

OPINION & FEATURES

A moment to exhale

WHILE pundits are busy pummeling President Obama with criticisms and shaking their heads in dismay over his actions on Guantanamo, General Motors, the health care industry and Iran's civil unrest, the President makes himself even more vulnerable to flagellation by admitting a nasty habit—smoking.

Pres. Obama ruefully admitted his fight with the big C (cigarettes, that is) but redeemed himself by signing one of the toughest laws ever formulated in American history—the anti-smoking law that seeks to keep teenagers off the habit.

After all, the President did

promise his wife, Michelle that he would quit “huffing and puffing” if she allowed him to run the presidential race. A smoking candidate would just simply run out of breath in a neck-and-neck battle for the finish line.

She proudly tells 60 Minutes how she has outed him from the habit cause there was simply no room in the White House for a president with a constant cloud of smoke.

However, the President has vaguely acknowledged moments when he “fell off the wagon.”

EDITORIAL

“Almost 90 percent of people who smoke began at 18 or younger,” he said. And in his youth, he was just one of many who fell prey to the vultures of the tobacco industry. “I know I was one of these teenagers. And so I know how difficult it can be to break this habit when it's been with you for a long time.”

But whether Pres. Obama sneaks a smoke now and then is not the issue at this point. It is a weakness that he sheepishly admits for a good cause. And perhaps, his bold confession of an achilles heel would be his key motivation towards his own personal change. (AJPress)



Pres. Barack Obama

AP photo

Has Comelec solved all the problems?

THE COMMISSION on Elections had awarded the poll automation to Smartmatic for more than P7 billion—and an escalation clause. With that, it is expected that the voting and counting of votes next year would be quick and cheat-proof.

I want to be as optimistic as the Comelec, but the facts do not encourage optimism.

With automation we expect the counting to be as quick as in the United States where the winner is known even before the people in the West Coast vote. But there is a difference in the elections in the United States and the Philippines.

In the United States, the elections for national and local officials are separate; in our elections next year, national and local elections would be synchronized. In the United States, there are only two parties; a vote for the party's presidential candidate is a vote for his vice presidential teammate. In the Philippines, we have a multi-party system, which means there will be candidates not only from two parties but from many, which means, further, that there would be many candidates to choose from. It also means that the vice president may come from a party different from that of the president, as had happened in the past.

Aside from the presidential and vice presidential candidates, there would be at least 24 senatorial candidates (possibly much more), hundreds of congressional candidates, thousands of candidates for governor and provincial board members and thousands more candidates for

mayor and councilors, plus 160 more party-list candidates.

In the ballots to be counted by the automated counting machines, the voter will not write the names of his choices as in the old ballot but will shade the squares opposite the names of his candidates. The machine can read only the dark squares, but not the voter's handwriting.

The Comelec will therefore have to print all the names of the accredited candidates in each ballot. Easily, there can be 300 names on each ballot. The ballot can be from two to three feet long. The bond paper tested in the sample Smartmatic counting machine was only half that long and it took a number of seconds for the machine to read that. In the actual counting, therefore, the time needed to read each ballot can easily be double that. Multiply that time with the number of ballots that each machine would count and you would have an estimate of how long it would take to count all the ballots.

But that's not the longest part of the process. Just going through the 300 names or so on the ballot would take at least five minutes, more than that in shading the squares for each candidate.

Which means that each voter would need at least 15 minutes (maybe much more than that) to finish. That would create backlogs at the voting precincts; the queues would be blocks long. Many voters would be turned off by the long lines and

go home; most of them would not return. Thus, many voters would not be able to vote.

The candidates who can deliver their captive voters to the precincts early in the morning would have the advantage. These voters would be under instructions to slow down the voting process to irk the latecomers so they would be discouraged from voting. Since the smart candidates would have his voters in place first, the latecomers would necessarily be those for his rivals. If they fail to vote, then there would be fewer votes for their rivals. The cheating would no longer be in the counting but in the voting. There would still be vote-buying.

That is on the voting day itself.

Then there is the printing and delivery of the ballots.

Each province, city or each congressional district would probably have its own ballot, otherwise each ballot would be a meter long. Therefore, the National Printing Office would have to print—on special thermal paper—hundreds of different ballots. There are more than 40 million voters; the NPO will have to print 44 million ballots, including a 10 percent reserve. Will the NPO be able to print all of them? If not, it would have to subcontract the job to outside printers. Isn't that a risk? Unscrupulous printers can overprint ballots and sell them to candidates whose workers can then shade them in advance for counting later.

Then there is the delivery. Thermal paper must

not be exposed to bright light, otherwise it would not register anything, just like fax machine paper. Delivery to remote areas necessarily would entail long trips, with the bundles being loaded and unloaded several times. Sometimes, exposure to bright light cannot be avoided. At times, they will have to be transported by boats and they may be wet. Also May, election month, is a rainy month. Won't the ballots be affected by wetness or dampness? We don't know yet. I hope not.

Then there is the risk that the ballots may be crumpled or wrinkled. The machine wants the ballot to be clean and smooth, otherwise it may not be able to read it. Sometimes, you cannot avoid that in long trips or rough handling, especially to remote areas where transportation is primitive. Hopefully, there would be enough reserve ballots to take care of these contingencies.

