

OPINION & FEATURES

Priorities

EVERYONE wants to get a piece of the action when Manny Pacquiao, RP's pound-for-pound king goes into the ring with Puerto Rican Miguel Cotto on November 15.

Therefore, it's not surprising to know that Philippine House Speaker Prospero Nograles and his cohorts are going on a side trip to the WBO welterweight match after their series of meetings in Washington with Speaker Nancy Pelosi and her party of lawmakers.

EDITORIAL

Admittedly, Speaker Nograles is an avid fan of "The Pacman" and even considers himself as part of Team Pacquiao.

So what is wrong with this picture? It is the fact that Nograles promised that he would be back in time for the resumption of session on November 9.

The absence of the 21 solons (including Nograles) who are planning to watch the fight from the House session will pose a recurring problem for the remaining House leaders -- the usual lack of quorum.

And it seems that Speaker Nograles and his company are not the only ones. A multitude of House members are scattered all over the world

at the moment, mostly on vacation.

It just makes one think how some government leaders could cough up so much for travel and vacation expenses, given that the Philippines is still going through the slow process of rebuilding and rehabilitating the destruction brought about by the recent typhoons.

It's like *deja vu*, only that it's very real. The \$20,000 Le Cirque dinner in New York will continue to haunt Filipinos in their dreams, especially those who lost family members and everything they owned from the severe storms and are surviving on donated cup noodles and biscuits.

Despite the successive calamities and the continuing hardships our devastated *kababayans* face, this type of audacious behavior continues to be seen among some of RP's government leaders. Perhaps it's time for us, as voters, to give undeserving leaders the "indefinite vacation" that they need. Come election time, we should exercise our collective power to separate the wheat from the chaff. (AJPress)



Speaker Prospero Nograles (right) confers with Deputy Speaker Pablo Garcia and Rep. Iggy Arroyo and members of the majority coalition before their caucus to finalize its agenda for the last two days of the second regular session on June 2, 2009.

Congress.gov.ph photo by Gilbert Engay/ MRS-PRIB

Do they dare debate?



STREET TALK
Greg B. Macabenta

HOW concerned are Filipinos in America over the results of the 2010 presidential elections? Very.

The spontaneity and the proliferation of disaster relief fundraisers organized by community organizations across the country, to benefit the victims of the recent rash of calamities, says something about how deeply we feel for our native land and for our people.

But we have become more keenly aware of an even worse scourge that the country has been suffering from at the hands of our country's leaders. More keenly because,

after the high that we experienced at EDSA, the return to the old ways has been so obvious and devastating.

A consensus has begun to develop among us that simply helping bring the victims of the recent calamities back on their feet will not be enough. The presidential elections are an opportunity to initiate more meaningful and lasting changes in our national life. We in America would like to help initiate that change.

Unfortunately, for all of our good intentions, we really don't know enough about the would-be candidates in the coming polls. Frankly, we're all going by word-of-mouth, press releases, spin and gut feel. To a large extent, we're really no better than some folks in the Philippines who prefer certain candidates because "*mukhang mabait*" (seems like a good man) or "*makatao*" (cares for people) or "*malinis*" (clean).

For this reason, a coalition of concerned Fil-Ams, most of them based in New York, has decided to dare the candidates to agree to a series of debates, similar to the debates that are essential to every presidential contest in America.

The Filipino American Legal Defense and Education Fund (FALDEF) is an organization of mostly New York-based Fil-Am lawyers who have been providing free legal services to Pinoy in need of such services, even outside of the Big Apple. FALDEF is part of the National Federation of Filipino American Associations (NaFFAA). In fact, the legal group's chairman, JT Mallonga, was East Coast region chair of NaFFAA until recently (Roger Alama has assumed the post).

A couple of months ago, Mallonga took up with me the idea of a series of debates in America among the Philippine presidential candidates. Despite seeing it as a long shot, I endorsed the idea

as NaFFAA national chair. So has Loida Nicolas-Lewis, NaFFAA national chair emerita.

