

Her process of political literacy and diplomacy

(Part 2)

LAST week, I wrote about ConGen Mary Jo Bernardo Aragon's mosaic's fairness and empathy. This issue will deal with her uniting force, her positive, service-oriented leadership.

A uniting force, her essence

Okay, what is the true essence of the Philippine people? That we are a people who would do their utmost for social harmony, and that everyone is taken of, regardless of stature or status. And ConGen emulates the best of our Filipino people, who happens to be employed by the Philippine government.

To Consul General Mary Jo Bernardo Aragon, we are more than Kapangpangans, Ilocanos, Visayans, Cavitenos, Cuyunons, Batanguenos, Igorots, Maguindanaos, Cebuanos, Tibolis, to name a few, but we are Filipinos, linked to the Philippines and our ancestors.

Based on that belief, and her commitment to reach out to as many of the 1,000,000 constituents in Southern California, Southern Nevada, Texas, New Mexico and Arizona, she is a significant presence in community events, from *simbang gabi* at the Los Angeles Cathedral of Angels, to Las Vegas' medical mission tour to the Philippines, to the Smithsonian's *Singgalot* exhibit opening, to Kalayaan's Independence Ball and even UCLA's *Miracle in Rwanda* Filipino-American Legacy Fund benefit, to a flag-raising event at a local hospital in Los Angeles.

"I believe in a strong connection to our culture and heritage. To be a better person, one has to stay connected and appreciate one's roots, and when you do, you feel better about yourself."

- Consul General Mary Jo Bernardo Aragon

I was with her while organizing for *Singgalot*, a Smithsonian exhibit on the 100 years of Filipino American experiences in the United States. ConGen Mary Jo came to one of our committee meetings and noticed our group's flagging team spirit, from folks' inconsistent attendance and erratic communication, at team meetings, affecting our overall teamwork. And without any criticisms lodged on us, ConGen Mary Jo showed us true leadership by example: she hosted one of our meetings, increasing the team's attendance, and true to her word, delivered on what she promised, including refreshments for the exhibit opening. When the closing for the exhibit came, she assisted us significantly. The result, a successful run of three months, from August 2 to October 26, 2008 at Remy's on Temple Art Gallery, at Historic FilipinoTown.

Such is her leadership, not prescriptive, but transformative in character, and by her presence, she changes the dynamic to be more inclusive, to be more participatory, to be more service-oriented.

Leadership on the line.

And speaking of transformative and exercising true leadership, one that extends borders of civility and fairness, who would have imagined that her consular office's letter demanding an apology from KABC countered with enough force of conviction the *Desperate Housewives'* racial slur, demeaning the Philippines' medical schools and its professionals?

The Filipino consul in Los Angeles, Mary Jo Bernardo Aragon, wrote a letter to ABC further defending her country's honor. "The US recognizes the students of Philippine medical and nursing schools and in general, does not require additional schooling in the US for Filipino healthcare professionals. "The offending moment came when Susan Mayer, played by Teri Hatcher, throws a fit at her gynecologist and questions his credentials because he suggests she is going through the early stages of menopause. "Can I check those diplomas," she says, "because I want to make sure they're not from some med school in the Philippines."

Almost instantly, Filipinos started objecting because they are very proud of their medical schools. The day after the broadcast, a Filipino American performance artist and college lecturer called Kevin Nadal started an online petition describing the line as "unnecessary and hurtful, but... also unfounded, considering the presence of Filipinos and Filipino-Americans in the health care industry". More than 50,000 people signed it.

The day after that, a spokesman for Gloria Arroyo, president of the Philippines, described the line as a "racial slur". Several Filipino politicians demanded an apology from ABC. The Foreign Ministry in Manila pointed out that many Americans went to the Philippines for medical services they cannot afford at home.

The reaction clearly took ABC by surprise because the network did something networks almost never do. Rather than say it was the prejudiced opinion of a character, not the show's producers—the obvious line of counter-attack—it apologized.

