

## **Public Lives**

December 18, 2005

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### **Between senility and sedition**

The Secretary of Justice, who is himself no longer young, first called the defiant 80-year-old retired general “senile” and in need of a psychiatrist. On second thought, he labeled him dangerous, and his declaration of a transitional government “an incitement to sedition.” He sent policemen in civilian clothes to effect a “citizen’s arrest.” In custody, the old man and his comrades were subsequently charged with inciting to sedition.

It is not difficult to see whose faculties have been failing here. I do not know retired Gen. Fortunato Abat personally, but, though he may seem politically naïve, his behavior does not strike me as senile, psychotic, or seditious.

Many of my best friends are old, but their minds and hearts continue to pulsate with life. Senility is a fact of life. We all die a little everyday -- some faster than others. The present government is full of people with decayed moral faculties, who, at a relatively young age, can no longer think properly.

My old friends may be senescent but they remain sentient, i.e., conscious and capable of responsive behavior. All over the world, many senior citizens continue to act as sentinels of the societies they helped shape. The word “seneschal” – old steward – might have been invented for them. It fits at least three active people in their mid-80s I personally know and admire – former senator Jovito Salonga, former ambassador Bienvenido Tan, and Letizia Constantino, my mother-in-law. The original concept of the Senate was of a deliberative body filled with such venerable and wise human beings.

Individuals who do not allow old age to interfere with their ideals and passions will always be perceived as somehow out of place in societies with young but politically inert populations. Their earnestness typically invites amusement, ridicule, and even outright

disapproval. Their activism makes exhausted publics feel vague and uneasy.

The general owes us no explanation for his actions. He has articulated a solution to the nation's problems that is arguable. He says, correctly, that we have a president that the majority of our people can no longer respect, and whose moral fitness as the nation's highest leader is in grave doubt. The institutional mechanisms by which these doubts would have been resolved were rigged and not allowed to properly function. The only thing left is to demand her resignation. Gen. Abat echoes a pervasive sentiment – that the problem we face is not just Ms Arroyo, it is the whole political class. He sees the present composition of Congress as equally problematic, and so he proposes to close it down. Not many Filipinos would disagree with that. He suggests a transition period in which to repair our basic institutions. That too sounds logical.

Where the general possibly erred was in believing that by simply calling a press conference and announcing the formation of a “transition government” to be led by him, he would be able to mobilize the people's disaffection and spontaneously trigger the military's defection. Still, that expectation is not as absurd as it may seem. We have the two Edsas to prove its feasibility.

Edsa I was a necessary act of sedition against a corrupt dictatorship. Edsa II was no less seditious in that it installed a new president even while the duly-elected one was still in Malacanang. Gloria Macapagal Arroyo owes her presidency to the seditious acts of thousands of young people who marched to Edsa to protest the concealment of the truth at the impeachment trial of Joseph Estrada, as well as to the military commanders who openly declared their withdrawal of allegiance to the incumbent president. So thin indeed is the line separating sedition from the quest for an accountable government that this crime ought to be consigned to the archives of the American occupation in the Philippines, rather than used as a weapon against political dissenters.

What Gen. Abat may have overlooked is the slow painstaking behind-the-scenes organizing and leveling work and dialogues that preceded both popular uprisings. He may have been looking only at the gravity

of the Arroyo presidency's crimes, which clearly outweigh the many lapses in judgment committed by Erap against the public interest. What he has failed to take into account is the reluctance of the people to act on their disenchantment and outrage against the regime. This is what we need to understand.

Gen. Abat has done his work; it is up to us to decide whether his failure should also close the book on the struggle to bring down an illegitimate presidency. It is our turn to account for our own failure to respond to the scandal of an unworthy leader.

After staging two successful people power uprisings that did not amount to any enduring improvement in our system of governance, our young people now appear to be in a severe political depression. They have become suspicious and cynical of everything that sounds or looks political. They detest the present government and what it is doing, but they are repelled even more by the traditional politicians who are waiting to take over.

To the young people's rejection of politics, which rationalizes their cynicism, there is a need to contrapose a redefinition of politics in a democracy. Our hopes for a stable, orderly and peaceful society must not breed intolerance for debate and dissent. If we are to avoid the seduction of dictatorship, or the antagonistic politics of communal identities based on ethnicity and religion, we have no choice but to patiently find our way through the paradoxes of democracy.

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