Chapter III

Alternative Pinoy Politics: Sketching Roadmaps

by Nereus Acosta

In the 31-month topsy-turvy rule of Joseph "Erap" Estrada, the hideous underbelly of Filipino political culture showed itself with shameless pride, not unlike Senator Tessie Aquino Oreta's now much-maligned and notorious jig in the impeachment trial of the Philippine President. A widespread malaise, a sense of helplessness – even hopelessness – seemed to beset the country in the months leading up to People Power II and the downfall of Estrada. The economy was headed for a tailspin. Scandal after revolting scandal in official circles became standard fare for the media and public discourse. Leadership and governance were adrift. Political narcissism ruled the day. Nothing could have metaphorically depicted this Zeitgeist, or the spirit of the times, more squarely than the mounting heaps of garbage in the thoroughfares of Metro Manila – uncollected, rotting and inviting of a health epidemic.

In private conversations or larger public forums, to speak of "alternatives" to this prevailing political culture seemed at times, to me, rather masochistic. As a first-term congressman, part-academic, part-activist, and part-NGO worker, being in politics was becoming a dispiriting tightrope walk. Amongst friends and colleagues, to muse about reformist "neo-politics" had become an ordeal in a political milieu where even common decency was being strangled and government converted into a den for venality.

How then could we cope and manage? Take to the streets, yes, express outrage and issue calls for a new order. Heavy baggage, indeed, but along the way some laughter helped – in fact, always helped. It is perhaps no exaggeration to say that the digital phenomenon of texting – with endless Erap jokes to boot – served as a coping mechanism and a balm of sorts for a wounded national psyche. People Power II was energized, in fact, by the rich trove of text messages and creative placards, lampooning Erap and his minions and allowing us to have a hearty laugh at our own foibles.

Humor and the capacity for levity have always been a source of the Filipino's resilience in the face of adversity, and perhaps this is as good a springboard as any to talk about practical guideposts for negotiating the rough shoals of Philippine politics and its attendant culture of patronage. I recall a conference I attended abroad in early 2000 where I spoke on Philippine political realities in a panel with representatives from other countries in the region, who also talked about their respective political systems. During the open forum, a British parliamentarian in the audience rose to issue a jocular commentary. He remarked, "After having lived and traveled in Asia, I am convinced that the problems of Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and others, while serious, are not hopeless, but in the Philippine case, everything there is hopeless but not serious." What an apt description, I told myself.

Chapter III
Alternative Pinoy Politics: Sketching Roadmaps
by Nereus Acosta

1. HOPEFUL AND… SERIOUS

To grapple with Pinoy political culture – as the foregoing chapters have extensively discussed – is to note how seemingly hopeless sweeping reformist initiatives could be. Grinding poverty of a vast majority stares us in the face. A whole educational, technological divide is widening between urban areas and an impoverished countryside. Corrupt practices pervade and shackle our institutions. Personalistic politics is a behemoth we can not easily set aside on the path to modern statecraft and institution building.

These are certainly very serious realities, demanding very serious remedies. However, while we must be dogged in our pursuits for better governance, it does not mean we lose the creative, fun-loving, humorous –and "not serious" approaches to dealing with our problems. I had gingerly taken that British parliamentarian's remark to mean that we Filipinos are, indeed, a rather happy, carefree lot – and while that may be a source of weakness, it can also be a strength in the face of real, debilitating problems.

So for those of us "neophytes" and politico wannabes in the sordid arena where "money, machine and muscle" – and not "mind" or "mediation" (as in understanding or empathy) or "motivation" (inspiring and inspired leadership) – pack a potent punch, I gather that this simply means that we enter or plod along in politics with a good measure of equanimity and a fair knowledge of self. Learning to laugh at ourselves should be therapeutic for the soul. In addition, while we can view the world with hard-nosed skepticism, we should always do so with a dash of optimism and wonder.

We ought not to take things too personally or too seriously – that is, too cynically. We belong to a hardy race. We survived the harsh tumult of colonialism, lived through the harrows of failed governance, and have borne the inadequacies of nationhood. We will, if the edifying experience of People Power II juxtaposed with the jolting wake-up call of the so-called Edsa III is anything to go by, manage to bring Philippine politics, in good time, to meet the higher demands of building a nation and making government and leadership work in a complex world.

