

The Political Medium is the Political Message

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If there is anything unusual in the Philippines today, it is the fact that Filipinos are acting in their usual selves. This may sound paradoxical but a closer look will tell that it isn't really so. In the past months, social scientists, political activists and progressive politicians had expressed the view that an altogether different breed of Filipinos was born after February 1986. Many were wont to describe this breed as having transcended traditional boundaries and more oriented toward the so-called 'new politics.' This categorization which stems from a comparison between the pre-EDSA and the immediate post-EDSA milieu was, in all likelihood, made using as referent the image projected by Filipinos during the martial law years as a malleable lot predisposed to acquiescence and inaction even at the most absurd Marcos gimmick.

The comparison and the resulting conclusion, however would not be unwarranted. Indeed, since the assassination of Senator Benigno Aquino in 1983 up to the EDSA Revolution of 1986, one can discern the unfolding of a consciousness, an awakening to a reality that demands not only serious contemplation but more importantly, enlightened action on the part of the people. Thus when this consciousness manifested itself dramatically in the streets of EDSA in those February days, there was nothing more logical than to expect the crystallization and maturation of this consciousness in post-Marcos Philippine politics.

Yet the pathetic defeat of the candidates identified with the Left in the recently concluded elections, among other things, invites a strong feeling of *deja vu* among political observers. Though analyses pointing to strategic and tactical deficiencies on the part of the Left are more or less correct, one question has not been adequately answered: what really went wrong? Suspicions that Filipinos have reverted back to their 'old' ways abound. Cynical observers have gone to the extent of practically heralding a cataclysmic future characterized by the alleged resurrection of the political monster called *traditional politics*. This is understandable enough.

Among Filipinos, the mere mention of the phrase immediately evokes images of politicians' goons terrorizing the voting public or of violent clashes among rival private armies

themselves. Furthermore, deception is implied in this political set-up as the patron-client relationship that marks it is viewed as practically the relationship between the manipulator and the manipulated. Deception and manipulation in this case can be concretized at best, by personality contests and at worst, by the usual practices of traditional politicians — e.g. dole-outs, vote-buying, mudslinging, empty but grandiose promises, and to a large extent, terrorism. That is why, traditional politics acquired its synonym in "dirty politics."

Yet despite, or possibly in spite, of EDSA 1986 these traditional practices prevailed in the previous electoral exercises. But what is perhaps more surprising is that it would seem that the winning candidates in both the senatorial and congressional levels won precisely because they operated within this framework. For example, though it would be inaccurate to say that outright terrorism was used in the senatorial race, the way the campaign was conducted left no doubt that it was more of a personality contest than an issue-oriented one. What is more significant was the tactic used by the administration candidates to broadcast themselves in public as "Cory's Choice" and with the accompanying picture of President Aquino raising their hands. The consequent victories of many political unknowns by virtue of this tactic affirmed the conclusion that if the elections proved anything at all, it is that the popularity of President Aquino remains undiminished.

On the other hand, the tactic of electoral Left to refocus of the campaign primarily on social issues proved insignificant as the electorate showed greater appreciation for the charming politico and his bombastic tirades. At best, the issue-oriented tactic of the Left elicited the amused indifference of the voting public. At worst, it invited total rejection especially when its enemies raised the classic red-scare hysteria.

Thus, advocates of 'new politics' nowadays seem to be at a loss about what to do exactly with the parliamentary challenge offered by the Aquino government. Those who started out with a heavy heart have once more sought refuge in the idea that armed struggle is after all, the most appropriate method of struggle against the present State. However, those

who were disenchanted with the manifestly half-hearted campaign conducted by the Left remained unequivocal in their insistence that the challenge of parliamentarism and more importantly, the political openings that are entailed in it are still there. Thus, a quiet debate is presently being fought concerning the correct strategy of the Philippine Left. All this because of the triumph of traditional politics.

