

OPINION & FEATURES

Remaining resilient

WE may not probably see it, but the Philippines, according to most financial and economic publications and analysts, remains resilient.

In fact, Nikhilesh Battacharyya, Moody's Economy.com analyst said in February that, "The Philippines, branded the sick man of Asia because of its relatively slow growth in recent years, will out perform many of its neighbors."

There is no doubt that the global financial crisis has hit most countries, even those which were once regarded as "invincible." In the United States, unemployment, foreclosures and bankruptcies are in a historic high, making the government step in to save those who are most affected.

One would think that the Philippines would fare worse, realizing that a huge chunk of dollar remittances come from the US. Although the exporting industry has been affected by the global recession, analysts said that this would be temporary due to the uninterrupted remittances and other robust businesses,

such as the business process outsourcing (BPO) industry.

Still, the country has remained stable and the reason could be is that the Philippine government has opened new doors to forge and strengthen ties with other Asian markets, as well as other countries.

Yes, the Philippines may not be spared from the impact of the global financial downturn already affecting most economies of the world, but thankfully, the local economy has shock absorbers prepared to soften its damage. Growth may be slow, but at least, for now, it is not reeling from the effects of the crisis. (*AJPress*)

EDITORIAL



Retooling our 'outrage meter'

THERE are so many things to be outraged about these days, there seems to be a need to update or re-tool our "outrage meter."

What just a few months or years ago would have sent thousands of Filipinos out on the streets in protest, these days elicits but a few angry remarks, press statements from the usual suspects, but from the majority, a shrug and an expression of: "So what else is new?"

So President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo is the real power behind the resurgent Charter change ("Cha-cha") moves that reportedly need only 20 more signatures before Congress convenes into a Constituent Assembly? Is this really a surprise? Isn't this what people have been saying all along, ever since our legislators first floated the possibility of amending the Constitution before the 2010 elections?

Previous public opinion surveys had reflected strong opposition to the move, but that position seems to be softening. A recent survey by the poll group Pulse Asia, as quoted in this paper, says four out of 10 Filipinos are not in favor of changing the Constitution now, while 33 percent support the move. (Read story) Significant, then is the 25 percent who said they were "undecided," though it's possible their positions will harden into a "yes" or "no" depending on which side of the Cha-cha debate prevails. Perhaps that's what the administra-



AT LARGE
Rina Jimenez-David

tion hopes will happen: That enough time will pass and the very "idea" of changing the Constitution becomes more palatable, more acceptable, gaining momentum as an "inevitable" political development.

And while in the past outraged Filipinos marched and rallied to prevent a president from tinkering with the Charter to suit a personal agenda, these days, reactions range from resigned dread to mapping "post-Cha-cha" scenarios.

It is possible that the periodic resurrection of what was once thought of as the dead horse that is Cha-cha is a strategy to bankrupt the opposition. Indeed, the numbers that have shown up at the many anti-Cha-cha rallies have been diminishing, while the opposition has been hard put raising funds to mount these rallies which have resulted in nothing more substantial than a few photo ops. It could also be a strategy to drain much more than funds from the opposition, including that rare currency, outrage.

A letter from Julie Po of the Concerned Artists of the Philippines expresses puzzlement at the "lack of outrage" shown in a recent editorial on the killing of Rebelyn Pitao. Rebelyn, the daughter of a New People's Army commander in Davao, had gone missing for days and her body was eventually found floating in a river bearing signs of torture.

Suspicion has of course fallen on the military, but as the Inquirer editorial pointed out, ultimate responsibility rests at the doorstep of President Arroyo herself.

What "discomfited" Po was apparently the equanimity of the editorial writer who concluded the piece by saying that "Rebelyn was just another victim." I myself think this statement was meant to be ironic, given the spate of disappearances, "salvagings" and assassinations not just of activists but also of journalists in the past few years. "Just another victim" is another way of saying too many have fallen—and that outrage at "just another killing" is increasingly becoming an exercise in futility.

Should the editorial writer have frothed at the mouth and trotted out the shibboleths of passionate oratory? Perhaps the calm, even tone was a statement in itself: that the killing of Rebelyn is no longer an extraordinary, earthshaking event; but rather increasingly, frighteningly routine. And that says so much more about the State of our Republic, than reams of outraged statements could have.

But is this something worth working up a lather for? Former President Joseph Estrada, on a visit to Cebu, chose to make the rounds on a vintage World War II jeep outfitted with a wooden machine gun. At this, police and even Malacañang spokespersons expressed alarm at the former president's choice of vehicle accessory, saying the opposition leader may have thought he was "above the law" by parading around with a heavy weapon.

"Use common sense" was Senate President Juan Ponce Enrile's helpful advice to police, while

Senate Minority Leader Sen. Aquilino Pimentel said it was all "a big joke."

Granted, the macho display through the streets of Cebu may have been in bad taste. But that is all it was, and by threatening to file charges for violation of a law proscribing the display of gun replicas, the police and Malacañang may have only boosted the stock of Estrada among gun enthusiasts. It's also proof that when it comes to Estrada, Ms Arroyo has no sense of humor whatsoever.

"Hope is so last January," a *New York Times* columnist wrote last week, commenting that outrage is the emotion du jour in America. While the country soared on the wings of hope following President Obama's inauguration, today the mood has turned sour, especially after the "change" that Obama promised seems to have curdled after reports of the AIG bonuses.

Well, hope seems to be a most elusive quarry here, too. The purported presidential candidacy of Gov. "Among Ed" Panlilio of Pampanga province, being pushed by a coalition ranging from academics to overseas Filipino workers, from activists to disgruntled civic leaders, appears to be foundering amid a sea of cynicism. Critics carp about the lack of funding, the lack of national exposure of the proposed candidates, the chutzpah of a priest who dares take on the political establishment.

