



HOUSING PROGRAM. Nacionalista Party President Senator Manny Villar talks about the importance of owning a home during the Awarding of lots of certificate to the residents of Brgy. CAA in Las Pinas City. This program is a version of the Community Mortgage Program (CMP) of the Philippines dubbed as The Integrated Shelter and Land Tenure for the Urban Poor which aims to eradicate poverty and reduce the number of homeless in our country.

have an OJT or an on-the-job trainee, the fiscal crisis is something that could deteriorate.

Our country could really be facing very serious economic problems. Our tax revenues have gone down, deficiency from a high of 17 percent during the time of FVR (former President Ramos) to 12 percent right now. That 5 percent drop translates to about P300-P350 billion and that's a lot. The next president should immediately give the highest priority to this, of bridging this gap.

We are recovering from the economic crisis—yes and no—but the next president has no time to practice. He has to start, he has to hit the ground running Day 1. He must know how to manage the country.

Q: The deficit will be P300 billion next year, how can you achieve 7 to 8 percent GDP growth per year to create enough jobs for people to be employed and attract those people who are abroad?

Villar: Next year will be tough and achieving that will be tough. I don't think we can pump the economy right away. But there are some areas that can immediately be improved.

The collection, for example can be improved. We can persuade Congress (and this is where our advantage, having been a former Speaker and Senate president, will come in), they can be persuaded to have some tax measures, rationalize fiscal incentives. When you take over a government, or any company, there are normally inefficiencies that you can immediately address and this is your source of spending money.

If you have no leadership, you have to buy loyalty. This is what is happening now to our country. Loyalties of congressmen and local government officials are being bought through projects. This is a tremendous waste of limited resources. If this is not done at the first year, this gives us a lot of savings. This is probably an area where we can draw some spending leeway. But 7 to 8 percent of course, admittedly, will be tough in the first year.

Q: Going back to the environment and the trees, you said you like them and Loren is running on a green platform. Does that give her an edge?

Villar: To be fair, the environment is a very serious, very important objective. But that is not the only objective. Capability as a president is also very important. I will not immediately rule out the other possibilities.

Q: Do you still expect any surprises from the administration which could derail the holding of the elections as scheduled?

Villar: Automation. It's not fair for me to say that that will be a problem but I'm worried about it.

Q: You are worried because it's new?

Villar: It is new and one cannot be sure that it cannot be...

Q: Also because you could be cheated?

Villar: Yes, I'm more worried about the second one.

Q: What is your back up system?

Villar: We are trying our best to come up with controls, we have our own computer experts but then again we realize that it's going to be tough.

Q: In connection with your fears about the automation, do you think there is the possibility of failure of elections?

Villar: If it breaks down, it could be failure. But we cannot go around and spread that we are going to have failure of elections because we want everybody to campaign to discourage anybody from tampering the election results or trying to stop the elections.

It is important for the process to continue. It is important that people campaign and people guard their votes so that the system will work. The more difficult it is to tamper, the less is the probability that there will be tampering.

Q: The Nacionalista Party (NP) is the oldest party, and Amang Rodriguez once said politics is addition. There have been a lot of defections to your party.

Villar: I have been talking about what I have built in the past and they form part of my credentials. But the one credential that I have done which shows that I can build. I'm building the party from practically nothing. When I took over the party, there was no elected member. Now we have more than 2,000 elected members.

Just in the last month, we have more than 150 municipal and city mayors that joined us. Many governors have joined us in rapid succession. There are congressmen who joined us and committed to join us. More governors have committed to join us, hundreds of mayors have committed to join us. We are confident that we are ready. One thing that I am proud of is that I think at this point we have rebuilt the NP. This is the party that fought for our political independence. Now, after a hundred years, this party is fighting for our economic independence. We have successfully rebuilt this party and we are all set to reclaiming the leadership of this country.

Q: What is your edge over them?

Villar: There is this unique advantage of having experienced poverty, having come from a poor family. I've experienced what I have been preaching sipag at tiyaga. At the same time, I can present my credentials as an experienced person. I can show my experience and say private sector

leader, I rebuilt from nothing my business which became the largest, became Speaker of the House.

These experiences are not easy to do. I don't know anybody in the country who has had that kind of experience from the private sector and became Speaker of the House and Senate president. That to me is an advantage. I don't want to brag about these things. I'm just saying, that combination is something that I'm very proud to show our people. I firmly believe that many candidates in the past can only talk about one or the other. My advantage is that I have both.

