

## **Mindnao, Philippines: Dios Mabalos, Jess, “Proud to be a Nagueño”**

Monday 27 August 2012, by [SANTOS Soliman, Jr](#) (Date first published: 24 August 2012).

NAGA CITY is still reeling, coming to grips, with the big and untimely loss of one of its best and beloved sons in former long-time Mayor Jesse “Jess” M. Robredo. So much has been said of this good man and his good work, yet one senses that there will never be enough that can be said about him – thus, a bit like Jose Rizal in that sense. And also somewhat like Rizal in his time, his countrymen did not seem to fully realize or appreciate his greatness until he was gone. (Is this syndrome part of our tragedy as a nation which needs a regular dose of tragic heroes like Ninoy Aquino whose violent death was also being commemorated along with that of Jess?) But not so in his beloved Naga, as we here knew soon enough that we had a gem of a public servant. *He was our local treasure that we let go to become a national treasure.* As a former Naga City Councilor once put it in his Explanatory Statement to the 1995 Empowerment Ordinance of Naga City (for which Mayor Robredo was cited in his 2000 Ramon Magsaysay Award), *“Then we can let the nation learn from us.”* (How uncanny that President Magsaysay himself died in a plane crash, another major national tragedy involving one who was beloved by his people.)

While we in Naga can say hands down that “It is a good time to be a Nagueño,” it is still very arguable for all of us countrymen to say, as President Noynoy Aquino does, that *“It is a good time to be a Filipino.”* But it is precisely phenomena like Robredo’s Naga experience from below of good local governance that should give us some hope that, with a critical mass of such good local governance experiences (and there are of course other *galing-pook*’s), “This nation can be great again,” as another late President, Ferdinand Marcos, once said. The impetus for *Kaya Natin*, a movement as well as mantra adopted by Robredo (it was a mantra also of still another former President, Fidel Ramos), comes mainly *from below*. Look, however, at all the presidential names that have just been mentioned alongside that of Robredo. In this regard, who is not to say that he too was of presidential timber, if only the system would give him a chance?

Perhaps, one insight here for the structure of governance is to restructure it so that the locus of sovereignty of a very highly centralized presidential-unitary system of government is significantly or qualitatively devolved to the local levels — to better deal with problems at their respective levels, rather than constantly and unreliably relying on the central government, especially its all-powerful President. In this way, channels are provided for the good use of local power that should draw in the best local talents for the purpose (but it has also seen the double-bladed bad use of local power by local warlords and traditional politicians). Devolution was of course the concept, though limited by the unitary framework, underlying the Local Government Code of 1991. This Code came at the time of Robredo’s first term (1988-92) as Mayor of Naga City. And thus an enabling legal infrastructure and a certain particularly good local talent converged. The rest, as they say, is history.

Naga will never be the same again. Much of the story of Robredo’s brand of local governance has been told and is being (re)told, with a vengeance, in the wake of his untimely passing. And we thus continue to learn more from him, from his leadership, and from his character. My own first personal encounter with Jess was as a cause-oriented peace advocate engaging a local official during his first few months as Mayor in 1988. Our non-governmental coalition, the Hearts of Peace (HOPE), shepherded then by the late Nagueña “Mommy Jean” Llorin, initiated a largely symbolic “people’s

declaration” of Naga City as a “Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality” (ZOPFAN) during the Peñafrancia Fiesta in September 1988. This peace zone was basically an assertion of the people’s right to peace, particularly from the armed hostilities between the AFP and the NPA. Jess gave us his moral and, quite importantly, political, support for this people’s initiative, which mayoral support, in the final analysis, was indispensable for this initiative to have a fighting chance at all.

The Naga peace zone initiative at that time tended to generate resistance from the security sector, especially the military (which was already in “total war” mode as declared by then President Cory Aquino after the collapse of the GRP-NDF peace talks in 1987), and even the local Catholic Church hierarchy. Both sectors were gripped by the scare that the “Reds” were taking advantage of, if not behind, the initiative. Ironically, the rebel CPP-NPA-NDF would later issue its national-level policy against peace zones which it viewed as counter-insurgency. So, one could imagine that the support he gave to the initiative took a certain amount of *courage, boldness or daring* on the part of Jess. He was then a very young (30-year old), first-time Mayor whose then Lakas ng Bansa group had a minority of only two against the big majority of eight from the opposition Cory Coalition group in the City Council of a city that was long a bastion of Catholic conservatism. Jess thus early on reflected a brand of leadership that was *open to new ideas and initiatives*, to experiment, and even to take risks, whether of a political or security nature, but with the *remarkable down-to-earth people skills to win over support* for his programs.

The risks for Jess with his support for the Naga peace zone were underscored by the fact that it was actually the country’s first ever peace zone, still an experimental concept. It may not have fully developed or been sustained here but it was an early example of concepts *that spread to and were replicated in many other places*. This was most notably in the case of peace zones in Central Mindanao, with a quite different (GRP-MILF) armed conflict context and more than a decade after the Naga peace zone became dormant. This was therefore just one of the earlier of many other Robredo-led Naga initiatives that would spread and be replicated elsewhere. Fr. Nelson Tria, himself a former Chairperson of another such initiative, the Naga City People’s Council, in his homily at a mass for Jess lying in state at the Archbishop’s Palace, described those initiatives as “*not just causing ripples but making waves*” – if I may add, uncannily like his plane crash (and death) at sea did, literally and figuratively.

