

Public Lives

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Democracy

Considering that almost all the past presidents of this country have been chosen by, and have served, mainly the elites and the middle classes, a yearning by the poor to change the rules of the game would not be unreasonable or farfetched. Those of us who do not suffer from material deprivation should be thankful then that the many who live from meal to meal still opt for peaceful elections rather than revolution as the path to a just society.

But sometimes this is not the way we see things. We prefer that the poor completely entrust the business of governing to us who are well-off and better educated. In our conceit, we think we have a larger stake in this country just because we pay more income tax, forgetting that everything that the poor consume is also taxed. So we sometimes hear exasperated talk proposing that we raise the minimum qualification for our national officials, and limit the right of suffrage to the educated. Such sentiments have an affinity with the demand to put an end to politics altogether. They are drawn from the same well that nurtures other more visible forms of tyranny.

Our readiness to substitute the efficient tyranny of the few for the haphazardness of a deeply flawed democracy is of course understandable. We have seen how our country has been left behind by its neighbors. We note with alarm the increasing costs of bad government. We worry about our growing inability to provide for the millions of Filipinos who are born every year. Against these urgent realities, we watch helplessly while corrupt and incompetent leaders are elected year after year by dependent and uninformed voters. We stand by in disgust when our leaders endlessly bicker with one another and fail to attend to the serious business of running the nation. In our minds, the stage is set for a wise philosopher-king who would have the complete blueprint for the best government we need. If we had such a ruler, we tell ourselves, all that is left is for obedient citizens to carry out what is decreed.

“It has always been a great temptation,” warns the philosopher Hannah Arendt, “for men of action no less than for men of thought, to find a substitute for action in the hope that the realm of human affairs may escape the haphazardness and moral irresponsibility inherent in a plurality of agents.... The trouble with these forms of government is not that they are cruel, which often they are not, but rather that they work too well.... But they all have in common the banishment of the citizens from the public realm and the insistence that they mind their private business while only ‘the ruler should attend to public affairs.’... It is the obvious short-range advantages of tyranny, the advantages of stability, security, and productivity, that one should beware, if only because they pave the way to an inevitable loss of power, even though the actual disaster may occur in a relatively distant future.”

I bring up these thoughts here because of the haughty way in which many have greeted the entry of Fernando Poe Jr. into the 2004 presidential race. Some have dismissively commented on the composition of the crowd that was shown on TV accompanying FPJ to the Manila Hotel press conference where he announced his decision. With the exception of Senator Tito Sotto, they were all nameless and unknown. But so what? Isn't this what democracy is about? And doesn't this precisely reflect the essential plurality of human affairs?

That a man who has avoided politics all his life, preferring to focus on his work as a movie actor and director in which he has firmer control, should feel compelled to respond to the clamor of his fans to enter a field in which he knows little speaks volumes about the despair of the poor who support him. Clearly, if there is a lesson they learned from the interrupted term of Erap, it is that they should use the power of their numbers again and again to elect a president they admire and trust.

It is a pattern that we have seen in the election of personalities that made their mark mainly through the mass media – Noli de Castro, Loren Legarda, Ramon Revilla, Robert Jaworski, Tito Sotto and many more like them. The final test of their fitness for office is not the relevant knowledge or experience they bring to their positions but the quality of their performance once they are elected. Here it would seem that the distinction between those previously trained for political

affairs and those who had come in from the cold is barely noticeable. Only a few of our elected national officials have been truly outstanding. The proper response to this lack, of course, should be a sustained program of recruitment and training of public leaders, the way the major political parties do it in Europe. Unfortunately, none of our political parties appears ready or interested to undertake this on any long-term basis.

Our politicians, in fact, seem more interested in maintaining themselves in power, even if this means swallowing their pride, by riding on the popularity of public idols. This is not something new by the way. By themselves our politicians have always had a hard time mustering crowds during elections, and so they usually hire actors, entertainers, and celebrities to grace their campaigns. Now the crowds have decided it may be better to elect the actors themselves than the professional politicians who have consistently mismanaged the country.

It is sad. But this is still preferable to a tyranny run by the educated few who claim to know all the answers and reserve no role for the masses in public life.

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