

No Left Turn

BEFORE THE MAY 1992 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION, THE PHILIPPINES was in no position to go anywhere. People felt, and rightly so, that the coterie of clowns and con artists who were sorry excuses for government leaders were not taking them anywhere. They felt there was no Philippine government to speak of in the first place.

Six years of political and economic mismanagement has thrown a blanket of disillusionment over the lives of everyone. The Aquino administration itself was sabotaging the Philippine economy through criminal neglect in the provision of basic services, as basic as electricity, water, and transportation. Its burning lust for foreign loans drove it to a securitization deal with the IMF-World Bank which further assured a net resource transfer of billions of dollars to the multilaterals. While thousands die of malnutrition and curable diseases, it negotiates the operation of a flaw-ridden and outmoded Bataan Nuclear Power Plant promising the payment of its fraudulent two billion dollar-price plus interest and opening the possibility to a few more thousand deaths through radiation.

At the same time, scandals and controversies rocked the political scene. Nineteen ninety-one gave the world the image of a president who once led her people against a US-backed dictator this time marching them on under a downpour to bully her country's Senate into approving the stay of US-run military bases. Couch potatoes were not spared time to recover before another comic spectacle was televised. Distinguished senators of the Republic were shown running after each other in the august Senate hall trying to grab the official Senate mace and symbol from each other like children would to a lollipop. Punches were thrown in the desperate attempt to oust the Senate president who hid the mace needed to convene the official session which will oust him. Nineteen ninety-two headlined a House unwilling to pass a total logging ban bill to save whatever remains of the once millions of hectares of virgin forests because it felt sorry for the hundreds of workers and ten or twenty magnates of big logging companies who would be unemployed. This after House Speaker and presidential candidate Ramon Mitra received a two hundred thousand-peso campaign donation from a Palawan logger.

Yet, despite all these, no social volcano erupted. The people bid their time in silent anger. In the midst of a contemptible national situation, the Filipinos trooped to the polls last May 11.

The election thus became the popular expression of a six-year rage against total national immobility for which traditional politicians were faulted. The Filipino people vented their anger by snapping the shackles of feudal patron-clientism and the lassos of party machine cowboys. Finally, they have refused to cater to anachronistic interests or be herded like cows.

But in knee-jerk fashion, a chorus of remonstrance emerged from the ranks of the intellectuals and the elite. They said that if the last presidential election is to be any indication of the maturity of the Filipino people, it is that they have saved the country from traditional politicians only to hand its future over to movie actors. That if anything, many Filipinos chose media-hyped Miriam Defensor-Santiago and action star Joseph Estrada not only over Speaker Mitra and Chief Justice Marcelo Fernan, but also over Senators Jovito Salonga and Aquilino Pimentel.

Maturity, these intellectuals and elite say, means voting according to issues, principles, and ideologies, if not for respectable personalities and track records. Spokespersons and segments of the progressive movement are particularly prone to criticize an electoral system that cultivates an electorate which foregoes principles and votes for personalities. They echo a guilty verdict ascertained by an elevated consciousness which is equally guilty of squandering history's swift-passing opportunities.

The elite, for its part, simply has no right to speak of voter maturity since it reared the political culture which gave birth to the mutant form of Philippine democracy. It is the populace's revenge that they voted movie actors in place of self-serving lawyers and businessmen.

The electorate has ruptured the old electoral arena, a feat which favors social movements that have been offering their alternatives. But the latter hoped the voter to cast his ballot according to principles even when they have not made it any easier for the voter to distinguish between their alternatives and the demagoguery of status quo defenders. All that the people were equipped to do was burn their bridges to the patrons and political machines of the past and leap to a new frontier, regardless of who was there to welcome them.

The candidates who basked in popularity and media exposure were there to meet them. Screen and media-created personalities made good use of the spoils of the nation's aimless political and economic direction. They exploited popularity and carted off with symbols of the popular consciousness.

But the phenomenon that is the "Filipino independent voter" should now transcend analysis of itself. It can, in turn, be used to mark the inability of the

progressive forces to appropriate historic moments by realizing that the unfolding political landscape is not a landscape at all but the volatile and dynamic currents of the sea. The triumph of the new voter should contrast to the left's groping state which caused it to fail to make an inroad out of the opening offered by the former.

The left, unlike in EDSA, did not miss out this time. It simply was not there to miss out. Tormented in uncertainty and devoid of prospects to liven up the passion characteristic of its nature, the left was caught in midstream, with no other hope but to get across or be a flotsam to the indifference of surging waters. It had one foot trying to pull from the past and another one hovering over a stepping stone it was not sure would provide a firm footing.

Those who did not want to be tormented explored the parliamentary road but entered too late an arena which required trained gladiators. They were there, admittedly, to learn lessons and build the electoral infrastructure for future matches. The rationalization stuck and they lost, heavily.

The traditional parties they identified themselves with also failed to articulate their cause in a way that would have captured the voter's imagination and symbolized the people's desperate anger and hunger for explanations. Crippled by disorganization and with no clear message to deliver, the principled traditional party-progressive forces alliance was a losing proposition. It simply was not positioned to respond to the need for change which the electorate demonstrated in an astonishing performance of independence.

The other social movements of middle class intellectuals wasted time, money, and effort to go data-gathering to determine the candidates who deserved the so-called sectoral and environmental votes. Their idea of electoral decision-making was dismissed by the people as an academic exercise which did not merit attention.

Given everything, the past presidential election carries this indictment: in certain conjunctures of history, the people are capable of moving on, even while the forces and groups who claim political leadership over them, whether elite- or mass-based, were only capable of botching up or missing out. But as the elite has no genuine interest in a more mature electorate, it is the left and the new social movements for change who suffer from failing to grasp this irony of a complex society.

It is more than a welcome episode in our wandering state of national affairs, and of course a point against our snobbish leaders and intellectuals, that the people have changed some bad habits. And this they did despite elite rulers who are energized by a political culture of ignorance and passivity, and in spite of a confused progressive movement still hoping for a turn to lead a country which has grown unfamiliar.