

## **Public Lives**

December 29, 2002

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### **The rise and fall of Mark Jimenez**

He came in from the cold sometime in 1998, like an emblem of the new shady lumpen-mandarins that had just come to power in the country. He was an enigma. Hardly anyone could remember what he looked like, nor what he had between the ears. He talked like a stevedore, yet seemed to have more money than the landed aristocracy. The only thing that seemed to matter about him was how much money he reputedly had, could make, and could give. The new president called him a “corporate genius,” when what he probably meant was consummate dealmaker.

He bought the most expensive piece of real estate in Forbes Park, as if to show that, like other things in life, status is a commodity that has little to do with honor. He waged a very expensive campaign to win a seat in Congress, as if to demonstrate that political power has a price tag and with only the remotest connection to social legitimacy. He acquired a venerable newspaper in the way a tenant would buy an old hacienda.

He showered the poor with groceries and gave donations to the foundations of the rich. The poor in return gave him their votes and the rich invited him to their parties. He was generous to the media that covered him, doling out cash without the affectation of an envelope. He shared his blessings with his colleagues in Congress, and one may suppose, he also contributed to the electoral fund of a number of them. And he consciously kept a record of all his charitable acts, in effect holding hostage everyone of his beneficiaries.

Mark Jimenez is the social outcast who made a pile abroad and came home to claim honor and influence in a society that has become flabby with its rules. He would have succeeded in exploiting the weaknesses of a nation that has become cynical of its own self-image, buying everyone and everything that could help him in his egoistic quest. But to his dismay, not everything was for sale and not

everyone accepted his money. Not a few found his crudity offensive. In flaunting his purchasing power, he was also mocking his recipients' sense of self.

Perhaps we will never know the real reasons behind his downfall. He seems to have badly miscalculated his own power and the vulnerability of his targets. He knew that his past activities in the United States could one day land him in jail. He sought refuge in the Philippines, confident that his money would protect him.

The situation changed when Joseph Estrada, his erstwhile patron, fell from power. Jimenez turned around quickly and sought out his connections in the new government, at the same time buying more protection by getting himself elected a member of Congress. He thought this was enough to forestall a bid to extradite him to the US, where he has been charged. But the new regime wanted him to testify against the former president. This was the only way to justify delaying his extradition. Jimenez initially agreed, but for reasons known only to him, he later backed out.

Feeling betrayed by people he thought he had already paid enough, he began to talk publicly about what he had given them. His revelations are damaging to his targets, but also very cleansing for the public because the immediate impact they create is one of recognition of the basic flaws of our political culture. I think most people believe what Mark Jimenez is saying, but they do not regard him as a sympathetic character.

Even his colleagues in the House of Representatives knew better than to put the entire institution at stake by shielding him from arrest. They prevailed upon him to save what remains of his honor by voluntarily leaving for the US to face the charges against him. The speaker of the house accompanied him to the American embassy to arrange for a "voluntary extradition" to spare one of their own the rituals of degradation typically applied to all persons under arrest.

We don't know what the embassy people promised Speaker Jose de Venecia, but the federal agents who escorted Jimenez do not appear to have subscribed to this scheme. They did not allow him to choose his flight or the manner of his travel. They handcuffed him inside the

plane and prevented him from communicating with the two congressmen who were supposed to accompany him. They locked him up in his barong in a federal detention center in Guam. So much for the dignity of an elected public official.

There are no heroes in this sordid tale. This is not a triumph of the rule of law in the Philippines. It took us four years before we could find the resolve to deliver Jimenez to the jurisdiction of the US courts where he is charged. Our authorities were trying to make all kinds of deals with him to delay his extradition. Only when these deals failed, and only after Jimenez began to malign everyone he was dealing with, was the imperative of the law followed. His extradition may be lawful, but it is contaminated by all kinds of interests extraneous to the law.

In the end, the man who made quick friends could not be rescued by any of his associates. Nearly everyone he thought would protect him from the long arm of American law ultimately wanted him out of their lives. He knew too much, presumed too much, and demanded too much.

A tragic character, Mark Jimenez is a parable for our times. He has come at a time when we are fast losing our faith in our capacity to govern ourselves. If we take to heart the lessons he exemplifies, we may yet change the way we live and recover our self-esteem as a nation.

*A Happy New Year to all of us!*

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