

OPINION & FEATURES

Melo's bed

IN the Philippines, the position of election chief is an extraordinary office; it has no exact counterpart in the countries we consider democratically mature. With one or two exceptions, ours may be the only democracy where the election chief—by tradition—becomes a household name, an outsize political personality whose very character shapes the conduct of elections.

Last year, Jose Melo, a former Supreme Court justice, succeeded Benjamin Abalos, one of the worst Comelec chairmen in memory; now he is faced with the most daunting election challenge since the fall of the Marcos regime. Essentially, he has to do two things: to conduct a

GUEST EDITORIAL

Consider the roll call of those who have served as chairman of the Commission on Elections. Ferdinand Marcos, for instance, had his Leonardo Perez, a fact that, by itself, already helps explain the corruption of the electoral process during Marcos' time. Corazon Aquino appointed Christian Monsod, whose competence and integrity allowed the peaceful transfer of power in 1992, despite the most closely contested presidential election and the thinnest presidential mandate in our history.

credible national election despite efforts by an unpopular but still powerful administration to delay or subvert it, and to hold the country's first automated general election.

These are two distinct tasks—and Melo must keep the difference in mind.

This reminder is prompted by the Comelec chairman's startling admission the other day that the prospect of a no-election scenario ("No-el," in the popular shorthand) was keeping him up at nights.

The Comelec is weighing the competing bids for automating

the 2010 elections; while serious concerns continue to be aired over the specifications and the system the Comelec settled on, there is almost universal agreement that the slow count of previous elections must give way to computerized polls. Under Melo, the Comelec enjoys wide public support for automation; for largely technical reasons, however, the bidding process for computerizing the elections has become problematic.

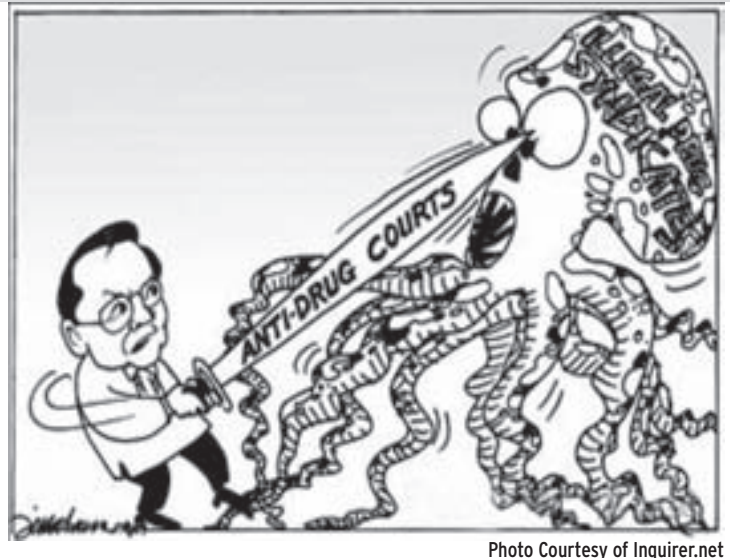
Some time ago, Melo shared his anxiety about the bidding becoming a failure. The other day, he spoke about the possibility of damaging legal maneuvers launched by either losing bidders or third parties. "Let's say by February, March or April, a [temporary restraining order] is suddenly issued, we will not have time to go manual," he said. "It keeps me up at night. That is my nightmare."

If that were to happen, the

nightmare would not be confined to Melo's bed; the entire country would be plunged into political turmoil unseen since the last days of the Marcos regime.

But would it, in fact, happen? Only if the following conditions are met: if the judiciary will privilege a lawsuit over a regular election, if the Comelec will prove unable to defend the electoral franchise—and if the Comelec will fail to provide for the contingency of manual elections.

Melo is too much the veteran jurist to imagine any court, or as a last resort the Supreme Court itself, stopping the Comelec from pushing through with its preparations for a regular election. There is no higher political task than the conduct of elections; it is (to use a more organic metaphor) the very lifeblood of democracy. (The urgency with which the Supreme Court decided on Fernando Poe Jr.'s citizenship case in 2004 encourages us to think that no such legal maneuver can prosper.) In other words, the first two conditions seem improbable.



The third condition—Comelec's contingency plan—is another matter altogether. What we understand Melo to be saying is that, if the election agency has no time "to go manual," then legal action may place the 2010 election in peril. But why wait until computerized elections are derailed by legal action before preparing for manual elections? Plan for the contingency now. We realize that contingency plans require additional resources. Perhaps Melo, then, is suggesting the need for yet another supplemental budget.

