

# OPINION & FEATURES

## Missing pieces

**AFTER several months of delay, Cezar Mancao II finally returned to Manila last June 4. The former police senior superintendent, whose promising career in law enforcement ended in 2001 with his flight to the United States, said he was ready to testify about the brutal murders of publicist Salvador "Bubby" Dacer and his driver Emmanuel Corbito in November 2000.**

Government prosecutors expect Mancao's colleague, former police senior superintendent Glenn Dumlaog, to be extradited as well within two weeks. Together, the two former members of the Presidential Anti-Organized Crime Task Force or PAOCTF could finally provide the missing pieces in the twin murders, specifically the identities of those who directly implemented, oversaw and ordered the hit on the high-profile public relations man in the final months of the short-lived administration of Joseph Estrada.

The ousted president reiterated last June 4 that he had nothing to do with the twin murders, even as Mancao vowed to unmask two men behind the crime,

identified only as "Bigote" and "71." Since civilians arrested in connection with the case led investigators to PAOCTF members who allegedly carried out the crime, speculation has focused on the mastermind and the motive.

The PAOCTF was Estrada's elite anti-crime unit, which Panfilo Lacson headed even when he became national police chief. In the months after Estrada's ouster, Mancao and Senior Superintendent Michael Ray Aquino fled to the United States. Dumlaog followed later. An officer accused of direct involvement in the twin murders, former

senior superintendent Teofilo Viña, was shot dead by a lone gunman in Tanza, Cavite in January 2003.

All the officers were top commanders of the PAOCTF. Could they have acted on their own? Mancao has alleged that Lacson had ordered Michael Ray Aquino to execute Dacer for incurring the ire of "Bigote." Critics have lambasted the Arroyo administration for selective justice, pointing out that if Lacson had not been implicated, this case would not have been pursued with unusual zeal. But if Mancao and, later, Dumlaog, stand by their original statements and see this case through, two families at least stand to get justice. (Philstar.com)



Philstar.com photo

### GUEST EDITORIAL

## Breaking through the glass ceiling

IN America, the "glass ceiling" refers to the point considered beyond the reach of immigrants and ethnic minorities such as becoming CEO of a Fortune 500 firm. Breaking through the glass ceiling in various aspects of mainstream American life has been a continuing struggle, particularly for people of color, but modest triumphs have been won and these have led to bigger victories.

The biggest breakthrough was seen recently with the election of the first African-American president of the United States.

From those pre-war years when signs on entrances to public places read, "Absolutely no Filipinos allowed," our people have come a long way in America. Proof of this are the recipients of the annual Filipinas Magazine Achievement Awards organized by the magazine of the same name which I publish and edit. The honorees have ranged from political figures like Governor Ben Cayetano of Hawaii and Hollywood stars like Lou Diamond Phillips and Tia Carrere to military brass like Maj. Gen. Antonio Taguba and Lt. Gen. Edward Soriano and corporate tycoons like Loida Nicolas-Lewis. In the last congressional elections, Steve Austria of Ohio, son of a Filipino doctor, won a seat in the US Congress. Still beyond the grasp of Fil-Ams is a seat in the US Senate.

It is in this context that events unfolding in Europe is *déjà vu* for us in America. For the rapidly growing Pinoy population on the continent, the glass ceiling still needs to be broken through in many aspects of European life, but a hardy few have been trying.

The most remarkable of these gallant efforts has been that of Gene Alcantara, a journalist and one of the most prominent community leaders of the

Filipino-British community in London. In 1998, he ran for a seat in the Westminster Council as a member of the Labour Party. He lost by 200 votes. He ran again in the May 2005 general elections, as an official candidate for the British Parliament of the Veritas Party. Again he failed.

But Alcantara's seemingly Quixotic efforts have begun to raise awareness among the United Kingdom's large ethnic minorities of the need for representation in the face of racial discrimination and scapegoating, not to mention instances of corruption and official misconduct in the seats of power.

In the forthcoming European Parliamentary elections on June 4, Alcantara will be running once again, this time as an independent candidate for one of the 78 seats allocated to the UK.

