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Politics and suicide

Suicide is a complex phenomenon. It is both a deeply personal act that is almost inaccessible in its meanings, and a social phenomenon that mirrors significant shifts in the life of a society.

Former Armed Forces Chief of Staff, General Angelo T. Reyes, was evidently a person in great distress when he took his own life the other day. He appeared to be wrestling with an unyielding thought when he visited his mother's grave. Psychologists will say he was likely suffering from a clinical depression resulting perhaps not from one incident, but from a series of frustrations and disappointments. He seemed vaguely aware of his condition. Drawing from the account of a close friend of the general, one newspaper reported that "The former AFP chief was tense in the past few days and would often ask family members to keep him company as he might inflict harm on himself."

So perplexing is suicide that no one can really say what impels it, even when a note from the victim is left behind to explain the deed. For this reason and many others, students of human behavior have been circumspect in formulating easy generalizations about suicide.

Sociologists in particular prefer to look at what is happening to a society as a whole by focusing on rates of suicide rather than on individual cases. Still, we might be able to draw some insights into the evolving conditions of a society by looking at the life and tragic death of one man who somehow shaped and reflected the events of his time.

Although he was a professional military man, Angelo T. Reyes became a key player in the nation's political stage. Whether he

welcomed it or not, he unexpectedly found himself, as head of the Armed Forces, thrust into the role of political arbiter during the crisis of January 2001. At that crucial moment, the military became, once again, the deciding factor in an unstable political equation. General Reyes made the decision to lead his soldiers in withdrawing support from then incumbent president, Joseph Estrada, paving the way for the accession to the presidency of Vice President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo.

Many doubts were raised on the constitutionality of this extraordinary mode of transferring the powers of the presidency. Estrada had a clear mandate, having won the presidency in a democratic election. Though he was being tried for corruption, he was not a tyrant. But the Supreme Court found a way of legitimizing Estrada's exit by declaring that by his actions, the deposed president had "constructively resigned." Estrada was subsequently arrested, charged, detained, and convicted for plunder. Bowing to political reality, however, the Arroyo government almost instantly pardoned the former president.

Despite his ouster from the presidency, Estrada remained popular with a broad segment of the voting population. It is a testimony to the close coupling of family and State in our society that Estrada's political vindication would come not too long after in the form of the election to the Senate of his wife Loi, and later, his son Jinggoy. The political alignments in our society revolve traditionally around families that alternate with one another in assuming State power.

Angie Reyes found himself navigating these perilous waters of Philippine politics when he decided to cast his lot with President Arroyo. Before that, Estrada had treated him not just as the head of the military, but as a close personal friend whom he trusted implicitly. Under Arroyo, the political star of Angie Reyes shone brightly. After retiring from the military, he was appointed secretary of national defense. At one point, he loomed as Arroyo's possible successor. He may have stayed too long in her Cabinet, moving from one department

to another, instead of running for senator or congressman before the disenchantment with the regime set in. In the end, he was unable to shield himself from the political fallout that Arroyo's scandal-driven administration had created.

Sooner or later, the investigations that come with the advent of a new government start knocking at the door of the past wielders of power. The latter usually try to protect themselves by currying favor with the new administration, or by remaining active politically – preferably in an elective position. Ms Arroyo prepared well for her exit from the presidency not just by putting her people in key positions of the judiciary and bureaucracy, but by securing a seat in Congress, along with her two sons, Mikey and Dato. Her own trusted lieutenants – people like the late Angie Reyes – were not as lucky.

Unlike Mikey Arroyo who smoothly wormed his way into a congressional seat as the nominee of a party-list of security guards, Reyes was prevented from sitting as first nominee of 1-Utak, a party-list of transport groups that had won a seat, after his membership in that sector was questioned. Stripped of political influence, he knew that he was vulnerable. He had a thorough understanding of how the political system works – its hypocrisy, its rottenness, and its rituals of degradation. But he could not summon enough will to bow to its sometimes brutal ways once he found himself at the receiving end of power.

In many ways, Angie Reyes is a casualty of our society's wrenching transition to modernity. His suicide can be read as a desperate reiteration of his protestation at the Senate hearing – after being accused of accepting a send-off gift of P50 million – that he was never greedy or selfish when he was head of the military. He was certain that he acted honorably and decently under the traditional parameters of an imperfect institution.

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