

## CREATOR ECONOMY

# Filipinos want the country's biggest YouTube star to be their next president

Raffy Tulfo's popular YouTube show helped him become senator. It may get him elected president.

By [ANGEL MARTINEZ](#)

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- Raffy Tulfo has the most popular YouTube show in the Philippines.
- Ordinary Filipinos trust him to resolve their problems more than the country's courts.
- The show helped him win a Senate seat, but critics say his sense of justice is flawed.

The parents of a young girl in the Philippine province of Cavite who died because the ambulance was not available, an overseas worker who caught her husband cheating on her at home, a group of fishermen who had their wages withheld — these are among the thousands of Filipinos who have taken their cases to Raffy Tulfo. They rely on him, rather than the police or the courts, to settle petty grievances and major criminal offenses alike. Now, they want Tulfo, the country's biggest social media influencer, to run for President.

Tulfo, 64, anchors the country's top-rated public affairs program, *Wanted sa Radyo* (Wanted on Radio). Many of the cases are also streamed on his YouTube channel *Raffy Tulfo in Action*, which has more than 28 million subscribers — the largest following for an

individual in the country. With a career of nearly two decades in radio and television, Tulfo is a popular figure. But it is his massive YouTube following that catapulted him into a political career, helping him win a Senate seat, and putting him in the lead in a survey of potential presidential candidates for the next election.

“Aside from being part of the media for so long, — which already makes him an influential person — his YouTube following definitely played a part in advancing his political career,” Ranny Randolph Libayan, a lawyer, told *Rest of World*. “There are more than 28 million people who idolize him .... He’s not only powerful, it’s like he’s invincible.”

Called “idol” by his adoring fans, Tulfo has repeatedly said he is not interested in running for President in 2028, claiming that the process “will just give me a headache.” But his fans have not given up, hoping he will change his mind.

“I’d vote for Tulfo in a heartbeat,” Claudine Mayer, an insurance executive who has appeared on his show, told *Rest of World*. After her niece died in an accident, Tulfo provided monetary assistance for the funeral, she said. “We need someone who helps out people.”

Tulfo, a college dropout, got his start in the broadcast industry as a disc jockey for a local radio station. He got his big break as a news reporter for People’s Television Network (PTV), the state broadcaster, and then became an anchor on the crime show *Philippines’ Most Wanted*. When he launched *Wanted sa Radyo* in 2011, his no-holds-barred style — with which he confronted and berated even government officials and the military — quickly won admirers. “*Ipa-Tulfo mo yan*” or “take him to Tulfo” became a catchphrase whenever there was injustice.

*Raffy Tulfo in Action*, launched in 2016, gained subscribers quickly. The pandemic brought tens of thousands of new followers every day. About 58 million people in the Philippines are on YouTube, and Filipinos largely get their news from the platform. The more than 11,000 vlogs on Tulfo’s channel have been viewed about 16.5 million times. He decided to run for senator, confident that his subscribers would vote for him. Tulfo won as an independent candidate and took office in 2022, vowing to be “a diligent senator, a working senator.” His show continued, gaining more subscribers and earning him millions of dollars. On his Instagram account, Tulfo often interacts with his 1.5 million followers.

**IDOL RAFFY, TINURUAN SILA NG LEKSYON!**



*Raffy Tulfo in Action* has over 28 million subscribers on Youtube, the largest following for an individual in the Philippines.

The Philippines is no stranger to celebrities entering politics. At least two dozen musicians, actors, and other high-profile Filipinos have become politicians over the years — from provincial mayors to congressmen to senators, and even president. Joseph Estrada, an actor, became vice president, then president, serving until he was impeached in 2001 for corruption. He returned to politics as the mayor of Manila from 2013 to 2019. More recently, former boxer Manny Pacquiao, who was elected congressman and then senator, ran for president in 2022. Actor Isko Moreno was mayor of Manila, and also ran for president in 2022.

What sets Tulfo apart is “the potent combination of celebrity with the strongman rhetoric,” Aries Arugay, a professor of political science at the University of the Philippines, told *Rest of World*. His show “appeals to a country that is marked by the deficiencies of governance and rule of law,” he said. “Filipinos ordinarily feel so disempowered. What his program represents is something that we don’t really see, especially in a society that has grown so jaded.”

The Philippines ranked 102 out of 139 countries in the World Justice Project’s Rule of Law Index last year. Among Filipinos, there is a “total lack of confidence in the country’s rotten criminal justice system,” the Asian Human Rights Commission has noted. “Impunity is written large,” with perpetrators assured that “they will get away with whatever they have done.”

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# 58 million

The number of people in the Philippines on YouTube.

