

# OPINION & FEATURES

## A tax on learning

**R**EADING broadens horizons, regardless of the subject. But for the Bureau of Customs, only books used in schools can be classified as “educational”—a category that exempts an imported book from taxes and duties. The BOC has since revised its rules, slapping taxes on the importation of many international bestsellers and other books that the bureau believes do not fall under the categories of “educational, scientific or cultural.”

The BOC’s move, endorsed by Finance Undersecretary Espele Sales, is based on a review of Republic Act 8047 or the Book Publishing Industry Development Act of 1995. Customs and finance officials said RA 8047 exempted from taxes and duties “only books or raw materials to be used in book publishing.” Critics pointed out that slapping the taxes and import duties violated the 1950 Florence Agreement on the Importation of Educational, Scientific and Cultural Materials, to which the Philippines was a signatory in 1952. The treaty provides for the duty-free importation of books to guarantee the free flow of “educational, scientific and cultural materials” among countries. But BOC and finance officials reportedly believe that novels and other international bestsellers do not fall under any of these categories.

The new rule has reportedly led to a halt in book importations in recent months, and the absence of new

book titles at popular chains. A number of those books are geared toward young readers. With the Internet, television and Wii competing for children’s attention these days, parents count themselves lucky when their children bother to read books. Many youths who enjoy light reading such as the *Harry Potter* series and the *Twilight* vampire chronicles eventually go on to heavier subjects including non-fiction and classic literature. Book enjoyment is carried on into adulthood. Does education stop after college graduation?

Taxes and import duties are passed on to consumers by book dealers, and higher prices could discourage book reading among Filipinos with a limited budget. Duty-free importation has allowed Filipinos to enjoy books at prices that are often lower than those in the sources of origin of the imported items. The government should review whether it wants to deprive Filipinos of this source of learning and enjoyment. (*Philstar.com*)

### GUEST EDITORIAL



Photo courtesy of Philstar.com

## Two less thieves

**T**HE good news is that there seems to be a growing consciousness among our people of the need for involvement and militancy in the presidential elections in 2010.

After a disastrous Estrada presidency and with the current Arroyo nightmare, several groups of businessmen, civil society activists, media owners and political power brokers have begun to launch high profile campaigns with the stated goal of ensuring a clean and honest election.

Because the election is just a year away—assuming it is held—it is possible to sustain the mounting enthusiasm and energy until the crucial moment. The last senatorial elections, where big-spending Arroyo pets like Pechay ended up in the camote patch, proved that a militant citizenry can foil even well-funded attempts to cook the polls. “*Akomismo*,” a campaign conceived by some ad agency friends and, from reports, is being actively supported by genuinely concerned business groups, is one such effort. “*Boto mo, ipatrol mo*,” a movement apparently spearheaded by the ABS-CBN group and supported by high profile business and civil society leaders, has just been launched. I am aware of other similar



**STREET TALK**  
Greg B. Macabenta

activities being planned and may soon be mounted.

This is great. Thank heavens for an aroused citizenry.

But ensuring that the next president is chosen in an electoral process that is not Garcified or Arrorized (rhymes with terrorized) only addresses one of the many problems that beleaguer our hapless country.

One of the most obvious problems, of course, is the fact that the political opponents of Arroyo, many of whom are swine, will use these laudable efforts to help them take over the pigsty.

But the biggest problem, sadly, is ourselves. We, the People.

Unless this aspect of the problem is addressed, we may end up dealing with what comic king, Dolphy, wanted to avoid when he brushed aside suggestions that he should run for president.

“My problem is, I might win and then I won’t know what to do.”

Indeed, the problem is that, all these efforts to ensure a clean and honest presidential election may result in an honestly and cleanly elected President from Hell.

Or, just as badly, it might result in an honestly and cleanly elected reasonably competent president

who will lead a Citizenry from Purgatory.

The harsh fact is that, while everyone is clamoring for change, it is doubtful that we really know what kind of change it is that we need—or knowing, it is doubtful that we are willing to accept the trade-off to achieve that change.

The trade-off will have to come in terms of national discipline, civic responsibility, a clear understanding of right and wrong and the willingness to do what is right—even if it hurts.

Even if it means giving up certain comforts and privileges. Being willing to line up and await our turn instead of jumping the line by dropping names or greasing pockets.

Even if it means overhauling some of the most endearing qualities of being *Pinoy*—*pakikisama* and loyalty to friends and family, whether good, bad or indifferent.

Even if it means selflessness to the point of self-deprivation and sacrifice.

Are we, as a people, capable of instilling these stringent standards on ourselves? Yes we are. Can we do it? Yes, we have.

When we Filipinos are overseas, we readily—and cheerfully—adjust to the rules and standards imposed by the host societies and governments. We learn to wait in line, follow traffic rules, work hard at our places of employment, get promoted without using padrinos, live within our means, pay taxes and even stay sober during weekdays.

