

OPINION & FEATURES

Where is the Senate going?



THE new majority that ousted Senate President Manuel Villar on Tuesday delivered the Senate presidency to Sen. Juan Ponce Enrile with a *carte blanche*. Enrile claimed he didn't seek the presidency, but took the offer of the majority "seriously" if the group had the numbers (14) to replace Villar. It would then appear that the presidency was a ripe plum, ready to fall into his lap.

ANALYSIS

Amando Doronilla

There had been persistent rumors since July about plots to oust Villar. So indifferent did Enrile appear to the move to topple Villar that he was quoted as saying at one time that the Senate "was no longer functioning as expected by the public because of politicking."

Thus, following his election to the presidency, Enrile has become an enigma, leaving the public and even his backers in the Senate coup without a hint of the kind of leadership he would provide to make the chamber "functional" or above "politicking" (of which he is a shrewd practitioner). They have given him the freest hand in shaping the Senate agenda in the history of shake-ups that have made the chamber an unstable forum of legislative leadership.

Sen. Loren Legarda, who was in the core group of senators that were disgruntled with Villar's leadership, said, "We must

have a Senate that is committed to fairness, statesmanship, and we must put national interest above political gain or expediency." She said the plotters worked hard to get the numbers to oust Villar to "strengthen the institution."

Sen. Panfilo Lacson, another member of the core group, said, "Senator Enrile is the only one we saw to make the Senate an independent institution. He told us he will fight for the independence of the Senate."

Villar also spoke in terms of the independence of the Senate. In tendering his resignation after seeing that Enrile had the numbers, Villar congratulated Enrile and pledged his support "in seeing to it that this chamber continues to maintain its unquestionable independence and its solid reputation as a bulwark of democracy."

These statements reflect the primacy concern of the senators in effecting leadership change: preserving the independence of the Senate. When senators speak of independence, they have in mind the chamber's independence from the executive department, the historical source of threat to the tripartite separation of powers and the senators' right to conduct inquiries into scandals involving corruption in the executive department and their oversight into executive actions.

But of more concern to the public is whether the Enrile assumption of the Senate presidency would lead to the transformation of the Senate from an inquisitorial institution that has

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'Obama of the Philippines'

I'VE been vastly amused over the past couple of weeks over talk about this and that Filipino being the Obama of the Philippines. My amusement positively reached stratospheric heights when Jojo Binay announced his candidacy, referring to himself in those terms.

Though why ever not? The text jokes have been flying thick and fast about the "first black man in Malacañang," Binay might as well make use of it. Joseph "Erap" Estrada himself made the "Erapations," the endless string of jokes about his lack of understanding of English, quite apart from governance, the selling point of his campaign for the presidency.

But it's not just Binay who has tried to appropriate the concept of the "Obama of the Philippines." The term has been applied as well to Chiz Escudero, with or without his blessings, I do not know. I'm sure the "presidentiables" among the senators - Mar Roxas, Manuel Villar, Ping Lacson, Loren Legarda, and Dick Gordon - would also like nothing better than to be seen as the "Obama of the Philippines." Even Loren, though she is neither black nor anywhere resembling a man, and though in fact she has lent her face to advertising a skin-whitening product.

All this misses the point about who Obama is or what he means. The Obama template has little to do with just being dark-skinned or young, though the first has everything to do with a country like America - a country that has been hounded by racial discrimination for most of its life despite hav-

ing formally freed its slaves a century and a half ago. The president who did so, Abraham Lincoln, was shot dead for the effrontery, which doesn't particularly bode well for the incoming president. Progress does have its price.

It helps, of course, to qualify as the "Obama of the Philippines" to be charismatic. Obama is so, a man whose rhetorical skills, admitted by friend and foe alike, winged him all the way to the White House. Both John McCain and Sarah Palin, of course, tried to use it against him, McCain dismissing him as showbiz, not unlike Paris Hilton (which gave Hilton every opportunity to dish him) and Palin equating eloquence with glibness. Palin, in fact, succeeded only in emphasizing the difference between eloquent and glib by making Obama and herself embody those qualities respectively. But which is also a very good reminder for Escudero in particular: Eloquent is not glib.