"The producers of Desperate Housewives and ABC Studios offer our sincere apologies for any offense caused by the brief reference in the season premiere," a statement said. "There was no intent to disparage the integrity of any aspect of the medical community in the Philippines. As leaders in broadcast diversity, we are committed to presenting sensitive and respectful images of all communities featured in our programmes."

(Andrew Gumbel, International Herald Tribune, October 5, 2007)

This incident occupied headlines around the world, including *The Philippine Daily Inquirer*, that



Philippine Consulate General LA Officers & Staffedited

even though this author was vacationing in Leyte, she was reading about this Los Angeles consul official's actions on behalf of her constituencies. As of this date, this online petition has attracted over 128,000 online petition signatures, clearly touching the hearts and minds of many folks around the globe.

This was not political grandstanding, for she had nothing to gain in terms of promotions, as in fact, it was the antithesis of diplomacy, to call out what you believe were unfair acts forcefully, and in this worldwide stir, ConGen Mary Jo had enabled progress in interethnic relations and integrated boundaries' leadership: KABC offered concessions in terms of sensitivity training towards diversity awareness, including fellowships in teleplay writing opportunities, and also positive shows highlighting diversity, including meeting with NAFFAA to dialogue on how they might improve highlighting diversity or more appropriately, integrating diversity. In the words of Chancellor Gene Block of UCLA, making "Diversity as part of the organization's DNA or genes, and not just its complexion."

And innate goodness in her diplomacy is part of Mary Jo's upbringing and childhood. From her mother, Visitacion Bernardo, who taught her to be proud of her roots, the country she was born, something she paid attention to, while finishing her senior year in high school in Vienna.

Her teachers were her role models in diplomacy

ConGen Mary Jo recalls not just her mother, but also her teachers, and her father as her role models in diplomacy. Inquiring as to who taught her world-class temperament and her skills in getting along with anyone, she recalls a Schiller College professor in English. It was not an ordinary teacher-student relationship, she said, it was more

than that,

"She invited us for English tea at her home, a group of us, for her to get to know us more as people. It made me feel comfortable. That became my second example. And my first example is my father, Benito Bernardo who I saw only kindness and helpfulness towards people, even his last peso would be given to those in need. When he passed away in 2003, one of his lasting lessons to me was do no harm to others, for if you do, the harm comes back to you ten times more. I want to have a life of no enemies, just like my father, no one got mad or angry at him for he showed them only kindness."

And her third role model is Luchie San Luis Quemuel based in Los Angeles. "She relates well. She gives you the warm feeling, makes us feel she really cares for us."

And just as her teacher, Luchie San Luis Quemuel, or her father, Benito Bernardo, or her Schiller college professor (whose name is under research right now, as our collective oral histories and memories are fast disappearing, help us in identifying this Schiller college professor in London who welcomed all her students, as if part of her family in the late sixties and early seventies), or her mother, Consul General Mary Jo Bernardo Aragon belongs to an elite class of humanitarians who practice coveted skills of interpersonal intelligence, political literacy, and diplomatic leadership, even when it means going on the line for fairness for her constituencies! Such is true, genuine leadership!

Prosy Abarquez-Delacruz, J.D. was appointed by Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa to LA City's Convention Center and Civil Service Commission, and served 2005-2008. She is now retired, following a 27-year public service with California's Department of Public Health, and now blissfully works as a features writer for Los Angeles Asian Journal. Her writings have taken her far and wide in meeting folks and appreciating their innate traits.

Scenarios

GOVERNMENT spooks Congress so its concurrence have intensified their would not be surveillance activities, focusing not on communist insurgents or Islamic separatists but on movements within the military.

The internal focus may have something to do with reports of renewed unrest over the impending change of leadership in the

Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and, worse, the possibility of the imposition of martial law.

Though the idea may seem farfetched in this land that once threw out the dictator who first placed the country under military rule, it won't be the first time that this administration would contemplate it.

Back in 2005, when there was a clamor for President Arroyo to step down at the height of the "Hello, Garci" scandal, the President had considered imposing martial law.

