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Crisis as Education

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IT'S NOT EVERY DAY THAT WE HAVE A CRISIS LIKE THAT OF the Erap presidency. Here's one learning opportunity not to be missed by educators who consider governance as central to building a sustainable society.

There's so much to learn about the present crisis but I've chosen to limit myself to a few of my favorite themes.

Crisis as actor

Is it the actor or the structure? the person or the institution? Erap or his government? both? Who's to blame for the present Philippine crisis? Such is the kind of questions that divide analysts of crisis situations like we face now. As in other cases the final word on this one is yet to come.

Already, even before the question could be debated Erap's critics had succeeded somehow in making it look like Erap is it. In other words, Erap is *the* problem, his removal *the* solution.

How it happened that an actor could be cut out of the structure and made to stand out as the heart of the matter should be an interesting case study. Some may celebrate it as a great media success story. No big deal for me really. It could just be about a self-fulfilling negative imaging helped into reality by the icon himself. The imagers had an easy target, to begin with.

The line "*Arrest the usual suspects!*" made famous by the movie classic *Casablanca* comes in very handy. Erap is the usual suspect—he drinks, gambles, womanizes, makes friends with his like and associates with people other people love to call "cronies" and "crooks". To his enemies, Erap's guilty even before his impeachment and public trial.

Like the hero in ribald tales in the habit of climbing up the queen's bedroom at bedtime, Erap is the 'lucky bastard' who made it to the top—the lofty place reserved only for monarchs, popes, and high-society. Erap—though hero to the *masa*—is the unwanted gatecrasher who 'raped' the sense and poise of the true-blue elite.

The negative media didn't bother or found no use to differentiate. Erap is not a dictator like Marcos, not a diplomatic manager like Ramos, and is the opposite of Cory in 'saintliness'. His regime is not particularly bad to be any different from that of Ramos' or Cory's. The issues against his regime are not new nor unique either and might equally stick on his predecessors'. If this regime had to fall due to corruption then past regimes—indeed many politicians and bureaucrats and big business—should equally be made to answer for their share in the commission and perpetuation of this social cancer.

Erap is the perfect straw man for everything that's gone wrong in running government. The persona—his lifestyle, his personalized leadership, and everything about his 'evil' ways—just doesn't fit. It doesn't fit into the mold of modern management where even corruption itself must be done in style and with legal sophistication. Erap seems to value friendship and loyalty more than the impersonal criteria required by technocracy. He doesn't know much or even care about philosophy and some such things but seems to go by his natural instincts and street-smart wisdom. His heart may truly beat for the poor but he doesn't seem to appreciate the intricacies of an anti-poverty strategy the way more sophisticated economists, politicians and NGO leaders do.

Does Erap's kind of style fit anywhere? It may sound bizarre but Erap may have some of the qualities needed for a more sustainable society.



I got a hint from Herman Daly and Reverend John Cobb who co-authored a book on sustainable development, *For the Common Good*. Our common future, they assert, lies in our collective ability and efforts to build a sustainable community (or communities) which could not be created under either capitalism or socialism. When asked about any historical parallel for their vision of society, Daly and Cobb alluded to a bygone era of enlightened feudalism where they say no one was excluded and everyone was cared for. That society or community was ruled by a caring patron who made sure everyone was included and secure.

Mindset and values matter

We each have our own biases, which is nothing to worry about. Bias in this sense is the slant where we come from when looking at things. It explains in part why our interpretation of the same reality differs, and so widely at times that we would call the other blind or stupid for not seeing things the way we do.

Reality is somewhat indifferent, though, no matter if our interpretation is near-perfect or totally blind. Our thinking can only grasp so much as the reality we try to figure out goes on changing, with or without us.

To me, life is only partly about certainties, the rest about speculation. What a boring world would it be otherwise. Many of our past and present troubles could be attributed to the thinking and decisions of those who were absolutely sure they were right and doing the right thing for you and me.

A few timely samples to consider. Some see Erap as the poor's hero despite his 'evil' ways. Others see Erap as the evil to be demonized, and Chavit Singson the hero to be canonized. The 'saintly whites' see the other as only 'sinly black'.

