

OPINION & FEATURES

Beyond poll automation

FINALLY, a special budget has been signed into law for poll automation in 2010. Not a hybrid type—automated in most parts of the country, manual in a few areas... such as Maguindanao, perhaps? The greatest fear of those who opposed hybrid elections was that manual voting would be retained in selected areas so that those not yet familiar with manipulating automated voting could still cheat the old way. The fear went both ways, with some quarters believing that it would be easier to cheat using vote counting machines.

Regardless of where one stands on poll automation, concerns about electoral fraud in 2010 persist. That fear can be useful if it increases public vigilance against cheating. Public expectations are unusually high that the general elections next year will herald long-awaited reforms. The Commission on Elections, working with electoral watchdogs and other concerned groups, should do its best not to frustrate those expectations.

The other day President Arroyo signed into law the supplemental budget for poll automation. Palace officials said she wanted to make modern elections part of her legacy. The enactment of the supplemental budget lifts the last barrier to the holding of fully automated elections. The next step is to ensure that the new system lives up to its promise of clean and orderly elections and a quick vote count.

Problems can start right at the procurement

GUEST EDITORIAL

of vote counting machines. The nation is still stuck with P1.2 billion worth of automated counting machines, all delivered and fully paid for, that are deteriorating, unused, in a rented warehouse. For 2010, the bidding and awarding of the contract for the machines must be aboveboard. The machines must then be tested for glitches and protected against hacking and tampering.

It will take more than voting machines to make elections credible. The Comelec must clean up voters' lists. It must level the playing field for all candidates by enforcing elections laws on campaign spending and premature campaigning. Law enforcement authorities must also do their part by preventing poll-related violence and harassment of voters. There are many ways of undermining the true will of the electorate. Poll automation is just one step in making the 2010 elections credible. (Philstar.com)



Photo courtesy of Philstar.com

Criminal justice, Philippine style

DEPENDING on which newspaper you read, Ping Lacson is either guilty as sin as the alleged mastermind in the liquidation of PR man Buddy Dacer and his driver, or the predictable target of criminal justice, Philippine style because of his relentless campaign against corruption in the Arroyo administration.



STREET TALK
Greg B. Macabenta

Reynaldo Berroya is either a seeker of justice or a vengeful former jailbird-turned-public official who wants to get even with Lacson.

Raul Gonzales is either acting true to stereotype as Gloria Arroyo's hatchet man, ready to swing the axe on Lacson's neck, or a do-nothing justice secretary who can finally

score on a high profile target.

Don't bet on knowing the truth anytime soon. First of all, the above scenarios are not necessarily "either-or." Despite the seeming contradictions, there could be some truth to all the premises.

Surely, Ping Lacson didn't develop his Dirty Harry reputation by being the chairman of the church choir during his stint as a police officer. Too many anecdotes portrayed him as a *berdugo*, they couldn't all have been based on the fertile imagination of Carlo Caparas or the cinematic exploits of FPJ.

But he has also been a real pain-in-the-behind

for Arroyo, her husband and her cabinet. It should be no surprise to anyone that their avenging angels are going after Lacson with every piece of evidence they can muster, whether truthful, half-truthful or fabricated.

Berroya is a former jailbird, thanks to Lacson. It is believable that he is also a seeker of justice, especially if it means dishing it out to a sworn enemy.

Raul Gonzales is, without doubt, Arroyo's hatchet man, but if he truly can convict a high profile target like Lacson, that would be a feather in his oft-tarnished cap.

In other words, it really shouldn't matter if Lacson is prosecuted for reasons of political vendetta. If he is proven guilty, that would still be an achievement for an administration that has allowed too many obvious thieves to get away.

Having said that, it should also be noted that the criminal justice system in our country operates at several levels.

There is the press release level, which comes in two versions. That of the accuser and that of the accused. In advertising, the number or frequency of commercials or ads released for a brand is referred to as its "share-of-voice." In the battle of press releases between the accuser and the accused, the applicable reference point is called "share-of-pocket." The more reportorial and editorial pockets lined, the greater the share-of-voice.

At this level, also, the parties involved all manage to sound convincing, sure of themselves, ready to submit to lie detector tests or face investigations, prepared to back up leaked information with incon-

trovertible proof and, naturally, all vowing to see that justice and the truth prevail.

To the uninitiated, this can all sound so confusing. They couldn't all be telling the truth, but which side is lying? This is where share-of-pocket and share-of-voice count, with the second being a logical consequence of the first.

This is all based on the principle that "He who buys the most media support gets to be believed," a variation on Joseph Goebbels' theory that a lie repeated often enough will be taken for the truth.

Then there is the second level where the back-room negotiations occur. Oftentimes, it's a game of blackmail and counter-blackmail.

I've got the goods on you.
Oh yeah? I've got the goods on you, too.
I'll pin you down first.

Do that and I'll expose all the skeletons in your closet.

Maybe we should talk this over.
Yeah, maybe we should.

The next day, both accuser and accused appear before the media to announce that "It was all a misunderstanding."

Peace follows—until one of the parties decides to double-cross the other. Then the excrement once more hits the fan.

And then, there's the third level, which is where the truth really is.

The trouble with the truth in our country is that it implicates too many people, not just one or a couple. Oftentimes, the accuser turns out to be as dirty as the accused, not to mention several others who

would not have been drawn into the case if those involved had been more reasonable—that is, if they had agreed to just talk things over.