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This is the reason Tulfo's office receives hundreds of appeals every day, his chief of staff and legal counsel Garreth Tungol told *Rest of World*. Those who are shortlisted are put through a "rigorous screening process ... to make sure that their issue is legitimate," he said. "Some people come just to seek revenge."

Tulfo's shows are often frenetic, with people shouting and weeping as he sits in judgment. After the show, the staff provides participants with a lawyer and draft settlement agreements, and also pays for counseling if needed, Tungol said. "We understand their appearance on the show could have effects on their mental health," he said.

But Tulfo's show is not without controversy. People who have appeared on the show have often suffered humiliation and even received death threats. His method of making a spectacle of people's problems on social media can lead to "the decay of the moral fiber of Filipinos," Libayan said. "Instead of trying to preserve the sanctity of society or strengthening our communities, Tulfo's program turns it into a circus by publishing it online, and instigating netizens who would rather presume that someone is guilty until they are proven innocent."

Tulfo does not pay attention to the criticism, and will keep the show going in its present format, Tungol said. Before he became senator, Tulfo was asked if he would give up his show if he won a seat. At the time, he said the show would remain, and could serve as a sounding board for legislation to solve people's problems.

But if Tulfo were to run for president and get elected, he would give up his show, according to Tungol. While there are no laws preventing him from hosting his show even from the nation's highest office, "it's just not going to be an efficient use of his time," Tungol said. "There will be so many more problems to attend to."

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**Angel Martinez** is a writer and researcher based in Manila.

## LABOR

# AI is making Philippine call center work more efficient, for better and worse

BPO workers say AI tools are monitoring their calls, assisting them with customers, and scoring their performance.

By [MICHAEL BELTRAN](#)

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- 86% of white-collar workers in the Philippines already use AI.
- Advanced language, emotional recognition, and generative AI tools have made work more demanding for BPO workers.
- Outsourcing clients are requiring more automation and AI integration in workflows.

“Thank you for calling. ... You’re speaking with Renzo. This call may be recorded for — uhm — this call may be re—” Renzo Bahala, a customer service agent for a U.S. credit card company, breaks his monologue. If he were at work, he would’ve earned a demerit.

“I have to say it straight. If I stutter, I have to do it again,” he told *Rest of World* as he rehearsed the script he uses as a trainee at Concentrix Corporation, a business process outsourcing (BPO) firm that employs approximately 100,000 people in the Philippines.

Bahala says each of his calls at Concentrix is monitored by an artificial intelligence (AI) program that checks his performance. He says his volume of calls has increased under the AI’s watch. At his previous call center job, without an AI program, he answered at most 30 calls per eight-hour shift. Now, he gets through that many before lunchtime. He gets help

from an AI “co-pilot,” an assistant that pulls up caller information and makes suggestions in real time.

“The co-pilot is helpful,” he says. “But I have to please the AI. The average handling time for each call is 5 to 7 minutes. I can’t go beyond that.”

“It’s like we’ve become the robots,” he said.

In the Philippines, advanced AI tools — including those with language recognition, emotion recognition, and generative intelligence — have made work more demanding, six BPO workers and a representative from a BPO worker’s association told *Rest of World*. They spoke of targets rising since 2022 and fears of industry layoffs and redundancies.

The Philippines, the second-largest BPO market in the world after India, has 1.84 million BPO workers. Although there is no official data for job losses due to AI, the Philippines’ labor secretary, Bienvenido Laguesma, told local media in June that some workers are already losing their jobs to AI. Industry estimates suggest that while 300,000 Filipinos could be out of work due to AI in the next five years, 100,000 new jobs could be created in roles like data curation.

The Philippines leads the world in AI adoption, and 86% of Filipino white-collar workers already use AI to “boost productivity, efficiency and creativity,” according to the 2024 Work Trend Index created by LinkedIn and Microsoft. Two-thirds of BPO companies that are members of the IT & Business Process Association of the Philippines are already using AI or are piloting it, Dominic Ligot, the association’s head of AI and research told *Rest of World*.

Even companies that prioritize a human touch are forced to use the tech to satisfy clients who are demanding greater automation, Alex Peña, director of special projects at Boldr, a BPO firm recognized by the nonprofit B Lab Global for its social impact, told *Rest of World*.

The BPO Industry Employees Network, a worker’s association that has 4,000 members, has been consulting with members about the impacts of AI, Lean Porquia, the association’s founder, told *Rest of World*. He said members have complained of having fewer co-workers and more responsibilities.

“Ideally, AI would be helpful. But what’s happening is that companies are using it to justify adding more tasks,” Porquia said. “At once, one can do customer service, sales, and tech

support.”