But the biggest contingency would be the lack of time in counting the ballots. The demonstration conducted by the winning bidder where a bond paper was inserted into the voting machine does not approximate what the true situation would be. I do not remember any time-and-motion study conducted to find out how many thousands of hours it would take to count 40 million ballots.

I hope Comelec and Smartmatic are thinking of all these problems.

What would happen if, God forbid, there is a failure of elections? Would GMA and her administration be a holdover government? God forbid! (Inquirer.net)

AS I SEE IT

Neal Cruz

Preparing for 2010



SKETCHES
Ana Marie Pamintuan

WHETHER or not President Arroyo plans to run for a congressional seat next year, it's a safe bet that her post-June 2010 plans will include two objectives: avoiding conviction for any crime, and keeping her family's wealth.

Speaker Prospero Nograles will continue to humor two evil swine by going through the motions of pushing for Charter change in the final session of the 14th Congress. Senators now worry that Nograles will try to convene a constituent assembly at the joint opening of the third session next month at the House of Representatives. If senators boycott the session or walk out, there are fears that pro-administration Sen. Lito Lapid, who chairs the committee on silence, may stay on as the token Senate representative.

But it's also a safe bet that regardless of how far Nograles is able to take Charter change, the general elections will push through as scheduled in May 2010.

So every presidential aspirant who does not belong to the administration party should by now be focusing on two things. First, the aspirant must beat the administration candidate. This race is no sporting event; in 2010, winning is everything. Every aspirant must realize that he or she will be pitted against the candidate of an administration that is determined to obtain victory at all costs.

Second, serious presidential aspirants must get competent individuals who can put together a case or cases that will show the nation and the world that crime does not pay in this country.

If the crooks in this administration are allowed to get away with plunder and enjoy ill-gotten wealth, just as the crooks of the Marcos regime continue to do, we will never see the end of large-scale corruption. No amendment or revision of the Constitution, no shift in the system of government will change the crooked way of doing business in this country.

It's not enough to hurl accusations of corruption. Proof must be presented, and not just testimonies of often unreliable witnesses. Documents must be obtained and a paper trail presented. This

task should be easier than during the post-Marcos years, given the increasingly tight international laws against money laundering and racketeering. Countries and financial institutions that refuse to cooperate face sanctions.

Lawyers must study the new United Nations treaty against corruption, to which the Philippines is a signatory. The treaty reduces the number of safe havens for public officials fleeing prosecution back home and wanting to enjoy the fruits of corruption in their retirement.

Plunderers and other crooks can accumulate piles of money the size of the Pyramids, but they cannot stash all that cash under their mattress. They need special banking services, such as those in Dubai or Colombia, to launder their money. They can put their money in prime real estate, in countries where foreigners are allowed to own land.

The latest buzz in the banking community is about an alleged P160-million commission paid recently to a swine. If laws against money laundering are properly implemented, that payoff could be traced.

The world is growing smaller for gangsters, terrorists and the corrupt.

But criminal charges must stand in court and must lead to the conviction of those accused of plundering national coffers. Solid proof will insulate whoever becomes the next president from accusations of political persecution.

Successful prosecution of the corrupt takes time and painstaking work that can require coordination with foreign governments and banking authorities.

Those working on these cases need patience, persistence, and courage against potential threats to personal safety.

They will also need sufficient funds. The biggest crooks also have enormous resources to hire the most expensive lawyers around the world. Those lawyers will block efforts to recover their clients' money, every step of the way.

The nation has failed to convict any of the heirs of Ferdinand Marcos for any crime. But new banking rules and laws against money laundering allowed the government to secure the conviction of former President Joseph Estrada.

Even then, it took government prosecutors six years to convict Erap for plunder. Former ombudsman Simeon Marcelo came close to a nervous breakdown.

It took less than a minute for President Arroyo to sign Erap's pardon, thereby saving him from serving even a minute at the National Penitentiary, and restoring his right to vote.

When we lose the guts to punish crooks, what happens? Imelda Marcos is claiming to be broke while enjoying her vast wealth, and warning that there is a special place in hell for those who oppress widows.

For his part, the unrepentant Erap now says that if he can vote, he can be voted upon—so he wants a second stab at the presidency. Whether or not the pardon restored his right to run for public office will have to be settled one day soon by the Supreme Court.

The next president will have to be more resolute in fighting top-level corruption. Pardon is fine, but only after punishment and rehabilitation.

The best protection for President Arroyo after 2010 is to secure the victory of her handpicked successor.

Her administration is expected to pour government resources into working for the victory of its standard bearer, if not all its candidates.

Rather than be distracted by speculation on the President's political plans for 2010, presidential aspirants should focus on ensuring the defeat of the administration standard bearer.

Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo has a single-minded focus on survival. Her enemies, on the other hand, are unable to unite behind either a common presidential candidate or a common purpose.

This must change soon or else the next chief executive will be the one “anointed” by President Arroyo.

Apart from preparing in earnest to win in 2010, presidential aspirants must by now start the spadework to send crooks to prison. This is the best way to discourage a repeat of lying, cheating and large-scale stealing.

While working for victory in 2010, presidential aspirants must also remember the admonition: think of future generations, not just the elections. (Philstar.com)



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