A number of these Robredo-led Naga initiatives are documented and analyzed in the annals of the *Galing-Pook* awards for excellence in local governance, and in a growing number of academic studies, notably from foreign universities. And while Jess was not the writing-type like Rizal, he does have a book about it all, but which is not so well known — *Making Local Governance Work: The Naga City Model*, published by the city government in 2003 as a selection mainly of his papers delivered before various national and international forums. This obscure book, if reprinted, might now become a posthumous national bestseller, given our better appreciation for what we have just lost.

By the start of his second term as Mayor of Naga City in 1992, Jess had a vision of progress for the city as “Uswag Naga 1998” in time for its 50<sup>th</sup> charter anniversary that later year. This sort of aligned with the “Philippines 2000” vision for newly-industrialized country (NIC) status espoused by then newly-elected President Ramos with whom Jess became politically aligned in Lakas-NUCD. But Jess purposefully chose the “cleaner” commercial rather than the “dirtier” industrial path for Naga. Those of us who have lived in Naga during the pre-Robredo years, and then the Robredo years up to 2010, could not but note the fast economic progress of the city, with the corresponding lively changes in its urban landscape. Those who had left or just visited the city during the pre-Robredo years would hardly recognize it during the later Robredo years, except for some old landmarks or haunts that are gladly still there for the Naga that we remember. Of course, “it’s more fun” now in Naga. Which is as it should be for a place that had once been referred to by an old American Jesuit

in Ateneo de Naga (the high school alma mater of Jess) as "*An Maogmang Lugar*" ("The Happy Place"), a slogan reprised for the city's 50<sup>th</sup> charter anniversary.

Jess was *progressive* not only in the sense of economic progress and of openness to new ideas but also in the sense of balancing growth with equity for the poor and of an egalitarian ethic. The latter has become legendary with all the stories told of his literally down-to-earth conduct, especially in the equal importance treatment, whether at work or otherwise, of city folk from all walks of life, and then his "signature" casual t-shirt and walking shorts attire. But *there is more substance than form to this egalitarianism*. This is best exemplified by the Robredo-led Naga "Kaantabay sa Kauswagan" ("Partners in Development") Program of housing and supporting socio-economic development for the urban poor. And to give credit where it is due (as Jess would have wanted), this was designed with the help of the Naga City Urban Poor Federation (NCUPF) led by its late long-time President "Tio Oning" Perez and its support NGO called Community Organization of the Philippines Enterprise (COPE) Foundation led by veteran community organizer Francia Clavecillas. It was eventually institutionalized in 1998 by a landmark City Ordinance authored by City Councilor Jaime Jacob. In this way, the poorer sector of Naga - not just the business sector — is seen as a partner too and a beneficiary in the economic development and growth of the city. And one does not see here the violent demolitions and dispersals that regularly occur in other cities of the country, especially in Metro-Manila.

In a manner of speaking, therefore, "*everybody happy, for richer or for poorer*," in this "Happy Place." Aside from the tangible impact in terms of security of land tenure and of housing infrastructure for urban poor communities, as well as direct and indirect contributions to the local economy, there have been the just as significant intangible impact on them in terms of civic pride, sense of community, dignity of the poor (with a corresponding changed, more enlightened perception of the poor by the richer sectors), and the bringing home of a message of hope to the urban poor sector in the region and elsewhere in the country. Which was what Jess actually *was and is* in terms of good governance for the rest of the country - *a message of hope*. For a critical mass of the urban poor in Naga, that hope has already been largely fulfilled by Jess and thus their undying gratitude for this particular legacy of his, their undying love for him. While most other Nagueños might be said to be proud of Jess or to like Jess, it is the urban poor sector that *truly loves* him. It is *they whose individual lives he has touched the most and made the biggest difference* in rising above poverty. It is no wonder that they are his most solid political base or constituency, the grassroots level of his "political machine," if you will.

Jess was no Superman, even if he seemed so to many here. As has been written often enough about Naga's remarkable performance in all aspects of governance, this is certainly not the work of only one man. It is the work of a people who have found a leader who could show them a goal, a direction and the means to get there. He was a receptive and supportive mayor who worked with and *provided the enabling conditions* for dedicated and talented city officials and personnel and for active and vibrant civil society organizations *to achieve a creative synergy*. His inspiring leadership by example and personal approachability would be like a magnet for the best and the brightest sons and daughters of the city to offer their services to it in various ways. With all the local intellectual resources around as well as coming home to Naga, there was no real need here for an intellectual giant type of a leader. Often more important for governance than intelligence or emotional quotients is what one might call relational quotient, something which Jess had in abundance. He often built relationships of trust through his leadership style which *understood the value of consultations, both formal and informal*. One particular form that this took was informal dialogues, sharings or brainstormings after office hours on matters of development with key city officials and civil society leaders. These would often enough lead to the conceptualization of several innovative programs and ordinances like "Kaantabay sa Kauswagan" and the Empowerment Ordinance.