Which brings me to recount a recent trek close to the Pinatubo crater with a group of young professionals. We gamely rode on a carabao-pulled ramshackle cart with Ambeth Ocampo, noted historian and columnist. We talked about how a century or so ago, our Katipunero heroes may have used the same mode of transport, and how vast a contrast life was in the downtrodden Aeta village where we took rest, from our concrete city jungles and cellphone/Internet-dominated lives. We learned that before 1991, Pinatubo's last eruption was over half a century ago and various rock formations over which lahar was spewed took millennia to form. This made me wax somewhat philosophical and think how infinitesimal specks we really are in a whole cosmic continuum. Yes, we need to alleviate poverty and bring villages like those of the Aetas to a level respecting human dignity and with government as a means toward that. However, elections and politics, while definitely important, are not the end-all and be-all of life – or should not define our existence.

Governments will rise and fall, leaders will come and go, but the elements of nature and the rocks of Pinatubo will always be there as they have been for ages. This should, at the least, help us put things in reasonable perspective. Life is short, power is transitory, and opportunities to initiate radical change not always available. Entering the arena of politics may well be fraught with difficulties, but you do what you can, make the most of the resources at hand, touch as many lives as you could, and act according to your own best lights. Still try to have fun in the process. As the MTV generation would say, chill out – and enjoy the roller-coaster ride.

Having said the foregoing, let us survey some of the contours of politics Philippine-style and attempt to sketch a roadmap of how to survive it – if not elevate and enrich it. This is not meant to be a detailed manual of "how-best-to-keep-afloat-with-ideals-intact-in-a-turbulent-political-sea-with-sharks-abounding." No one political scientist or politician can give clear or formula guidelines on this. At best what can be offered are inchoate, if earnest, suggestions based on certain experiences on how new entrants to the political field can push an agenda of reform, however limited, without being pushed out of the running by the rough-and-tumble of patron-centered and money-dominated political dynamics. In other words, how to be "alternative" and still be effective.

In the final analysis it is the individual 'practitioner of power' who alone can best grapple with these questions given his own unique context. The road for an alternative politician will be rougher in say, the wilds of Sultan Kudarat or Bukidnon, than for one in Manila or Metro Cebu where expanding technology, mass media and a wider education base may augur well for the progress of neo-politics. It is easily bruited that all we need is a heart and mind in the right place. While true, I think this is incomplete and rather naive. There is no doubt that the challenge to effect dents in a stagnant political system require not only keeping one's heart and mind in the right places. There is a need to toughen one's stomach to withstand the mendacity and barefaced practices prevalent in local bureaucracies or the feudal mindsets of many leaders.

Chapter III
Alternative Pinoy Politics: Sketching Roadmaps
by Nereus Acosta

2. PERSONAL POLITICS: STAYING THE COURSE

Do More than Politics

This may seem ironic, but if one wants to walk the rough road of Pinoy politics as we know it, my first bit of advice is to be involved in something other than politics. Politics should not inform your entire existence nor define who you are. Make time out for another endeavor or two, however minimally. You actually assume a mien of substance or credibility as a budding politician when you have some expertise or focus that can help serve the ends of reformist leadership – teaching, NGO work, media involvement, the arts, civic projects, pro bono legal work, sports/youth or other advocacy programs. Propagate ideas and banner ideals in arenas beyond the confines of a municipio, kapitolyo or kongreso.

If you are good at what you do and are earnest of focus, you can surely create ripples of goodwill, and people in the community will seek you out for what you say or do. Managed publicity may help (some politicians hire PR agents to "market" a public image), but this is no substitute for the sheer power of a good idea or a dearly held principle communicated clearly and convincingly in barangay hall meetings or seminar-forums, informal settings, or creative expressions (a play, skit, song-and-dance number) – and as much as possible with a touch of good humor or levity.

