# Beware these political misfits

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What is it about elections that bring out the toxic machismo in male candidates? By picking on those perceived to be weaker, do they think they’d look stronger and thus a better fit for the immense power that comes with an elective post?

Three male politicians displayed such mindset in recent days with sexist remarks about women couched as jokes, that two of them claimed were merely meant to enliven a sluggish crowd. Someone should have warned them: The last time a cocky candidate dismissed his rival as “just a housewife,” she sent him and his family packing posthaste.

Over the weekend, the Commission on Elections (Comelec) issued a show cause order to Pasig congressional candidate and lawyer Christian Sia for the possible violation of Comelec Resolution No. 11116 or the Anti-Discrimination and Fair Campaigning Guidelines, which cover acts of bullying and discrimination involving gender, ethnicity, age, religion, and disabilities, among others.

In a campaign sortie, Sia had generously offered “female single parents who still have their period and who might feel lonely” the opportunity to sleep with him once a year. After initially blaming the uploader for failing to show the audience’s “positive” reaction to his joke, Sia slammed party rival, Pasig City Mayor Vico Sotto, for allegedly blowing up his remarks to “divert” attention from relevant issues, though he offered no proof.

## Misogynist remarks

In Misamis Oriental, reelectionist governor Peter Unabia was similarly issued a show cause order for saying that nursing scholarships should only be given to “beautiful” women, as “ugly nurses” could worsen the illness of male patients.

Meanwhile, Mataas na Kahoy, Batangas Vice Mayor Jay Ilagan mocked his rival, former Batangas governor and veteran actress Vilma Santos for being “laos (obsolete),” and no longer a threat to his gubernatorial bid. He was asked to explain his “unsavory” remarks as they might have violated Comelec’s guidelines on discrimination.

Davao de Oro Rep. Ruwel Gonzaga also got a show cause order for three instances of misogynist remarks against his widowed rival and women’s sexuality. But even women, particularly former Duterte official Mocha Uson who used a suggestive campaign jingle in her run as a Manila councilor, seem tone-deaf to how sexual references detract from the more relevant focus on political platforms.

Beyond their legal liabilities, these candidates displayed an appalling lack of gender sensitivity and awareness, and may have inadvertently alienated women voters who, according to Comelec, outnumber males by at least 1.5 million.

## Sexist jokes

Worse, Sia echoed the common assumption that equates women’s worth with her looks, youth, and reproductive role. Calling one of his staff onstage, he proceeded to fat-shame her, essentially saying, “See? If I were sexist, would I hire a woman who looks like this?” He promptly got another show cause order from the poll body.

On Tuesday, the Supreme Court ordered Sia to respond to complaints filed against him by two lawyers and the Gabriela party list, which asked the high court to sanction the lawyer for violating not just Comelec guidelines, but also multiple provisions of the Code of Professional Responsibility and Accountability.

The Philippine Commission on Women meanwhile called out Sia for dragging down the level of political discourse, saying that campaigns are “not [a] stage for inappropriate jokes at the expense of marginalized groups.”

That sexist jokes have become expected entertainment in political sorties is hardly surprising, given that former president Rodrigo Duterte had normalized the use of slurs against women to beef up his macho image. From making a crass reference to joining the rapists/murderers of an Australian missionary, to directing the military to shoot NPA amazons in their vaginas, and gloating about his sexual abuse of his sleeping househelp, the man accused of “crimes against humanity” by an international tribunal, has bequeathed a legacy of misogyny to misguided politicians.

## Stereotyped narratives

Fortunately, the Comelec is in a unique position to change the stereotyped narratives on women. Already, it has declared campaign areas as “safe spaces” subject to regulation and restrictions to guard against “discrimination, incitement, immoral doctrines, and indecent shows.”

Why not cancel the candidacy of the three male offenders and make an example of them to warn those who would abuse Comelec guidelines and drag down the level of political discourse? The high court can meanwhile disbar the lawyer/candidate for displaying an abject ignorance on the practice of law.

These incidents also underscore the crucial role that voters have in ridding the country of abusive politicians. Pasig voters in particular have had a very telling glimpse into one candidate’s character, values, and condescending regard for women, who comprise half his constituents.

As with the rest of us voters, the choice is ours: will we ignore such red flags, or use them to guide our vote?