Indeed, conventional wisdom says Governor Panlilio has the mere ghost of a chance to make it to Malacañang if and when he runs in 2010. Then again, isn't that what people said about Among Ed's chances when he ran in Pampanga? And isn't that what pundits also said about a neophyte senator's run for the White House? (*Inquirer.net*)

Move over Cha-cha, election mode is on

THERE have been never-ending rumors of Charter change (Cha-cha) efforts by administration allies in Congress who continue to work on it. There were even reports about clandestine meetings to map out Cha-cha strategies to carry it out at all cost. Most of the time, these reported Cha-cha moves, no matter how supposedly secretly being plotted, nevertheless come out anyway in the light of day. So just like coup plot talks that go the rounds of rumor mills, how can these Cha-cha plots prosper?

Opposition Senators suspect something sinister in the ambivalent stand of President Arroyo on the raging debate about the latest moves by pro-administration Congressmen to revive a Constituent Assembly (Con-Ass). Senators Alan Peter Cayetano and Francis Pangilinan have reportedly challenged Mrs. Arroyo to break her silence on Con-Ass. The two Senators noted that her unclear position only serves to fuel rumors that she really wanted to stay beyond her six-year term.

Are the two Senators joking? Why should the President give them any hints at all? That's

precisely meant to keep them guessing. And while they are at their wits' end, can they say now that Mrs. Arroyo, who is into her last 15 months in office, a "lame-duck" President? Despite denials to the contrary by the Palace and its chief political allies in Congress, arch opposition leaders like Cayetano won't believe it anyway.

President Arroyo's term of office ends exactly at noontime on June 30, 2010. My good friend TV/radio broadcaster Arnold Clavio even has a special portion in his daily radio morning program over DzBB a "count-down" on the remaining days in office of the Chief Executive. As per his count yesterday, she has 461 days left in her term.

Another good friend, DzRH radio anchor Deo Macalma fondly calls the President as Gloria "Magtatagal-Arroyo, a pun of her maiden name "Macapagal," over unceasing talks about supposed plans to extend her term in office through Cha-cha.

The alleged renewed campaign to amend the country's 1987

COMMONSENSE

Marichu A. Villanueva

Constitution gained a new life after reports came out that no less than the President's

eldest son, Pampanga Rep. Mikey Arroyo is leading the efforts to push Cha-cha in Congress. In fact, ousted Speaker Jose de Venecia was supposedly being tapped to bring Cha-cha back to life in Congress. De Venecia disclosed that Mikey, along with Leyte Rep. Martin Romualdez met with him in his office at the Batasan Pambansa in Quezon City where they talked about the latest developments on Cha-cha in Congress.

While they confirmed talking about Cha-cha during their discussions, both Mikey and De Venecia vehemently denied having talked about reviving the Cha-cha campaign in Congress in exchange for the latter getting back his Speaker's post.

Should the Con-Ass bid succeed, De Venecia believes Congress could then push for a transition period that would extend the terms of all elected officials after 2010, including President Arroyo, to

allow the Con-Ass to revise the Constitution.

De Venecia, however, stressed for as long as administration allies could muster the 197 votes in the House of Representatives and get the Supreme Court to uphold their move, "there will be no stopping Cha-cha."

Incumbent Speaker Prospero Nograles obviously got peeved over such reports that De Venecia is purportedly being lured to join the Cha-cha moves in Congress because of his House leadership's failure to get the required number of votes to push the Con-Ass. Nograles is spearheading another tack to amend certain economic provisions of the Constitution through legislation by Congress.

The Cha-cha-mongers are spreading the latest scenarios that the administration allies are in dire need of a graceful exit for President Arroyo, one that would not subject her to any plunder suits once she steps down from office.

But the last time I checked our Constitution, there is still a provision that cloaked the President with immunity from suits on executive decisions and

actions taken while in office. So what gives?

A recent survey conducted by Pulse Asia showed that four out of 10 Filipino adults or 42 percent were averse to Cha-cha. The non-commissioned survey, conducted from Feb. 2 to 15, showed only 33 percent of respondents are in favor of amending the 1987 Constitution while 25 percent are undecided on the matter.

What is a rather disturbing result of the survey revealed that most Filipinos or 57 percent know little about our 1987 Philippine Constitution. Pulse Asia noted "big pluralities to small majorities" (42 percent to 56 percent) across geographic areas and socio-economic groupings are against constitutional amendments at this time despite the fact they know little about our own Constitution.

If we are to believe the opposition scenario, the principal motivation of administration allies to press for Cha-cha is precisely to extend the term of Mrs. Arroyo so that she could keep this presidential immunity from suits. Duh?

A staunch pro-Arroyo Congressman Luis Villafuerte of Camarines Sur has declared the House could push through Con-Ass despite the Senate's strong

objection once they could get 197 signatures. This refers to the magic number which represents three-fourths of the combined Senate and House membership to effect any changes in the 1987 Constitution. A finer reading of this constitutional provision would show that three-fourths of the votes refer to warm bodies voting at the floor, not mere signatures on paper.

Presidential adviser on political affairs Gabriel Claudio literally laughed off these renewed Cha-cha rumors while everyone practically, especially the opposition, is in election mode already. In fact, the Commission on Elections are in the thick of preparations to implement the poll automation for the May 2010 elections after President Arroyo signed into law the Congress-approved P11.3-billion budget for it.

The Comelec starts public bidding for the equipment to be used in the first nationwide computerized polls. The opposition presidential bets have been on campaign mode way ahead of administration aspirants who are still jockeying to get Mrs. Arroyo's anointing as her presidential standard-bearer. So who's still in Cha-cha mode? (*Philstar.com*)



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