Trust the reach of a good word said or a compliment made about you. Mahatma Gandhi once said that if you approach everyone with respect you invariably are treated with such in return. While a large number of the Pinoy electorate respond to burlesque and may be easily swayed by bombast or melodrama, I believe many appreciate simple, sincere efforts to reach out, to listen, and to engage and challenge them beyond patron-client expectations. The latter objective may be something you could pull off more easily if you were seen not just as a politician who dispenses favors but a professional, a teacher, a businessman, an artist, an athlete, or an NGO advocate.

As a member of the Provincial Board of Bukidnon prior to my election to Congress, I taught a graduate course at the Bukidnon State College and conducted periodic environmental lecture-seminars in all the elementary and high schools in the district. Nothing elaborate or ponderous, as far as the latter activity was concerned. After a flag ceremony and before the students would go to their classrooms, I would ask the teachers for about half an hour to interact with the assembly and show a few eye-catching posters of our damaged ecosystems and what could be done to save some of them. We would have a short impromptu quiz or a jaunty answer-question game – with notebooks or sundry school supplies as simple prizes – to engage the students and make them respond with more enthusiasm. Usually I would bring several tree seedlings which we would plant along the perimeter fence of the school. From the practical standpoint of political mileage, this whole approach seemed to reap added benefits. Many students would tell their parents what transpired that day, how a local public official spent time with them and acted as 'teacher' on some environmental issues. The Education Department administrators in the province would also learn about my visits from the teachers' reports and send word that they were pleased a politician would take time out to be with teachers and students, especially in far-flung areas. In effect, you were hitting the proverbial two or more birds with one stone.

Of course, in each of these visits teachers would unfailingly ask me to look into what could be done to patch a leaking roof or add a new classroom, secure for them more textbooks, chairs – even chalk and paper! Endless entreaties for the most basic needs, including questions on their salaries and allowances. I would respond with a standard, rather lame answer that not all their needs could be addressed at once but that we would do our best in the council to assist their school. In any case, making those continued forays into schoolyards and crowded classrooms, planting trees or the metaphorical seed or two of environmental awareness, perhaps made it easy for a number of people to see me as an "alternative" politician.

When I won a seat in Congress and had to spend more time in Manila, I sought to do as much of these activities during congressional recess periods or during some of my short visits home. Because of development funds members of Congress are able to utilize as built-in allocations in the General Appropriations, more derisively known as "pork barrel," I was in a better position to assist more schools directly with infrastructure

projects (classrooms, gyms, stages) and answer some of the same mounting needs or requests of teachers. Yet, while greatly appreciated as some form of a dole-out, a set of "goodies" derived from an obscure central government kitty, the extra personal effort to still give that short lecture, interact with students and engage in an educational exercise/game with them, plant a few trees and share some laughs, may be seen as more memorable a contribution – or for political capital, well, more advantageous.

The same approach is taken or methods replicated in various other settings. Instead of students, it may be a group of barangay health workers or day care teachers or farmers. While appropriating many of the personalistic practices of the political culture – the customary tapik, haplos, akbay, kamustahan, kainan/merienda, patawa, donasyon (donations) – you seek to elevate consciousness with fairly substantive information and help them learn something of value. Beyond patron-clientilism, you try to add to their own education, to the sense that a leader can be with them not to dominate but to mobilize, teach and inspire them to do more thinking for themselves.

This latter thrust is complemented by two radio programs on public affairs which I still maintain every weekend – since 1996. The airwaves as classroom, as it were. I dish out a commentary or two on local and national affairs in the Visayan (Cebuano) language with more than a smattering of Binukid, the indigenous language of the Lumad Bukidnons and Higaonons, to reach communities in the hinterlands of Mt. Kitanglad. As Provincial Board Member this proved valuable. I remember sighs of surprise from Lumads who would get to see me in person when I visited their villages, telling me they thought the person on radio was much older and how they liked the fact that I kept trying to greet them or leave a quote or two in their language over the airwaves.

In provinces like Bukidnon radio is still for many the only immediate connection with the larger world so it is a potent tool to communicate, entertain, educate, and, yes, obtain wider exposure to a political constituency. On air I would always greet families or individuals personally, especially for birthdays (for which I kept a rudimentary database) and ask about how they were doing – which I was told a number of times was a source of thrill for many. Along with this "personal touch," was the thrust to engage listeners in mini-lectures. I tried to collapse complex discussions into metaphors and analogies so that concepts like globalization or changing the Constitution would be within cognitive grasp. Intellectualize, yes, but popularize the issue and make it easier to digest using more familiar lingo.