Q: What makes you more profound than the others?

Villar: When you have experienced it, it's something else. Experiencing hunger, for example, is something. Experiencing not knowing whether or not you will have something to eat the following day, not knowing where to get money to go to a doctor, seeing a loved one unable to get good medical treatment because you have no money, not knowing where to get the next matriculation fee. These are things that I have experienced. When you talk about choosing a president, when we make mistakes that's alright we don't feel it because

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When you talk about choosing a president, when we make mistakes that's alright we don't feel it because the rich will still eat. But we have to realize that in any mistake that we do in electing a leader, it's the poor people who suffer. This spells whether they will eat or not, whether they will be getting medical treatment or not, whether they will get jobs or not. That is why I feel that we have no room for just using emotions here.

Q: What do you think about moves to change the Constitution, is there any chance?

Villar: Amending the Constitution is something that people should decide, not the leader. But I am not afraid of any Constitutional change or amendment. For me, what is important is the leader and personally, I can work with a parliamentary or a presidential or a federal.

Q: How do you alleviate poverty when you yourself said the deficit next year will reach P300 billion?

Villar: Seventy percent of the poor in the country are in the agricultural sector. If you want to very quickly address poverty, you must focus on agriculture. It is also one of the most corrupt departments. So if you can focus on addressing that problem, then you will have some excess to spend on agriculture.

I am looking at repairing first the irrigation systems instead of coming up with new ones. We can immediately jumpstart the agriculture. This is what I call agricultural renaissance because I really feel that agriculture should be given a second look now with the changes in the commodity prices. And we have no choice, 70 percent of our people are in it. We are to address poverty immediately despite our increase in fiscal deficit, agriculture should be given highest priority.

Q: You said that it only takes P80,000 to rehabilitate per hectare of irrigated land. How much money will you devote to irrigation?

Villar: Using the budget of agriculture should be enough. Actually, right now there is the AFMA Law that gives P20 billion more to agriculture that has not been implemented. I think we can squeeze another P20 billion to implement the AFMA.

Although maybe even half of that should be enough for the first year. Because to me, just maximizing the budget of DAR and the DA, if you rationalize these two departments, and add maybe about P10 billion, we should be able to jumpstart our agricultural renaissance.

Q: What is your foreign affairs policy?

Villar: Our foreign policies, they have not changed in the last few decades. We have not really incorporated the changes in the world order, for example, the growth of Russia, China, Brazil or India. There is a very clear change that is happening now.

This is a movement away from the US, calls for currency other than the US, calls for more representation from developing countries led by these nations, the growing strength, the growing economy and influence of China and India in Asia. All of these must be taken into consideration but we should not also forget that we are a nation with 10 million overseas Filipinos. They must be incorporated in our foreign policies now.

We must be very active in negotiating bilateral treaties or agreements with other countries for the protection of our overseas Filipinos and for the improvement of opportunities there. Right now we are not proactive. The location of our embassies must be altered taking into consideration the new realities of the world.

In terms of manpower allocation, I guess we just have to allocate more to countries where there are more Filipinos to be taken care of. The Department of Foreign Affairs can play a big role in economic development also.

For example, there are some countries where we must be very active in getting investments for example, from China, Taiwan. US is very far and there is really nothing wrong with looking at the new possible sources of investments. I think that this can be done without hurting our relations with the US.

It is very important for us to maintain an independent foreign policy. I think we can regain more respect from US, China and all other countries if we maintain an independent foreign policy.

Also, we must consider that we will be given the importance in this area only if we are also important economically. That is why I think our big population is something that can really make us even a great nation. It is not a liability. If we can push our economy to have 7 to 8 percent growth in six years, average, with this kind of population, we can be respected

and other countries will start listening to us.

With the kind of economy that we have, with the kind of problems that we have, whatever we do, we will not be given the importance that we like to get from them.

In fact, if we can significantly increasing the purchasing power of this 90 million people, we will have a huge market.

Q: As a group, the OFWs remit more money than all foreign investors combined in a year. They remit \$17 billion. The biggest that we have had for foreign investment is \$2.5 billion.

Villar: This is also an area that has to be addressed. We need to be consistent in the application of our rules. We have to improve infrastructure. We have to extend the NLEX to Rosario, La Union. We have to extend the SLEX to pass Lucena. We have to connect SLEX to NLEX. These things have to be done very quickly so that we can impress the foreign investors and show them that things are happening in our country very quickly.