This is the reason why most celebrated cases involving high ranking officials and prominent personalities are never resolved, after reams of press coverage and pompous announcements by authorities. The collateral damage is considered unacceptable.

It is often at the second level where these cases end up. The quid pro quo is what results. The accusers and the accused who are also often the blackmailers and the blackmailed agree to back off and leave each other's skeletons in their respective closets.

If this were not the case, why haven't those who claim to have the evidence in hand made their findings public? If they have the goods on Lacson, what's keeping them from ordering his arrest?

On the other hand, if Lacson is as blameless as he vigorously claims to be, why doesn't he have affidavits from the very same persons who are said to be implicating him, clearing him of any involvement?

And why did these police officers go into hiding in the first place?

Frankly, I don't think the protagonists in this shadow play really want the truth to come out. I think they would all rather agree on a *déte*. No more corruption exposes by Lacson and no more ambition to become president. No more anti-Lacson inquiries by the Arroyo government and all the grisly cases simply left to gather dust.

Such is criminal justice, Philippine style. (E-mail: gregmacabenta@hotmail.com)

One billion words for Earth

FROM 8:30 to 9:30pm on Saturday, March 28, is Earth Hour. People all over the world are urged to switch off all their lights for one hour. This is not only saving energy but also casting a Vote for Earth.

This year, Earth Hour (last Saturday of March) has been transformed into the world's first global election, a choice between Earth and global warming. For the first time in history, people of all ages, nationalities, races and backgrounds could use their light switch as their vote. Switching off the lights is a vote for Earth. Leaving them on is, well...

Voting for Earth with the use of the light switch should be easier than the 2010 automated Philippine elections. And its impact is global. Staying in the dark for an hour should be an opportunity to create activities. Before you know it the 60 minutes are over and you'd probably want to stay in the dark a little longer.

The World Wildlife Fund is urging the world to vote Earth and reach the target of one billion votes, which will be presented to world leaders at the Global Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen 2009. This meeting will influence national policies and governments to take action against global warming, which will replace the Kyoto Protocol. It is the chance for the people of the world to make their voices heard.

Earth Hour began as a small effort in Sydney in 2007, when more than two million homes and businesses switched off their lights for one hour. In 2008 this effort grew into a movement for global sustainability. Some 50 million people participated and switched off their lights. Familiar landmarks such as the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco, Rome's Colosseum, the Sydney Opera House and the Coca-Cola billboard in Times Square all stood to be counted in the darkness. We should have our own Philippine landmarks darkened. What about all those billboards from hell?

HUMAN FACE

Ma. Ceres P. Doyo

This year, 2009, Earth Hour moves to the next level. The goal: one billion people switching off their lights as part of a global vote for planet Earth. Vote Earth is a global call to action for every individual, every group, and every community. It is a call to stand up and do something for planet Earth and its future. Over 74 countries and territories have pledged their support and millions are expected to cast their vote for Earth this Saturday. The number is growing every day.

You can watch the numbers grow in the Earth Hour and Vote Earth websites. Even social networking sites in Cyberspace—Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, etc.—are participating. If you are able to navigate the Internet, or if someone could do it for you, visit www.voteearth2009.org. You could register, send your short message and even upload a photo or two of yourself and of a spot on planet Earth. My message: "Amazing Earth, Great Mother, we pledge to protect you." I uploaded a photo I took of the bright blue waters and the limestone cliffs of Coron, Palawan.

That is part of the Vote Earth campaign for "one billion words for Earth." This is using the power of words for a cause. The present state and the future of planet Earth is something people should continue to talk about and write about. Words and images are of key importance. One could do articles, blogs, messages, posters, streamers, stickers, buttons, etc. You can download "We Vote Earth" sample designs from the Internet. Lots of how-to's, too.

By the way, March 22 was World Water Day. Earth is a watery planet, that's why it is also called the Blue Planet. Viewed from outer space, Earth looks like a blue jewel. It's the water of the oceans that makes it blue.

Now, Earth, with its diverse and awesome life forms (including more

than six billion humans) that need water, is sending an SOS. There is a water crisis.

The salt and fresh water remains constant but is it available and safe for every one? We all need fresh water to drink. But the availability of clean water—for all—is a problem.

According to reports of the United Nations Environment Programme, the crisis is essentially one of poor water governance. But the real tragedy is its adverse effects on the everyday lives of people, most especially the poor. Many of them live in blighted areas and suffer from water-borne diseases as well as water disasters. The quality of water suffers from the loads of waste dumped on waterways and water sources.

Here are some alarming facts about Earth's waters:

The amount of freshwater in the world remains constant, but its uneven distribution and increasing demand create growing scarcities. At present some 40 percent of the world's population lives in areas with moderate to high water stress.

Species have been declining faster in freshwater than in any other habitat on Earth. About half the world's wetlands have been lost and more than a fifth of known freshwater species have already been driven to extinction. Over the last 30 years, the Freshwater Species Index fell by 50 percent. WWF points out that the relatively smaller decline in North America shown by the index is deceptive. Much of the loss in industrialized countries occurred before 1970.

More than one billion people lack access to a steady supply of clean, safe water, while 2.4 billion lack adequate sanitation. More than two million people die each year from associated diseases, including 6,000 children every day. The situation has been improving but, at the present rate of investment, universal access to safe drinking water cannot reasonably be anticipated before 2025 in Asia, 2040 in Latin American and the Caribbean, and 2050 in Africa.

And yes, we need water to grow food.

Every act, every word, every vote for Earth counts. Vote Earth on March 28. (Inquirer.net)



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