

OPINION & FEATURES

Horror Roll

THE Arroyos seem to be on a roll these days -- in the hall of shame, that is.

First were the lavish dinners in Le Cirque in New York and Bobby Van's Steakhouse in Washington, DC which created quite a stir among their detractors, especially since the cost of dinners could've fed 180,000 hungry and impoverished Filipinos.

Then, there was the preposterous plan of (SALN) for the last two years. In their SALNs, it was noted that Mikey and brother Camarines Sur Rep. Dato Arroyo acquired properties in the United States, as well as local business interests, after winning seats in Congress. According to Vera Files, "Mikey did declare a residential house in the United States in his SALN for 2005 and 2006, during his first term as representative of Pampanga's second district. But he did not report the location of his US property as required by filing guidelines."

EDITORIAL

And of course, who could forget the \$329M NBN-ZTE scam that has haunted the First Couple since 2006? Last week, The Office of the Ombudsman has cleared the Arroyos from the scam but has left former elections chief Benjamin Abalos and Social Security System president Romulo Neri with blood on their hands.

According to the 144-page decision on the NBN-ZTE case, dated August 27, 2009: "The panel has not been presented with convincing and solid evidence directly or indirectly linking respondent Jose Miguel T. Arroyo in the project."

And yet, even after this mysterious absolution, another anomaly surfaces—this time involving Pampanga Rep. Mikey Arroyo, the eldest among the three children of Pres. Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and First Gentleman Mike Arroyo.

According to Vera Files, Mikey failed to declare his \$1.32M beachfront property in Foster City, San Mateo County in California in his Statement of Assets, Liabilities and Net worth

to Vera Files, "Mikey did declare a residential house in the United States in his SALN for 2005 and 2006, during his first term as representative of Pampanga's second district. But he did not report the location of his US property as required by filing guidelines."

Mikey has vehemently refuted reports of the irregularities, "calling them malicious and a waste of his time." He maintained that his family is financially capable of acquiring such properties.

"I have always been transparent with my SALN ever since I entered public office. I have declared everything I own there. It is self explanatory," he said in a statement.

"With regards to the San Francisco Bay house, it is registered under beach Way Park LLC in which I am a shareholder and which I declared in my SALN. And this fact was even attested to by the writer or the writers of the story," Mikey further said.

"The three Arroyos in Congress—Mikey, his



File photo of the first couple taken during a golf game at the Shenzhen Golf Club in Shenzhen, China on November 2, 2006 followed by lunch with ZTE officials at the ZTE headquarters. Inquirer.net file photo

brother Diosdado "Dato" Arroyo of Camarines Sur, and his uncle Ignacio "Iggy" Arroyo of Negros Oriental—are among the 30 richest House members, according to their 2008 SALN," Vera Files also reported.

And the apple does not fall far from the tree. Weeks ago, Pres. Arroyo had to justify the more than significant increase of her SALN—from P66.8 million in 2001 to P143.54 million in 2008.

Eluding accusations of graft and corruption seems to have become a common fare for the Arroyos. The successive exposés of their questionable wealth leaves so much room for doubt. And while they are still able to dodge these allegations and keep their riches intact, thanks to the predilection of their strategic allies in the government, they are left wanting on what's most invaluable—the Filipino people's trust and confidence. (AJP/Press)

Preserving Baguio's natural beauty

The City of Baguio is made alive with festivities as the 100th Charter Day of its founding is celebrated. With the theme "Fostering a Culture of Caring," the event will be highlighted with a grand parade that is touted to be "The Parade of the Century" in the city made famous also by its Panagbenga festival (parade of flowers).

Many happy memories come to my mind when I remember driving on the zigzag roads, the cool, clean breeze, the fresh smell of tall pine trees, foggy nights and early mornings, colorful flowers of many kinds that never seem to wilt, in this place called Baguio City. Few people know this beautiful city was once swamp land, hence the soil was good ground for planting all sorts of crops, fruit bearing plants and trees. To date, Baguio fruits and vegetables are more fresh and luscious than those grown in other regions.



