

Philippines: A big year for verity

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MANILA, Philippines — Just about everybody in our country these days is looking for the truth—senators, bishops, the media, students, professors, spin doctors, and street-corner pundits. Truth is the most sought-after commodity, yet its nature and uses are also the least understood. But, it appears we are not alone in this sport.

Vanity Fair calls 2007 “a big year for verity in film” and quotes the marketing tag lines of seven of this year’s big hits—“Atonement,” (“You can only imagine the truth”); “Michael Clayton,” (“The truth can be adjusted”); “Gone Baby Gone,” (“Everyone wants the truth ... until they find it”); “In the Valley of Elah,” (“Sometimes finding the truth is easier than facing it”); “Redacted,” (“Truth is the first casualty of war”); “Reservation Road,” (“To find the truth, you have to find who’s hiding it”); and “The Number 23,” (“The truth will find you.”)

Almost all of these can suitably describe the Filipino’s experience with truth. But the last two are especially relevant to us. Sometimes indeed, we don’t actually have to see the truth to know it; we only need to find out who’s hiding it. In 2001, the public clamored to know the contents of the infamous “second envelope.” When it was blocked by Joseph Estrada’s 11 senators, everyone became sure of what it contained, and thereafter lost all interest in determining what it really contained. It was all that was needed to bring out EDSA People Power II.

One could sense that we are today quickly moving in the same direction. When Romulo Neri, former director general of the National Economic and Development Authority, suddenly invoked executive privilege in the middle of his testimony at the Senate inquiry on the national broadband network (NBN) deal with China’s ZTE Corp., it became clear to every reasonable person who was listening that he could not say what he wanted to say because it would incriminate President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. But this concealment was not enough to make the public form a judgment of what was being hidden.

Rodolfo Noel “Jun” Lozada’s testimony made this possible. He provided crucial information, and the public’s imagination filled the gaps. Today, there is almost nothing that Neri can tell us that we don’t already know after hearing Lozada. Neri’s truth has thus become redundant. If it has any remaining uses at all, it may only be to secure a conviction or acquittal in a court of law. But the public does not need this level of determination to be able to act with confidence in the political sphere.

Truth is anything but simple. “A mobile army of metaphors” is how the philosopher Nietzsche calls it, rather than as the accurate representation of reality that many assume it to be. Because of its complexity, modern society has parceled out the search for truth into many specialized quests. The quest for truth about the physical world is assigned to science, while prophetic truth remains the province of religion. Outside of these two spheres, the quest for truth is subordinated to specific goals. In modern politics, what matters is not so much what is true, but what one can invoke to legitimize one’s rule. If it were otherwise, liars would never be in power. Similarly, in law, the applicable code is not so much what is true or false, but what is legal or illegal. Judges know that not every truth is worth knowing, but only those facts in a case that are relevant to a determination of

legality or illegality.

To understand these distinctions is to be able to appreciate the parallel inquiries that are going on in the different institutional spheres of our society. They may all be about the same subject—the ZTE-NBN deal—but their objectives are different.

As I see it, the object of the Senate inquiry is to know how and by whom the deal was put together, how and by whom it was assessed, and how it was finally approved. The goal is not so much to determine criminal culpability as to identify weaknesses in the law and existing procedures, possible lapses in judgment, and implications for legislation and governance. Because the Senate is a political body, the inquiry also becomes inescapably a moment in the ongoing contest for power between the majority and the minority.

It is true—politics is not exactly the best site to look for the truth. But then, neither is the justice system a privileged site for finding the truth. Indeed, a refrain we often hear from lawyers is that not all truths are admissible in court. It is clever for Malacañang to argue that the proper resolution of the ZTE-NBN controversy rests exclusively with the courts. Treating it as a purely legal matter is a way of suppressing the many other faces of truth.

What is at stake here is not just the legality or illegality of a contract. More than this, what is at stake is the power of citizens to hold their leaders accountable for decisions that are made in their name. Have these leaders been transparent and faithful to their oath of office? Or have they misused the powers and prerogatives entrusted to them? Such questions are decided not in court or in church but in the public sphere of politics, not by judges or prelates, but by a nation's citizens.

We should wait for the next elections then, they tell us. Under normal circumstances, we should indeed. But if the electoral mechanism itself has been rigged and brazenly abused by the present leadership, shouldn't the first step be to repair this vital mechanism of democracy and restore its legitimacy? This brings us to the key question: Do we still believe this is possible under Ms Arroyo? The truth has caught up with us. It is time to face it.

P.S.

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