

Public Lives

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The populist and the modern

The election of a movie actor as president of the country in 1998 and his ouster by people power in 2001 are watersheds in our nation's political life. These two events represent the political awakening of two distinct social classes – the middle class and the poor. They also signal the reactivation of two parallel aspirations – modernity and social justice.

Decades of portrayal of folk-hero roles made Joseph Estrada, in the people's eyes, a credible champion of the poor. His election as president came as a shock both to the educated voters and the traditional politicians who mocked his political ambition and ignored the emergence of a constituency of the poor.

Two developments are responsible for this phenomenon. The first is the breakdown of the political machines that, until Martial Law, controlled electoral campaigns. Marcos made the old political parties irrelevant, and the synchronization of presidential and local elections after 1986 buried them. The second is the tremendous rise in influence of the national mass media, in particular television. Erap overshadowed a thousand times the appeal of Rogelio de la Rosa (movie icon of the 1950s) because of the continuous re-run of his old movies on television.

Fernando Poe Jr.'s popularity is even more astounding. The same voters who made Erap president are more than likely to support him if he declares his candidacy.

Such voters may not be modern, but they are not irrational. They glean the character of public personalities from the way they project themselves in the mass media. They make their political choices on the basis of clear values like trustworthiness, resoluteness, and dependability. We may disagree with the criteria they use in choosing leaders, or we may fault them for their gullibility, but we may not call them unthinking. Unthinking were the voters who, in the era

of traditional oligarchic rule, blindly followed what the landlords and political bosses told them to do.

The terrain of our political life has changed because of the emergence of a new breed of voters whose political views have been shaped mainly by television. This is not a development that is peculiar to the Philippines or to politically immature societies. One will find it too in the United States, Europe and Japan. What intensifies the media effect in settings like ours is the absence of genuine political parties and debate on the ground.

The other watershed in our political life is the one that fed Edsa I and Edsa II. It marks the politicization of the Filipino middle class. The abuses committed under Martial Law completely disillusioned the members of this class, who had initially looked upon the Marcosian authoritarian experiment as a way out of the impasse into which the oligarchy had led the country. They worried that Martial Law was leading the nation toward civil war, and, with the assassination of Ninoy Aquino, began to take upon themselves the role previously played only by professional politicians. The result was a powerful middle class movement that challenged both the dictatorship and the armed revolution of the Left. Today the movement lives in various arenas of civil society intervention.

Its name is modernity, and its favorite theme is governance. This movement is not oblivious to the realities of poverty and inequality in Philippine society. But it sees these basically as the consequences of bad governance, a code word for graft and corruption and mismanagement. One flank of the movement seeks the solutions to these persistent problems in the renewal of moral values, the strict enforcement of the law, and concrete acts of sharing. The other flank seeks enduring solutions in the reinvention of social and political institutions and the political empowerment of the marginalized.

The populist and the modern, representing two important moments in our nation's life, are the two most salient models of leadership in our country today. They seem mutually exclusive, but they need not be. It is possible to anchor a comprehensive social justice program on a commitment to modern governance. The leader who can effectively

distill these two aspirations into a single quest and give them a credible face is the millennial president we have been looking for.

This is not just a matter of finding a media popular person with modern impulses. This is, more importantly, a question of whether we can find a leader who can inspire the Filipino middle class to champion a new social equilibrium that offers hope to every Filipino. Without a steady constituency for reform, no president can succeed in solving the persistent problem of poverty given the existing institutional framework. Charter change alone will not do it.

Most of our professional politicians have begun to recognize the centrality of media popularity to electoral success, but they have done little to address the substantive issues of social justice and governance in their political platforms. The public knows who they are but not what they represent. Instead of serving as instruments of illumination, the mass media become tools of further mystification.

This is counterintuitive to what is happening in Philippine politics. Whether they come from the ranks of the middle class or the poor, our people increasingly demand intelligence in public discourse. They want perspectives and analyses, not charges and countercharges that only confirm their worst beliefs about politicians. They want to be inspired, not further disillusioned.

Merry Christmas!

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