ROSES & THORNS
Alejandro R. Roces

The Spaniards, not the Americans, were the first to discover this place, then dominated by a large village called kafagway. It was then inhabited by the Ibaloi and Kankaney tribes. The Spanish colonized the place and they covered its rich gold deposits, but did not realize soon enough its urban potentials. The name of "Baguio" as we know it, comes from a Spanish word for *baguiw* (pronounced *bagyu*, *bagyew*, *bagiw*),

an Inibaloi word for "moss" (submerged slimy water-plant with floating leaves). I used to wonder why the name Baguio took after the name of the local word for storm or typhoon. We know that, rather than storms, there are more earthquakes that visit the place. Historically, the correct written spelling of the name with an accent on the letter "i" to produce the original sound of *-iw*, was prescribed by the Dominican religious. Through the years, however, careless writers, who have no appreciation or knowledge of preserving language or etymology, inadvertently replaced the meaning of the word because of the wrong way the word came to be spelled out.

When the American colonists came, they could not stand the sweltering heat in the center of Manila then, so in June 1900, they sent a group led by Dean Worcester, a member of William Howard Taft's Commission, to explore farther north and find a cooler place where hotter summers could be spent. Their efforts were rewarded when they chanced upon this hilly place covered with pine trees then inhabited by a group of about 40 Igorots and Ilocanos. The rest is history. The wilderness was transformed into a picturesque city by Daniel F. Burnham, later epitomized in America as the "Father of the City Beautiful" Movement, for transforming many places into aesthetically beautiful urban dwellings. Burnham designed the famous Burnham Park, what used to be a natural park gone dry and commercial, as well as the City of Manila under the American regime. Americans de-

clared Baguio the Summer Capital of the Philippines and The Mansion, which used to be the residence of the American governor-general, is now the Philippine President's vacation place. Baguio Country Club was built 5 years later in 1905. The club remains to be my favorite vacation place to date.

After years of recovering from a devastating earthquake in 1990, Baguio is now a bustling commercial city, but much less the Summer Capital that it used to be, that was originally designed for no more than 25,000 people. Now the population runs to almost 300,000 and expected to grow causing the lack of water. There are about 23,000 cars that ply its small highways daily causing smog, covering the clean smell of fog. There are too many people, lately the coming of too many Koreans, too many houses that dot the hills once covered with pine trees. I think the local government should plant more trees to replace the millions that have been lost to development and put more restrictions on garbage and pollution to maintain the cleanliness of the city. Plans of expanding the city's parameter should be done as carefully as possible and with utmost regard for the environment.

As the pleasant cool atmosphere beckons to more and more people, we hope Baguio's natural beauty will not be lost to too much urban clutter and garbage, the pristine wilderness totally lost to buildings and noise. We should call on everyone to keep it green and clean. (Philstar.com)

Judgment day

I WROTE this in February last year after Romulo Neri called Arroyo evil and promptly forgot about it. Or said he didn't recall ever saying it:

"Someone remarked to me that Neri was just in survival mode in contrast to Lozada who was in heroic mode, but I wonder if Neri is really showing excellent survival instincts. And I do not mean that either in the context in which Lozada uses "survival," which is not just the survival of the body but the survival of the soul, not just the survival of physical life but of spiritual life. I mean that simply in the primitive, instinctive, sense of self-preservation. You have to ask: Does Neri really think he can survive Arroyo after calling her evil?"

"He may of course deceive the public about it. He may of course be coy to the public about it. He may of course tell the world he can't remember anything about it. But do you think for one second he can deceive GMA about it, that he can be coy to GMA about it, that he can convince GMA he can't remember ever saying she was evil? Other allies have been punished more for less. Look at Jose de Venecia. In Neri's case, heroic mode is clearly also survival mode: Be a hero or perish. But one has to ask the question: Is he really bright?"

"I'll be the judge of that" was how he replied some months ago after being asked if it didn't bother him that he was taking the cowardly, and unprincipled, way out. I said then, and I say now: No, you won't. History will be the judge of that, and it will judge you harshly."

