

Book Review

Joseph Ejercito "Erap" Estrada: The Centennial President (1998)

BELINDA A. AQUINO*

A review of Aprodicio A. Laquian and Eleanor Laquian, *Joseph Ejercito "Erap" Estrada: The Centennial President* (Institute of Asian Research, University of British Columbia and the College of Public Administration, University of the Philippines, 1998), 321 pp.

This book emerged from the authors' experience as part of the campaign machinery which worked for the election of Joseph "Erap" Estrada as the thirteenth President of the Philippines in May 1998. Described as a personal behind-the-scenes account of that electoral campaign, it also analyzes the convergence of social and political forces that focused on Erap's electoral victory. It deals with other serious topics as popularity vs. political machines, religious and ethnic votes, political dynasties and *starization*¹ of politics, the role of the media in politics, the Commission on Elections, electoral fraud and reform, globalization and the new *masa*.²

The authors should be commended indeed for taking on such an ambitious project and putting out the book in record time. It is not easy to participate in a national campaign, which is physically demanding in a fragmented stretched-out territory like the Philippines, and put together a coherent account of the often bewildering complexities and intractable verities of electoral contests in a very politicized society such as the Philippines.

After a brief introductory chapter revolving on Erap's resounding victory, the book offers a comprehensive overview of the Philippines in 1998 focusing on major topics, such as the economy, population growth, environmental degradation, graft and corruption, social fragmentation and the country's class-based politics. This is followed by a chapter that details the main events immediately preceding the elections, such as the Cha-cha controversy³ which spun off such initiatives as Pirma and the possibility of, instead of the May 1998

*The author is currently Professor of Political Science and Asian Studies at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, where she is also Director of the Center for Philippine Studies. The second edition (with an Epilogue) of her book, *Politics of Plunder: The Philippines Under Marcos* (1999) has recently been launched by the new National College of Public Administration and Governance, University of the Philippines.

elections happening, a No-El (No Elections) or Fa-El (Failure of Elections). About six chapters are devoted to the dynamics and logistics of the Erap campaign, including an agenda for winning strategies, motorcades and rallies, the use of opinion polls and surveys, and the Byron Hotel Operation. These chapters constitute the heart of the book.

The rest of the book offers accounts of or commentaries on the country's politics, variously characterized as *bayanihan*-style,⁴ dynastic, regionalistic and tribal. A couple of chapters describes the role of the church, elites, media, and intellectuals in Philippine politics. The book ends with a presentation of Erap's program of government for the next six years and two documents prepared by the authors, in collaboration with the Policy Studies Group (PSG), as their contribution to Erap's Program of Governance if he were to be elected President.

As a result of the authors' meticulous documentation of the campaign, readers indeed get a detailed, if intimate, understanding of political life in the country in general, and of the main protagonist, Erap, in particular. This book almost approaches the genre of political biography in a popularized form. Erap is an intriguing political personality who has been maligned, ridiculed, misunderstood and misrepresented on the one hand and idolized on the other. He has been one of the most controversial figures to emerge in post-Marcos Philippines, and he has not only survived but also prevailed in the predatory world of Philippine politics.

The overall strength of the book is the wealth of field material obtained through the authors' observation, skills and painstaking note-taking. One gets firsthand impressions of how campaign politics plays out, whether in the smoke-filled rooms of Byron Hotel or in a far-flung barrio podium under a blazing mid-day sun. The flavors, the scents, the contradictions, the intrigues and complexities of Philippine politics are faithfully narrated. The book has generated enough case study material that can be probed further to get a deeper understanding of the dynamics of political change in Philippine society over time.