I recall speaking and explaining news reports about the Asia-Pacific Economic Forum (APEC) Summit the Philippines hosted in 1997 and said that globalization was like the high seas and our country a banca, with outriggers as the so-called safety nets for poor sectors affected by our entry into the world economy. Big countries like the USA were like the Super Ferry and how we survive the storms ahead (trade practices, economic crises) will depend on our policies and leaders, as the port (of isolation and a protectionist economy) is now far from sight. There has been no clear way for me to know the extent of an impact such radio programs had on some people, but I believe that in places where television would still be a luxury, reaching them weekly through radio was a factor in helping me win votes when I ran for Congress in 1998.

The other more direct benefit to having parallel work or commitments outside the demands of public office would be largely psychological. An occasional diversionary activity can always be a form of stress relief, a chance for needed respite. I always say that teaching a graduate course or two (in public policy and political science) helps me keep my sanity in the chaotic, sometimes disorienting maze of legislative and local politics. By wearing the "professor hat" I am afforded the space to think a little more clearly, focus more analytically and convey ideas more freely – away from the burdens and boundaries of public office and from the crushing mundane schedules I am forced to keep as legislator, local leader, or benefactor of sorts to constituents. This may be about time management, but to me, it is more importantly about "thinking management" – a chance to ground or center yourself in the face of pressures that buffet you ceaselessly.

Seek a Watering Hole

Those in public service who may begin entertaining quixotic notions of tilting the windmills of traditional politics are bound to encounter rude awakenings. A "can-do" spirit can be met with cynicism and resistance by many, foiling plans or programs in the process. You may think you are just doing what you think is best based on what you may regard as sound analysis of the issues and the needs at hand, but because you failed to carefully consider the very elements of a personalistic culture you face a breakdown of a well-meaning project. It is easy for those of us educated in urban centers or abroad to think we know some of the answers to the pressing ills of society, crafting our own developmentalist schools of thought. Then you run into brick walls and intransigent mindsets and realize you are a babe in the woods, so to speak, and falter in connecting with those you seek to help or work with. Perhaps this is what many technocrats experience – and the failures of Masagana 99 or sundry credit schemes of administrations past come to mind. One starts with a grandiose vision, well-enunciated

objectives, a strategic thrust, but somehow they all fall short of addressing real needs or worse, collide with a clientele's prevailing cultural predispositions.

In such stressing circumstances, a politician who seeks "alternative politics" needs to have a venue for reflection and discussion, a time to be with so-called kindred spirits and draw some form of inspiration, affirmation and resolve to stay the course. A group of like-minded friends or allies may suffice, but it is also important to build as wide a network as possible of reformist local leaders who are in similar straits or facing similar challenges. While arguably a tiny minority still, such individuals could compare notes extensively and fashion better approaches out of a survey of practices that have largely worked. The advent of e-mail and the now ubiquitous cellular phone should facilitate such exchanges, apart from an occasional organized meeting.

Apart from my own family (a partner, confidante and friend for a wife works wonders), supportive friends in the Liberal Party and its youth wing (Kabataang Liberal ng Pilipinas, where I serve as national Chair), colleagues in the academe and NGO network, I have been fortunate to build friendships over the last two years within an assembly of over a hundred young leaders from different fields called the Philippine Forum. Convened by then Trade and Industry Secretary Manuel Roxas, we first congregated in January 2000 for a long weekend at Clark, Pampanga, detached from the woes of our busy careers, to, well, simply talk to one another, discuss the problems we face as a people, and derive some psychic reward in the thought that there are other earnest Filipinos who do care deeply about their country, who are restive and are trying to contribute their noble share in building a society and a future we could embrace with pride.

