

Public Lives

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The president's declining popularity

Both the surveys and the mass media confirm it: President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's popularity is vanishing quite fast. So fast that by 2004, there may be nothing left to support a re-election bid. The presidency that fell on her lap by sheer accident is a test of fitness rarely given to aspiring presidents. The growing perception is that she may not make it.

All this is a little hard to understand in one sense. Despite the large budget deficit, the Philippine economy as a whole has performed better than most other economies in the region. Unemployment and low incomes may be the lot of many Filipinos, but the real wonder is that the situation is not much worse given the effects of the global recession and uncertainty. Prices have remained generally low, and we have not been hit by food scarcity. There is a pervasive gloom in the air, but it is not keeping us from celebrating Christmas and greeting the New Year with the same energy as before. We seem to be more gripped by a sense of wasted opportunities than by a total feeling of hopelessness.

Neither is the political situation so dire as to provoke a choice between a coup d'état and an immediate charter change. Our institutions may lack maturity, and recurrent problems of governance may continue to hamper our progress to modern nationhood, but our society is not exactly on the brink of dissolution. Some of our neighbors are not so lucky.

We have avoided the dangerous impasse created by the impeachment trial of a corrupt president, and we have succeeded in stabilizing the change induced extra-constitutionally by Edsa II, which could easily have led to a civil war or a military dictatorship. Though we are far from establishing a new social order acceptable to the large masses of our people, what we have so far accomplished is not a mean achievement at all. For all the failures of our past leaders, the Philippine state remains a viable and legitimate concept in the

eyes of our people. They await the 2004 elections not with indifference but with great anticipation. Surely the president of a nation is entitled to claim a little credit for some of this.

Where lies the problem then? Why do people think the hopes of Edsa II have been squandered? Why is GMA's presidency increasingly seen as disastrous for the country? Why has she been unable to provide inspiring leadership, to prod the nation to greater patience and effort, and to give hope?

I do not think, as many of GMA's supporters do, that the problem is merely an inability to communicate effectively. To think in this way is to reduce a complex problem of governance to a public relations puzzle. The president's situation has little to do with PR. It has everything to do with faithfulness to an idea, a passionate commitment to a cause.

The president knew what those aspirations that eventually came to a head at Edsa II were all about. She had woven them into the first speech she gave when, hurriedly returning from a trip abroad, she declared her resignation from the Estrada administration. She spoke about new politics, about transparency and accountability in government, about a new ethic of public service. She spoke of leadership by example, of the need for commitment and intelligence in the creation of a modern nation.

Many heard this arrival speech as empty rhetoric, belated but still welcome. Having chosen to remain discreet and silent in the movement to oust the former president, GMA could not claim leadership of Edsa II. She was neither its symbol nor its inspiration, unlike Cory Aquino in 1986. Her succession to the presidency was a legal expedient rather than the logical outcome of an extraordinary political process.

Had Estrada been removed by impeachment, no one would have questioned the validity of the vice president's succession. But since Estrada's exit took an extra-legal route, the vice president's succession was no longer legally compelling or necessary. One doubts very much if a vice president from Estrada's own party would have been allowed to take his place. Only the nation's wish for

instant stability made GMA's assumption of the presidency acceptable.

Unfortunately, once the Supreme Court affirmed the legality and constitutionality of her presidency, GMA promptly forgot the political mandate that catapulted her to the presidency, which was to undertake the transition to a new style of governance. She began to conduct herself like a traditional politician, dispensing political appointments to allies, forsaking the cause of change and giving in to the vulgar vanities of power. Stripped of its substantive purpose, the Edsa II presidency also lost its charisma. From there on it had no other objective but to prolong its stay. GMA's ratings began to go down when it became clear that what was most important to her was being reelected.

"The mere power politician," says the sociologist Max Weber, "may get strong effects, but actually his work leads nowhere and is senseless." Without a clear cause to work for, this type of politician is easily swayed and led into forms of action designed to produce impressions. Thus, instead of policy initiatives, what the public begins to remember is the way the president speaks, or smirks, or conducts herself in public.

Filipinos are not looking for an autocrat when they say they want a decisive and willful president. They are just looking for a leader with a cause that is larger than self.

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