

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*)



Privacy

TWICE over the past few weeks, a broadcaster from the giant network ABS-CBN was involved in a high-profile controversy. The height of that profile was defined principally by the network's own intensive coverage of the two events.

In both instances, the journalists of the giant network circled the wagons around their beleaguered colleagues. The broadcasters' versions were highlighted. The network's treatment of the news suggested the innocence of their colleagues even before investigators or, in the second, the courts had the opportunity to establish that fact.

One cannot fault, I suppose, the journalists of this network from rallying around their colleagues during a moment of challenge. They saw themselves as a family, and tended to be protective of their "ka-pamilya."

But what is disturbing is that, in both instances, the reporting emanating from this network suggested that the difficulties confronting their colleagues were due to "political harassment"—or at least some form of vendetta against the network for the sometimes strident tone of their coverage. This last characteristic of the network's news coverage should be avoidable. The quality of professional journalists housed by this network should make us expect something better than indulgence in conspiracy theories or, worse, a severe case of persecution complex.

The tragic death, a few weeks ago, of Ted Failon's wife threatened to deteriorate early on into a public melodrama. Rumors were rife; they were unhealthy. Most likely, they were unfounded and unkind.

Police investigators were under intense pressure to immediately resolve the cause of death. They were upset that the scene of the apparent suicide was tampered with. They were exasperated that the people they wanted to question appeared reluctant to submit to their hospitality. And they were more than a bit clumsy, dragging househelp and relatives in for questioning and charging the uncooperative with obstruction of justice.

Faced with a total public relations disaster, investigation of the incident was turned over to the NBI. The death was finally ruled a suicide. That was that.

But all through this sad episode, Failon and his colleagues in the network began suggesting that all the clumsiness on the part of the police in the first hours of the investigation was inspired by revenge. Worse, there was even a suggestion the high-handed treatment of the grieving relatives was inspired by a conspiracy directed by an influential person.

That, I thought, was uncalled for. It added a political tinge to a tragic private affair. But I was ready to charge it to the emotions of the moment and avoided touching on it in this space.

Until the other day, that is, when veteran journalist Cheche Lazaro went to court to post a P12,500 bail. This was in response to an arrest warrant issued by a court on an illegal wiretapping case filed, in her private capacity, by GSIS vice-



FIRST PERSON
Alex Magno

president for communications Ella Valencerina.

Valencerina says she sued at her own instance. Her complaint, basically, revolved around an incident where a phone conversation with Lazaro was taped and then subsequently aired. Whether a violation of the Anti-wiretapping Law happened in this instance is, obviously, for the court to decide. The fact that the fiscal who looked into the complaint decided this was a case worth filing suggests of Valencerina's action is not entirely without legal merit.

I can empathize with Valencerina's grief.

Once, my mobile phone rang with an unregistered number. When I took the call, I found myself on the air with two insistent female lawyers who happen to be hosting a television program. Without the courtesy of a forewarning, they began asking me questions about that controversial Venable contract. I told them I hadn't seen the contract and had no basis for commenting on it.

Disappointed with my reply, and probably hoping I could add to their agitation about it, they began taking me to task for not knowing about the contract. I told them it was not in my usual business to do so. They wanted me to do a dissertation on it anyway, without bothering to inquire if I was in the toilet or driving a vehicle at the moment. Annoyed, I cut the conversation off, telling them this was a faux issue.

That unwelcome intrusion into my private peace became even more so the next day when they beat me up in blogs for being dismissive of the issue. Since then, I have avoided taking calls from unregistered numbers. In this age of phone patches, simply taking a call could land you in a broadcast.

The mass media could be intrusive. It could so easily break into anyone's privacy and brazenly trample on rights to privacy. There needs to be a finer consensus in the journalistic community over the conduct of interviews and the use of phone conversations, outside the formal setting of an interview, for airing.

On this concern, there is public merit in hearing out the arguments in the case filed against Cheche. Ordinary citizens, not only journalists, have rights too. Over a decade ago, US broadcaster Connie Chung was fired by her network for airing off-the-record comments made by Newt Gingrich's mother. The comments were unfavorable to then First Lady Hillary Clinton. It was Mrs. Gingrich, not Hillary, who was the victim here.

Again, I thought ABS-CBN's treatment of the Cheche bail filing was wobbly. The scene at the court was staged, with public school teachers holding placards in the background. The network's broadcasters cried harassment and (wrongly) suggested the GSIS chief, who had a run in with the owners of the station, inspired the case.

Cheche is a friend and a journalist I profoundly respect. She should have discouraged her network from transforming this case into a heavily editorialized event. (*Philstar.com*)

Run-off in 2010 presidential election proposed

EARLIER I wrote that if Manny Pacquiao wanted to run for governor or representative of Sarangani Province, that would seem all right inasmuch as he has a fervent desire to serve his countrymen. I spoke too soon. Like my media colleagues and the thinking public, I was appalled by the irresponsible way the champ disregarded the Department of Health's exhortation for him to wait a few more days in Los Angeles, which has been placed on the watch list for swine flu. The incubation period for the flu virus takes a full week. I can understand his argument that it was tougher to wait in LA, but what's unforgivable was the way he greeted the welcoming crowds at the Ninoy Aquino International Airport (NAIA), led by his children, with hugs and kisses and then motor-ing with his party to the packed Quiapo church, the Mall of Asia and a hotel afterwards—when the most sensible thing to do was to leave the airport quickly and stay at home.

