

Partisan Annotations

ALEXANDER R. MAGNO

Fred M. Lobo. *Fidel Valdez Ramos: The Centennial President: Vision, Action and Statesmanship*. Manila: The Manila Bulletin, 1998, 244 pages.

Aprodicio and Eleanor Laquian. *Joseph Ejercito "Erap" Estrada: The Centennial President*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1998, 321 pages.

1998, celebrated as the centennial of the Philippine Republic is noteworthy for another reason: a change of administration that probably reflects a sea-change in Filipino politics.

The change in leadership creates a rather trivial debate: who is to be called the "centennial president"? Will it be Fidel Ramos, who was President of the Republic in the first half of 1998 and who oversaw the preparations for celebrating the centennial? Or will it be Joseph Estrada who assumed the reins of power on June 30 and who may be rightfully described as the first president of the Republic's next hundred years?

The debate being trivial, it need not be resolved here. But some confusion is caused by the appearance of two relatively unimportant — and clearly hurried — books, each describing a different person as the "centennial president."

The first book, in order of appearance is Fred Lobo's *Fidel Valdez Ramos: The Centennial President: Vision, Action and Statesmanship*. It was launched in the dying weeks of the Ramos administration. The second by Aprodicio and Eleanor Laquian, *Joseph Ejercito "Erap" Estrada: The Centennial President*, was launched at Malacañang Palace in the early weeks of the Estrada administration.

Scrapbook

Lobo covered President Ramos for the Manila Bulletin. For those who watched the televised mid-afternoon press conferences held in

Malacañang, Lobo is the reporter who routinely threw the funny question that signaled the session is over.

Ramos was obviously quite fond of Lobo. And the sentiment was returned by the reporter. His pieces on the Ramos presidency dripped with unqualified admiration for the President he covered. Such unqualified admiration fit in quite well with the tone of the paper he wrote for the Bulletin has always adopted a feel-good, uncontroversial and unobtrusive posture towards the powers that be. It is a posture that the paper has maintained from the pre-martial law years, through the period of dictatorship and in the post-Edsa years. The paper sells ads, not controversies.

Lobo's book is actually a scrapbook of the pieces he wrote on Ramos from his inauguration in 1992 to the twilight of his administration. As an addendum, Lobo includes a few of Ramos' key speeches.

No one will accuse Lobo's book of being "analytical" — much less critical. It is a "file" of admiring news stories. Its utility lies mainly as a reference on some of the more important events during the Ramos administration.

This book is not even history. There is no attempt here to situate events in some context or framework. It is a reprint of news stories written in the strictest tradition of "old journalism:" strict reportage, with no comment or analysis.

Insider information

By contrast, the Laquian couple produced a largely unstructured volume recounting their involvement in the campaign to get Estrada elected as president.

The book resembles Lobo's volume in the sense that it is strictly narrative. Perhaps due to the rush to get it to press, the writing is raw and many portions of the text are repeated further into the narrative.

This is a documentary of insiders caught up in the maelstrom of a political campaign. The Laquian couple write freely and candidly of the people and groups involved in the Estrada campaign, the personal animosities and the disagreements. Because of this, the book becomes interesting material for those curious about how the personalities associated with Estrada's rise to power are grouped into factions, ideological blocs and competing gangs.

The Laquian couple report rather candidly about how specific personalities got involved in the campaign effort, what roles they played and how they were able to influence the principal. The narrative is intended to be documentary of a campaign in the genre of *The Making of a President*.

It is worthwhile to note that while the Laquian couple worked for the Policy Studies Group of the Estrada campaign, their narratives tells us that they are convinced early on that programmes of government do not win elections in the Philippines. Unintendedly, this might be the most penetrating insight into the nature of Filipino electoral politics offered by the book.

Like Lobo's volume, the Laquians' is completely uncritical of its main subject. The Laquians look at Estrada adoringly. In several long sections, they describe the personal traits and milieu of the new President. They make no critical appraisal of the new President nor offer an assessment of the historical importance of his accession to the highest office in the land.

Like Lobo's volume, too, the Laquian book includes a few key documents adopted by the Estrada campaign. One of these provides an outline of the policy preferences of the Estrada group.

This is a snapshot of a presidency at the moment of its birthing. The policy inclinations documented here will probably be significantly altered as the realities of governance begin to bite. This book, therefore, will probably have a short shelf life — receding in importance as the centers of influence shift. But it will be the book of reference on a presidential campaign that bested the others in the crucial elections of May 1998.

Wanted: Analysis

Given what they are, the two books under review here can best be raw materials for further studies into presidential politics in the Philippines.

Eventually, someone must make an objective assessment of the role and place of the Ramos administration in the historical unfolding. The political economy of the reforms stands in want of comprehensive assessment.

Eventually, too, what has been referred to as the “Erap Phenomenon” must be studied closely for whatever it tells about shifting sensibilities, changing demographics and altered alliances in Filipino politics. There is much here that has yet to be understood.

In the meantime, we have these two reportages: raw but informative. It will be unfair to ask of both books impartial assessments. They are partisan annotations. Too close to their respective subjects, they cannot be otherwise. ❁