There are weaknesses as well, which perhaps inevitably result from wanting to write a popular bestseller, as the senior author had described the project, which has, at the same time, some depth in terms of political analysis. Given the plethora of case material the authors had gathered along the way, it was understandable that they sought broader or deeper connections with the theory of politics and the forces that have been written about in the Philippine social science literature, such as political parties, the church, elites, media, intellectuals, *masa*, etc. One can characterize the book as a combination of journalistic reportage and a pop scholarship of sorts. Without footnotes (though there are occasional references), the authors could not have intended the book

to be a scholarly research endeavor on Philippine political behavior. They covered the length and breadth of the campaign in thick ethnographic detail but would occasionally explore more deeply some aspects of the Philippine political culture, such as the dynastic and tribalistic patterns (Chapter 11) of politics in some areas, and the roles of elites, intellectuals, and the media in the political arena (Chapter 13). But these are complex and diverse topics which cannot easily be characterized and analyzed. What the book does is repeat some of the usual images or stereotypes about them, e.g. the Filipino 'burgis class' bloated sense of morality and intellectual pretensions (p. 213), the media as a complex and ungovernable aggregation of egos, wealth, and power (p. 216), the intellectuals as usually left-leaning or creative individuals in academic circles, some of whom are supposed to be impractical, not concerned with wealth, status or fame (p. 228), and so on. In some instances, it is not always clear what the argument or issue is. On page 222, for example, there is a distinction being made about the elites maintaining the dream (presumably of their hegemony in society), but if the teeming masses come up with a new idea or a candidate challenges the dream, it is there to be used to belittle such efforts. So, when a credible threat comes around, the members of the intelligentsia are a quick to trot out the dream. There must be some ideological subtext I am missing here. And the most vociferous of these elites are some 120 newspaper columnists in the three top English newspapers in Manila. In fact, some of these supposed elite columnists are no more than charlatans purveying uninformed verbiage.

The book's major flaw is its overkill on Erap. He is effusively overdrawn and comes out twice bigger than life, which might even be embarrassing to Erap himself. The reader is saturated with endless cute anecdotes about this lovable rogue even if he was the family black sheep. It seemed he was always on the right side of the gods, a favored son of destiny. Some details like his very nice legs while playing basketball (as noted by his future bride), and how a female campaign aide kept staring at him because he reminded her of her late husband's looks are disconcerting as well as distracting. Accounts of his concern for the poor and empathy for the powerless are also a bit repetitive. He did not need to be oversold on his human qualities.

On the other hand, a hard analysis of his public persona and performance as mayor, senator, and vice president of the country is missing. How did he do as a public official for many years in a variety of positions? This would have enhanced his credentials as a presidentialiable in terms of having both local and national experience. He was the first town mayor to be elected president among the postwar occupants of the highest position in the country. Given that his performance as a senator was lackluster at best, how did he survive that club of articulate and contentious debaters?

Another omission is a thorough account of the masa factor, which was instrumental in Erap's impressive victory. The book has devoted chapters to

the church, elites, media, intellectuals, and other groups of people, but the masa are interspersed in an obscure section (p. 50). And even there, the masses seem like inert entities in the face of Erap's popularity and charisma, even as the authors argue that Filipino life has changed qualitatively in contemporary times. The masses, they note, have been empowered to think for themselves and have become less vulnerable to following blindly what they are told to do. It is further argued that the improvements in their lives as common *tao* (especially those who have relatives abroad sending remittances regularly) have increased their aspirations to become more *burgis* than proletarian (p. 198). If all these are true, they are indeed radical changes that should have been explained more adequately.

In any case, the masa line of argument becomes even more convoluted when the authors conclude that in the case of Erap, it could be hypothesized that regionalistic politics got replaced by class-based politics. I suppose the distinction being made is that regionalistic politics is equated to elite politics and class-based politics involves the masa. And since there are more members of the masa than members of the elite nationwide, Erap had an overwhelming margin over his rivals whose main appeal was regional. This argument is probably specious at best. His victory could be attributed in large measure to a high name recognition and widespread popularity as a movie idol for many years. Also the preemption of the *dagdag-bawas*⁵ cheating scheme by the Byron Hotel operatives headed by Ronnie Puno, who had recruited some of the 1995 elections *dagdag-bawas* perpetrators, was a brilliant strategic move by the Erap campaign people. Other "dirty tricks" were preempted. The use of the "exit poll" was another winner in that it made whatever schemes by Erap's opposition to cheat in the counting of ballots that much harder to carry out. Erap's charisma was bolstered by campaign operatives who outmaneuvered the ruling administration's machinery.