If he is, he must say so plainly. His candor has spooked, not only presidential aspirants, but ordinary citizens too, who look forward to the 2010 elections as both a safety valve and a clean slate. There can be no postponement. (*Inquirer.net*)

PENMAN

TWO big issues having to do with culture blew up while I was away these past two weeks, and I feel constrained to say what I think about them, because—well, I'm a Filipino.

This week I'll take up the first one—the brouhaha that followed singer Martin Nievera's rendition of the National Anthem, *Lupang Hinirang*, at the Pacquiao fight in Las Vegas last May 2. The National Historical Institute and some commentators took Nievera to task for his interpretation, which deviated from what turned out to be news for many Filipinos—a legally prescribed way of singing the song, under Republic Act 8491 or the Flag and Heraldic Code.

I didn't get to see the fight live, so I had to go to YouTube to listen to Nievera—and when I did, I had to wonder what the fuss was all about. The performance was a tad dramatic, to be sure, but wasn't the moment titanicly theatrical as well? I didn't think that anything was wrong with Martin; rather, I think something's wrong with the law in its intent and implementation.

Let's begin with intentions. Can you imagine what it would be like if some emperor declared that, say, Shakespeare's *Sonnet 18* (*Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?*) or even Rizal's *Mi Ultimo Adios* should be read aloud in one and only one way?

Of course, the National Anthem isn't just a poem or a pop song, as many have archly observed; it's a verbalized symbol of national unity, and therefore—the argument might go—singing it one way would concretize the spirit of that unity. In this sense, I can understand the NHI's exasperation. If we can't even get the tempo of *Lupang Hinirang* right, what can we?

But I think that misses the point, which is that the

anthem is also a work of art, and as such is inevitably subject to interpretation. Its meaning can be affected by its context. When I sing it together with a quadrangle of other Filipinos, all at one pace, I find and put myself within the collective, the me-in-the-nation. When I sing it by myself, more expressively, I seek and find the nation-in-me; I reread it and sing it as a poem to which I bring my own experience and emotions. When an accomplished artist reinterprets the anthem, it's not a form of disrespect, but high praise and a way of revivifying what to many of us have turned to stale, memorized, emotionless words sung at flag ceremony.

I don't think our revolutionary heroes will turn in their graves if they heard this blood-hallowed hymn played differently from way they heard it in 1898—to begin with, it didn't even have any official Filipino lyrics, as we know them today, until 1956! The freedom they fought for was handmaiden to a democracy—at least a theoretical one—that should allow for diversity, divergence, and dissent. As unpleasant as it may be, that includes the right to quarrel—nonviolently—with and about the nation and its symbolic representations.

This nation's more than a hundred years old. We should feel confident enough about ourselves to accommodate a range of expressions about who and what we are. If we've failed to cohere as a nation, it isn't the fault of the anthem or of its singers, or because we've failed to sing the anthem to the one lawful beat, or flown flags with the prescribed shade of blue. It's more likely because we haven't been open and inclusive enough as a society in more significant and more material ways.

And what of implementation? Since when has



Martin Nievera

the Flag Law—crafted in 1998 in a fit of Centennial fervor, when we were too busy contemplating the embroidery on our barongs—been applied with the religiousness it demands by law enforcers bearing color swatches of Pantone 286, the official shade of blue? (Since when, for that matter, have we observed the Constitutional separation of Church and State, with Catholic Masses and prayers held at nearly every government function from the Palace down? And before that comment cranks up the hate-mail machine, let me say outright that I do pray—privately, without requiring or expecting it of my State-university colleagues and staff.)

Cultural policing like this promotes a narrow, mechanical sense of nation, one grounded on ultimately impractical rules rather than an appreciation of the nation as an organic entity.

I don't see the United States diminished in any way when Mariah Carey, Whitney Houston, Beyoncé, Christina Aguilera, and Clay Aiken choose to sing *The Star-Spangled Banner* this way and that (if you want proof, go to YouTube and check out their versions). We may argue with the quality of their singing or the excessive flourishes of their interpretation, but hardly with their privilege to sing the song the way only they can. That's why professional singers—and not marine or army sergeants (unless you were Barry Sadler)—get invited to sing at big events; for a few minutes, they bring new life to an old tune (or, to use the fancy critical term, they defamiliarize the familiar, which is basic to

any art). I seem to remember—and please correct me, fellow boomers, if I'm wrong—that RJ (yes, that RJ) and his band the Riots got banned from the airwaves for a while back in the '60s for doing a rock rendition of *Lupang Hinirang*. Was Jimi Hendrix any less American for doing the same thing at Woodstock in 1969?

As a workable compromise, let the anthem be played and sung the prescribed way in official government functions, and perhaps in schools at flag ceremony; that's all the practice of uniformity we need; but leave artists to interpret it as only artists will, emotively, with all its possibilities for both artistic success and failure.

