

OPINION & FEATURES

Mother-unfriendly

PHILIPPINE society is supposed to be matriarchal and the country, for the second time, is led by a woman. Yet the Philippines fared badly in an annual international survey on the state of mothers.

Now in its 10th year, the State of the World's Mothers 2009 Report ranked the Philippines 42nd among 75 less developed countries, four notches lower than its rank last year. The report, prepared by the US-based Save the Children Inc., classified 154 countries into three development tiers, with the Philippines falling into the middle tier together with most other Asian nations. In this tier the Philippines ranked behind Thailand, which placed 11th, China (14th), Vietnam (23rd), Mongolia (29th) and Malaysia (36th).

The Mothers' Index was based on women's health, educational, economic and political status as well as children's well-being. In the first tier of "more developed" countries, Sweden, Norway and Australia were ranked as the most mother-friendly countries in the world. In Tier 2, which included the Philippines, the best places were Cuba, Israel and Argentina. The Maldives, Cape Verde and Uganda topped the list in the last tier.

GUEST EDITORIAL

Sen. Pia Cayetano, who chairs the Senate committee on social justice, said the country would be unable to meet the Millennium Development

Goals particularly in the reduction of maternal mortality and deaths of children under five years old. She said an average of 10 to 11 mothers die daily in the country from childbirth complications.

The country's ranking in the Mothers' Index was weighed down by the fact that in 2007, skilled health personnel were present at only 60 percent of childbirths. In the same year, 28 out of every 1,000 Filipino children did not live until their fifth birthday, 28 percent of children under five were moderately or severely underweight, and only 33 percent of women used contraceptives. Those were sobering figures as Filipinos paid tribute to their mothers on their special day last Sunday. (Philstar.com)



Canceling each other out

Daly City has the most number of Filipinos in America as a percentage of population—over 30 percent. In spite of that, there has only been one Filipino-American elected to the city council all these years. Mike Guingona.



STREET TALK
Greg B. Macabenta

For many years, Pinoy candidates tried but failed to get elected, mainly because every-time someone from the community announced his intention to run for a council seat, somebody else would jump up and declare, "Why you? Why not me?" And would promptly throw his hat

in the ring. Invariably, three or four candidates from the Fil-Am community would end up running against each other and fighting over the Pinoy vote. Invariably, they would lose. Mike Guingona's victory was due to the fact that he decided to campaign outside of the Fil-Am community while wooing his voter base. He had actually participated in a pact with other Pinoy would-be councilmen who had agreed that only one of them would run. Mike lost the straw vote but decided to run anyway (shades of Fidel V. Ramos).

Daly City is not the only place in America where Filipinos have battled each other in a mad scramble for political office. It has become a joke among us that the way to prompt someone to run for an elected position is by announcing that you intend to do so.

Doesn't that remind you of the present scramble to become THE replacement of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo?

Everyone seems to believe that Arroyo is so vulnerable, he or she is convinced that toppling her anointed candidate in 2010 is equivalent to a slam dunk. That, of course, is a sure way for the administration candidate—assuming it is not Arroyo herself—to win.

Didn't anybody suspect something fishy when Malacanang's mouthpieces began making noises about supporting Gov. Ed Panlilio for president, when the latter's camp began to send out feelers concerning his presidential ambitions?

Right now, with Ping Lacson, Mar Roxas, Manny Villar, Dick Gordon, Francis Escudero, Loren Legarda, Brother Eddie Villanueva, Among Ed Panlilio, possibly Mike Velarde and heaven knows who else, gearing up to run against the administration candidate—and, in the process, slashing at each other—the Arroyo candidate doesn't have to do much sniping and scuttling. The Saviors of the Country are doing that to each other.

Each of the declared or implied "presidentiables" claims to be imbued with qualities deserving of the presidency. Some of them are, in fact, qualified for the highest position in the land. Others simply need to read up on the Peter Principle.

Of course, the United States is no different. In every presidential contest, several contenders al-

ways turn up—some of them never give up trying and others are just plain spoilers—but because the two party system prevails in the country, and a candidate from an independent party has no chance of winning, all the wannabes on both sides of the political fence submit themselves to a primary where the final selection of the party standard bearer is made.

The only candidate who managed to give the impression of a fight was Ross Perot, several elections back. Ralph Nader was nothing but a spoiler and probably caused Al Gore to lose.

At any rate, when the smoke of the primary battle clears, the losing candidates are expected to rally behind the winner, the way Hillary Clinton campaigned for Barack Obama, after losing a close fight.

Back when the two party system was still the norm in our country, the Nacionalistas and the Liberals all ended up with standard bearers, although there were those who, not being happy with prospects in their original parties, decided to jump ship. That's how we ended up with Liberal Senator Ferdinand Marcos becoming the official candidate of the Nacionalistas.

These days, with so many political parties springing up and old ones being cosmetized with new, fancy names—mostly sounding like a battle slogan—one has to have tons of money to be able to rise above the din, enjoy sufficient top-of-mind-awareness and manage to get the required percentage of votes (well below the percentage that would be considered a mandate) in order to win.

Guess who has an advantage in such a contest? It doesn't take rocket science to know that the administration candidate enjoys a tremendous edge.

Proceeding on the premise that all of the would-be presidents have the good of the country at heart and granting that they are genuinely concerned over the dregs to which our hapless people have descended, is it possible for them to consider submitting to the equivalent of a presidential primary, where the strongest and most viable candidate of them all is selected and is supported by the rest?

