

Public Lives

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Religion, cinema and politics

Outside the church where his remains lay in state, Fernando Poe Jr.'s movies were being played for the common folk who lined up and waited for hours to take a last quick look at their idol. No scene more graphically captures the substance of Filipino culture. An FPJ movie has the same effect on his fans as a religious experience -- the cleansing of the spirit and release from bondage. The actor has more in common with a prophet than with a politician.

They came not only to bid him goodbye. They were there also to thank him for his kindness, and to ask his spirit to continue to watch over them. In this manner do we, as Filipinos, accept the enigma of death. Death prompts us not only to recall where we have come from, but also to ask where we are going. The resolution of death's mystery constitutes the core of every religion.

Some observers have compared FPJ's funeral with that of Ninoy Aquino's in 1983. The crowds that attended the two events were comparable; FPJ and Ninoy were both heroic figures, but the similarity ends there. Ninoy's funeral was a political event that acquired religious meanings. FPJ's funeral, in contrast, was a religious moment that acquired political undertones. Ninoy, as a political symbol, gained in stature from the spiritualization of his death. His greatness has survived the failure of EDSA I. FPJ, as a cultural icon, stood to lose everything from the politicization of his death. His star would have dimmed if his funeral had sparked an EDSA IV.

A glance at the depreciation of politics in the eyes of our people would be enough to explain this phenomenon. So low has the image of the politician in our society sunk that hardly anyone who ventures into the world of politics today can hope to leave it with his name intact. It was for a good reason that Fernando Poe Jr. was a reluctant politician.

Some people have read political meanings into the passing reference made by Susan Roces to the way FPJ was unfairly treated during the presidential elections. But these statements must be taken in the context of the media interviews in which they were given. She was asked what she thought of the government's plan to honor her late husband by conferring on him a posthumous National Artist award and arranging for his burial at the Libingan ng mga Bayani. With admirable restraint, she questioned the integrity of this offer by comparing it with the foul manner in which her husband was portrayed during the election by the same administration that was now proposing to honor him. This great woman was determined not to allow her husband's death to be the instrument of anybody's political agenda.

Aware that these statements could easily be misreported as the launching of a political bid, Ms. Roces stressed that she had no political ambition and would not run for any political office. But she also said that she would continue to champion the cause of the poor on whose behalf her husband had sought the presidency. This advocacy may inevitably cast her in a political role, but I believe her when she says that politics, as we know it in this country, is farthest from her nature.

If some politicians of the administration and the opposition thought that the grieving admirers of FPJ could be transformed into a raging mob and re-rerouted from the cemetery to the palace, they were mistaken. They know nothing of the spiritual nature of mourning in our culture, a purgation rather than a loading of the emotions.

The Arroyo government should be ashamed of itself for reacting the way it did during the funeral. Instead of maintaining a respectful silence in the face of the collective mourning for a fallen warrior, it called in the Armed Forces to fortify and defend the palace against the assault of an imagined enemy. The Secretary of Justice, Raul Gonzalez, appeared on television to issue a warning against acts of sedition, forgetting that the Arroyo regime he serves was installed in 2001 by such acts of sedition. The state would be constrained to defend itself, he intoned. So it will – against the sovereign people. Secretary Gonzalez personifies the pathetic paranoia of a

government that, because of its own duplicity, has become fearful of its citizens.

If this government falls, it will not be because of the anger of FPJ's grieving supporters. It will collapse from the weight of its own corruption, hypocrisy, and incompetence. And, yes, from its own fears. President Arroyo would have learned nothing if all she saw at the funeral were the anti-government messages that some of the actor's admirers wrote on banners and manila paper. For the real message of the funeral was the deep affection that the simple folk lavished upon the man they regarded as a hero. If she had watched Susan Roces during all this time, she might also have learned a lesson on what it means to speak from the heart.

How sad that our politics should be discontinuous from our people's faith. How tragic that our nation's leaders should be the opposite of the movie world's heroes. Should one still wonder why our voters try to repair this weakness by turning to preachers and movie actors for leadership? We know, of course, that the solution does not lie in this, nor in the vain attempt to discredit preachers and actors who enter politics. The solution, reason tells us, lies alone in the urgent task of reforming and elevating politics itself.

In the aftermath of 9/11, the writer Judith Butler asked: "What, politically, might be made of grief besides a cry for war?" It is a question we might ask ourselves in this season of tragedy and grace.

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