

## Philippines: Greed in a changing landscape

Saturday 16 February 2008, by [DAVID Randy](#) (Date first published: 9 February 2008).

MANILA, Philippines — “You moderate their greed.” This was the instruction of National Economic and Development Director General Romulo Neri to Rodolfo Noel Lozada Jr. at one point in the latter’s work as technical consultant on the national broadband network (NBN) project. The reference is to the scandalous “commission” that the main brokers for the project, then Commission on Elections Chair Benjamin Abalos and First Gentleman Mike Arroyo, allegedly built into the project costs. Although Neri has dismissed the pregnant implications of this statement, claiming it was just a colorful way of saying the costs must be cut, such language conveys something interesting. It connotes the passing of an era, a change in the landscape.

Note that neither Neri nor Lozada seemed surprised by greed as such. They only wanted it moderated. They understood the game being played here: the conversion of political influence to its monetary equivalent, and the role of “political sponsors” in the government procurement process. But a commission of \$130 million, constituting half of the total cost of the project, was deemed indefensible. Not immoral or illegal per se, but plainly excessive given the “norm.” Thus Lozada supposedly admonished Chairman Abalos thus: “*Chair, bubukol po ito, masyado pong malaki. Baka kalahati [\$65 million], pupuwede.*” [“Chair, this will stick out, it’s too big; maybe half [\$65 million], will do.”]

If we can appreciate the fine line being drawn here, we might also begin to understand the pained farewell oration of former House Speaker Jose de Venecia Jr. just before he was booted out of office by people who had been beneficiaries of his patronage. “What is happening to our country,” he wailed, “Everything is for sale!” No one, of course, believes that this seasoned politician is unfamiliar with the uses of money in Philippine political culture. Indeed his reputation in the House of Representatives is that of someone who institutionalized the giving of allowances and stipends to favored congressmen for every conceivable occasion.

What De Venecia was mourning was not the commoditization of politics as such but the death of loyalty or personal allegiance. What he was protesting was not the distribution of cash but the unbridled greed that seemed to attend the crude political maneuvers leading to his removal from the speakership. This is the tragedy of a traditional politician who has been totally outmaneuvered by the unscrupulous new merchants of power.

Like the feudal socioeconomic base in which it is rooted, traditional politics is authoritarian and arbitrary. Official power is but an extension of the private interests of the patron. Yet the relationship between the patron and his followers has a moral dimension. In exchange for the support and protection that the patron gives to his dependents, he claims their allegiance and undying gratitude. That is why the greatest sins in traditional society are treachery and ingratitude. This was the principal motif of De Venecia’s speech as he bowed to the rudeness of market politics.

This is a point I have tried to develop in previous columns: that the terms of traditional politics are changing right under the nose of its doomed players. The old values that used to mitigate the oppressiveness of feudal power — self-restraint, the value of friendship, loyalty, word of honor, etc.

— are fading away. What is replacing the grip of old-world politics, however, is not the ethical professionalism of modern politics but the sheer rapaciousness of the parvenus of present-day Philippine politics. Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's presidency is emblematic of this kind of transitional politics, still traditional and oppressive in every way but shorn of any redeeming qualities. No qualms, no shame, no conscience, no limit.

A society can get indefinitely stuck in this half-way stage between the old and the new. In this ambiguous state, the stench of decadence is sensed everywhere, acting as an incitement to corrosive cynicism or to moral conservatism. The passage to the new is finally cleared only after a wrenching effort is forced upon the society by the imperatives of system survival in a changed environment.

That wrenching moment is brought about by perturbations that occur with increasing frequency. The pressure for change is felt at the individual and societal levels. The reluctant and terrified whistle-blower Rodolfo Noel Lozada Jr. exemplifies the personal insecurity that an individual, caught in this transition, experiences as he comes face to face with the ugly side of a gangster regime. He sees how defenseless he is as he unburdens himself of the guilt of an entire system.

At the level of society, citizens note the unreliability of institutions that have been instrumentalized by personal power. They realize they can no longer call upon the old unspoken norms to restrain those who wield power. But, more than this, the "rule of law" is exposed for what it is in a highly unequal society: nothing more, says the scholar Ben Anderson, than the oligarchy's "firmest general guarantee of its property and political hegemony."

At the Senate hearing Friday, Lozada explained his decision to appear as driven by the need for him to think beyond his family, and for once to see himself as a member of a nation. Here he echoes a modernist sentiment that, more than a century ago, brought the generation of Jose Rizal to the threshold of an era of national and individual emancipation. In so doing, Lozada has become an agent of change. We salute him.

---

**P.S.**

\* From Philippine Daily Inquirer. First Posted 02:33:00 02/09/2008.