

Philippines: Are elections a right option for the left?

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Progressive candidates are testing electoral politics once again, at a time when experts see a breakdown of the political party system

Who's afraid of the left? "I don't think they should fear me because all the issues that we're fighting for, like the regularization of workers, are normal demands to improve the line of the working class," says Elmer Labog, or Ka Bong as he is popularly known in the labor movement.

This time, no less than Labog, who chairs the militant Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU) that big industrialists had dreaded for its sustained militancy among the ranks of organized labor for over four decades now, is gunning for the Senate.

The 66-year-old labor leader and former Bayan Muna Party-list Rep. Neri Colmenares, a prominent human-rights lawyer and activist, are running in tandem under the Makabayang Coalition ng Mamamayan, or Makabayan, which already has five party-list groups leading the "progressive" bloc in the House of Representatives.

Labog noted that the majority of businesses are actually the small- and medium-scale enterprises that were severely affected in the Covid-19 pandemic. "They should be funded as a matter of support, directly from government since government has the resources and capacity to do this."

Provided, he added, that "those funds that should be part of the solution to the pandemic should be distributed to those who would really need them."

History has shown, noted Labog, that the path taken by the left-wing movement has been to be "fiscalizers of abuses of those who are in power." In the House of Representatives, he said, they provide the check-and-balance against interest groups to help address the widening inequality of wealth in this country.

"We really need a Senate counterpart. We have bills that do not find a counterpart in the Senate," said Colmenares as he explained why he is running again after two failed attempts for a Senate seat.

It is widely believed he can easily regain his old seat in the Lower House, being one of the high-profile fiscalizers during his three terms in the Lower Chamber. He also continues to lead Bayan Muna, which has consistently topped highly contested party-list elections.

"Pero malaki siyempre ang boses ng Senado kesa Kongreso [But the Senate certainly has a bigger voice than Congress]. We have conducted congressional inquiries on various issues and it has been effective in the sense that we're very noisy, [but we] are just one of the 300 members of Congress, while in the Senate you're one of the 24," he said.

A declared socialist

"Hindi na pwede 'yung [It's no longer possible] business as usual," according to Bukluran ng Manggagawa sa Pilipinas (BMP) chair Leodegario de Guzman, 62, or Ka Leody. He joined the presidential race to "challenge the traditional politicians, their dynasties and the elite."

"Kundi man mga bilyonaryo, supported ng mga malalaking korporasyon 'yung kanilang pagtakbo. Interes na naman ng mga kartel at malalaking korporasyon ang isusulong tulad nang dati [If it's not a billionaire, it's a big corporation supporting their run. They will then be expected to push the interests of the cartels and big corporations just like before]," he told the *BusinessMirror*.

As he put it, *"bobolahin na naman 'yun mga tao sa eleksiyon. Dadaanin lang sa laki ng mga billboard, sa dami ng mga commercials, pakaing trapo-style, motherhood statements ng pagbabago para sa buhay ng mga manggagawa at magsasaka para lang manalo sa puwesto [They will just dupe again the people in an election. They will put up big billboards, with as many commercials as they can get, feed them trapo-style, spout motherhood statements of change for the lives of the workers and farmers—all these, just to win a seat]."*

Ka Leody said he filed his certificate of candidacy as the standard bearer of the Laban ng Masa Coalition, along with political economist Dr. Walden Bello as his running mate, to finally "challenge the big corporations which had always used traditional politicians to protect their interests. In 2016, he had run for the Senate under the Partido Lakas ng Masa (PLM), but lost. He was also a nominee of the Sanlakas party-list in 2013.

Ka Leody said he intends to win based on a platform that would zero in on the specific problems of the Filipino working class. *"Ang puno ng problema ay 'yung mga batas na nag-le-legalize sa paglaki ng yaman ng iilan at nag-le-legalize din sa paghihirap ng mamamayan [The root of the problem are the laws that legalize massive accumulation of wealth of a few, and also legalize the poverty of our people],"* he said.

Militancy as a way of life

A declared socialist, Ka Leody confided he had also once dreamed of being rich by pursuing customs administration at the Philippine Maritime Institute (PMI) right after finishing high school in his hometown of Naujan in Oriental Mindoro in 1976. During his student days, he was never an activist, but he knew how to be poor, having been born to a peasant couple, and being the seventh in a brood of 13 children.

While in college, he worked at the Aries Philippines Inc., a garments factory where he was hired as a manual worker until becoming its master cutter. He later became active in the union and in 1978, their Federation of Free Workers (FFW)-affiliated union went on strike.

He embraced militancy after then opposition leader Benigno Aquino Jr. was gunned down on August 21, 1983, triggering public outrage in the streets.

During the "Tarlac to Tarmac March," Ka Leody went undertime from his job to join the street protesters as they entered the capital. He then enlisted himself with the "Justice for Aquino, Justice for All," one of the prime movers of the massive street protests that led to the downfall of the late strongman Ferdinand Marcos in 1986.

At his workplace, Ka Leody was accused of "sabotage" for leading a protest action right inside the factory. Dismissed from work despite his 12 years in the garments factory, Ka Leody joined the KMU as a full-time labor organizer.

His wife, the former Marie Tolentino, an employee at the Development Bank of the Philippines, tried

to make ends meet for their family by setting up a home-based “made-to-order” sewing business. Being a certified master cutter, Ka Leody assisted in the production work, while being deployed as a KMU labor organizer in Metro Manila.