Traditional politics, on a theoretical plane, is based on the assumption that the people constitute the passive entity in a patron-client relationship. Conversely, the politician is seen as the active component able to deceive, manipulate and control the mass of voters at the shortest period of time as allowed by the campaign period. This conception virtually assigns the politician a very difficult task of altering the consciousness of a mass of people predisposed to harboring mistrust against the politician as shown by the pejorative use of the noun "politiko." The triumph of the politician is therefore viewed as signifying the victory of the politician's money, gimmickry and cunning over a gullible mass. The implication is that the electorate, aside from being the passive component of the set-up, is an idiotic entity not knowing what is good for it, and worse, extremely susceptible to the tricks played on it by a politician.

New politics is thus seen as primarily the attempt to make the voting public know what is good for it, and secondarily, to make this public realize the emptiness of the traditional one. The medium seen fit for this task is an issue-oriented campaign in which winning votes will no longer be a question of say, the attractiveness of one personality over another but a question of stances on salient issues like the US bases, agrarian reform, etc.

The debacle that greeted this approach make one want to rethink the whole question. Even in places considered by the Left as its areas of hegemony, votes were cast in favor of traditional politicians (LABAN, GAD, KBL or whatever) and corollarily, their traditional methodology. Moreover, during the last constitutional plebiscite, in the so-called "red areas", the Yes votes overwhelmingly prevailed in spite of the No campaign of the Left.

The rethinking must immediately focus on the question of methodology, the medium's validity as a political endeavor. Could it be that the issue-oriented campaign struck a discordant note in the political psyche of Filipinos? The answer to this is obvious but the strategic implications are far-reaching. The question that takes primary importance is this: must one operate within this psyche (whatever it is) or must one attempt to supplant or go beyond it? The second option has its answers in the last electoral exercise. The first, however, presupposes a review of the essential features of this political psyche and ultimately, a reinvestigation of the fundamental characteristics of that relationship between the politicians and the masses.

Perhaps there is something gravely wrong with the cognition of the electorate as the passive component of the

set-up as opposed to the perception of the politician as the active entity, since this view, among the advocates of new politics, virtually renders the system altogether unusable. Advocates of new politics, in their honest desire to propagate and instill their principles in the electorate mass, are inclined to regard the set-up as something unprincipled or opportunistic. Thus their contempt for any plan to operate within its parameters. Yet this conception and practice could be radically transformed if the masses are viewed as the active component in traditional politics, and the politicians as the passive actors. This view would give proper recognition to the people as the main actors of history (though this history may not be the "proper" history from a partisan standpoint, it is still history!). Might it therefore be possible to conceive of the "politiko" in the set-up not as a composer, lyricist and conductor all in one but a mere conductor only able to give harmony to a cacophony of tunes?

The phenomenon of Cory Aquino and her ascendance to power, the "people's power" displayed at EDSA and even the ALSA MASA-like millenarian vigilante groups are palpable proofs that this cacophony of tunes takes concrete political form depending on the partisan nature of their conductors.

The victory of Senator Joseph Estrada, a popular actor who ran under the banner of the Enrile-led Grand Alliance for Democracy (GAD), may be illuminating. As of this writing, Estrada is the lone GAD senatorial candidate who is assured of a seat, with former Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile still having to fight for his. Political analysts are confounded by the reasons behind the victory of this candidate, who aside from being a novice in the senatorial race is also GAD's most apolitical candidate (in that he did not make public his political platform, took no stance on many issue etc.). Moreover, Estrada's sole national exposure is even that of being identified as a Marcos loyalist. Yet even this so-called "kiss of death" did not stop Estrada from making it to the top 14th slot of the 24 winning candidates. That he survived, and with an impressive showing at that, defies conventional political explanations. But the fact that Joseph Estrada is a very popular actor whose image is always that of an aggrieved hero fighting for the cause of the poor (nevermind his actual politics) may in itself be the explanation. The plurality of Estrada's votes over that of the Left candidates who trailed dismally may spell the actual problem of a new politics operating within the traditional political minds of most Filipinos.

Traditional politics and the relationship existing in it constitute a very potent terrain of electoral struggle that is waiting to be given harmony. More importantly it awaits the artful and imaginative direction by the electoral Left or any group intent on progressively transforming Philippine society. Only when the theoretical and strategic value of traditional politics are appreciated, given direction and utilized accordingly, can the hope to transcend it be actualized successfully.