Some love money, whiskey and women. Others see these as 'evils' that men do and hate the guts of those who do so. Still others just pretend as in the Victorian fashion of hypocrisy where everybody knows everyone's doing it yet nobody wants to speak about it. Some just couldn't care less.

The *jueteng* scandal that put President Erap on the chopping block, so to say, is a curious boiling pot for clashing mindsets and values.



What's more worrisome for me is the kind of extremism and polarization that the Erap problem has generated. On one end, Erap's got many blind supporters who'd 'die' for him right or wrong. On the other, there's the bile and viciousness of some Erap opponents who first cast the stone but who themselves have much to account for with what they had done when they were (they still very much are) running the show. I'm reminded by the demonization that engulfed Eastern Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

A biased view of jueteng

Jueteng grabbed the attention of my friends Robin Broad and John Cavanagh in the course of their research for a book on Philippine development and environment problems in the late 1980s. They found it to be a mass activity in the barrio which people take for granted though they know it's prohibited by law and benefits mainly few powerful operators and their protectors in government.

This form of gambling is a fascinating underground casino economy that shows how small savings of ordinary people can be leveraged into millions, a leveraging practice not so different from the way Makati banks make money out of small deposits from the Ilocos region. It also involves both crude and sophisticated laundering operations made possible with bank complicity. The enormous amount of money generated bankrolls political campaigns, lines the pockets of corrupt officials, funds charitable activities. Some of it even ends up in the vaults of religious institutions.

Like all sorts of gambling, *jueteng* is sustained by a culture of speculation and *suerte-suerte* or hope for lady luck. But people gamble for different reasons. The poor gamble for a better future, the non-poor gamble to have more or just for fun.

Buying and selling in the stock market is a form of gambling. Currency trading is an even bigger form of gambling because it has transformed the international financial system into a global casino. In one day this casino economy causes the movement of over a trillion dollars in and out of national economies at a mere tap on the computer key. Such movement has little link to but makes claims on the real economy, the actual production and trade of goods and services. More, it can cause the collapse of economies, as in the 1997 Asian crisis. The banking 'mafia' of Makati is one big player in this money game.



Education about media

There's something common to writers and the Abu Sayyafs: both have weapons to hold people in ransom. Writers have their pen, the Abu Sayyafs their guns.

Not so long ago I had this to say to friends and comrades: aren't NPAs under greater burden to prove they're democratic and fair than, say, gospel barkers who use only words and evangelizing antics to win hearts and minds? Yes, but they explain things away on the grounds of expediency, as often they do.

But words and pens can ruin lives, too. Just look at how some media people frame their headlines and construct their stories. Like some armed rebels or bandits, quite a few media people seem to be just as unmindful of the meanings and implications of the power in their hands.

For good or ill, mass media (TV, radio, print, movies, billboards, internet, etc.) has more to do with our everyday education than formal schooling. They have more influence on the way we think, behave, work, eat, dress, enjoy life. Maybe because schools are more into preparing us for the future while mass media provides the staple helping us through our daily grind.

The survival or fall of Erap will be determined by many things but media will certainly be among the crucial factors. I think the present Erap predicament is due in large part to failure in communication. Reagan was not a better president but communicated well. Erap failed to communicate with those who from the start never liked him or wanted him to succeed. Likewise he failed to communicate with hostile mass media and underestimated what it could do for or against him.

Speaking for the people

In this heady, polluted crisis atmosphere "people" has been invoked so much that it can stand next to Jesus Christ in the company of superstars. Ditto for the equally abused term "civil society", god's newest 'gift' to sustainable development.

Erap says he has the people's mandate. Gloria says the voice of the people calls for Erap's resignation. Radicals, communists and other do-gooders assert the people want Erap out. Some self-proclaimed NGO leaders claim that civil society wants Erap to go. The Philippine Daily



Inquirer wants us to believe that the only correct civil society position is *Erap resign!*

Really? Who has the right to speak for the people anyway? In my book, no one but the concerned people themselves or whoever it is they allow to speak for them. The right to speak or the right to silence is a sovereign right of every individual that only he/she can exercise or choose to cede to another person.

