

OPINION & FEATURES

Lavishly unpopular

ADMITTEDLY, President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's visit to the White House last July 30 was highly-anticipated and drew its share of attention. Unfortunately, it was short-lived. Two days after the chief executives met, Former President Cory Aquino succumbed to colon cancer. For 5 days, from the time of her death to Pres. Aquino's journey to her final resting place, the beloved leader's death quickly stole media attention and the limelight away from President Arroyo.

Yet, after farewells have been bidden, the mourning crowds have dispersed, and Tita Cory was finally laid to rest, President Arroyo retrieves her thunder once more – this time, because of the controversial expensive dinners that she and her entourage reportedly rewarded themselves with, during their US trip. The infamous Page Six of the *New York Post* sparked what it called "a political firestorm" in the Philippines by reporting the \$20,000 dinner that Pres. Arroyo and her party lavishly feasted on in New York's four-star restaurant, Le Cirque.

The news report was enough to send Filipinos back home abuzz with disgust and disdain over this callous spending, especially since half of the country's population are living in an impoverished state. The government claims that the dinner was shouldered by Leyte Congressman Martin Romualdez for the Arroyos' wedding anniversary. Yet, despite this assurance, Romualdez has kept mum about the dinner deal. It would be good to note that congressmen in the Philippine government do not earn high salaries. Rep. Ro-

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mualdez should have a believable reason for doing such a magnanimous act. Otherwise, his pork barrel is next in line for a thorough investigation.

And while the \$20,000 Le Cirque dinner is still fanning flames of contempt among Filipinos, yet another infuriating report from The Washington Post surfaced. Apparently, three days before their extravagant dinner in New York, Pres. Arroyo and her cohorts "of about 65 people (including security and food tasters) had dinner at Bobby Van's Steakhouse on 15th Street in Washington after she met with President Obama. The group took over one of the restaurants private rooms and dined on lobster, steak and fine wines; at the conclusion of the meal, an unidentified woman opened a handbag stuffed with cash, counted out bills and paid the \$15,000 tab – which included a generous tip," according to the report. And of course, another Congressman, Quezon Rep. Danilo Suarez, claims to have paid for the steakhouse dinner. At least he was quick to speak up and defend the president.

At the average dollar exchange rate of \$47.50, the total amount of the dinners (\$35,000) is around P1.7 million. In a country where a family of five needs at least *P6,195 a month to eat three square meals a day, P1.7M for two dinners for a party of 65 persons is still excessive. To hear that our country's leaders are feasting on



Inquirer.net

lobsters and steaks while the rest of the impoverished population is scrimping on what little they have, nibbling on *galunggong* and suffering from malnutrition, leaves much room for contemplation. (AJP/Press)

*According to the 2007 reports by the Philippine National Statistical Coordination Board's Official Poverty Statistics

Ex-envoy to US confirms military rule plan

MANILA – At the bish-ops-businessmen's conference a few weeks ago, the possibilities of a declaration of emergency rule or an imposition of martial law were among the topics discussed.

In that regard, I am prepared to sadly confirm that our incumbent national leadership would indeed be capable of placing our democracy at great risk in pursuit of its survival.

The past week, our nation found itself deeply mourning the immeasurable loss of our beloved former President Corazon Aquino, who was responsible not only for ousting a dictator but also for restoring our democratic institutions.

As we quietly paid tribute to our one and only charismatic leader at La Salle Green Hills, I was overwhelmingly reminded that each of us has a responsibility to contribute to the defense of our democracy.

Having served as the Philippine envoy to the United States in 2001-2006, I decided that I, too, should contemplate how I could make my own contribution under the present conditions. This humble contribution, intended to guard our democracy, has been fully earned by the Filipino people under President Cory Aquino's leadership.

I believe our people are fully entitled to know this with certainty if we expect

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Albert Del Rosario

to advance the concept of a proactive citizenship and to encourage vigilance at all times in the protection of our democratic freedom.

The facts as related would also serve to provide a momentary view of that quaggy place to public officials who may in the future be asked to advance a Palace agenda that is contrary to the national interest.

It was in 2005 during the "Hello Garci" controversy that the then Speaker of the House, Jose de Venecia Jr., came to Washington. He indicated that the Palace had empowered him to ask if we could defend for them the suspension of the writ of habeas corpus.

When the privilege of the writ is suspended, a person can be arrested and detained without charges.]