The reason—to be blunt about it—is that, when we break the rules abroad, we are made to pay for it. In the US, the children of the president have been cited for drunkenness. Member of Congress are routinely issued traffic tickets and,

just as routinely, thrown in jail for corruption. In the Middle East, violators get their heads chopped off.

Moving closer to home, the way Dick Gordon imposed strict traffic rules in Olongapo and in Subic proves that we can submit to discipline if there is a consistent and fair enforcement of ordinances and laws.

With due respect to the well-meaning folks behind the “*akomismo*” and “*boto mo, ipatrol mo*” movements (many of whom are skilled marketing persons), I would like to suggest that these efforts be phased, starting with a frank and merciless self-evaluation and the imposition on ourselves of the standards that we propose to impose on the country’s leaders.

When we mindlessly litter the streets and dispose of our garbage every which way, we are hardly in any position to get rid of the garbage in our political system.

When we break traffic rules, drop names, pay bribes, cheat on our corporate taxes, expect special treatment and feel entitled to a fast buck, we are hardly in a position to expect legislators and presidential family members to become exemplars of decency and discipline.

The harsh fact is that the dishonest and abusive among us are not just the politicians. If we look in the mirror, we will see who they are.

I keep being asked what can be done to minimize thievery in society. My response:

“Don’t steal. I don’t. That makes two less thieves.”

Indeed, the cure for our national ills is, “*Tayo mismo!*” (*gregmacabenta@hotmail.com*)

## Philistines

**W**HEN I travel, I normally come home with a bagful of books. These are the only luxuries I allow myself; the only reward I take for hard work.

Over time, I have accumulated a small library. Books overwhelm my other worldly possessions. They spill over my tables; compete for space on my bedside. When I have guests, I clear seats of literature to accommodate them. I keep a powerful vacuum cleaner to keep my book pile from turning into a dust pile.

My friends, amazed at the clutter, ask if I have read all of the books I collect. To that query, I quote Umberto Eco’s snarling reply: They are not all meant to be read; only to be kept there for research and to be reminded about how much there still is to know.

Eco, that writer of such thick prose, is an even more obsessive book collector than I am. He amassed tens of thousands of books around himself, most of them barely browsed.

I paid good money for my books: so, habitually, I steal hours from my sleep to read them. I do so with a bit of maniacal frenzy, jumping from one to the next, digesting a chapter here and another there.

These days, it seems, I will have to figure out a way to smuggle in my books since I habitually bring home enough of the stuff to be feasibly considered in “commercial quantity” by the gatekeepers of commerce. I am considering putting them in a box and labeling the thing “food”—as in food for thought

Some Philistine at the Bureau of Customs re-

cently decided that, notwithstanding our commitments to the Florence Convention on the duty-free movement of literature, printed material should now be taxed. That intellectually hazardous opinion has been upheld by the Department of Finance, an event that probably signals a new dark age for the country.

That bizarre inclination to tax books in defiance of our treaty commitments and our society’s best interest is, no doubt, influenced by the frantic effort to beef up public revenues. The effort is frantic because of the failure of our revenue agencies to meet their targets of late. That failure now confronts us with a yawning public sector deficit that will likely force us into a new round of borrowing.

There are many reasons why our revenue agencies are failing to meet their goals, even as we discount the adverse effects of the current global financial crisis. I will not go into these many reasons here. But surely, taxing books will do very little to cure institutional failings.

To begin with, we already have a very low per capita consumption of printed material. Taxing books will only aggravate the crisis of idiocy that threatens our community. The decision to tax books is itself a symptom of that malaise.

Make no mistake: I have always been a strong supporter of broader public revenues. I supported VAT when it was most unpopular. I suggested imposing a special levy on fossil fuels when prices

inordinately dropped a few months ago. I will support a steep increase in sin taxes on alcohol and tobacco even if doing so will burn a hole in my pocket.

But I cannot support taxing books or, for that matter, related media such as CDs, DVDs, I-pods, digital libraries and laptops. I cannot accept that proviso in the DOF ruling on the matter that unjustly empowers a minor bureaucrat at the Customs gate to decide on his feet whether the material bring brought in is “educational” or not.

My objections go beyond trite definitions of what is “educational” and what is not. It touches on a fundamental principle of what the state ought to be in society.

The state exists not only to provide order and protection to citizens. It does not exist solely to keep people employed and healthy. Beyond all those, the state ought to be a factor uplifting civilization. It must facilitate the community’s edification, not impede it.

It is the state’s responsibility to support culture and the arts. This is the reason governments support museums and subsidize orchestras. It is the reason governments are expected to support research and fund universities.

A few years ago, we will recall, one had to register with the Customs Bureau a laptop that was being brought out of the country and returned. That was to avoid being taxed for the device upon

return.

Since I frequently traveled for meetings, the laptop was an unavoidable companion on planes. The required registration was unbearable annoyance. I harassed every policy-maker I could get my hands on win relaxation of regulations on the matter. I argued that computers (which used to be classified by our Customs Bureau as “toys”) are important tolls for literacy and productivity.

