

Philippines: Philippines: Politics for the masses: Ka Leody vows to address economy, health and climate change crises

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Labor leader Leodegario “Ka Leody” De Guzman is one of 10 running for the presidency in the May elections. His socialist views are not the usual sound bites people hear from other candidates. But could he sway voters to embrace what he is offering, so they understand he truly means to represent the oft-neglected masses?

We’re all equals

At home, Ka Leody, 62, describes himself as non-hierarchical, both as husband and father. Everyone in the family is equal and has the right to speak their mind provided these are justified.

“Wala ditong boss [sa aming bahay]. Lahat pantay-pantay. Lahat pwedeng sumagot at mangatwiran. Hindi pwedeng dadaainin sa ‘ako ang tatay kaya sumunod kayo.’ May boses ang lahat,” he tells VERA Files in a Zoom interview.

(No one is a boss here. We are all equals. Everyone is allowed to speak out and explain themselves. It doesn’t work that way just because I’m the father you have to follow. Everyone has a voice.)

This equal treatment at home reflects the socialist mindset that most Filipino voters are not used to hearing from those seeking public office. Just as De Guzman treats his family as equals, he believes that by applying the same principles in governance, particularly to address the sectors (workers and masses) he vows to serve, everyone will be better off.

“Mas hindi hierarchy, kundi parang ka-level [lang nila ako] upang alamin ano ang problema at ano ang solusyon dun sa problema,” the Partido Lakas ng Masa (PLM) bet said.

(It’s not going to be a hierarchy, but as if they are on the same level as I so we can find out their problems and how to resolve them.)

First presidential forum

As a long-time labor leader, among his commitments during the Feb. 4 Kapisanan ng mga Brodkaster ng Pilipinas (KBP) Presidential Forum are to reorient the country’s economy, empower more workers, support micro, small and medium enterprises (MSME), and end the practice of contractualization.

The televised forum was the first Ka Leody appeared in with other presidential candidates Senators Panfilo Lacson and Manny Pacquiao, Manila Mayor Isko Moreno, and Vice President Leni Robredo. Former senator Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. again begged off, as he did with the first presidential interview with broadcast journalist Jessica Soho.

Netizens expressed dismay when De Guzman was not invited to the GMA Network-organized interview or the ones conducted by talk show host Boy Abunda on his YouTube channel.

In a published [opinion piece](#), PLM chairperson Sonny Melencio said De Guzman "could have projected an alternative radical and progressive platform in response to the urgent needs of our people in contrast to the patchwork and inadequate electoral reform agenda put forward by the other four candidates."

Ka Leody was not pleased about being passed over for the network interview, and appalled at the basis of his exclusion.

"Kung ang kalakaran ay survey, kung sino ang mas sikat yun ang iimbitahan," he pointed out.

(If surveys are the basis, the most popular get the invitation.)

In the [pre-election poll conducted by Pulse Asia](#), Marcos received 53% and Robredo 20%. Moreno and Pacquiao both gained 8% of the respondents' approval, while Lacson got 6%. The survey was the basis for GMA's presidential interviews. Less than 1% of respondents picked De Guzman as their next president.

The poll, conducted from Dec. 1-6 last year, used face-to-face interviews.

"Ngayon first time na may kandidato mula sa hanay ng manggagawa, bakit hindi sila excited? Bakit hindi pakinggan ang boses ng manggagawa?" De Guzman lamented.

(It's the first time there's a candidate from the ranks of labor, why aren't they excited? Why don't they listen to the voice of workers?)

Not a winnable candidate

"At may dagdag pa yan, na hindi raw ako winnable," quipped De Guzman.

(And there's more... they say I am not winnable.)

His exclusion from the GMA interviews did not stop Ka Leody from answering some of the questions asked of his four opponents, which he filmed and is available for viewing on [Facebook live from PLM's page](#).

He has been a labor activist for the last 40 years. Today, the presidential aspirant continues to rally not just for workers' rights but for every Filipino.

"Ka Leody has his feet on the ground and knows people's grievances. He is running for president to use this powerful post in solving the problems of the masses," said Melencio in his opinion piece.

Many, however, remain skeptical about his chances, citing his lack of political machinery and experience, aside from likely splitting votes for Robredo, who like the labor leader is against the return to power of the Marcoses.

The December survey results only seem to reinforce the opinion that De Guzman has very slim chances of winning.

But Ka Leody brushed this aside. In a statement, he declared that poll findings did not faze him.

"Tuloy lang [tayo] sa pagtaas ng diskurso para pag-usapan ng masa ang plataporma ng mga

solusyon sa kanilang pang araw-araw na problema," the statement further read.

(We will continue to raise the level of discussions for the masses to talk about our platform of solutions meant to address their day-to-day problems.)

Herbert Docena, a sociology professor from the University of the Philippines, believes that De Guzman and his running mate, lawyer and professor Walden Bello, can be winnable by empowering the masses [*"to fight for programs that promote their interest"*](#) rather than by securing the votes of the majority.

De Guzman declared that he would not run for president if he did not comprehend the misery of the Filipinos and did not have clear solutions to the problems that have plagued them.

Getting his feet wet

Moreover, he believes that his 40-year experience as a labor activist is sufficient preparation to be president.

De Guzman's stance on social and political issues in the country is not without antecedents.

He worked in a garments factory for five years and started as a political activist after the assassination of Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino Jr. in 1983. As protest movements against the Marcos dictatorship increased, the then 24-year-old Leody became part of a rally organized by the slain senator's brother, former senator Butz Aquino, the "Tarlac to Tarmac."