Taken aback

Taken aback, I could only ask why. The Speaker responded that it was to be used against certain members of the political opposition.

As I contemplated the circumstance, the question was repeated. I replied in essence that what our people needed was good governance, and not a weakening of our democracy. I added that given our being the first republic in Asia, the scheme could result in our becoming a failed state.

With apologies, I expressed as succinctly as I could that the plan was not

defensible, and that we could not defend it.

Late that evening, I dutifully reported what had transpired to Foreign Secretary Alberto G. Romulo, who looked favorably on our having taken a clear and firm position.

Emergency rule

Several days after the Speaker's return to Manila, I received a call from him. He said he was contacting me from the Palace to advise that there had been a change of plan and that the proposal to suspend the writ of habeas corpus was no longer an option.

It was obvious to us that while the specific proposal had come under consideration, there were officials in our government who strongly opposed it.

Some weeks later, the Speaker called me once more from the Palace. He wanted to know if I could source a safe phone. My response was that there was probably no such thing in Washington.

Forceful stand vs media

He then proceeded to ask if we could defend the declaration of emergency rule. To my reactive query on why we were intending to do this, he answered that the government was preparing to take a forceful stand against the intransigent media.

I replied, without hesitation, that such a position against the Fourth Es-

tate would bring upon us the condemnation of the international community. That, I said, was also indefensible, and we could not defend it.

Subsequently, the Philippine press began to publish articles on hypothetical situations fostered by the Palace regarding threats to national security, at the same time providing emergency rule as a constitutional means to address the threats.

With this apparent propaganda, we knew with near certainty that emergency rule would be declared.

US gov't alerted

The US state department was also alerted by the press reports. When asked by them what we thought, I aired my opinion that there was an increasing probability of emergency rule being declared, that it was not good for the Filipinos and for the Philippines, and that we should discuss strategies on how the plan could be averted.

A review of the weeks prior to and during the declaration of emergency rule will show that the US government sent a procession of government officials to Manila, including Ambassador John Negroponte, who was then director of national intelligence.

The American visitors were to ostensibly share their views with our government about the lack of wisdom of such a declaration.

Emergency rule was nevertheless declared by the Palace on Feb. 24, 2006.

To justify unjustifiable

Since we could not justify what was unjustifiable, the Philippine Embassy in Washington limited itself to reporting factual occurrences in Manila, while expressing hope that the declaration would be lifted at the earliest possible time.

This, I thought, was the best course of action to at least preserve our reputation for credible representation in the United States.

On the sixth day after emergency rule was declared, Assistant Secretary Chris Hill – the US official then tasked to negotiate with North Korea in ending its nuclear program and now the new US ambassador to Iraq – visited the Palace.

By the ninth day, emergency rule had been lifted. (Inquirer.net)

(Editor's note: Albert del Rosario was conferred the Order of Sikatuna, with the rank of datu, by President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo in 2004. He received the Edsa II Heroes Award in 2001. He graduated from New York University with a degree in economics and has held positions in various companies including the Philippine Long Distance Telephone Co., Smart Communications, Metro Pacific Corp., Negros Navigation Co. and Fort Bonifacio Development Corp. He has also been involved with the Philippine Cancer Society, Management Association of the Philippines and American Chamber of Commerce.)

Growing artists

"WHAT is art? It is the response of man's creative Soul to the call of the Real." Rabindranath Tagore

Synergy made it happen. Actually, the caring teachers made it happen. Mrs. Epps, Randy and Meg Palisoc, the Fil-Am and Chinese-American founders of this school made it happen. The entire school body made it happen. They chose to create a nurturing space to grow these elementary students to their fullest potentials, including coaxing out the artists within them! And the students got their medals symbolizing work well done, after 17 judges made evaluate their work.

Synergy converted a space inside the church to be a temporary art gallery, with classical music playing in the background, a colorful bouquet of yellow daisies and trays of goodies: fruits, cheese, crackers, no frills, simple, just elegantly served in trays. A powerpoint presentation continuously showed the students working on their paintings.

Unlike Paul Cezanne, whose studio overlooked the hills of Provence, a studio built by his banker father, these children worked on art inside their cramped classrooms in Los Angeles, a not so special space dedicated for art. Unlike Cezanne who had the luxury to paint each morning, until it was time to meet his friend, Zola at Le Deux Garçons Café, these students were given limited blocks of time to finish their work. What a charmed life Paul Cezanne lived – an artist and a banker's son. These LA students didn't have the charmed life that he had.

