

Lorenzo Tañada and his times

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MANILA, Philippines—He lived much longer than his contemporaries. Born a few months after Emilio Aguinaldo proclaimed Philippine independence from Spain in 1898, and Lorenzo Tañada was 93 when he died. Had he lived like a Japanese centenarian, he would be 110 on Sunday, Aug. 10.

The martial-law generation referred to him as the “Grand Old Man of the Opposition.” It was a label that suited him well. Tañada was indeed all of that. He belonged to that era of Philippine politics when leaders consciously thought of themselves as noble stewards of the sacred legacy of nationhood and democracy.

He was the contemporary of Claro M. Recto, Jose P. Laurel, Eulogio “Amang” Rodriguez, Elpidio Quirino, and, of course, Ramon Magsaysay. He outlived all of them. In the 1960s, he was joined in the upper chamber by a younger generation of bright politicians that included the likes of Ninoy Aquino, Pepe Diokno, Jovito Salonga, Raul Manglapus and, of course, Ferdinand Marcos. First elected senator in 1947, Tañada’s career in politics ended when Marcos declared martial law in 1972. He served in the Senate for 24 years, making him for many years the longest surviving senator of the republic.

But the irrepressible Tañada refused to retire from politics after Marcos padlocked the Senate and jailed some of his colleagues. He swiftly metamorphosed into a “parliamentarian of the streets,” lending his venerable presence and stature to the street protests against the dictatorship. One memorable photograph of the old man during this time shows him braving the high-pressure water from the fire hoses of the Marcos police, defiantly locked in arms with street activists like Lino Brocka, Chino Roces, Ed Garcia and Rene Saguisag, among others.

He was present in almost every forum, always clear-minded, jovial and eloquent. He sat beside young activists like Lean Alejandro, not as a passive relic from a distant past, but as “Ka Tanny,” a living participant in the unfinished project of nationhood. He lived to see the downfall of the Marcos dictatorship, and the restoration of a fragile democracy under Cory Aquino.

His final crusade was the dismantling of the last of the American bases at Clark and Subic—which he waged through the broad Anti-Bases Coalition that he chaired. Tañada was inside the Senate hall in a wheelchair, watching militantly from the gallery, on a rainy day in September 1991, when the Salonga-led Senate rejected a new bases treaty. Immediately after the historic vote was announced, the senators turned in the direction of the old man and gave him a long standing ovation—an extraordinary tribute to a Filipino leader who had served the nation well. It was his final battle, and the grandest of his political victories.

But Tañada was not always the fiery nationalist that he was toward the end of his life. Rather, he was, like his brilliant contemporary, Claro M. Recto, transformed into one by his times—to borrow a concept from Renato Constantino’s political biography of Recto, “The Making of a Filipino.” Not many will remember that Tañada was a member of the Philippine Economic Mission headed by Sen. Jose P. Laurel that negotiated and signed the infamous 1954 Laurel-Langley Agreement, which

extended the scope of American parity rights in the Philippines to include nearly all sectors of the economy. Tañada found himself defending a trade agreement that Recto had denounced as an unconscionable act of economic servility. Yet it is worth noting, as an aside, that, according to Constantino, Recto's life too as a crusading nationalist began only in 1955, in the course of his personal battle with the US-sponsored Magsaysay for the leadership of the Nacionalista Party. Two years later, Recto and Tañada joined forces to offer a nationalist alternative in the 1957 presidential elections, and lost.

To the extent that the generation of Recto and Tañada was consumed by the twin tasks of consolidating the country's independence and ensuring its long-term economic growth, the reform of the feudal social order itself took a back seat in the consciousness of these great leaders. When Magsaysay, for example, sought to jump-start rural reconstruction through a land tenure bill, Recto shot it down as an "ignoble brainchild" of an American conspiracy to keep the Philippines agricultural.

In this sense, Tañada belonged to that generation of aristocratic Filipino leaders—the legatees of a Filipino "ilustrado" class that imagined itself, in Jose Rizal's words, "the brains of the country, within a few years ... its entire nervous system." It was in every respect an elitist generation, set apart from the masses by education and wealth, which still had an underdeveloped vision of social equity and, even more, of popular self-determination.

But because Tañada's life spanned several generations, he saw for himself the transformation of Philippine society and the growth of various forms of social struggles. He, too, was growing in consciousness. His early advocacy of civil liberties matured into a commitment to fundamental social rights, and so, toward the end of his life, Tañada had surpassed Recto's radicalism. From elite politician, he had become a social activist.

P.S.

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