Letter have already been written and sent via speed mail to the prospective candidates, as well as to the COMELEC, and will also be hand-carried and personally delivered by officers of the Aquila Legis Foundation of the Philippines.

The letters read, in part: "Cognizant of the fact that in next year's presidential elections, the stakes are even higher and the issues more complex, with voter interest more intense than ever, voter education calls for a more expansive discussion between leading candidates for president and vice-president on the critical issues confronting the Philippines.

"A globally-televised presidential debate would provide a forum where for the first time the Filipino electorate, irrespective of geographic location, will see and hear their presidential candidates offer and defend their positions on critical issues facing our nation today and to articulate their policy options thereon. Conversely, the globally-televised presidential debates will undeniably help the Filipino electorate evaluate the relative competencies of the candidates and compare policy options and party platforms."

Why do I say that the planned debates are a long shot? First of all, the campaign period is so short—from the time the COMELEC gives the go-signal to start it—that the candidates will most likely concentrate on provincial sorties, where the harvest of votes will be more substantial, rather than spend time overseas.

But an even more obvious reason is that some of the candidates may not welcome the idea of being exposed as having very little between their ears. A debate on the problems plaguing the country and the solutions that each candidate proposes will very quickly unmask the flakes among them.

Perhaps they can get away with it in Manila, before an audience of fans and friends and in the hands of cooperative moderators. But in an environment where blunt, albeit polite, questions will be asked and motherhood responses will be sliced up and dissected, blurring and clever punch lines will not go very far.

FALDEF and NaFFAA are well aware of the obstacles. But we think that daring the candidates to agree to a debate is like testing their readiness to assume the highest position in the Philippines. They can choose to decline and the can give all kinds of reasons for doing so, but they can be sure that such a grand cop-out will be widely circulated in America and then passed on to the media and to our relatives in the Philippines—the relatives whom we have

been supporting with our billions in dollar remittances.

But that's not all. Assuming they can't find the time to travel to the US, then surely they can find the time to debate in Manila. According to Mallonga, the US organizers will welcome co-sponsoring such a debate with civic organizations in the Philippines.

Frankly, this is the kind of voter education activity that civil society and the media in Manila should organize, whether or not Fil-Ams do. Why should it take overseas Filipinos to think of something as important as subjecting to the gauntlet those who want to become leaders of our country?

For so long, Philippine media have treated presidential elections like a showbusiness extravaganza, where the size of the crowds generated at political meetings is used as the indicator of "winnability."

But that, precisely, is what ails our electoral process. Winnability, very often, has little to do with one's credentials or qualifications for the most important executive post in the land.

I'm reminded of a comment I made before the last presidential elections, when I learned that a very high profile media person was reportedly being groomed for either president or vice-president by a corporate complex known to be political king makers.

I said that if the big bosses in that corporate complex had so much faith in the executive abilities of the media person, why didn't they hire him to be chairman or president of their own group of companies? But if they didn't think the fellow was good enough to run their businesses, why insist on inflicting him on the country?

We have seen so many of these flakes and dummies take over the ship of state and run it to the rocks. We can't afford to let it happen in 2010. A series of debates among the presidential candidates is as crucial to making an intelligent choice in the Philippine elections as it has been in the US polls.

This is why, despite it being a long shot, we in NaFFAA have encouraged FALDEF to go ahead and dare the candidates to agree to the debates. At the very least, we hope to persuade them to agree to such a series on their home turf, organized by Philippine civil society and the media, if they can't find the time to come to the US.

Note that FALDEF is willing to cover the travel expenses of the candidates (although not their entourage). This is how seriously we regard this matter. Hopefully, that will send a loud message to civil society and the media in the Philippines.