It seems Pacquiao's head has swelled with all the adulation, especially his inclusion among the 100 most influential people by *Time magazine*. But the bigger blame lies with his advisers, led by Environment Secretary Lito Atienza. Instead of prodding him to be the true champion of the people's welfare by minding their health, his advisers told him to ignore the admonition of the DOH and the World Health Organization and defy the Palace and insist that he's very healthy. Pacquiao flunked this public service test, while Atienza et al. failed to project true wisdom.

With the Comelec's deadline for registration of national candidates set for November, the political tempest has begun to boil and political analysts like Tony Gatmaitan have already counted 14 candidates for the presidency. Among them, I note Noli de Castro, Manny Villar, Joseph Estrada, Mar Roxas, Richard Gordon, Chiz Escudero, Loren Legarda, Gilbert Teodoro, Bayani Fernando and it seems, judging from his expensive ads, Pagcor's Ephraim Genuino. There are speculations that even Manny Pangilinan is running, though he has denied this. Some people think Go Negosyo's Joey Concepcion is testing the water. Ang Kapatiran Party has launched a search for relatively unknown local politicians with proven track records, who could be projected for national roles. One of them is Mayor Rustico Balderian of Tabon-Tabon, Leyte, a successful US-based doctor who returned to his hometown, only to realize how sorely lacking it is in facilities to educate his poorer townmates. With his own money, Balderian put up a nursing school which became so successful (95 percent passing rate in the board) that students from bigger towns and cities began flocking there. Then he put up a hospital for the school, and later a computer school. Soon he realized that in order to transform his town more effectively he should run for mayor.

Interestingly, there seems to be as many political movements being launched as there are candidates. Among them are Gordon's Bagumbayan, Ako Mismo which is suspected to be the support base of MVP,

POLITICAL TIDBITS

Belinda Olivares-Cunanan

and recently the ChangePolitics Movement dominated by anti-administration people, which aims to reduce vote-buying but which I can foresee eventually pushing for an

opposition candidate.

Camarines Sur Rep. Luis Villafuerte of the Kabalikat ng Malayang Pilipino (Kampi) party was recently quoted as opining that the 2010 race will be a *labanan ng mga mahihina* (battle of the weak) where the candidate with the political machinery wins. No doubt it will be a battle of coalitions and alliances, and here the touted merger of Lakas and Kampi, both under the President's wings, is thought to have the advantage over groups seeking resuscitation such as the Nacionalista Party, Liberal Party and Nationalist People's Coalition. But though presidential political adviser Gabby Claudio has been predicting the merger, when this will ever happen is anyone's guess. Former President Joseph Estrada has threatened to run if the opposition doesn't unite behind one candidate, but no matter how many coalitions are formed, it's clear there will be five or six candidates running.

Having many candidates raises the possibility of a minority winner again, at a time when a new president needs a clear and strong mandate to institute badly needed reforms because of the global economic crisis. This has given rise to the idea of a run-off election, similar to the system in some European countries (such as France, where Nicolas Sarkozy won in 2007 in a run-off against socialist candidate Segolene Royal, after they got the two highest number of votes in a field of four candidates). Iloilo Rep. Raul Gonzalez Jr. recently filed HB 6183, titled *Run-Off Election for President*, on the argument that a minority-elected president is at a great disadvantage, because he has to forge alliances with various political groups and is thus more susceptible to the influence of certain vested interests as he tries to solidify his hold on power and govern more effectively.

Gonzalez pointed out that all the post-EDSA presidents were minority presidents, with Fidel Ramos garnering only 23 percent of the votes in the 1992 elections and Joseph Estrada, the most popular post-EDSA candidate to run in a regular election, bagging only 40 percent. By contrast, asserts Gonzalez, all except one of our pre-EDSA presidents were elected by a majority vote. The exception was President Carlos P. Garcia who won a mere 41 percent of the votes in 1957. The two presidents who had the biggest margins of victory were Ramon Magsaysay in 1953 who got 69 percent of the votes, and Manuel Quezon who bagged 68 percent in 1935. The clear majority won by our pre-EDSA presidents may be one reason why their terms were marked by relative political stability. The exception was that of Ferdinand Marcos who, while having garnered 55 percent of votes over President Diosdado Macapagal, ran into enormous turbulence because of his declaration of martial law and his refusal to give up power. (*Inquirer.net*)



Main Office:
1150 Wilshire Boulevard
Los Angeles, CA 90017-1904
Tel: (213) 250-9797 • Fax: (213) 481-0854
e-mail: info@asianjournal.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 10119
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
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