

OPINION & FEATURES

A clean slate

WE look back at the year 2008 and we see a difficult year for most of us—the fall of businesses, people losing their homes and jobs, and the financial crisis that has affected not only the country but the whole world. Yes, what has happened this year is a big change to what we have gone through the previous year.

We have conformed our lives in certain living conditions—something that we were comfortable in, something we think we should keep as long as we can. For us, it is our safety zone.

And as instinct would tell us, any change, drastic or not, will upset the balance we think we have now.

So we resist the changes, we try to look for excuses not to work around it and in the end miss the possibility and opportunity to change for the better. This is all because we were

scared about stepping to the challenge of making our lives different, regardless of the difficulties we have to face.

We forget that change—good or bad—not only brings the best in people, but also shows the real character of those around us.

So as we leave 2008 behind, we face the new year on a clean slate—full of hope and ready to face another year of challenges—and change. (*AJPress*)

EDITORIAL



Hero's day

THERE was an interesting story that came out about two weeks ago from the House of Representatives on their approval on third and final reading a bill that would put an end to more than a century of observing every Dec. 30, Rizal Day, as one of the official holidays in the Philippines. It is one of the non-working holidays observed nationwide to commemorate the death anniversary of our national hero, Dr. Jose P. Rizal.

This proposal—under House Bill (HB) No. 1289—seeks to move the observance of this national holiday instead to June 19 to mark the birth anniversary of Dr. Rizal.

It was authored by a group of solons led by Iloilo City Rep. Raul T. Gonzalez Jr., namesake of the Justice Secretary of President Arroyo. The House measure was unanimously approved in plenary

a few days after the House Committee on Revision of Laws recommended its enactment.

The National Historical Institute supports the approval into law of HB 1289. In their endorsement, the NHI noted the observance of Rizal Day on December 30 of each year which traces its historical basis to a decree issued by the first Philippine President, the late Gen. Emilio Aguinaldo on Dec. 20, 1898.

NHI Chairman Ambeth R. Ocampo wrote to Rep. Gonzalez that this decree actually declared December 30 of each year as a day of national mourning and was intended to honor Rizal and other Filipino patriots during the Spanish period. On that basis, Rizal Day was declared as one of the official holidays in the country with the enactment of Act No. 245 of the Philippine Commission. It was signed on Feb. 1, 1902.

The NHI chief concurred with the proposed enactment of HB 1289 as the more appropriate day of commemorating Rizal Day on his birth anniversary every June 19. “While Rizal Day is observed on June 19, classes have just started and students would be able to actively participate in the commemorative activities,” Ocampo pointed out. Of course,

as presently practiced, June 19 is like any other ordinary days in the calendar while Rizal Day is observed during the long school vacation in all levels starting Christmas all the way to New Year’s day.

Aside from Gonzalez, other authors of the bill include Reps. Justin Chipeco (NP, Laguna); Ma. Victoria SyAlvarado (Lakas, Bulacan); and Ma. Evita Arago (LP, Laguna). Obviously, all three lawmakers hail from the home province of our national hero who was born in Calamba. The house of the Rizal family in Calamba is among the national shrines being maintained by the State. The House-proposed measure will amend EO No. 292, known as the Administrative Code of 1987 that set December 30 as Rizal Day.

Rizal was executed on Dec. 30, 1896 by the Spaniards in a firing squad at Bagumbayan, later called as Luneta and was subsequently named as Rizal Park. Thus, every year the official commemorative activities of traditional raising of the giant Philippine flag, the wreath-laying rituals and military honors principally take place at the Rizal Monument in Luneta.

While the Senate has yet to come up with its own counterpart measure, or they may just adopt this proposed House bill to move Rizal Day to June 19, President Arroyo has done her own changes on Rizal Day celebration. She has moved the traditional venue of observing this holiday from the Rizal Monument in Luneta to Baguio City’s own Rizal Park. She started this in 2002 when she made the controversial Rizal Day declaration that she won’t run in the May 2004 presidential elections. And the rest, as we say, is history.

The darkest moment of this most recent history was the Rizal Day celebration in 2000 when a spate of deadly bombing attacks in several crowded places in Metro Manila that killed 22 holiday revelers and seriously maimed scores of people, including children.

Five locations were bombed almost simultaneously within the span of an hour. A bomb exploded at Plaza Ferguson in Malate, Manila near the US Embassy. Another bomb was detonated at a gasoline station in the Makati central business district. Two policemen from the bomb squad, died while trying to defuse the improvised explosive devices.

Another IED was placed inside a bus traveling along EDSA. One passenger was killed while several others were injured. Alert authorities were able to foil IED found at the cargo handling area of the Ninoy Aquino International Airport (NAIA). The bombing attack that claimed the most casualties occurred at the Blumentritt station of the Metro Manila Light Rail Transit (LRT).

Initially, various Islamic groups were implicated in the bombings, from the Abu Sayyaf bandits to the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, including the Jemaah Islamiyah (JI) terror group from Indonesia. As subsequent events unfolded, the Rizal Day bombings were retaliatory attacks of the MILF against the all-out war policy of the administration of then President Joseph Estrada.

It took almost three years before law enforcement authorities were able to solve the Rizal Day bombing attacks with the arrest in May 2003 of Saifullah Yunos (aka Mukhlis Yunos), a member of the MILF’s special operations group. Fathur Rahman Al-Ghozi, an Indonesian national and a JI member was subsequently arrested and convicted for illegal possession of explosives in relation to the Rizal Day blasts.