Since 1979, the European Union has held elections for seats in the European Parliament whose decisions have a profound impact on legislative initiatives in the 27 member states of the EU.

A look at Alcantara's curriculum vitae reveals that he is no slouch. He comes more than adequately prepared to represent, not only the ethnic minorities in the UK and other EU member states but the British mainstream, as well.

Born in San Pablo, Laguna, he worked in Saudi Arabia before moving to London to pursue Russian

studies, following this up with a postgraduate diploma in East-West Trade at the University of Westminster. He then got his MBA from Oxford Brookes University after successfully presenting a thesis on UK, French and German Cultural Diplomacy. He also finished the TUC Employment Law course at the College of North East London in 2005.

Alcantara worked for the British Council for over two decades in various capacities, the last being as head of accounting services and accounts payables with 20 people under him. As a program officer of the British Council, he looked after scholars from Nepal, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Africa, and as a management consultant, he traveled widely in Asia, South America, East and Southern Africa and the Middle East. In 1999, he was assigned to Poland and operated between Warsaw and Krakow for three and a half years as assistant director and resource manager, promoting British cultural relations in Central and Southern Europe.

Aside from English, Alcantara speaks Russian and some Spanish and Polish and continues to be fluent in Tagalog. In fact, he occasionally does Tagalog news reports for ABS-CBN's Balitang Europe. He became a naturalized British citizen in 1992.

I first met Gene Alcantara when my wife and I went on the road around Europe in late 2004 to encourage the participation of European Filipinos in the 3rd Global Filipino Networking Convention that was held in Cebu in January 2005. Already well known among Filipino-Britons because of his involvement in community organizations like the Centre for Filipinos, Alcantara had become the *Pinoy* to watch after his almost successful attempt to win a seat in the Westminster council.

Alcantara accepted our invitation to speak at the Cebu convention on behalf of Filipinos in Europe, along with Switzerland-based Anny Misa-Hefti of Babayan. He delivered a paper on the growing presence of Filipinos in the United Kingdom while Hefti made a presentation on the plight of Filipina workers, mostly domestics, in Europe. Shortly after the convention, Alcantara announced his candidacy for the British Parliament.

I first learned about his current candidacy over a month ago from another *Pinoy*-Brit in London, Peps Villanueva, a colleague in my ad agency days in Manila. According to Villanueva, Alcantara has generated a lot of attention and growing support, not only among fellow Filipinos but also among other minority groups. This is because one of Alcantara's thrusts is fair treatment of illegal immigrants and a path to legalization. Exactly what ethnic minorities are trying to achieve with immigration reform in the US.

Alcantara currently works as an immigration adviser and case worker, a function regulated by the Office of the Immigration Services (OISC), and deals with various immigration issues affecting migrants in the UK and their families. He has dealt with cases involving Filipinos, Thais, Pakistanis, Indians, Turks, Africans and East Europeans.

Alcantara thought he could adequately serve the needs of his clients and the community through his immigration and journalism work, but he soon realized that he would be of greater service and impact if he was in an elected position, to give voice to the many who are not heard. It was for this reason that he decided to throw his hat into the electoral ring again. (gregmacabenta@hotmail.com)



### STREET TALK

Greg B. Macabenta

## Yes to Right to Know, No to Right of Reply

THE last time the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) checked with Congress the proposed enabling law called Freedom of Information Act (FIA) under Senate Bill 3308, it remains pending before the Senate committee on public information and mass media. According to the PCIJ, the House of Representatives had already approved its FIA version under HB 3732 early in May 2008.

More than two decades later since we have ratified our 1987 Constitution, it is only now that such an enabling law on FIA, or the "Right to Know," is being finally put in place. The proposed legislation seeks to embed in our country's body of laws the intent and spirit of Article III, Section 7 of the Philippine Constitution.

This provision states: "The right of the people to information on matters of public concern shall be recognized. Access to official records, and to documents and papers pertaining to official acts, transactions or decisions, as well as to government research data used as basis for policy development, shall be afforded the citizen, subject to limitations as maybe provided by law." The only restrictions to the exercise of this freedom are, of course, the limits imposed by libel and other related laws.

