

## **Public Lives**

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### **Demanding closure**

Of the many questions that have been asked since the nation first became aware of the “Hello Garci” tapes, two have stood out. Did President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo conspire with Election Commissioner Virgilio Garcillano to rig the canvassing of the 2004 election results in Mindanao? Did the Armed Forces of the Philippines allow its personnel and resources, including its wiretapping capability, to be used to promote the personal political career of Ms Arroyo?

Plain commonsense tells us that it would be almost impossible to get truthful answers to these questions while Ms Arroyo is president. The government of a country with weak institutions like ours has enough power in its hands to frustrate any serious inquiry into such issues. The Arroyo regime, in particular, has repeatedly demonstrated its readiness to do whatever it takes to remain in power.

Even those with crucial information to reveal, and do not personally like Ms Arroyo, may not find it easy to come out. The costs are high; the outcome is not certain. The effects on the privacy and peace of mind of the whole family, not to mention the threats to one’s personal security, are vexations that one’s kin will usually regard as totally unjustified. Unless one is intentionally seeking publicity, it is more natural and convenient to say nothing. That is why the public typically questions the motives of those who come out to volunteer what they know, while it reserves the virtue of discreetness to those who remain silent.

Truth-seeking and truth-telling, therefore, are not natural inclinations. They are learned moral actions. A society presses for the truth when persistent ambiguity and lies begin to be experienced as injurious to its long-term growth.

Such moments, I think, are brought about by changes in the circumstances of people. People wake up one morning and, as if

recovering from amnesia, they start to ask questions whose answers previous generations have always known but hardly cared about. We've always known politics in our country to be dirty, for example. As Ms Arroyo reminds us, no one comes out of it with clean hands. We've also known that agencies of government are routinely abused by those in power during elections. The framers of the 1987 Constitution knew this and sought to minimize the practice by barring the reelection of the president. What then is different about the 2004 election? Why have we allowed wiretapped conversations about election rigging to cast doubt on the determination of the "true" electoral outcome previously made by the Commission on Elections, Congress, the Namfrel, the bishops, and the international observers?

The answer can only be that something changed in the situation of Filipinos that made them believe that it is now not only possible but necessary to have a government that has a clear mandate and is accountable to the people. That is why they are demanding fidelity to institutions, and a rational accounting of the acts of government. To the horror of the traditional politicians who have taken for granted the habitual indifference and dependence of the public, Filipinos are taking democracy and the rule of law seriously. They are demanding truthful answers to questions no one thought important before.

My interest as a sociologist is to determine what changes are supplying this impulse toward political modernity. In previous essays I have proposed two possible factors: first, the phenomenal spread of television and radio as vehicles of politically relevant information and opinion, and second, the acquisition by the Filipino of modern political values as a result of overseas employment. In the limited space of this column, I shall try to summarize these two points.

From 1986, television has served as an effective medium of political democratization due largely to the unprecedented use of Filipino as the dominant language in news and public affairs programs. This used to be a role reserved to radio. Because of the language shift, television acquired a central role in the shaping of the national discourse. Instead of being supplanted, radio received a boost from the growing popularity of television. The combined effect of this is the weakening of the importance of traditional patron-client structures that, in the past, almost exclusively determined political behavior.

Since the mid-'70s, Filipinos have begun to travel to parts of the world they had not known before. Today more than 8 million Filipino workers live in 192 countries. They remit to their country not only money, but new beliefs. Their exposure to a variety of cultures and societies shapes, among other things, their understanding of politics and their expectations of government and citizenship. Coming home after finishing their contracts, they can hardly be expected to think of their country in the old way. They have seen how governments in modern societies work, and how citizens assert their rights and demand responsibility of one another, and wonder why Filipinos must be content to live with corruption and incompetence at home.

They feel entitled to demand more certainty in the application of our laws, greater predictability in the conduct of our institutions, and more transparency in the actions of those who make decisions in their name. These demands, born of a new awareness, swept the Estrada government out of power in 2001. It is just a matter of time before they sweep Ms Arroyo away.

The crisis that the Filipino nation faces today is the product of new horizons, not a curse or a recurring misfortune.

*Comments to <public.lives@gmail.com>*