After 10 years with the KMU, Ka Leody found himself embroiled in a political dispute within the left-wing labor movement and eventually sided with a breakaway faction that formed the BMP in 1993.

Like Ka Leody, KMU’s Labog said he was also bound to lead a normal life before being exposed to the labor movement. After graduating from high school at the Catholic-run St. Mary’s College in his hometown of Bayombong, Nueva Vizcaya, in 1972, he took up forestry at the University of the Philippines in Los Baños.

But when martial law was declared a few months later, Labog was herded inside a detention camp following a massive crackdown on mass organizations that were declared illegal on campus. He had just joined the left-wing Samahang Demokratiko ng Kabataan, or SDK, although in high school he was already influenced by his cousins, then active members of the outlawed Kabataang Makabayan.

Labog completed basic subjects in forestry before he left for Manila to work as a hotel waiter and eventually a bartender as an “extra”—the term then used for contractual workers in the service sector. When he led the fight for their rights to be regularized, Labog lost his job, along with other contractual workers, at the Regent Hotel.

He tried his luck with DMG Corp., but the general manager found him too frail for manual work in their automotive assembly firm. Instead, she recommended him as a bartender at the Manila Hotel where he eventually joined the KMU.

In 1982, after militant labor leaders led by then KMU founding chairman Felixberto Olalia were rounded up by the military, Labog felt it was time for him to work full time with the labor center. But as a labor organizer, he was initially deployed in the Southern Tagalog region. He was later involved in the first zone-wide strike at the Bataan Export Processing Zone.

During the 1985 KMU national convention, Labog was finally elected to the KMU board led by the late KMU chairman Rolando Olalia, as secretary for health, cooperative and economic development and later, as deputy secretary general and as general secretary. In 2004, Labog succeeded the late KMU chairman Crispin Beltran when the latter was elected Anakpawis party-list representative.

Election, ‘one part’ of the struggle

Even his close friends and relatives were perplexed. But Colmenares said that from the start, he had expected elections would be a challenge since the legal left has always been with the opposition and is independent from well-funded interest groups.

“He is really serious in running, not for himself, but for the majority of our people who remain marginalized. So we will always support him,” remarked businessman Michael Cruz. The latter’s wife Liberty is a cousin of Neri, who, along with popular entertainment celebrity Angel Locsin, belongs to an illustrious clan in Bacolod City.

The Cruzes actually invited Neri and his wife Shali for a family dinner one weekend to ask how the family could be of help in the campaign, even if the couple were bent on supporting Vice President Leni Robredo and her 1Sambayan.

Incidentally, Colmenares was one of the main convenors of 1Sambayan, although he was there as an individual advocate. He was topping the preliminary voting for their choice of the senatorial lineup,

only to be eased out of the 12-man opposition slate, which was dominated later by the political right and traditional politicians.

Colmenares maintained he would continue to respect the 1Sambayan decision, but said he was firm in his candidacy even if the “reality” in a national election is the financial resources that usually make a difference in the campaign.

It was apparent to him that an influential segment of the fragile coalition that bannered uniting the political opposition was influenced by right-wing politicians and civil society groups. They had successfully touched base with the old political “elite” and big capitalists which found a common enemy under the current dispensation.

Colmenares said that based on past elections, the legal left has emerged with a mass base of about 3.5 million, but with its own nationwide political machinery, which is important in forging alliances compared to other candidates who merely rely on the administration and the LGUs for their votes.

He also noted the “growing realization” among fragmented progressive forces, agreeing on critical issues. “Now, more than ever, whatever differences they had is now overshadowed by the overwhelming factor of the problem issues,” he said.

Ka Leody, on the other hand, observed that most opposition groups merely wanted to focus on an “anti-Marcos, anti-Duterte” campaign. *“Kako kahit mahadlangan natin ang pagbabalik ng mga Marcos, kung kami’y contractual pa rin, wala pa rin pagbabago sa buhay ng mga manggagawa at kung ang mga magsasaka ay tuloy pa ring nahihirapan sa Rice Tariffication law, walang mapapala sa bagong president [I said that even if we succeeded in blocking a Marcos return, if people remain contractuals, there’s no improvement in their lives, and farmers continue to languish under the Rice Tariffication law, there’s no benefit to gain from a new president],”* he said.

Meanwhile, Labog said that “It would be a surrender of our basic principles to bow down to the whims and practices of big business and surrender the demands of the workers.”

Last October 30, an “all-labor federations assembly” convened for the first time at the Quezon City Sports Club to declare their support for a “Labor Vote” by endorsing Colmenares, Labog and FFW’s Sonny Matula on their senatorial ticket.

The KMU leader thinks it’s time for businessmen and industrialists to be educated and open-minded on the matter of sustaining the struggle for higher wages and benefits as well as better working conditions. “These are our legitimate and birth-given rights, and that’s the bottom line,” Labog said.

Colmenares said they really don’t mind being identified with the left during the campaign. What they condemned was the “red-tagging,” which he found dangerous under the current dispensation.

“Duterte is capable of violence and it is possible that violence will be employed [during the campaign],” according to Colmenares. He described the situation as a “paroxysm of rage of a dying dynasty.”

“He is losing. Duterte is a lame duck. He is losing power slowly. If he doesn’t know it yet, then we’re very sorry for him,” Colmenares concluded.

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