The trouble with our democracy

A citizen can bullshit President Erap and get away with it. The impeachment trial takes this message farther—no one is above the law and Erap is just like you and me though he's not quite like anyone of us. It's a wonderful democracy but not without the usual hassles .

Every voice or every vote counts, so goes common wisdom. There are over 70 million of us thinking, believing, valuing, doing different things. And there are over 20 million voters taking one or other position on this crisis. How then do we count each voice or vote? What about the loudest voices or the sounds of silence? Or the voice of Joker, Estelito or Davide? What weight should each of them carry?

What and who entitle them or you and me to count and weigh those votes and voices is not the issue. We make judgement from moment to moment as we speculate (gamble) on any number of choices every minute, as it were.

Since we cannot possibly listen to every voice or vote, will an honest sampling do to make a fair judgement? But statistics tell and don't tell. An individual can be just as right or wrong as a mass of demonstrators.

It's a tricky situation, as many things cut both (or in multiple) ways. We're in a bind obviously. It seems there's no avoiding the same age-old questions about democracy that persist till now.

There's no intention to make light of radical reformers or to divine legalistic democracy and moderation. To me, any idea (including extremist ones) has a value in and for itself that must be respected. The best and worst ideas that have caused mass movements and social changes were once only ideas of an individual or a minority. It's the imposition of any idea on others that I resist.



Raising these questions is no idle exercise. It makes a case for an attitude of openness and healthy mistrust of any, but especially, fixed and strong partisan judgements, including those of my own.

Right to be governed rightly

The right of every citizen to good governance goes without saying. The problem is, good governors and good governance are hard to find.

Mistrust of government is widespread and increasing. The reasons are many. Transparency, rule of law, accountability and democratic participation are accepted principles of governance that are breached daily.

Corruption, like prostitution, has been with us for as long as anyone can remember. It's not unique to the Erap regime. Erap's predecessors may be more sophisticated but they're not clean either. It's ironic that Erap who's made it his major agenda to combat corruption would be the first celebrated target.

The problem runs deep down the barangay and reaches up to the highest places. In two areas alone—taxation and procurement—we can see how corruption has become the SOP of everyday public service. According to one study, only about 40 centavos of every tax-peso actually goes to the Treasury while the rest is pocketed by tax collectors and auditors. In civil works contracts, taxpayers are cheated by as much as 50 percent of total project costs in the form of bribes or commissions (or the so-called “for the boys” and “SOPs”) pocketed by politicians and bureaucrats.

Corruption is an international problem, though most studies seem to focus almost solely on so-called corrupt Third World governments. “There is always somebody who pays, and international business is generally the main source of corruption,” says George Soros.

Corruption thrives on secrecy, but has less opportunity where there is more transparency. A liberal policy on *jueteng* is sound. Speculation or gambling cannot be legislated out of existence, to begin with. The state can invest in education, if people think gambling is really that bad, and leave individuals to decide for themselves. This is pretty much in line with the Dutch policy on forbidden drugs. Legalization of *jueteng* would make this activity transparent. More, it could create disincentives and impose punitive sanctions against corrupt officials and operators who profit from the honest speculation of so many.



Effective does not necessarily mean accountable. The Suharto regime delivered dramatic results in poverty reduction in Indonesia but it was judged as the most corrupt by one study of the Transparency International. Besides, the Suharto government has yet to fully account for its terrible human rights record.

A nation not willing to finance its own poverty reduction programs and social development deserves little respect. The Erap government will have to do more to make taxation, planning and budgeting truly democratic and social-leveling instruments.

As taxpayers and voters, we demand our right to good governance. We can always hold government to account for their promises, for the consequences of their decisions. Our right extends to a justifiable act of removing an unaccountable government.

A high point in civic initiative is where citizens depend less on government and more on themselves. In this rapidly globalizing world the central government is not only a big disappointment in defending national interest but also helps facilitate further loss of sovereignty of local communities.

The quality of governance cannot rise much higher than the existing level of political culture and practice of the governed. In this sense we deserve the kind of government we get. If we're not getting the right kind that means we still need to exert more to deserve one.





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.