As it turns out, even history may have to wait.

The Ombudsman has gotten there first. Though since the de- of the Office Ombudsman in Malacañang, has gotten there has been the it, and she has Neri harshly.

You don't whether to or cry. On one you can't help the situation. Just look at our front-page pictures last Saturday of the First Couple enjoying the lush greens of Shenzhen Golf Club in-between negotiating the ZTE deal and the tearful face of Romulo Neri asking "Why me?" You can't help, even with the aid of charity, Christian or otherwise, but laugh your head off at the fate that has befallen Neri. Heaven's humor or wit can be savage sometimes.

It's the picture of the pawn being sacrificed to save the queen. But one the pawn richly deserved. Neri of course got to be in that boat for refusing to answer three simple questions. Those questions were: (1) Did the President have any interest in the NBN project? (2) Did the President order him to prioritize the NBN? and, (3) Did the President order the continuance of the project despite his allegations of bribery? Questions whose answers were obvious. Although Neri could always have said truthfully, "No, the President did not do it.

GMA is not the president."

He refused to answer on the ground that his boss enjoyed executive privilege. Which the Supreme Court promptly upheld, despite the violent objections of its chief, Reynato Puno. Now Neri knows the full meaning of the privilege he claims his boss to have. Arroyo doesn't just have the executive privilege to not answer to the people, she has the executive privilege to let others take the rap. Others who may not entirely be willing to say, "We, who are about to be fed to the wolves, salute you."

Arroyo doesn't just have the executive privilege to not account for her actions, she has the executive privilege to execute others for theirs.

Why you, Romulo? Why not you? Why should you expect fairness from a legal system you have helped to pervert? Why should you expect justice from a justice system you have helped to befoul? Why should you expect to live in peace and prosperity in a system of right and wrong that you championed, where the guilty are rewarded and the innocent are punished? Or as in the case of Lozada, where the truthful are hounded and persecuted beyond belief?

You're innocent? You deserve to have your innocence shoved up your, well, whatever.

On the other hand, Neri isn't entirely an ogre, even if by Lozada's testimony he likes to be a financial masseur (massage the *bukols*) and believes like the Greeks in the virtue of moderation (moderate the greed). He's just a coward. I can't bring myself to be as gleeful about what's

happened to him as I've been about what's happened to Jose de Venecia. That other one truly deserved what he got. And more, after he added insult to our injury by posing as a paragon of virtue who had been deeply wronged after he got ditched as speaker by the snakes on the plane, or House. *Gusto mong mag-alaga ng ahas, mag-apatuka ka na lang sa ahas*, to paraphrase Elizabeth Ramsey.

But it's not too late. The Neris of this world, unlike the De Venecias of this world, are not past redemption. De Venecia can always try to change his stripes and damn the evil he himself nurtured and perpetuated, but no one will need him, no one will heed him, no one will help him. His only chance at forgiveness will be to enjoy a monastic order that practices the vow of silence.

Neri can still turn around and tell all he knows about the NBN deal, as Lozada, who truly seems to have found the virtue of forgiveness from living a near-monastic life in La Salle with his wife and kids, counsels him to do. He can moderate his fear and massage his lumps and realize he can always make himself whole again, he can always give himself a soul again. Or he can simply ponder the prospect of jail and discover that the truth shall set you free—sometimes completely literally.

Then and now, in his case heroic mode is survival mode. He can be a hero, or he can perish. He doesn't rise to redeem himself now, and history won't even bother to judge him.

It will just glance at him, and snicker. (Inquirer.net)



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Conrado de Quiros

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ASIAN JOURNAL PUBLICATIONS

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

Northern California:
841 San Bruno Avenue West, Suites 12-14
San Bruno, CA 94066
Tel.: (650) 583-6818 • Fax: (650) 583-6819

Las Vegas Sales Office:
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Las Vegas, NV 89102
Tel.: (702) 792-6678 • Fax: (702) 792-6879

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