Mind you, Synergy shares space with a church: Mondays to Fridays are for them while weekends are for the congregation. How can anyone even find a nurturing space or the privacy that they need to complete their work? The closet perhaps? How about the playground? Under the teacher's computer table?



RHIZOMES
Prosy Abarquez Delacruz, J.D.

time to

While hunched below, bent on their knees, paper on the floor, a Synergy student artist carefully paints to simulate Georgia O' Keefe, Van Gogh and Pollock's work. As she shares her story, she believes without persistence, she would not complete her project.

Another student artist describes how he took the risk of voting for his classmate. He felt he was good, but his classmate did not want to submit his work to be displayed. So, by voting for him, he thought he was helping him recognize that he, too, is a good artist. I love that these children are being trained not to be competitive, but to be supportive of each other.

Another student artist describes how water swished, splashed, and spilled on their paper. They hurriedly worked together, yes together, to contain the damage. Water spills combined with splashes of paint to simulate the work of Jackson Pollock.

Could it be that accidental mistakes become abstract paintings? Hmm, maybe, but perhaps not. Could it be that the support one gets becomes the source of her inspiration to create art? Who really knows what inspires an artist?

Take a look at this artwork – matted, not framed, but just the same, its beauty comes through! More importantly, the child's inner joy, perhaps even her self-esteem grows.

Inner joy is achieved when one connects to the Universal Source. I was talking to Nicole Arizcorreta and asked her how she felt about painting. She told me she was happy to see it displayed.

I encouraged her to paint more. I told her that if she painted regularly, she will feel more connected to the Universal Source who gives us blessings. I was not sure if she believed in God,

but as I was talking to her in English, a man translated in Spanish to her mother.

Her mother's eyes welled up. She looked fatigued from a long day's work. Yet, she was fully present, alert, and interactive. She stayed until the awards program ended.

When I asked why she was teary-eyed, she said that she felt honored that someone noticed her child's work. I reassured her that her daughter seems gifted. I shared that I liked her painting a lot. And perhaps a small investment to buy her watercolors and paper might help her child stay motivated to keep on painting.

"Look at your daughter's eyes", I pointed them out. "Her joy is from within." I am not sure how it translated into Spanish, but as I glanced at her mother's eyes, still teary, I too got affected.

I felt privileged, being part of this moment: a child happy to see her art work displayed, even fussed over with a ribbon, a mother's pride and delight with her child's performance, and the translator and myself vicariously absorbing the happiness of their human connection.

I felt a sense of gratitude towards the school's founders for insisting on educating these underprivileged children, setting their spirits free. The children of workers who assemble furniture, cook in restaurants and wash dishes. The children of workers in the bottom of the food chain, and yet being educated by Synergy as though they were children of royalty.

It struck me at that moment that this was the true meaning of having no child left behind." If only the residents of the White House or the House of Congress can witness what I am seeing and fund them with the same level of resources afforded to our military establishment.

In Holland, their country's media creates educational programs focused on families and children. Television helps students solve mathematical problems and teaches them how to

read. Students are given financial incentives by the government, ranging from \$150 to \$300, to complete high school, then college, and even after college – to learn about other cultures by traveling to different countries. What a progressive vision – focusing the country's resources to educate Dutch children.

And we are not that far off here in Los Angeles. Here in LA, we have a multi-racial community celebrating the success of Synergy's students, as well as 17 volunteer judges from different sectors: church, entertainment, non-profits, writers, and some important public figures from the arts community.

We were greeted by the warm smiles of the student council officers, who served as Synergy's ambassadors of goodwill, welcoming judges as we arrived. All 17 judges showed up, relishing the positive atmosphere of synergy, of hope, of learning, wowed by the positive energies of well behaved students.

For our judges' panel, we agreed on a criteria based on three factors: how the artwork evoked our feelings, how they simulated the originals and how they incorporated their own interpretation or innovation.

For a while, I thought I was in heaven, seeing multi-racial students, teachers, parents, guests, community and judges relishing each other's company, getting along for heaven's sake – people with different ethnicities, genders and religions. It was bliss! It was grace for the day! This is the best of Los Angeles and one only needs to make time to witness how a diverse group could get along to create joy!

This afternoon, the colors of the rainbow were brown, black, white and yellow, linking arms to form a complete circle of evolved humanity and helping each other succeed. The Universal Source would be pleased. Indeed, this is the city of angels. ■

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