Getting official documents and records from government agencies really pose a lot of challenge to journalists worth his or her salt. It is the enterprising spirit of journalists that comes in good use. Skills and patience are needed if we don't have the "Right to Know" law yet.

There are many ways to skin the cat, so to speak. You can beg, borrow, or steal. But why do we have to commit a crime like filching or stealing documents when it is well within our "Right to Know" these things from our government?

Under SB 3308, it requires government agencies to grant requests for access to information within seven calendar days from receipt of written request. A request may be denied only when the agency can show that the information falls squarely among the limited list of exceptions like if it involves information that has national security implications.

The proposed law also calls for full disclosure of all govern-

ment transactions involving public interest. These government transactions imbued with high public interest would be subject to automatic disclosure to the public. This, as proposed in SB 3308, should include contracting foreign loans, concession agreements, contracts, treaties and other similar transactions of government agencies without the need of request or demand. Government officials or employees who wittingly refuse to grant a request without legal or valid grounds, or failure to comply with the mandatory disclosure of these State transactions would be subject to both administrative and criminal liabilities.

In the absence of clear rules we invoke an existing law that also our right to demand a response on official request we make to government officials and employees concerned. This is contained in the Code of Conduct and Ethical Standards for Public Officials (RA 6713). It states: "All public officials and employees shall, within 15 working days from receipt thereof, respond to letters, telegrams, or other means of communications sent by the public. The reply must contain the action taken on the request."

From press censorship to human rights violations, access to public records was among the priority concerns of Filipinos that were addressed by the 50 men and women who drafted the framework of our 1987 Constitution. Last Tuesday night, the largely pro-administration House of Representatives out-voted the small group of minority congressmen to push through with the holding of a Constituent Assembly (Con-Ass) to amend our Constitution.

If the administration timetable should be followed according to the plans obviously laid out all the way from Malacañang Palace, the much-coveted Charter change (Cha-cha) initiative would finally take place this year. This is when the 14th Congress convenes into Con-Ass during its third and last regular sessions in July. That is, if the Senate fails to block their House

colleagues from proceeding without their participation.

The Philippine Constitution, the bedrock of our country's democracy, came into being exactly a year after former President Corazon C. Aquino took over after the end of the EDSA People Power Revolution in February 1986. From then on, we have thus experienced and enjoyed fully the freedoms that were deprived us during the 20-year dictatorship of the deposed late President Ferdinand Marcos.

In fact, the Philippines pride itself with the distinction of having the freest press in this part of the world. Much of the press freedom that we in Philippine media enjoy is based on free access to information and public records.

While the Senate has yet to act on the proposed "Right to Know" bill, it had been too quick instead in its legislative action in approving earlier this year the controversial Right of Reply bill. The proposed bill is not even included in the common legislative agenda of both chambers of Congress, nor was it certified as priority bill by the Arroyo administration.

The Right of Reply bill was approved unanimously at the Senate. It was pushed by its principal author, Senate minority leader Aquilino Pimentel Jr. It was a big letdown for many Filipino journalists who hold in high esteem Pimentel when he ironically led this move in Congress to impose prior restraint in the free exercise of press freedom in our country. After all, Pimentel is regarded as one of the many admirable leaders who bravely fought the tyrannical Marcosian structure during those dark days of dictatorship.

The House of Representatives led by Speaker Prospero Nograles had no choice but to act on this proposed measure thrown on their lap by the Senators. Fortunately, the House adjourned on Wednesday without acting on the House counterpart bill authored by Bacolod Rep. Monico Puentevella.

However, this does not mean the threat to our press freedom is over. Like the Con-Ass Resolution that was killed, then subsequently resurrected, this Right of Reply bill may yet "come back to life" when Congress resumes sessions later. Junk the Right of Reply bill and pass into law instead the Right to Know. (Philstar.com)

### COMMONSENSE

Marichu A. Villanueva



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 • Fax: (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

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

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

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