There is no doubt that the book is a useful contribution to the existing literature on Philippine politics. But its value could have been enhanced by a stronger and tighter editorial construction, mainly to reduce the trivia and clutter of detail that detract from the substantive points. That way it could have been focused more sharply. An introductory chapter could have spelled out the main thesis of the book, the central thrust, which does not have to be an academic paradigm familiar only to political scientists or analysts. To try to arrest the essence of the Erap phenomenon would have been a logical beginning. That was a construct of the imagination deserving further inquiry. Political phenomena are always fascinating subjects for research. A review of the relevant literature on electoral politics would have been useful, and again here, one does not have to include the whole slew of political forces: church, media, elites, intellectuals, etc. which the book tries to do. Inclusion is a desirable value but it can also be unproductive. In trying to include everything, one is bound to miss something. For instance, there is no reference to the

military or the bureaucracy, both of which have been significant institutions in the politics of the country.

The next section could have combined Chapters 2 and 3, again to weed out unnecessary details like the traffic jams and sweltering summer heat, and to probe further into the maneuverings of the Cha-cha initiative advocates and other frenetic activities of political groups. What were they trying to do? There was a lot of calculated maneuvering on the part of Ramos partisans to try to derail the scheduled election. For all its anti Cha-cha stance, the Church was also doing its own share of undermining Erap. There were spirited or vicious power struggles within Erap's camp itself, which would have made good copy in terms of politics, Philippine-style. The inclusion of a section on class-based politics in Chapter 2 is a bit problematic in terms of the analysis, which is that the Filipino masses in the 1998 elections had acquired a new sense of empowerment and had found a voice in party politics. Is this the essence of the new class-based politics? Obviously, this is the kind of complex empirical question that could not be adequately analyzed in a book that did not intend to be an academic work in the first place.

Chapter 4 should have included not just the authors' view of Erap as we know him but also the landmarks of his political career as mayor, senator and vice-president, as suggested earlier. The intimate family vignettes make for folksy reading, but should have been supplemented by an assessment of his public performance, his sense of preparedness for the highest institution in the land. Similarly, this section could have delved into the nature of charisma, a key variable in any political study. The explanation of Erap's private sense of morality could have been more satisfactory with a reference to Philippine society's double-standard and other machismo-oriented values on male and female sexual behavior.

The last chapter, which could have pulled together the high points in the book, could have been written in a more visionary and inspirational manner. It is too programmatic. This is not to imply that programmatic statements and strategies are unimportant, but the presidency is also a symbolic institution that is anchored on a long-range vision of leadership and strength amidst continuing political fractiousness and trivialities. Estrada will be confronted by more than just policy issues that must be judged against the three-way test that authors think will determine the last and best public performance of Joseph Estrada. He is an extraordinary politician and must embody the country's aspirations towards the new millenium. In this connection, it is instructive to repeat what Indira Gandhi once said, "My voice will not be hushed, for it is not a lone voice. I speak not for myself. . . but for the deep and significant changes in society which alone can be the basis for true democracy and fuller freedom." Something out of Erap's inaugural speech in Filipino, a first in the country's history, could have been quoted as a vision statement.

Finally, with less haste again, an Index could have been developed, which would be extremely useful not only to readers but to institutions like libraries and future researchers on Philippine society or politics. And since the book has been distributed internationally, a glossary of terms and acronyms uniquely or specifically Filipino would be useful for readers not familiar with the Philippines.

Endnotes

¹The phenomenon of movie stars entering the world of politics by capitalizing on their popularity as movie/TV idols.

²Common people, sometimes also called common *tao*.

³Refers to charter change, a move initiated by sympathizers and supporters of then Pres. Fidel Ramos' extension of term in office/reelection by amending the 1987 Philippine Constitution. This initiative sought to amend the 1987 Philippine Constitution to lift the one-term (six years) limit on the President of the Republic. "Pirma" or the signature campaign was spearheaded by a former ambassador and had the support of some local chief executives and a number of lawmakers in both the Senate and the House of Representatives.

⁴A Filipino tradition of helping fellow members of the community accomplish major tasks such as building a house.

⁵A deceitful scheme of counting/canvassing electoral votes done by subtracting votes from a candidate and adding these votes to the favored one.