It helps to be charismatic, but it is not necessary. Cory Aquino was personally neither charismatic nor eloquent, at least not when she started, but the power of her message made her so. Truth is its own charisma, justice is its own eloquence. Cory may have spoken with an inflection that little varied, but it was enough to make the prostitutes of Mabini Street freeze in their tracks and dream of a better life when they heard it. And Cory was there long before America conjured up Obama.

The Obama template is best typified by what Obama said in his acceptance speech: Change has come to America - an exquisitely simple way to describe an awesomely complex event. Obama, in fact, doesn't just represent change, he represents epochal change.

Change, of course, is always change from and change for. The "from" in Obama's case is easy to see. It is a change from George W. Bush. Those

who say that Obama is largely an unknown quantity forget that he was among those who opposed the Iraq War from the start, something even Hillary Clinton couldn't claim, which struck at the heart of everything Bushistic.

In that respect at least, many Filipino oppositionists would qualify as the "Obama of the Philippines," having their own George W. Bush in the person of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo (GMA). Some of them, like Alan Peter Cayetano and Escudero, both young, though far from dark-skinned, were at the forefront of the effort to impeach her not too long ago. One might say that strikes at the heart of everything GMAic.

The change "for" is the trickier part. That too is clear in Obama's case. It is a change for racial equality, or a giant step toward it. It is a change for global cooperation and multilateralism, away from confrontation and unilateralism. It is a change in the direction of assuring the survival of humankind instead of satisfying only the American pursuit of "happy-ness." I don't know how far Obama will go on to do those things. But he gives the hope they can be done.

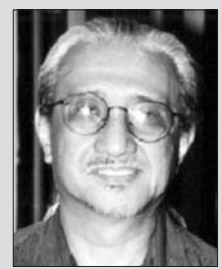
That's what's not clear about those posturing or contemplating passing themselves off as the "Obama of the Philippines." The only change they're clearly for is changing GMA with themselves. In fact, anyone attempting to claim the title will have to offer the hope at least of profound change if not an epochal one. Not unlike the kind of change Archbishop Angel Lagdameo and several bishops described a couple of weeks ago, a change that restores the moral, democratic and libertarian foundations of this nation. Or since



those foundations have never really been fully laid down, finishing the job once and for all. Then may the world stand up and cheer the "Obama of the Philippines" just as it did the "Joan of Arc of the Philippines."

Finally, for all the adulation that Obama has reaped from the world, he has remained humble. Certainly, he shows no messianic complex. And rightly so, realizing as he does that a leader is only as good as the people he leads. That is something the would-be saviors of this country keep forgetting. Change isn't going to come from one person, it is going to come from an entire community. The truest quality of the "Obama of the Philippines" will not be to move mountains but to move hearts and minds, it will not be to command but to inspire, it will not be to work heroic deeds by himself but to get a nation to do it with him.

Whom the shoe fits, let him wear it. (Inquirer.net)



THERES THE RUB
Conrado de Quiros

His Senate loss could be Villar's liberation

GO TO LOBOC: Will somebody please check if we are still on the world map? Reuters reported yesterday that scientists saw for the first time in more than eight decades a pygmy tarsier on a misty mountaintop on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi. The tarsier is one of the planet's smallest and rarest primates.

What is the excitement all about? All that those scientists, also tourists, have to do to see, photograph and cuddle tarsiers is go to Loboc town in Bohol, an unspoiled nature retreat reached from Manila by direct flight or by ferry from Cebu City.

The mouse-size tarsiers are there waiting in the trees - staring with unblinking big brown eyes - by the banks of the Loboc river where you join a leisurely ride-cum-lunch up and down the unbelievably clean stream.