People privy to developments during those days said the target date, for reasons that remain unclear, was Oct. 16. The plan was for the President to abolish



SKETCHES
Ana Marie Pamintuan

needed to impose martial law, and then change the Constitution to shift to a parliamentary system of government.

To its credit, the administration was split on the idea. Key Cabinet and military officers were

divided, and eventually sanity prevailed. That was the first time—long before Romulo Neri gave the same description—that I heard a key official describe the President as "evil." But she backed down.

It might have helped that Washington was alerted by an administration ally at the time—one who has since had a serious falling-out with the President. The ally had tried to enlist the Americans' support for the idea. The Americans put their foot down, sending word to Philippine officials in Manila and Washington, and later sending a top official to Manila, just to make sure the administration got the message and would not

try to revive the idea. The buzz at the time was that this episode cost Albert del Rosario his job as Philippine ambassador to Washington.

If the current buzz has any basis, some characters in the administration are again toying with the idea. I don't know what makes them think Barack Obama's administration would be more receptive to martial law than the Bush administration, unless some scenario—a major eruption of violence in Mindanao, for example—can be used as justification.

It's a wild scenario, as far as Gen. Alexander Yano is concerned. The AFP chief does not like either having the military used for partisan purposes, or seeing soldiers getting involved in politics through coup attempts.

Yano is also not worried about the possible appointment of Lt. Gen. Delfin Bangit as his replacement when he retires in June.

Bangit has been an aide of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo since her days as vice president, and later headed the Presidential Security Group.

He now heads the Southern Luzon Command. Bangit, as military officers will tell you, is a capable soldier. Though his

appointment will mean that senior officers will be bypassed, among them Army chief Lt. Gen. Victor Ibrado and chief of the directorial staff Lt. Gen. Rodrigo Maclang, the choice of AFP chief is a presidential prerogative.

The only question is whether Bangit will put loyalty to the President above loyalty to country, or if he thinks the two are one and the same thing.

Yano told me that officers who have spent about three decades in the service are not going to destroy unsullied reputations that they have painstakingly built over the years to obey an unlawful order in the name of fealty.

But Filipinos can have a different concept of loyalty and debt of gratitude. Also, bypassing senior officers in favor of a younger one, whether or not AFP officers will admit it, can cause some demoralization.

Will that demoralization translate into a coup? Yano believes that at this point, any coup is unlikely to succeed, although given the country's history, there could always be officers dreaming of staging a coup.

Military and defense reforms have also been sustained by Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro—one less reason for any coup to succeed.

Teodoro's support is key to the imposition of martial law, and he doesn't look like the type who will go along with it, especially if the reason is contrived as it was in 1972.

But what if Teodoro is replaced by someone more pliable, like a particular retired military officer who has reportedly been eyeing the post for some time?

Teodoro visited *The STAR* the other day to start selling himself as presidential contender. He has the educational credentials, the youth, the absence of controversy, the money, plus a gorgeous wife who can be priceless in a campaign. But he has to lose the talk about "paradigms"—guaranteed to put anyone to sleep – and work on his mass appeal. At this point he reminds me somewhat of the electoral appeal of Marcelo Fernan—clean, competent but not winnable.

As of March 19, Malacañang announced, survey tpoatcher Noli de Castro was still the top choice of the administration coalition for its 2010 standard bearer.

That could be a blessing in disguise for Teodoro, though he told us he did not consider President Arroyo's endorsement a kiss of death in 2010. Still,

there are those who think that in the 2010 race, whoever is the administration candidate will suffer the fate of John McCain and the anti-Bush American vote, in that a vote for the administration bet, no matter how clean and competent, will be seen as a vote for Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and everything she stands for.

Teodoro has already lost the support of his moneyed uncle, businessman Danding Cojuangco, whose Nationalist People's Coalition is expected to endorse Sen. Chiz Escudero. Teodoro shrugged off the falling-out, saying only that in their family, they seemed to have trouble separating politics and personal matters. And anyway, he said, "I don't want a political father."

If he is serious in his quest, at some point in the near future, he will have to quit as defense chief. In the case of Fidel Ramos, he quit as defense chief a year before the 1992 race.