I'm not saying that artists are above the law, or that laws are unnecessary. If a writer or musician steals, rapes, or passes a bouncing check, he should be jailed or punished like everyone else. As for singing the National Anthem—well, I can't sing a tenth of Martin Nievera's notes, but I'd be willing to try and sing it the way he did in a public venue, to be prosecuted as a test case for the Supreme Court to sort out: *ang makulong*, so to speak, *nang dahil sa iyo*.

Next week, I'll take up the other and perhaps more materially important issue—the so-called "Book Blockade of 2009." (*Philstar.com*)

Flowers and festivals in May



Photo Courtesy of Philstar.com

MAY is the month during which many cities celebrate their fiestas and festivals. In the *barrios*, fiestas used to rival each one in terms of grandeur and splendor. Now because of hard times, celebrations are still held, though with less fanfare and sumptuousness. Urban cities hold festivals differently than those in the *barrios*; they are held

with more fashion and style. Now that it's one year before election time, fiestas are tinged with political campaigns. In rice-planting and crop-growing communities, May is the month when farmers look forward to a bountiful harvest, followed by brief periods of pleasure and plenty ("*piesta na naman!*," as the Filipino saying goes). Because of the recent "untimely" storms,

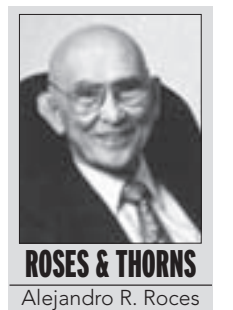
many rice fields expected to yield harvest soon, were flooded and millions worth of crops were destroyed. Increasingly, farmers now have to contend with climate change and its ill effects.

Still, true to the innate religiosity of our kababayans, through good and bad times, they never forget to honor their patron saints. Despite the hard times, fiestas continue to be a Filipino way of life, a unique gathering of families and friends where thanksgiving for life and its blessings are expressed. Let me put it this way, if we lose our fiestas, we lose our identity as Filipinos.

Three major fiestas are commemorated during the whole month of May, the Antipolo Pilgrimage, Flores de Mayo and Santacruzan. The Antipolo Pilgrimage describes the devotion of Filipinos to Our Lady of Peace and Good Voyage. It was believed that the Virgin of Antipolo accompanied the galleon ships for five consecutive round trips from Manila to Acapulco. On her maiden voyage to Acapulco, aboard the galleon ship San Diego, it was said that the Virgin performed a miracle by "calming the seas when a storm threatened to sink the ship". Hence, the Virgin was given the name "Our Lady of Peace and Good Voyage". Few people remember that the whole Christendom celebrates the month of May in special devotion to the Virgin Mary. *Flores de Mayo* (Flowers of May) is the flower festival where beautiful flow-

ers are offered to the Blessed Virgin Mary. Each of the 31 days of May is supposed to commemorate one of Mary's virtues. Each day, children, especially, come for afternoon catechism and para-liturgical services highlighted by a floral offering to our Blessed Mother. These afternoon festivities culminate in an elaborate procession to the Church called Santacruzan.

The passing of the month will not be complete without practically all cities and barrios throughout the country holding the *Santacruzan*. It is one of the most colorful May-time festivals in the Philippines, considered to be the "Queen of Filipino Festivals", which depicts the finding of the Holy Cross by Queen Helena, mother of Constantine, the Great. Unlike the usual images of saints paraded in most local pageantries, this procession portrays 17 biblical and historical characters, among them, the Marian, with nine representatives of the nine titles of the Virgin Mary, including two of my favorites, Rosa Mystica (Mystic Rose), who carries a bouquet of roses and Reyna de las Flores (Queen of Flowers), the reason



ROSES & THORNS

Alejandro R. Roces

why Flores de Mayo is so often confused to be the same festival as the Santacruzan. The 18th character, the Reina Elena, dramatizes the historic role of Queen Helena, the legendary founder of the true Cross, represented by the small cross she carries. She is escorted by her son, Constantine. Traditionally, for the Santacruzan to be more exciting, the chosen Reina Elena is kept a secret until the day of the parade to surprise the people. Hence, this is the reason why, over the years, beauty queens and well-known personalities have come to portray the role. Recently, church officials warned the faithful against homosexuals who participate in Santacruzan parades, compromising the sanctity of the religious practices, eliciting pride and false glory in the process. The religious tradition is seemingly lost; instead the procession has increasingly become a venue to advance political and commercial interests, and even used for fund-raising and beauty competition.

Traditions may have been changed to fit the times and trend. Be they grandiose and majestic, simple or devoid of opulence, may our fiestas continue to exude the spirit of tradition and heritage essential to the expression of our faith and not be lost to oblivion and wordliness. We must never tire of saying how old traditions used to be. We owe it to our children and the generations after us. (*Philstar.com*)



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