Loboc is just 15 minutes from the much-talked about Bohol Beach Club, the Shangri-la of retired tourism icon Anos Fonacier, whose adrenalin is surging with the construction of the Panglao airport next door to his resort.

FRIENDLY MOVE: Reuters reported that scientists spent over two months in Sulawesi locating and then trying to capture some tarsiers with nets. They caught three, while a fourth got away.

An excitable researcher reported with glee that he was bitten by an uncooperative tarsier. After his rabies shots, he should have that swollen finger fully documented and immortalized in bronze. They should have gone instead to Loboc. The

tarsiers there almost clamber up to you, except that they, especially the females, want you to make the first friendly move. But while cuddling them, please make sure you do not hold the head. They have no protective skull.

So when you walk by the trees on the way to the river ride, reach out for your favorite tarsier, talk to it, cuddle it like a pet. Don't worry, they do not charge for the picture-taking like costumed Igorot natives do in Baguio and environs.

ENRILE PRESIDES: Back to civilization, there is loose talk that Sen. Juan Ponce Enrile was installed Senate president via a stratagem hatched in Malacañang. The insinuation is that the chamber under him would now be friendlier to President Gloria Arroyo.

That is pure hallucination. The bare fact is that the 84-year-old solon from Cagayan is the choice of a new majority that includes sworn enemies of President Arroyo. It was this working majority, not Malacañang, that picked him to serve their present needs.

Anyway, the coming days will show what would emerge in place of the oppositionist Senate under erstwhile Senate President Manuel Villar.

We do not have to keep guessing for long, what with red-hot issues swirling around Charter Change, the impeachment of the President, the P728-million agriculture fund scam, and other scandals with no less than President Arroyo being mentioned.

VILLAR LIBERATED: Having watched Villar operate, I can almost see that he will adjust to being a plain senator in no time. He is equipped, and mo-



tivated, to transform his fall from the Senate helm into another launch pad for something better.

His life story, starting in the wet markets of Bataan and Tondo, is replete with seeming setbacks that only prime him for a relaunch to greater heights. Every challenge seems to strengthen his resolve.

As Senate president, he was straitjacketed into being a moderate. He had to juggle the conflicting interests of 24 senators, each of whom was a virtual Senate. Presiding over them was a delicate balancing act.

Managing operations was not really difficult, considering Villar's training and experience, but leading the Senate must have cramped his inclination to fiscalize, to strike out whenever he saw something amiss.

Seen in this perspective, his fall was actually a liberation. Now Villar is free to be himself.

POLLS RANKING: And considering the time fi-

nally made available to this declared presidential aspirant, Villar is somebody to watch as the nation moves on to the 2010 presidential election.

It may have been a coincidence but the latest Pulse Asia survey conducted in October shows Villar rising to No. 2 (together with former President Joseph Estrada) as the people's preference for president.

His 17 percent in that survey was an improvement on his 12 percent last July when he was just No. 5 in the rankings.

In the latest survey, Vice President Noli de Castro still held on to the No. 1 position, but he shed four percentage points (he had 22 percent in July compared to 18 percent in October.)

Freshman senator and second finisher in the 2007 elections Francis Escudero is third with 14 percent, up by one percentage point, followed by Sen. Loren Legarda with 13 percent, Sen. Panfilo Lacson with 7 percent and Sen. Manuel Roxas with 6 percent.

SIMILAR RESULTS: The result of the last Pulse Asia survey is similar to that the Social Weather Stations conducted Sept. 24-27, which showed Villar also in the No. 2 spot with 28 percent (from his previous 25 percent).

While De Castro was still No. 1 in the same SWS September survey, he lost ground (from 31 percent last June to 29 percent in September).

In the same SWS survey, Legarda got 26 percent; Lacson 17 percent; Escudero 16 percent; Roxas 13 percent; and Estrada 3 percent.

Another SWS survey commissioned by a political party showed Villar and Estrada sharing the No. 2 spot with 17 percent and De Castro holding the top spot with 19 percent from his previous 28 percent rating. (Philstar.com)

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