Porquia said Filipino BPO workers are at the lower end of the tech value chain, performing simple, repetitive tasks that can be automated.

Bahala, 21, began working at call centers in 2021 to pay for his education. But what he once viewed as a temp job became permanent in a nation with the second highest unemployment rate in Southeast Asia.

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“AI is supposed to make our lives easier, but I just see it as my boss.”

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Bahala doesn't know how many years he'll be answering calls.

At his previous employer, calls were screened at random by human quality control associates. Bahala said he could make an occasional error or talk to a caller for longer without always being noticed.

He moved to Concentrix in August to diversify his resume and get a small pay raise. Each call at this BPO is monitored by advanced AI programs that decide if the customer is satisfied and the worker is productive, Bahala and another Concentrix employee, who requested anonymity due to a nondisclosure agreement, told *Rest of World*. A manager sometimes double-checks the AI's judgment.

It works like this, the workers said: a sentiment analysis program could be deployed in real time to detect the mood of a conversation. It could also work retroactively, as part of an advanced speech analysis program that transcribes the conversation and judges the emotional state of the agent and caller.

Bahala said the program scores him on his tone, his pitch, the mood of the call, his use of positive language, if he avoided interrupting or speaking over a caller, how long he put the caller on hold, and how quickly he resolved the issue. Bahala said he nudges customers toward high-scoring responses: “yes,” “perfect,” “great.” Every stutter, pause, mispronounced word, or deviation from a script earns him a demerit.

The program grades Bahala, and, though his base pay remains fixed, continually underperforming could mean probation, no incentives, or even termination, he said.

“AI is supposed to make our lives easier, but I just see it as my boss,” he said.

Concentrix did not respond to requests for comment.

The BPO employees *Rest of World* spoke with said AI co-pilots made them more efficient. They said the program recognizes what is said, swiftly pulls up the customer's past concerns, and suggests solutions and follow-up questions in real time. The Concentrix employee who requested anonymity said the co-pilot even "tells me if I need to slow down, speed up, or deliver a statement with empathy."

Paul Quintos, a political economist at the University of the Philippines who studies the BPO sector, told *Rest of World* that as AI technology develops, its benefits would accrue disproportionately to companies over workers.

"AI increases workers' productivity with little to no improvement in terms of wages. It even intensifies the pressure on workers to perform like machines," he told *Rest of World*.

Benjamin Velasco, a social scientist at the University of the Philippines, said AI is only the latest tool for the BPO industry to intensify the pace of work and cut costs. "Even before AI, BPO companies have been pushing their employees to be more productive," he told *Rest of World*.

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"AI is not to replace people but to help people become more productive."

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Another BPO employee in Manila, who requested anonymity due to a nondisclosure agreement, said she had already lost a job once to generative AI. At a BPO industry news firm in Manila, she went from writing one original article a week to 20 articles per week in 2023 with the use of ChatGPT. The articles often had inaccuracies that the writers struggled to fix.

"Backlogs would pile up, sometimes from the month before," she told *Rest of World*. "Managers would keep reminding us to finish. It was never-ending."

Eight of the 10-member team, including the employee, were laid off this March.

The employee is now a trust and safety analyst at Accenture, where she checks the accuracy of AI-generated data for Facebook's parent company, Meta. She said she is working on an upcoming feature wherein Meta AI recognizes photos posted to Facebook



and Instagram and displays relevant prompts next to them for the user to explore. She said she cross-checks the Meta AI's response for accuracy, with the help of a Microsoft AI assistant. Another employee, who requested anonymity due to a nondisclosure agreement, said she works on a similar program for Instagram reels. A Meta spokesperson declined to comment.

The employee working on Facebook said that two months ago she was given 200 seconds per prompt.

This was revised to 170 seconds per prompt in October.

“[The managers] check our errors and say we can't drop below a 90% accuracy,” she said. “It's getting really tough; hardly anyone can keep up consistently. You see others in your team scoring just 60% and worry for them.”

Accenture did not respond to requests for comment.

The BPO Association's Ligot sees a potential benefit in AI investments and says they may shift “resources towards training and upskilling employees for roles that AI cannot automate easily.”

The Philippines' Department of Trade and Industry undersecretary Rafaelita Aldaba said at an industry conference in October that AI “is more about augmentation than replacement.”

Peña at Boldr, which is a smaller BPO, said the company uses open-source tech to keep up with larger competitors who have in-house AI capabilities, even as “the demand for AI-enabled customer support increases and becomes the expectation.”

“AI is not to replace people but to help people become more productive,” she said. “If you needed 10 team members before, maybe now you only need five.”

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