

Philippines: What the New Politics Is All About

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Intervention of Laban ng Masa Chair Walden Bello at the Freedom from Debt Coalition State of the People Assembly (SOPA), July 20, 2021

Thank you, FDC friends, for inviting me to this State of the People online assembly to talk about the New Politics.

How the Media Dumbs Down the People

I have been monitoring the news very closely, in particular TV Patrol. About 40 per cent of the show every night during the last three weeks has covered the internecine struggle in the Duterte camp between Manny Pacquiao and the president. The show has lapped up every twist and turn of the affair and reported on the president's every move, even when the press really knows he is bluffing, as on the issue of whether he will run for vice president. ABS-CBN is so obsessed with the fight among the personalities of the administration and uncritically reporting what the administration says on other issues that it is almost another PTV 4. Harry Roque appears an average of five times in 1-1/2 hours!

Most of the media share this focus on personalities instead of issues. They seem to be convinced that personality conflicts are what the people want and that the people are not concerned with issues. The media are, however, part of the problem. They have, in fact, centrally contributed to this dumbing down of the public instead of promoting an earnest and critical discussion of the issues affecting the nation.

Support Pacquiao—Can They Be Serious?

Now, one might make some allowance for the media in this obsession with personality politics. But when a coalition that claims to be the principal voice of the opposition says that it is open to having Manny Pacquiao be the opposition standard bearer in the 2022 elections, that is quite another matter. When the spokesperson of that coalition announced this, so many of us were astounded and asked ourselves, can they be serious? Remember that several weeks ago, they said Pacquiao was not to be considered since he was too closely allied with the president. What had changed to cause them to change their minds? Two things. One was Pacquiao had become a foe of the president. The other was "winnability." What Pacquiao stood for was apparently hardly considered.

Well, let me remind people of what this fellow stands for. Pacquiao's guide to rule is the Bible, and especially the chapter on Leviticus, which he quoted in February 2016 in defense of his hard-line stance against LGBTQs:

"If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads." (Leviticus 20:13)

On the death penalty, Pacquiao also quoted the bible to support his militant pro-penalty, pro-Duterte stance, saying, “Even Jesus was sentenced to death.”

The choice between the Duterte protégé in 2022 and Pacquiao is between rule by the gun and rule by the bible. Meaning it’s no choice at all.

Let me add that when we were both in Congress, Pacquiao was vice chairman of the Committee for Overseas Workers Affairs of which I was chair. This guy attended only one hearing in the five years that he was there, and in that one hearing that he attended, I had to guide him step by step on how to conduct himself. He never, never did any fucking work, and I had to take on so many of the tasks that had to be done by the vice chairman.

Program Matters

Many of you are in Laban ng Masa and others are close allies. You know that we have a very different approach. Instead of picking a personality on account of her or his winnability, we prioritize the program that someone offers. This is why the first thing we did was to disseminate our 25 Point Program via a full-page ad in the Inquirer even before we began thinking of who we would field as a candidate. We did this because we are confident that Filipinos will listen critically to programs provided we create the conditions for them to be able to do this instead of dumbing them down as many in the media and many political parties do. Our process differs from that of other coalitions. Instead of choosing a candidate based on the winnability criterion via closed-door inter-organizational consultations, we prefer the more transparent democratic process of starting by having different candidates vie for the people’s support with their programs and ending by choosing the one whose program and character best resonate with the people. This is something close to the spirit of the primaries in the United States.

Of course, we are all for having one common opposition candidate, but that candidate must have a program of action that we support. It cannot be just because he or she is winnable. There is the illusion afloat that in the struggle against Duterte’s choice for president, we should just go with who is winnable. Unless we have a candidate that offers an alternative vision of where we need to bring the country, one that is embodied in a no-nonsense but inspiring program, we will do down in flames.

Moreover, we believe that our common opposition candidate must offer a program that goes beyond just preventing Duterte’s gang from continuing in power but promotes the comprehensive transformation of our society in the direction of more justice, more equality, and more real democracy.

How to Win in 2022

I think we all agree that 2022 will be an extremely decisive election. We differ with others on how to do this. Some feel everything must be subordinated to choosing a candidate, even Manny Pacquiao, or Isko Moreno, or Ping Lacson—all current or former allies of Duterte—who can beat Duterte’s anointed. We believe that that person must truly be a person whose opposition credentials cannot be doubted, whose character and record are beyond reproach, and who offers a viable and inspiring comprehensive program for economic, social, and political transformation.

Walden Bello

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