Regulations on bearing laptops across borders were eventually, albeit reluctantly, relaxed. Today, one is never asked at the airport about where the laptop was procured. My understanding is that computers are now free from duties, as they should be. That is the only way we could broaden public access to the global mainstream of information and culture.

The idea that some bureaucratic minion might be empowered to make a judgment at the gate on whether a printed material is educational or not is truly outrageous. Every publication is an instrument of literacy, even if they might offend the morals of some or be consigned as trash by others.

Where we stand today, literacy is already an imperiled skill. The Philistines who want to tax books aggravate the danger facing our civility.

I will never line up in that red lane reserved for people with goods to declare before Customs officers to present the books I purchased abroad. If they persist on inspecting the literature I bring to make a judgment on their “educational” value, I will sue for invasion of privacy. (*Philstar.com*)



**FIRST PERSON**  
Alex Magno



**Main Office:**  
1150 Wilshire Boulevard  
Los Angeles, CA 90017-1904  
Tel: (213) 250-9797 • Fax: (213) 481-0854  
e-mail: info@asianjournalinc.com  
http://www.asianjournal.com

**Manila Office:**  
Suite 208, The Manila Bank Corp. Bldg.  
6772 Ayala Ave., Makati City 1226  
Tel: (632) 893-1720 • Telefax: (632) 813-8746

**New York and New Jersey:**  
5 Penn Plaza, Ste. 1932, New York, NY 10001  
Tel: (212) 655-5426 • Fax: (212) 655-9241

**Jersey City, NJ, Harborside Financial Center,**  
2500 Plaza Five, NJ 07311  
Tel: (201) 484-7249 • Fax: (201) 484-7201

**Las Vegas Sales Office:**  
3700 W. Desert Inn Road  
Las Vegas, Nevada 89102  
Tel: (702) 792-6678 • Fax: (702) 792-6879

**ROGER LAGMAY ORIEL**  
Publisher & Chairman of the Board

**CORA MACABAGDAL-ORIEL**  
President & Executive Editor

**MOMAR VISAYA**  
Editor-in-Chief

**JOSEPH PERALTA**  
Associate Editor

**SHARON ANN BATHAN**  
Features Editor

**DANTE SAMBILAY**  
Art Director

**BANDER LAW FIRM, LLP**  
Legal Counsel

### ADVERTISING AND ADVERTORIAL POLICIES

Asian Journal Publications, Inc. (“AJPI”) reserves the right to refuse to publish, in its sole and absolute discretion, any advertising and advertorial material submitted for publication by client. (“Client’s Material”)  
Submission of an advertisement or advertorial to an AJPI sales representative does not constitute a commitment by AJPI to publish a Client’s Material. AJPI has the option to correctly classify any Client’s Material and to delete objectionable words or phrases.  
Client represents and warrants that a Client’s Material does not and will not contain any language or material which is libelous, slanderous or defamatory or invades any rights of privacy or publicity; does not and will not violate or infringe upon, or give rise to any adverse claim with respect to any common law or other right whatsoever (including, without limitation, any copyright, trademark, service mark or contract right) of any person or entity, or violate any other applicable law; and is not the subject of any litigation or claim that might give rise to any litigation.  
Publication of a Client’s Material does not constitute an agreement to continue publication. Client agrees and covenants to indemnify AJPI and its officers against any and all loss, liability, damage, expenses, cost, charges, claims, actions, causes of action, recoveries, judgments, penalties, including outside attorneys’ fees (individually and collectively “Claims”) which AJPI may suffer by reason of (1) Client’s breach of any of the representations, warranties and agreements herein or (2) any Claims by any third party relating in any way to Client’s Material.  
AJPI will not be liable for failure to publish any Client’s Material as requested or for more than one incorrect insertion of a Client’s Material. In the event of an error, or omission in printing or publication of a Client’s Material, AJPI shall be limited to an adjustment for the space occupied by the error, with maximum liability being cancellation of the cost of the first incorrect advertisement or republication of the correct advertisement.  
Under no circumstances shall Asian Publications, Inc. be liable for consequential damages of any kind.

ASIAN JOURNAL PUBLICATIONS, INC. publishes the Los Angeles Asian Journal, published twice a week; the Orange County and Inland Empire Asian Journal, Northern California Asian Journal, Las Vegas Asian Journal and the New York / New Jersey Asian Journal which are published once a week and distributed to Los Angeles, Riverside, San Bernardino, Orange Counties, Northern California, Las Vegas and New York and New Jersey respectively.  
Articles published in this paper do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the publisher. Letters to the Editor are welcome. Letters must contain complete name and return address. The materials, however, are subject to editing and revisions.  
Contributions and advertising deadlines are every Mondays and Thursdays. For advertising rates and other information, please call the L.A. office at (213) 250-9797 or the Las Vegas Sales Office at (702) 792-6678 or send us an email at info@asianjournalinc.com