Conspiracy buffs are warning that if Teodoro quits around May or June and the right men are installed in the top defense and military posts, then the groundwork is being laid for martial law.

Only time will tell how wild this scenario is. (*Philstar.com*)

Confused about 'Nicole'

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AIDS. AIDS, said the pontiff, is a tragedy "that cannot be overcome through the distribution of condoms, which even aggravates the problem." Instead, the Pope suggested, the pandemic could be overcome by "spiritual and human awakening, and friendship for those who suffer." (We can make friends with people living with AIDS, or PLWA, all we want, but to really help them, we need to help them secure the necessary medication, and help promote the use of condoms.)

"Is the Pope living in the 21st century?" Alain Fogue, who is helping PLWA in Cameroon, was moved to ask. "He lives in Heaven and we are on earth."

Meanwhile, back in the Pope's own ranch, there seems to be a real difference of opinion regarding the treatment of a case involving a nine-year-old girl in Brazil who had been raped by her stepfather and got pregnant because of it. A Brazilian bishop excommunicated the girl's mother and the doctors who performed the procedure, but did nothing to censure or punish the rapist.

The National Catholic Reporter quotes Archbishop Rino Fisichella, president of the

Pontifical Academy for Life, as criticizing the excommunication, saying it was "hasty" and unnecessary, and that the girl "in the first place should have been defended, hugged and held tenderly to help her feel that we were all on her side," he wrote in the official Vatican newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano*.

"Before thinking about excommunication, it was necessary and urgent to protect her innocent life and bring her back to a level of humanity of which we men of the church should be expert witnesses and teachers," he said.

"Unfortunately, this is not what happened and it has impacted the credibility of our teaching, which appears in the eyes of many as insensitive, incomprehensible and devoid of mercy," the archbishop added.

He likewise criticized the way Archbishop Jose Cardoso Sobrinho handled the situation, saying that his public declaration led to the sensationalizing of the "despicable, yet all too common, violence against girls and women."

Sometimes, sensible voices from within the Vatican manage to get heard. But is the Pope listening? (*Inquirer.net*)

Teodoro says he is his own man

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candidate in the 2010 elections. But Teodoro gave us, "I could not care less" shrug when pressed about this rumor. As far as he is concerned, he clarified, he considered himself "resigned" from the NPC after he took his oath of office as Defense Secretary.

He feels having a greater chance of winning if he would be carried by the administration coalition as its standard bearer because, admittedly it is difficult, if not impossible to win as an independent in a presidential race here. Thus, Teodoro vows to work hard to win first the coalition's selection process that would be held any time soon this year.

While holding FVR in high esteem, Teodoro told me, he won't do a Ramos who formed his own Lakas-Taoy party. This is the predecessor of the Lakas-

NUCD that carried Ramos as presidential standard bearer in the 1992 elections after he lost to the late Speaker Ramon Mitra who won the party convention endorsement of the ruling LDP. "Once I participate in the process and agree to its rules, then I am bound by the result. If I agree to the process, then I will not form my own (party)," Teodoro vowed. He said it is up to the coalition to select who would be his vice presidential running mate if ever selected as its standard bearer. For now, Teodoro refused to answer if he would settle to run instead as vice president or as a senator if he does not become the standard bearer of the coalition.

Teodoro made no bones about the much rumored falling out he has with his uncle Eduardo "Danding" Cojuangco, founder and chairman emeritus of the NPC. "I'm not controlled politically

by my personal affiliations. My family don't separate politics from personal affiliations," he stressed. In fact, he confided to us, it was only during his stint in Congress that he came to know and became close with his first cousin, Benigno "Noynoy" Cojuangco Aquino III when the latter won in his congressional district in Tarlac.

At the outset, Teodoro vowed to work on the "structural reforms" as one of his visions for the Philippines. "But we cannot be in perpetual state of reforms," he pointed out. It must start with basic Charter changes that must be carried out at the beginning of a new administration. That time would finally come, hopefully, Teodoro said with conviction, with him at the helm of the country. Then history would remember him for this. (*Philstar.com*)