We have met for two years in a row as an assembly, but out of that have been created spin-off groups that meet more regularly. One of these is the more visible, if outspoken, pagbabago@pilipinas whose slogan is the bold exhortation: *matauhan na tayo*. The overriding thrust of the movement is the change of the prevailing political culture and the institutionalizing of good governance practices – accountability and transparency in public service. It has been most heartening to see a synergy of ideas and ideals in this forum (carried out to the reaches of the e-mail network) and to view our present realities with a more holistic optic, thanks to the unique perspectives of artists and NGO workers, media practitioners and business managers in this budding network. In real ways this has been a refuge for me, a regular infusion of fresh energy in an otherwise trying, sometimes unsettling, milieu of horse trading, power brokering and unrelenting pressures from different fronts – constituents, leaders in the field, political party, colleagues in Congress, agencies of government, and the sometimes disquieting fetters of *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude) in the many levels of human relations.

Keep your Compass

The world of alternative politics is terra incognita, uncharted territory. There are too many variables to grapple with because change, or the desire for it, requires a reinvention of old ideas and an overhaul of bad habits. We all know how change can be so resisted by those whose interests lie with keeping things the way they are; and depending on the scale of the initiative, the hindrances could be minor or vociferous. I recall a barangay leader who deeply resented the livelihood programs we were introducing in his area, believing these were going to curb usurious lending schemes which benefited him. To destroy our work's credibility, vicious intrigues were sowed about how we were out to profit from government funds and milk poor women dry. Such incidents caused me untold distress. Then, of course, there are the attempts to bribe or sweet-talk you into rather surreptitious deals (contracts, influence peddling, the temptations to graft and the sort).

When I signed the impeachment resolution against President Estrada in late October 2000, when it was still rather politically precipitate, many of the barangay captains and other constituents in Bukidnon disagreed with me and even somewhat resented the decision I made. I lamented having been put on the defensive as I received flak for taking a stand based on conviction. Yet, you readily understand that all this comes with the territory. To withstand these 'tempests,' one has to draw from a wellspring of grit and grace. Call it conscience, prayer, ethics, moral sight, virtue or just plain good sense. The important thing is to know what your core principles are and where they lie. At the end of every trying or confusing day, I should still be able to know where I am headed and what my guideposts are. It is, of course, said that power's grip can be intoxicating and can blur one's vision. However, like the metaphorical compass, you need it most when visibility is low and storms brew in the horizon.

Chapter III
Alternative Pinoy Politics: Sketching Roadmaps
by Nereus Acosta

3. PEOPLE POLITICS: MANAGING MEANING?

I remember spirited discussions on culture and socio-anthropology during an international leadership seminar I attended some time ago. The staid arguments forwarded at first were largely on the externalities of establishing structures, developing skills, marshalling resources, identifying the "clientele" and "beneficiaries" of programs. Then when elements of culture and psychology were discussed, the debate turned lively. All the more so because the forum had participants from disparate political systems in Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas – many with the baggage of colonialism and the experience of authoritarian regimes. Like proverbial nebula, you never really know what it is you are getting into or likely to find when you speak of the culture people are a part of or connected to – the amorphous web of expectations and perceptions, beliefs and cognitions at individual or community levels. In dealing with leadership issues, one has to see how important "internalities" are – what those in leadership positions grapple with, how individuals you work with react and respond to circumstances, what ordinary citizens from their vantage understand of or expect from leaders or government.

A speaker in that forum said leadership was about "managing meaning." While rather vague, I took that to mean that you had to put yourself in the shoes and in the skin, as it were, of the people you serve. It would be rather pompous, for instance, talking about electoral reform or the abstract concepts of democracy to an impoverished village in Bukidnon at the height of the El Niño drought, pontificating about not selling their votes when it is clear that their economic insecurity and gullibility would make them easy prey to the machinations of politicians of the guns-gold-goons variety. How would an "alternative politician" deal with this reality? How would one face the never-ending lists of favors sought – money for medicines, employment, scholarships, mediating conflicts, donations for fiestas, even somewhat preposterous entreaties like looking for lost carabaos?

The "meaning" these people hold vis-à-vis their leaders is that of the patron, a repository of solutions to many of their survival needs. The legislative advocacies you espouse count little for the many who seek intercessions for a variety of needs. On a squarely pragmatic level, I know finding someone a job or paying matriculation for someone's child will mean far more to these people than my having been principal author of what was touted as a landmark measure, Republic Act 8749 or the 1999 Clean Air Act.