For them not to agree to such a primary is exactly what Arroyo and her strategists want. That almost guarantees their victory.

They should recall the story of King Solomon who, upon being approached by two women, both claiming to be the mother of an infant, decided to test them by ordering the baby cut in two.

One woman readily agreed, preferring to see the baby killed than have the other claim it. The other woman, however, told Solomon that she would rather see the baby taken by her rival than see it die.

"Then you must be the real mother," said the king.

Now is the time for the heroes and the statesmen among the opposition candidates to declare that their concern for the country is greater than their own presidential ambitions. Whoever willingly does so may be the one most deserving to be president. (gregmacabenta@hotmail.com) ■

People raring to vote in 2010

LA Union Rep. Victor Ortega is right: President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo can run for prime minister in case of a shift to the parliamentary system, as can former Presidents Fidel Ramos, Joseph Estrada and Corazon Aquino.

In fact, running for member of parliament in Pampanga may well be on Ms Arroyo's agenda, for as my Pampangueño friends point out, she has been making quick hops to her province with regularity each week, as at no other time in her career. The problem, however, is that before this happens, there has to be a shift first to the parliamentary system through Charter change.

But majority of the people do not want Cha-cha now, with only a year to go before the presidential elections, as it is being perceived as a means to enable Arroyo to prolong her stay in power. The people are raring to vote for her successor and their local officials in 2010, and I agree with many political pundits and sectoral leaders who opine that this administration would be pushing its luck too far if it forces Cha-cha now. Fortunately, House leaders see this clearly and they are now talking about Cha-cha through a constitutional convention after 2010. If after that time, the shift should come about and Arroyo decides to reenter politics, she doubtless would win in Pampanga, and there would be nothing wrong with her campaigning for the vote of her peers.

I watched on TV the first of the so-called "debates" among a handful of presidential aspirants at the Ateneo de Manila University last Tuesday, and it looked more like a getting-to-know-you session with Richard Gordon, Mar Roxas, Gilbert Teodoro, Ed Panlilio and Francis Escudero than a tough debate with hard questions. But I trust we will get to that point. I thought Gordon and Roxas were fair in their treatment of Arroyo, citing their positive experiences while working with her, and agreeing that her weakness was her failure to rein in corrupt subordinates and relatives. I thought Teodoro was a brave heart to openly espouse Arroyo's cause, given the palpable anti-administration audience recruited by opposition figures there. In the end he won plaudits from the mostly young people for his lack of self-consciousness in talking about her achievements. But Francis Escudero showed why he's rating well in the surveys: he has no platform except to rabble-rouse in his attacks on Arroyo, which appeals to the anti-Arroyo youth. He sounded "Kenkoy" several times, sending the young audience into stitches. But to the older folk he did sound hollow.

Last Tuesday, I observed that with the number of aspirants joining the presidential race, we would again have a minority president. Pundits have noted that in such situation, the winner would be unable to project a strong mandate and become vulnerable to vested interests. A solution to this was offered by Iloilo Rep. Raul Gonzalez Jr. last April 13 when he filed House Bill 6183, which calls for run-off elections between the top two

POLITICAL TIDBITS

Belinda Olivares- Cunanán

contenders within three weeks after the election. But since a run-off election would require amending the Constitution, Gonzalez proposed that it be treated

as a "surgical" constitutional amendment, to borrow constitutionalist Fr. Joaquin Bernas' memorable phrase. That means an amendment process like an ordinary piece of legislation, except it has to be passed by a three-fourths vote in each chamber instead of by a simple majority.

Another problem is that the Constitution requires every amendment be approved directly by the people in a plebiscite. Gonzalez's brother, associate dean Dennis Gonzales of the Ateneo School of Government, pointed out in a recent interview with Cecile Alvarez and me that one difference between our system and Germany's is that in the latter, constitutional amendments are acted upon only by parliament, which explains why amendments can be passed easily; if any questions arise these are brought to a specially-created constitutional court. In the last 60 years, he said, a total of 60 amendments have been approved, or about one for every year of the Bundestag's existence. Here amendments have to pass through the proverbial eye of the needle.

In a recent chat, Comelec Commissioner Rene Sarmiento was careful to point out that there has as yet been no bidding for election machines and so there is failure of bidding. What has failed is the effort of bidding companies to satisfy the specifications set forth by Comelec's special bids and awards committee, but he stressed that these companies are allowed to file motions for reconsideration and complete requirements within three days.

I asked Sarmiento why the Comelec does not follow the suggestion of election lawyer Romulo Macalintal to use the 1,991 machines the Comelec paid for in 2004 although the P1.3 billion purchase contract with Mega Pacific was invalidated by the Supreme Court. Macalintal recalled that the case was dismissed by the Office of the Ombudsman for lack of evidence, and the money paid was never returned by the supplier. Moreover, he said they were certified as reliable by Science Secretary Estrella Alabastro, and the government continues to pay P4 million annually for their storage.

Sarmiento replied that the new Poll Automation Law, RA 9369, calls for full automation from the precinct level to the transmission stage (at a total cost of P11.3 billion), whereas the Mega Pacific machines are good only for transmission of city and provincial results, i.e., partial automation.

I believe that what keeps the Comelec from touching those machines, more than anything else, is the controversy its mere mention would kick up anew. Nevertheless, I share Macalintal's concern that the automation of the 2010 elections is imperiled by the failure of all the firms to qualify so far, even as the vote counting machines continue to gather dust in the bodegas. (Inquirer.net)



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