The other dark spot of this holiday was the Rizal Day observance in 2002 when the President dropped the bombshell that she won’t run for the presidency. But as it turned out, she merely bought time to shield herself from the unceasing political attacks against her administration.

Thus, the solemnity of Rizal Day, however, has become associated with these two unfortunate incidents while we were supposed to be honoring the martyrdom of our national hero. If only for these two reasons, I favor the transfer of Rizal Day on his birth date instead.

The proposed changing of date of commemorating our national hero’s day comes on Rizal’s 112th death anniversary this year. President Arroyo earlier intimated to me she would take the opportunity to explain in layman’s language to the Filipinos how her administration intends to shield the Philippine economy from the full impact of the global financial crisis when she delivers her Rizal Day message tomorrow. Hopefully, it would not be bombastic that would turn out to be nothing but smokescreens only. (*Philstar.com*)

COMMONSENSE

Marichu A. Villanueva

Beyond regret

IN a fitting end to the year, former President Corazon Aquino apologized to Joseph Estrada for the popular revolt that kicked him out of Malacañang two years and a half into his term.

The apology, blurted out by the ailing “Tita Cory” after Erap’s remarks at the launching of Pangasinan Rep. Jose de Venecia Jr.’s authorized biography, could have been elicited only by someone with the charm of Erap.

It’s a dazzling personality that can make people forget that he is a convict, sentenced to life for plunder based on the painstaking efforts of prosecutors, a convict who is free only by the grace of his successor Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.

The Estrada camp, which is laying the groundwork for his bid to regain the presidency, is milking the apology for all its worth.

In typical fashion, Cory Aquino has opted to add nothing more to her comments, leaving everyone to speculate that what she truly regretted was having helped install Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo in power.

But people power II was not about Erap’s constitutional successor. It was about a people becoming fed up with brazen corruption and doing something to stop it.

The past eight years have shown that stopping corruption takes more than people power. And the year now ending shows how little we have done beyond people power to eradicate the culture of corruption and promote good governance.

Crony capitalism is back, jueteng is back, extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances are back. As several quarters pointed out in the course of the year, it’s as if Ferdinand Marcos himself is back, or is at least roaring with laughter in his temperature-controlled crypt in Ilocos Norte.

These are true causes for regret, at the end of a year that was also marked by crises in food, fuel and finance. We must apologize to the next generations for our failure to deal decisively with those causes and give them a better future.

* * *

Cory Aquino’s apology reflects the frustration felt by people throughout the year as corruption scandals piled up and went unresolved.

ZTE scandal witness Jun Lozada, harassed by shady characters in a manner reminiscent of the Marcos years, became an ugly reminder of why it does not pay to denounce wrongdoing in this government.

The markedly different fortunes of Lozada’s friend Romulo Neri, meanwhile, are a reminder to pragmatic *Pinoys* that silence is golden, that omerta in this administration—fully endorsed by the Supreme Court—pays handsomely.

Omerta, the code of silence observed by members of the Italian mafia, has also marked the much-anticipated return to the country of former agriculture undersecretary Jocelyn “Jocjoc” Bolante.

As the year drew to a close, the Supreme Court rounded out the case for omerta, stopping the Senate from reviving its probe of the “Hello, Garci” vote rigging scandal unless the chamber published its rules of procedure on inquiries in aid of legislation. This requirement, the tribunal pointed out in its Dec. 23 ruling, is stipulated under Section 21, Article 6 of the 1987 Constitution that the President’s allies are now mightily trying to rewrite.

Since senators, like congressmen, think that being lawmakers puts them above the law, and since they are too busy or lazy to be bothered with drafting procedural rules or to be bound by them, that Supreme Court order might have finally put a stop to all congressional probes.

Never mind if the order infringes on the oversight functions of a co-equal branch of government. In this country, the Supreme Court is vested with awesome powers which, when wielded by unscrupulous individuals, can bring the nation to perdition. Next year, the SC

environment is bound to be worse—another reason for frustration as 2008 draws to a close.

This year President Arroyo’s political mentor and first justice secretary, Hernando Perez, was also cleared of charges that he accepted a \$2-million payoff from former Manila congressman Mark Jimenez within days after the President assumed power in 2001. The case was thrown out after Jimenez, a convicted US felon, lost interest in pursuing the case. What happened to the money trail supposedly provided by the Swiss?

After all those exposés, people are left with a feeling of helplessness. Shameless crooks with immoderate greed leer at the nation with the question: “So we are corrupt. What are you going to do about it?”

* * *

Wallowing in frustration is useless and unhealthy. This year’s sources of regret should strengthen the people’s resolve to work for good governance and improve the nation’s capability to resolve cases of lying, cheating, stealing and large-scale corruption.

The new year should strengthen the nation’s resolve to improve institutional capability to make criminals pay. At the same time, whistle-blowers must be protected and rewarded instead of being turned into pariahs.

EDSA II and its copycat version, EDSA III, gave Filipinos people power fatigue. As Cory Aquino has shown, people power can also offer a sad lesson in being careful what you wish for.

There are Filipinos who are not ready to close the book on people power—one that stems, like the original one in 1986 – from oppression, brazen venality and the corruption of all democratic institutions. But even if Filipinos have lost their appetite for people power, there are many other paths to reforms, though not as dramatic and with less immediate results.

Beyond expressing regret and apologizing for mistakes, the nation must see to it that ugly history does not keep repeating itself.

“Enough already” and “never again” are good mantras for the coming year. The nation ignores the need for reforms at its own peril. (*Philstar.com*)



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