume YouTube and Facebook)
- Presence of grassroots movements among overseas Filipinos to support the candidacy of opposition leader Robredo, who ran as an independent candidate
 - Many groups linked with campaign groups in the Philippines; existing political associations with branches overseas and the role of social networks

Overseas Campaigning in Japan

- As early as October 2021, Filipinos began mobilizing, forming their own groups, as well as forming overseas branches of Philippine-based groups; “organic”
 - Team Leni Robredo Japan, Team Leni Robredo Global Japan, Solid Leni-Kiko Global, Pinoy Pink Ninjas
 - Networking with groups in other countries – global networking
 - Use of social and digital media: Zoom (for meetings), Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok
 - Bloggers and Vloggers in Japan reached out to their followers to campaign for Robredo and fight misinformation and disinformation
 - “As vloggers, we put our lives at risk to fight disinformation.” (Filipino vlogger in Japan)

Overseas Campaigning in Japan

- The campaign for Robredo in Japan was anchored on the politics of “radical love” that espoused values of decency, kindness, generosity, and love, which saw itself in opposition to hate, mockery, and division that some campaigns were said to sow
 - “It is more radical to love (*Mas radikal and magmahal*)”
- The campaign – both domestic and overseas – was volunteer-based
 - Economic: campaign donations from overseas Filipinos
 - Performative: rallies, online concerts, online interviews with opposition candidates
- Non-registered voters and even those naturalized as Japanese helped in the campaign
 - Naturalized Australians and Canadians taking on dual citizenship (restore Philippine citizenship) in order to vote in the PH elections

Political Campaigning Overseas in a Pandemic

- Adherence to COVID-19 protocols, which can differ among nation-states
 - Lockdowns, strict surveillance (such as in Hong Kong)
- Heavy use of digital media and social media
 - Thus linking overseas Filipinos through collaborative campaign activities
 - Facebook groups and pages, group chats, Twitter, TikTok, YouTube, Instagram
- Donations (monetary and in kind)
 - Direct: as campaign funds
 - Use of mobile phone apps in addition to online money transfers
 - Indirect: through sending of relief goods and monetary donations for victims of calamities (e.g. typhoon in December 2021)

Political Campaigning Overseas in a Pandemic

- Tapping existing social networks and overseas political groups
 - Mobilized resources (both human and material) for the campaign and other activities
- Migrant's economic capital (and at times, breadwinner status) utilized to influence left-behind family members' political decisions
 - One of the strategies employed by the global volunteer group, Solid Leni-Kiko Global
 - Use of ICTs not only for maintaining family ties, but also for political decision-making

Why Leni Robredo?

- Anne (40s, entrepreneur): “I am a first-time voter despite living here in Japan for more than 20 years, but I registered because Leni promises a brighter future for Filipinos.”
- Pete (50s, entrepreneur): “I am not a registered voter but I am helping campaign for Leni because of her platform and record of public service.”
- Stan (40s, chemical engineer): “I only got involved in the Filipino community when I got to know them through some anti-Duterte groups, and with Leni as a candidate I want to be involved in her campaign.”
- Jane (50s, domestic worker): “I support Leni because of her platform of good governance.”



Fundraising activity in Minato-ku, December 2021



Spring march and picnic, Yokohama, March 2022



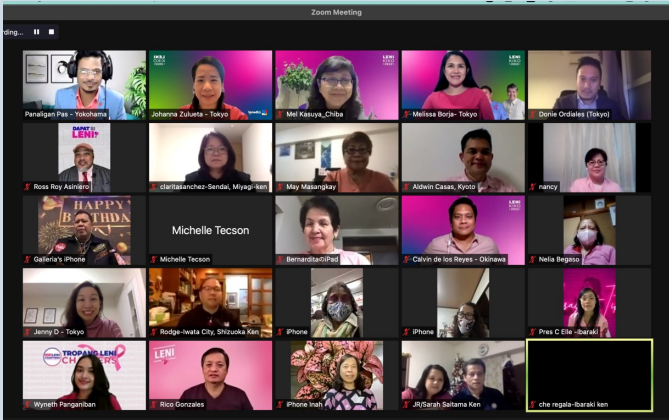
New Year's Party, Ginza, January 2022



Labor Day Gathering/Miting de Avance, Shibuya, May 2022



Hibiya Park, October 2021



TLR Japan GA, October 2021



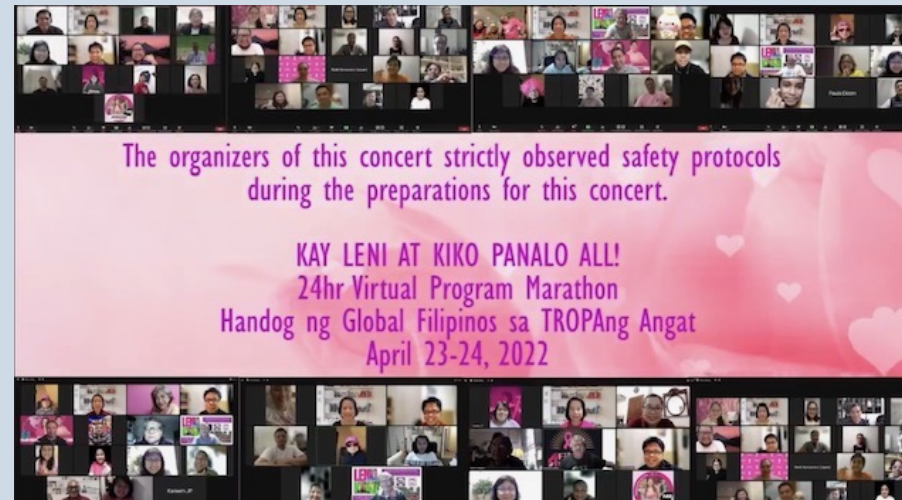
Darumas for Kick-off Party, Roppongi, November 2021



TLR South Korea and 1Sambayan Korea event poster



Online concert by TLR Japan and TLR HK, February 2022



24-Hour Online Global Concert, April 2022

Post-Pandemic Futures

- The campaign for Robredo led to the formation of a movement among overseas Filipinos as they fought for good governance.
- The presidency of the late dictator's son has prompted Robredo supporters in Japan to say that the movement that has been created will continue (“re-group” and “re-organize”), pointing to the role of the Filipino diaspora in Japan and in other countries in nation-building and the safeguarding of democracy in the homeland.
 - Some groups have met up (online meeting) with Robredo and her team to continue to fight disinformation on social media, as well as to prepare for the midterm elections in 2025
- What is the future like for this movement?

Thank you for your attention.