Besides Butz Aquino, senators Lorenzo Tañada and Jose Diokno, among others, inspired Ka Leody to pursue his advocacies.

"Na-inspired ako doon sa speeches nila. Pagbalik ko, nag-active na ako, namigay na ako ng mga yellow ribbon sa loob ng pabrika, at sumali na ako doon sa Justice for Aquino, Justice for All," De Guzman shared.

(I was inspired by their speeches. When I returned to work, I became active, handing out yellow ribbons in the factory. I also joined Justice for Aquino, Justice for All.)

Forty years after becoming an activist, he continues to rally against the return of the Marcoses. Back then, the piece-rate pay system prevailed in most factories. It meant getting paid based on the number of garments completed rather than being compensated based on hours rendered.

The pittance that they were paid per piece was a serious issue that they fought against. *"Pakiramdam namin kasi nalulugi kami,"* De Guzman recounted. *"Dumadami ang trabaho pero kaunti lamang ang nagiging dagdag sa suweldo."*

(We felt we were at the losing end. The workload kept increasing but any additional pay was very small.)

Bagong Politika, Bagong Ekonomiya

Aside from his obvious pro-labor agenda, De Guzman and running-mate Bello wish to advance their platform they have dubbed as *"bagong politika, bagong ekonomiya."*

"Ibig sabihin, politika na kontra doon sa kinasanayan ng dynasty, ng trapo, ng mga elite na suportado ng mga bilyonaryong negosyante, nung mga korporasyon," he said.

(This means politics contrary to what they had gotten used to - the dynasties, the traditional politicians, the elite supported by billionaires and corporations.)

If elected president, Ka Leody will prioritize revitalizing the economy and addressing pressing issues particularly health and climate change.

"Lahat ng yan ay may tama sa ating mamamayan. Ang apektado niyan ay yung ating mga marginalized sector," said De Guzman.

(All of these impact the citizens. And the most affected are those in the marginalized sector.)

Recent data released by the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) showed the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) posted an increase of 7.7% in the fourth quarter of 2021, which brings the full-year growth to 5.6%.

But think tank IBON Foundation, while recognizing the Philippines' GDP growth as among the fastest growing in the ASEAN, said Filipinos were not reaping the benefits of this expansion.

Further, it cited the country's November unemployment rate of 6.5% was its highest, while the inflation rate of 4.5% in 2021 was also the highest in the ASEAN region.

If elected, De Guzman said he and Bello plan on reforming the budget and pivoting it to programs aimed at creating more livelihood opportunities for marginalized sectors like farmers and fisherfolk that will ultimately boost food production and make the country self-sufficient.

On dealing with the pandemic, De Guzman vowed to institute changes in the healthcare system, particularly raising salaries of healthcare workers and putting up more health facilities complete with medical equipment, medicines, and trained personnel.

He likewise supports government mass testing to curb transmission of the virus should other highly transmissible variants surface to prevent a return to restricted mobility..

System change

Ka Leody stressed the need to change the system of government, so this reflects what the country stands for, adding this must be embodied in its laws, policies, and budgetary programs.

He pointed out the lack of significant changes in policies and governance even when new administrations, from Marcos to Duterte, took over.

All past presidents - from Ferdinand Marcos Sr. to Cory Aquino, Joseph Estrada, Gloria Arroyo, and Benigno "Noy" Aquino III promised the moon and the stars but not one delivered, he said.

Politics for the masses

During the interview with VERA Files, De Guzman also highlighted climate change issues and its relation to the situation of the country's workers, especially farmers, fisherfolks and indigenous peoples.

Aside from his labor-first policy, Ka Leody, whose parents are both farmers, also vowed to protect the rights of indigenous peoples.

"Unahin muna natin yung kabuhayan noong ating kababayan, ng ating mga manggagawa (at) kailangan pangalagaan talaga at proteksyunan yung kanilang karapatan sa paninirahan doon sa

kanilang mga lugar na daan taon na nilang pinangalagaan,” said De Guzman.

The labor leader who chairs the Bukluran ng Manggagawang Pilipino (BMP) is a member and an official of various human rights groups such as the Philippine Human Rights Information Center (PhilRights) and Bulig Pilipinas.

As a labor and human rights activist, De Guzman likewise acknowledges women’s and LGBTQ rights, as well. He proposed that his cabinet members consist of 50% women and LGBTQ members to maximize their skills in nation-building.

“Dapat kilalanin yung papel ng ating kababaihan at ng ating LGBT (members) sa ating bayan. Hindi pwede silang i-discriminate na para bang mga lalaki lamang ang may kapangyarihan na gumawa ng mahahalagang desisyon sa ating bayan,” said De Guzman.

When VERA Files asked that he clarify his statement, he said that his remarks had a different context. The labor leader stressed he was not referring to gender, as the question was premised on the country’s political context, thus the solution was not a simple change in leadership but required a full system change.

When asked why he should be the Philippines’ next president despite his lack of resources for campaigning including television and radio advertisements, Ka Leody De Guzman declared Filipinos must elect a leader who is one with the masses and understands their plight.

“Subukin natin ang isang lider manggagawa na bitbit ang plataporma hanggang sa kasalukuyan. Kaya naniniwala ako na dapat ay bagong politika, politika ng masa, politika ng mamamayan, hindi ng iilan.”

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