

Risa's generation

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RISA HONTIVEROS-BARAQUEL IS RUNNING for senator. The latest surveys show her to be hovering between 13th and 15th place—still outside the winning circle of 12, which includes the likes of Bongbong Marcos and Lito Lapid. But, clearly, she is very much within striking distance, almost by a miracle, having come from way behind—from the ranks of deserving candidates who languish in the bottom of survey rankings only because their names do not ring a bell.

Risa, who is 44 years old, belongs to that generation of Filipino leaders who, if they are not yet in command of the nation, should firmly be in the line of succession to the nation's leadership. Behind her pleasant demeanor and mellifluous voice is a solid record of involvement in social movements spanning more than two decades.

She was barely out of college when she became one of the founding members of the Coalition for Peace, where I first met her. She rose from the ranks to become the head of Pandayan, an organization of young social democrats, mostly from Ateneo, who championed the rights of peasants, workers, the urban poor, indigenous peoples and women. Pandayan later joined forces with other progressive groups like Bisig to form Akbayan, the party-list organization.

If she wins, it will be the first time a real social activist will become a member of the Senate, the nation's most important political forum. It will be a major watershed in our country's political life. It will infuse into the Senate not only youth but a coherent political vision drawn from mass movement experience.

Historically, the builders of our country have been much younger. Rizal was only 27 when he led the reform movement of Filipino students in Europe, Bonifacio was only 29 when he founded the Katipunan, and Aguinaldo had just turned 28 when he was elected president of the new revolutionary government in 1897.

But, in the years following independence, our political system tended to push back the successor generation, delaying its entry into positions of leadership. Martial law eliminated one whole generation of young Filipino leaders by forcing them to go abroad or underground. Many were crushed, physically or spiritually, or both. The traditional politicians, meanwhile, are living longer, growing more prosperous, and staying around longer.

In contrast, the youth's patience has grown shorter. Disenchanted and dispirited, many of them no longer identify with the nation's saga. When they think of political leadership, they think of political predators who feed on the carcass of an impoverished and demoralized people. They have become cynical about politics and cannot see their personal growth as intertwined with that of the nation. A few have resolved to continue the armed struggle, unable to see any space for their ideals in the corrupted world of electoral politics.

But many from Risa's generation, grown equally weary of armed conflict, have decided not to completely yield the terrain of electoral politics to the old political class. They are the activists who

refused to give up, but who have also become aware that sheer advocacy means little unless translated into collectively binding decisions backed up by political authority. Seizing upon the limited space provided by the party-list provision of the 1987 Constitution, they took up the challenge to join mainstream politics and proceeded to build a modern political party from the ground rather than simply absorb and convert existing mass organizations into an electoral machine. A handful of them have managed to break into the House of Representatives as party-list congressmen, but now even that restricted space is fast being taken over by traditional politicians.

Risa has been a two-term party-list representative herself. Her senatorial bid in this year's election is the logical culmination of a serious effort to re-configure Philippine politics by peaceful means. She wishes to be elected on the basis of her clear progressive positions on controversial social issues, rather than with the aid of traditional practices that, in our system, never fail to drain the starting idealism of young politicians. Her staunch position on the reproductive health bill from the perspective of women's rights is admirable not only for its courage, but also for its intellectual rigor and ethical consistency.

Perhaps only a Risa Hontiveros can pull off something like this in so traditional a society as ours. She is firm but never arrogant. She argues from a normative position of social justice, but is never blindly ideological. She married a military officer. She is articulate and intelligent, but also beautiful in every way. A young widow with four children, she has been through all kinds of adversity. She is determined to turn this country around, but she is not ambitious for herself. Lincoln once said: "Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power." I have seen enough of Risa in various settings to be able to say: here is a woman who will have no problem passing Lincoln's test.

This is a tribute long overdue. Young Filipinos like Risa must be recognized not only for what they have given back to our country, but for the philosophy of hope they continue to promote.

By Randy David

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