Q: What are your views on the VFA?

Villar: It can be reviewed but you cannot have a unilateral review. An agreement has to be reviewed by both nations. Nevertheless, I think negotiations can be done with the US government for the improvement of the interpretation of this agreement. Scrapping this immediately is not necessary at this time. It needs improvement.

Q: You said one of the challenges of genuine leaders is how to beat the popularity syndrome. Is this the reason why you are with showbiz folks like Willie Revillame to foil the Kris Aquino and Boy Abunda team? Did you ever consider Willie as your VP?

Villar: To be fair with Willie, he has not applied. It never entered his mind to enter politics. I think he is doing quite well in *Wowowee*. But this is the game, this is precisely the system now. To me, if you want to reform the system, first you have to be elected. Otherwise, you can just dream. But you have to do something about that dream, and to do something about that dream you have to first get elected.

Q: Do you intend to give your reply on the double insertion issue?

Villar: I am very happy to report to you that all of the witnesses that they invited, all of them said not guilty or the accusations were simply not true. That is why it is now established that: 1. There is no double entry, it's not possible to have double entry; 2. There is no realignment because there are two roads and; 3. There is no overpricing because it's based on the zonal value.

I am very happy that the witnesses all cleared me because this is the only issue so far raised against me. I am very proud of this road because this shows that I am capable of building this kind of infrastructure. I have not made a single peso from it, I would like to make that clear. In fact, if you will review all the records you will see that the only people who made negative comments about C-5 are all presidential candidates.

Q: And some of them will become your VP.

Villar: Because they called for an investigation. But they heard the witnesses and a lot of them have changed their minds already. Somehow the issue has become clear to them that there is nothing wrong with that project and I am not guilty of anything. In fact, I'm very proud of that project.

Q: What role do you intend for Cong. Cynthia Villar to take in your administration?

Villar: I've always considered my wife as an equal. I've always respected her views. My wife is very competent and she would know what to do. I don't have to tell her.

Q: What do you attempt to achieve in your first 100 days?

Villar: First, is to establish that this term will not be a corrupt one—at least, the Office of the President.

Then there are a lot of things that can be done in each department. That is why it is very important that the next president will be capable of multitasking. You cannot be addressing one issue and say, 'Okay, I will address education first, then after that I will address the Mindanao conflict, and then the health problem next.' You cannot do that. You got to address all.

In fact, I would want as many projects that can be finished in the first 100 days. It is very important to perform well in the first 100 days in terms of all areas. There must be visible improvements in all areas of government because it is very important to inspire the bureaucracy.

Once you fail to inspire the bureaucracy, your term will have failed. Not only the first 100 days. The first 100 days is the first milestone, the first year is the second milestone.

Hopefully you can bid out already some very important projects on television, transparent, to establish the trend. There are so many things that can be done.

Competitiveness, for example very quickly, you immediately must create a competitive environment. In all of the heads of departments, you have to tell them that you have to compete. You have to tell college presidents to compete using quantifiable basis. For example, you have to tell them you have to be rated according to how your graduates perform in board examination.

As president, you must be prepared to be rated and compared with other presidents of the region. If I make it as president, I would be willing to be compared with the presidents of other countries.

There are so many indices abroad, the Human Development Index, Competitive Index, Corruption Index, we must aspire to improve our standing in all of these indices. These are the things that foreign investors will look for. If they see dramatic improvements in all of these indices then they can see that the country has suddenly become competitive. In 100 days you cannot accomplish all this, but you can lay the groundwork.

Q: What are the weaknesses of Manny Villar?

Villar: I'm not perfect. What I am just saying here is for all of my inadequacies, inefficiencies—I have a lot of failures in life (and) I have experienced difficulties—but when you look at me, you are looking at Manny Villar, what you see is what you get.

You're not looking at my mother, my father or the tycoon behind me. You are looking at Manny Villar.

Q: Are there more houses and lots to be given away?

Villar: I actually give houses and lots from time to time. I have been doing this for the past 10 to 15 years now. I will continue doing that probably for the rest of my life. If I make it as president when I retire, I will continue doing this kind of work. If I lose, I will still continue doing this kind of work.

Q: What step will you take to ensure that your real estate empire will not benefit from any government policy of protection?

Villar: We have laws on this, divestment etc., and they will have to be followed. But to me, everything will be transparent. It is important for things to be transparent to avoid these kinds of problems. ■