The latter in particular initiated a system for partnership in local governance between the city government and the people of Naga through the creation of a Naga City People's Council as the key official structure for people's participation in the city government's decision-making. As we noted above, it was this which was particularly cited in the Magsaysay Award for Jess. But he did not rest on this laurel. In a keynote address to the NCPC in 2001, one year after the Award, he said "We are interested to go further, aside from having the structure and having the institution. We would like to have *a meaningful relationship* with the NCPC. The challenge is posed to you and at the same time we are also accepting the challenge of finding new ways on how we can enhance the working relationship that we have." Then, early in the following year 2002, he engaged my services as an independent consultant to conduct a rapid field appraisal to assess or evaluate the implementation and impact of the Empowerment Ordinance and the NCPC, with a view to make corresponding recommendations for their strengthening, improvement and sustainability. For Jess, *it was not only a matter of doing things beyond the expectations of people but also making them part of the doing of those things.*

At this point, ***Dios Mabalos*** (the Bikol equivalent of "Thank You," but literally translated as "God will repay"), Jess, for all you have given to and have made of our beloved Naga, of which you were so **"Proud to be a Nagueño."** For all your accomplishments, particularly as our Mayor, we are rightly proud of you as fellow Nagueños. You are our *"Pogi"* in more ways than one. For what Naga has become and has come to mean, largely due to your work as its Mayor, each of us are all the more "Proud to be a Nagueño." We once said "Then we can let the nation learn from us." And so, we let you go to answer a natural higher calling for you, that of heading the crucial Department of the Interior and Local Government with general supervision over all local governments as well as the Philippine National Police. By all accounts, which we are hearing loud and clear now, your usual leadership by example was already making reformist headway just two years into your new job for the country. But, alas, this has been cut too short.

Before closing the DILG chapter of the good governance work of Jess, there is one particular aspect of his work as DILG Secretary that has escaped general attention. It is that the President's constitutional power of general supervision over the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao was actually delegated to him, ironically as a consequence of an unrepealed 2009 Administrative Order of then President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. In this additional capacity, Jess oversaw President Aquino's much needed ARMM governance reform initiative that took off with the initial appointments of OICs there in December 2011. By mid-2012, it was reported that people were starting to feel the changes in the ARMM in terms of cleaning up corruption and the electoral system as well as more effective delivery of basic services and various projects. And these contributions of Jess for Muslim Mindanao were not forgotten by our Muslim brethren when their *Eid'l Fitr* prayers at the end of the Muslim most holy month of Ramadan, while the search for Jess was still ongoing the day after his plane crashed, were *for peace and for him.*

What an honor too that Muslims would give to someone publicly known to be an avid Catholic devotee of *Nuestra Señora de Peñafrancia* in the old *Ciudad de Nueva Caceres* (with all the centuries-old painful memories of the Spanish-Moro wars that this conjures). This just goes to show that gratitude, solidarity and the human spirit have no religious or ethnic bounds. I am particularly happy to note this because of my own advocacy for peace in Muslim Mindanao. I would occasionally address this advocacy to Jess who would welcome it, more so in his new capacity with national responsibilities over internal security, peace and order. The wild thought may have also crossed his mind: if only the whole country could be declared a peace zone.

If only Jess were still with us, I doubt that we would let him rest in the continuing work of good governance of this oftentimes ungovernable country. Unfortunately for us, let him rest in peace in the best possible peace zone, having already entered the pearly gates of heavenly peace. Fortunately

for us, he has shown us his way, he has left us his legacy, for the rest of the way forward for us. When chancing upon his bosom barangay-mate buddy and former City Councilor Jun Lavadia near the Archbishop's Palace wake for Jess, we could at first only mutually shake our heads and mutter a few words in disbelief or denial about this sudden and untimely big loss. But then Jun said something simple but profound, **"Yaon pa man kita."** ("We are still here."). I think Jess would have liked the Nagueño fighting spirit in those words. To this, he would likely shout back, from where he is, the standard shout reply to shouts of *"Viva la Virgen!"* during the Peñafrancia fiesta processions: *"Viva!"* ("Long live!") Indeed, *Viva Jess!*

**Soliman M. Santos, Jr.,** Naga City, 24 August 2012

---

---

**P.S.**

\* SOLIMAN M. SANTOS, JR. is the Presiding Judge of the 9<sup>th</sup> Municipal Circuit Trial Court (MCTC) of Nabua-Bato, Camarines Sur and the Acting Presiding Judge of the Municipal Trial Court (MTC) of Balatan, Camarines Sur. He has been a long-time cause-oriented activist, practicing lawyer and peace advocate in Naga City. He was the recipient of a 2007 Naga City Mayoral Recognition Award for cause-oriented advocacy for peace, people empowerment and human rights.