

Analysis

Calamities as catalysts of political upheavals

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Catastrophic events, such as the devastation wrought by Tropical Storm “Ondoy” and Tropical Storm “Pepeng,” sometimes prove to be catalysts of political upheavals with far-reaching consequences for the course of politics in the country.

Ondoy and Pepeng have already drastically redrawn the political map of the May 2010 presidential election more than any other nature-triggered calamity that hit the country during the past 40 years.

They are the worst disasters to shake the country, in political and security terms, since the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo in June 1991.

The Pinatubo event produced the second largest terrestrial eruption of the 20th century. It was purely a natural catastrophe, unlike the Ondoy and Pepeng disasters in which the flooding was not mainly caused by an extraordinary volume of rainfall. The flooding was aggravated by manmade abuse of the urban drainage infrastructure (i.e., clogging of esteros, creeks and rivers with mountains of plastic garbage bags).

Pinatubo’s eruption had worldwide effect. The volcano ejected roughly 10 billion metric tons of volcanic ash and lahar, more than the eruption of Krakatoa in Indonesia in 1883. The ash cloud, which covered an area of 125,000 square kilometers, brought darkness to much of Central Luzon and Metro Manila.

Fine ash fell as far away as the Indian Ocean and satellites tracked the ash cloud several times around the globe.

Day turned into night

Volcanic ash darkened the skies, turning day into night. It fell like fine snow and blanketed the streets and rooftops.

I remember that my car, parked in Makati City, was covered with a two-inch layer of fine volcanic ash in a matter of hours. Carburetors of cars were choked by fine volcanic ash, leaving them stalled in the streets.

Lahar buried many towns in Central Luzon. A total of 364 communities and 2.1 million people were affected by the eruption. It destroyed more than 8,000 houses, and caused heavy damage to agriculture, roads, bridges and communications systems.

Lahar destroyed 800 sq km of rice land and killed almost 800,000 livestock and poultry.

US bases abandoned

The eruption also had ramifications in foreign policy. The eruption forced the United States to abandon two of its largest military bases in the Asia-Pacific region—the naval base in Subic Bay and

air base in Clark, Pampanga.

The lahar deposit on Clark's runways grounded US planes and disrupted aviation traffic, accelerating the US decision to end the lease of the bases with the Philippines in 1992.

The end of the lease was the target of agitation by Filipino nationalists and a long-standing irritant of Philippines-US relations. Lahar did the job for the nationalists.

Although the effects of the Pinatubo eruption were more far-reaching than the Ondoy and Pepeng devastation, the weather disturbances brought about domestic political consequences that are expected to decide the course of political change in the 2010 elections.

Noynoy phenomenon

The storms' devastation cannot be claimed to be responsible for the phenomenal early lead of opposition Sen. Benigno "Noynoy" Aquino III in the opinion polls of Social Weather Stations in September.

Coming at a critical time, when the country was just nine months away from the May 2010 presidential election, the storms exposed the appalling vulnerability of the Philippines to disasters.

Ondoy and Pepeng also highlighted the inadequacy of the country's capacity to provide relief services to the Filipino people and to respond to the extensive dislocation of infrastructure and productive assets.

The woeful response of the government to deliver relief goods to flood victims and to shield the vulnerable population from the ravages of the storms undoubtedly translated into a heavy electoral baggage for the administrations' majority coalition.

Heavy cross to bear

The devastation has served to worsen the unpopularity of the Arroyo administration, a heavy cross to bear for its probable presidential candidate, Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro Jr.

While the government bore the brunt of public criticism for the breakdown of its relief services, none of the presidential aspirants, including Aquino, emerged as heroes or saviors of the people.

None of the presidential hopefuls could make an issue of the government failure to alleviate the state of national calamity declared by President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.

Partisan debate muted

The scale of the tragedy and devastation transcended the political divide between the administration and the opposition. It muted partisan debate.

In the wake of the assessment of the damage to life and property, old plans on the urban renewal of Metro Manila and its environs, many of which are still inundated, were dusted off and given to new commissions to implement.

The issue of whether any of the presidential aspirants is best qualified to implement the master plan for the rehabilitation of Metro Manila has now come up as the criterion for electing the next president to replace a corruption-ridden administration.

Newfound sponsors and supporters of Aquino claim that results of the latest SWS survey reflect the

deep-seated clamor for a leader the people “can trust.”

Surveys before the storms

The surveys were conducted before the storms lashed the country and reflected the sentiment stemming from the public mourning over the death of President Corazon Aquino—a wave that her son has ridden to boost his electoral chances.

The question still remains valid: Are Senators Manuel Villar and Francis Escudero, deposed President Joseph Estrada or even Vice President Noli de Castro—all of whom are struggling to catch up with the 60-percent rating of Aquino—the leaders the Filipinos can trust?

The devastation left by the storms has introduced a new issue to the presidential race: The capacity of the next president to carry out massive reconstruction, to reform the zoning laws in the metropolis and to unclog its waterways.

The task, for example, of resettling squatters living on the banks of flooded waterways to safer places and not sending them back to the flood-prone catch basin of Marikina City’s Valley of Death requires political will.

This task involves more than looking for a leader the nation can trust.

Cory legacy wearing thin

Already, the Cory legacy of good governance is wearing thin on the escutcheon of Senator Aquino.

The task requires him to lift his game higher than being a coy and phlegmatic recruit for the presidency, who relies on the good dynastic legacy left by his parents.

Senator Aquino needs to re-polish his armor and present himself as a capable executive and administrator equal to the challenge raised by the magnitude of the rehabilitation of the wrecked urban infrastructure of Metro Manila and neighboring provinces.

He has to do more than mouth pious shibboleths of good governance.

The devastation brought by the storms offers a moment for all the presidential aspirants to reveal their qualifications to lead the nation instead of presenting themselves as leaders who can be trusted or who can look after the interests of overseas Filipino workers, or who can act as champions of the masses.

P.S.

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