

Political Round Up: Politicizing the Bureaucracy, Recycling Political Allies

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The recent round of presidential appointments has aroused suspicion over the motivations and logic behind Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's decisions. Rather than merit, integrity, and competence, political relationships seem to be the common thread behind these appointments. Government positions, and the authority over policy and resources that go with it, appear to be handed out as part of a largesse package that oils a network of transactional politics.

The designation, for instance, of Ralph Recto, a defeated administration senatorial candidate in the 2007 elections, as National Economic Development Authority (NEDA) chief conveniently came after the one-year ban on appointing those who lost in elections. Recto, known as the main proponent of increasing the Value Added Tax rate, is only the second non-economist to head the socio-economic planning authority in the last 35 years. Though NEDA's top post does not have to be reserved exclusively for an economist, Recto's appointment has reinforced government critics' claim that it was all political payback for sticking with the administration during the last elections.

Zenaida Ducut's selection as head of the potentially powerful Energy Regulatory Commission (ERC) has been attributed to her closeness to the president as a cabalen (province-mate) and former classmate. Ducut's decisions will have implications on government resources and on prices. She will also play a role in the Meralco controversy. Prior to her appointment to the ERC, Ducut served as the president's deputy presidential legal adviser and as a three-term representative of Pampanga's second district. While Ducut chaired the House Committee on Energy and co-authored the Energy Power Reform Act, government regulation is a different ballgame

Perhaps the news that raised most eyebrows in the last few weeks was the transfer of Romulo Neri as head of the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) to administrator of the Social Security Services (SSS). Neri has been hopping from one government body to another - he headed NEDA before being transferred to the CHED after the ZTE-NBN controversy [1]. He will now handle the SSS' P30-billion trust fund. His appointment also coincided with the launch of the National Social Welfare Program, which clusters existing social welfare programs, currently under the Government Service Insurance System, Department of Social Welfare and Development, and the Department of Health. Neri will lead this umbrella body, thereby, giving him a cabinet rank and retaining his immunity from having to disclose any information on Arroyo's involvement in the NBN-ZTE scandal (by invoking executive privilege).

Recto, Ducut, and Neri are just few of the recent appointees considered loyal functionaries and defenders of Arroyo. With her presidency under fire, having close friends and allies in key managerial positions in the bureaucracy is imperative for her political survival. This, however, reinforces what former Civil Service Commission (CSC) Chair Karina Constantino-David describes as the "politicization of the bureaucracy", a situation where political appointees 'invade' positions usually reserved for career service personnel. Appointing political allies to plum posts is not a new practice, but Arroyo has done it far too much. A 2004 World Bank study on public sector improvement and corruption found that political appointees have reached the levels of service director, regional director, and bureau director, which are usually reserved for career service

personnel or those who passed the constitutionally-mandated eligibility tests.

Arroyo also seems to have a soft spot for retired generals and those connected to the military establishment. It will be recalled that the military played a decisive role during the 2001 EDSA uprising and in neutralizing some factions within the armed forces that have plotted to overthrow Arroyo's government.

According to the CSC, at least 48 retired military officers occupy key positions in the government today. Six out of 29 cabinet officials had links with the military establishment. Angelo Reyes stands out for having been appointed to four Cabinet posts in the last seven years: National Defense in 2001, Interior and Local Government in 2004, Environment and Natural Resources in 2006, and Energy in 2007. Reyes was the Armed Forces Chief of Staff who led the mass defection against Estrada in January 2001.

Arroyo's habit of dispensing political positions has become a pervasive practice, to the extent that new positions and titles are created to accommodate chosen cronies. Mike Defensor and the Task Force on the NAIA is a case in point. The same World Bank study mentioned earlier found that rather than enhancing "bureaucratic capability and efficiency", the situation has led to demoralization, discontent and ineffectiveness. The most recent sets of Arroyo's political appointments punch holes on her supposed decisive resolve to address the economic crisis. Putting political allies with little background and at best questionable capacity or competence at the helm of key agencies given strategic roles in solving the crisis does not inspire confidence. Finally, while political appointments may still fall within presidential prerogatives, Arroyo's abuse of the practice places her nowhere near the good President that she aspires to be. She runs an administration mired in patronage, plunder and payback.

P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] See related article on the controversies hounding the Presidency in this issue. On ESSF website: [Political Round Up: Gloria's 8th SONA and the ghosts of past controversies](#)