

19 January 2000

Hanging on Dental Floss?

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AS THEY SAY IN BULACAN, *PATAY LANG ANG WALANG katwiran*, similar to 'dead men tell no tales'. But I like to stretch it a bit further, to absurdity, if you will, *patay na nangangatwiran pa*, roughly meaning 'dead but still fighting'. These lines caricature what I deeply feel, some kind of an inexplicable 'positive cynicism', (if there's such a thing) about our present situation.

And so also why the title. I first thought of the expression 'hanging on dental floss' during our Rio campaign (1992 Earth Summit), inspired by a type of bikini I saw along the beaches of Ipanema, Copacabana, etc. Since then I've been using it, both lightly and seriously, to describe situations where I find myself in deep shit—and that is, defending the indefensible.



Where I stand

It's upbeat mood, a new high, for the anti-Erap forces once again after the January 17 trial impasse. Middle-of-the-roaders, already in a bind trying to justify their position in this crisis, are once again caught up in a new twist. The temptation to join the herd of anti's seems irresistible, especially as it is made to look like it's the only rational choice for any honest, 'thinking' Pinoy (as though the rest of us are plain stupid).

I'm for opening the controversial second envelope. I believe Clarissa Ocampo's testimony. I believe Jose Velarde is the same person as Erap. I believe Erap received the jueteng money from Chavit. I believe the so-called billions in question are private monies (not much to bleed from public funds, anyway), coming partly from jueteng but largely from wealthy Chinese and probably intended to finance Erap's candidates in the coming elections. I believe many of the wrongs and 'evil' ways imputed on Erap are true.

But these are all beliefs, and most probably shared by many. And I differ from those who want to impose their beliefs, especially those in media and other self-proclaimed spokespeople of the Filipino people

The trial court is a different animal altogether. It couldn't care less what I believe in. Its business is to hear an accusation, consider different sides and render a fair and impartial judgement,

How come I'm not with the anti-Erap camp? How come I'm not with the EDSA or Makati crowd? How come I'm not at Mendiola with the Erap partisans either? Where am I exactly?

The answer is simply, I'm a bit lost in the noise of extremely partisan voices.

I cannot sympathize wholly with either camp, though they each represent part of the truth and current crisis reality. I cannot identify with the replacement syndrome, that is, the thinking that replacing Erap holds the key to reform and renewal. I would take a chance with a deeply wounded Erap, hoping against hope he won't turn into an arrogant and vengeful survivor, if he survives at all.

My wish is for the stand-off to drag a little bit more. I'm wishing for more time to expose the defects of our social system inside out. I wish Erap to go sooner or later, but I wish he would lead a process of creative disintegration. I want him to go, bringing down the rest of the hypocrites with him.



So much is being papered over in this crisis. If only the stand-off would drag long enough to educate the mass of citizens, especially Pinoys outside of Metro Manila, about what's fundamentally wrong with our society, our economy, and the way they have been and continue to be governed across regime changes. What senator Enrile said to former president Ramos "*pare-pareho lang tayong mga basura*" (you/we are all garbage here) could not be more scathing. I wished he had added that the only difference is some garbage smell better and wrapped more nicely than others.

My dream scenario, a pipedream obviously, is somewhat of a helter-skelter or a 'Goodnight Saigon' (Billy Joel's "we all go down together"). I've said this to friends and associates many times before, from when Erap was being demonized as 'gangster president' very early on. Who knows if a much better renewal might emerge out of chaos?

Where I'm coming from

I'm in deep shit, so to speak. The only two times I used my right to vote I seemed to have cast it in favor of two 'evil presidents'—Marcos in 1965 and Erap in 1998.

Each time, though in totally different circumstances, I did gamble my own sets of values and standards for who I thought would be a good governor. In both cases I thought I chose the one who'd lead our country out of the rut. By the way, in both cases I was paying my taxes properly.

Why Marcos? It's for the vision, the intelligence, the decisiveness needed to lead our nation to modernity. Why Erap? For exactly the opposite reasons that made me choose Marcos—no sophistry, simple and 'touchable', lots of commonsense (native or street-smart wisdom, if you will), a big heart in the right place (for the poor).

Between these two regimes was a long story and a big change in my life. I became a rebel, a political prisoner for seven years, an adherent of new impossible (some say, cosmic) causes. In 1988, I found a new religion: sustainable development cum civil society. Increasingly, I was becoming cynical about rationality though I knew I continue to be captive to it, as in analyzing the causes and solutions to the condition of unsustainability.

I don't trust government. I never did, fully, anyway. But I never considered it unnecessary for the kind of changes I want to see happen in our society. Government is like a 'necessary evil' I have to live with



and confront for what reform it might bring about. I know my dream of a society without government is plain wishful thinking and might just be as unlivable as a society misgoverned.

Sorry to leave this hanging....Erap decided to step down just now.

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About the author

Isagani R. Serrano is Senior Vice President and Board Member of the Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement (PRRM). He's written for CIVICUS the following: *Civil Society in the Asia-Pacific*, 1994; *Humanity In Trouble But Hopeful* in CITIZENS, 1995; *Profile: Philippines* for CIVIC INDEX, 1997; *Coming Apart, Coming Together* in Civil Society at the Turn of the Millennium, 1999; *A Global Citizens' Commitment*, 1999. A community organizer, educator, writer, guitarist, 'farmer', and political prisoner for seven years during martial law in the Philippines. Trained in education and literature, community organization and development management. Holds a Master of Science in Environment & Development Education (MSc in EE/DE) from the South Bank University-London.