Otherwise, Heaven help our poor country! We could be in for another six years of grief. (gregmacabenta@hotmail.com)

Historic window

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, which triggered People Power that toppled corrupt dictatorships, confronts today a historic window of opportunity: a surge of people's organizations bent on dismantling "unequal

Philippines stressed in 1991. "Translating that moral agenda into effective nationwide pastoral strategy is another story," adds this San Carlos Major Seminary professor.

His analysis is sketched out in a paper titled, *Limitations and Prospects of the Roman Catholic Church for the Democratization of the Filipino Polity*. Excerpts from this study:

The landless and powerless have "the single most urgent claim on the nation's conscience," the bishops asserted. They backed the agrarian reform law. Four administrations have come and gone since. But "no prophetic critique from the hierarchy" expressed solidarity with the peasants, as exemptions to favor the landed and lack of political will gutted reform.

Nor did Church leaders re-examine "historical ties with the urban and rural landed class. [There] is no collective willingness to renounce privileges this arrangement offers...

[Thus] a church for the poor has not yet become a church of the poor."

The Church harnesses institutional and human resources for clean polls. And Church leaders blast corrupt officials for beggaring the nation.

Historically, the Church's moral interventions swirl around the axis of these valid concerns. This is fixation over process. It glosses over the need to unmask "viciousness of a political structure that promotes a predatory oligarchy, a patrimonial state, and weakly institutionalized political parties."

Nor does it address how elites manipulate state apparatus to promote their class interests. "It is a serious failure not to advocate for birth of genuine political parties of the poor or parties based on policies that represent them."

The Philippine hierarchy is not as homogeneous as it is touted to be. Church "witnessing" can waffle and sow confusion.

Two issues reflect this fact. One was the clash over whether former President Joseph Estrada should be granted presidential pardon from conviction for plunder. The second dealt with "sealed envelopes" stuffed with cash laddled by the Arroyo regime "without strings" during the second impeachment.

Many spurned them, but they didn't "rock the boat" and chose to be mum. Other bishops "returned to their poor dioceses" where they used the money for the poor. Nonetheless, "the absence of institutional stance, condemning such implicit bribery by the highest public office of the nation was appalling."

Many Church leaders prefer the ossified framework of "Church-State" relations. Here, the Church morphs into a power-broker, instead of an institution with moral ascendancy. "In the Philippine experience, the poor easily becomes excluded."

Several cultural factors reinforce the atrophy. One is "dominance of and dependence on patrons." Filipinos don't see welfare policies as obligations

of the state. Another is "hegemony of family and kin." Filipino families are prone to exact "compliance and loyalty over and above common welfare." And "a culture of impunity" distorts democratization.

"A historic surge of people's organizations that seek to transform unequal power relations" is ongoing today. Distinct from the state apparatus, these groups' basic thrust is "to contest state power, individually or in concert." They offer alternative visions and concrete experiences. The "vibrant public discourse" brings to the public agenda a host of concerns, particularly those of the marginalized.

The Church's social tradition consistently valued the role of citizens and their organizations. These economic, social, cultural or political groups often "facilitate the attainment of the common good."

In 1991, the Second Plenary Council decided to form basic Christian communities, whose social commitment would "leaven the Church." As each diocese reshaped the program, BECs moved drastically from

its "prophetic framework." Many today limit themselves to spiritual concerns. Others act as "the longa manus (long arm) of the hierarchy's agenda."

The Church's chosen social location is crucial in the effectiveness of its pastoral mission. The Church ought not to miss the historic opportunity and seek, instead, a new social location in civil society.

"A Church interacting with civil society can resist the simplistic discourse of corruption or the reliability of electoral contests as main axis of its moral interventions in the political sphere." It should shift to a "Church-in-Civil Society paradigm."

The Church could get bogged down in the old quagmire. "[Then] its prospects as a credible and effective social force for the common good will run out," Cartagena cautions. "A Church that hesitates to be prophetic against power structures that prevail cannot be God's sacrament for the 'fullness of life' that Jesus came to inaugurate."

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