In the Cebuano language, the predominant vernacular used in many parts of Bukidnon, the concept of leader is equated with "dakong tao" (literally, big person – not in physical size, but in stature and capacity to work wonders for the "gamay nga tao", or small people). I have asked myself whether "managing meaning" should at its most barefaced be about pandering to people's base impulses and indulging in populist rhetoric. It is, quite obviously, much easier to capitulate to their demands or expectations – invariably give money for that medicine prescription instead of initiating a longer-term and more tedious preventive health-care program, dole-out some crumbs instead of starting a painstaking livelihood micro-credit program for women and families, maintain ward leaders to do the dirty chores and bring in the votes instead of building cooperatives. For the trapo, it boils down to a rather crude simplification: why empower when you can continue to enslave?

Even so, programmatic approaches may not necessarily address widespread dependency and helplessness. Early on I had mentioned well-meaning programs running into brick walls of resistance from the very people these programs were meant to serve largely because of a 'disconnect' between the components of such programs and the cultural context within which participants lived. If we are serious about attending to the problems of the poor and about making reforms work in our system, then maybe this is where serious "meaning management" must come in. If we really want to initiate change we need to have a greater sensitivity and understanding of their reality, their psychology, the idioms they use, the symbols they respond to – and incorporate these into the frameworks we adopt for our programs.

What made Rosalinda, the Mexican *telenovela* dubbed in Tagalog, the single highest rated show in Philippine television history (that is, before the Estrada impeachment trial bowled the country over and made watching it a national fixation for three weeks)? The *telenovela* was certainly tapping into deep cultural strains of melodrama and pathos, the *inaapi* syndrome, persistence, the power of a hopeful ending. Alternative politics may be well about finding these too, but not pandering to them lest you tread on demagogic turf. Yet, the lines are never that clear, and the challenge is, I gather, finding the balance where you strike a chord in a community's psyche but

you do not reinforce dependency and maintain feudal stereotypes and expectations. This the politician has to determine by his or her own best lights, so that people are truly empowered by making them enjoy and own the process of change because their "meanings" are appreciated and applied to programs intended for their benefit.

Build an Alternative Base

Organizing communities, let alone sustaining them, is never easy, as many non-government workers will say. But one way of getting to the foregoing point of "balancing" what emotionally or culturally appeals to people and what can be changed or expanded (i.e., political consciousness, civic engagement) is to interface non-government work with the roles a politician plays. Alternative politics, in fact, demands that politicians move beyond the confined parameters of official authority and local hierarchies (e.g., a Congressman implicitly pressured to keep other local elected officials like barangay captains under his wing) and start working with sectors on ground level. While it is always important to deal with local leaders and attend to their needs – visit them during fiestas, act as ninong to their children's weddings, accord their solicitations due regard – you cannot put all your political eggs in the basket of personalistic dynamics. To move an alternative political agenda is also to have parallel thrusts of organization and mobilization.

How much these parallel thrusts succeed will depend on the conditions and features of a particular political area. In semi-urban areas, where there may not be one predominant political figure, and where ownership of land may not be concentrated solely in one family, the process may be less cumbersome. However, among sakada workers in a local economy dominated by sugar barons, for example, the task of empowering is far more painstaking – and largely frustrating. The idea of microcredit or livelihood projects, for instance, as tools for people to earn on their own – and in time make more decisions on their own – would seem rather alien. Yet, once an intangible wall of timidity and ignorance is broken, the results can be dramatic and heartening.

Such has been the case in our largely non-government replication of the Bangladesh-inspired Grameen Bank microcredit scheme in northern Bukidnon. Grameen is the Bengali word for village, and Grameen Banking is a revolutionary mechanism pioneered by Bangladeshi economist Dr. Mohammad Yunnus in the 1970s to help very poor women lift themselves up from poverty by giving them collateral-free small loans they could otherwise never be able to access from any formal bank. To date, the Grameen system has benefited over 40 million women in Bangladesh and is adopted in over 50 countries of the developing world. In Mindanao our project is called BULIG, the Visayan word for help, and stands for Bukidnon Unified Livelihood Investments through Grameen.

After a decade BULIG with its 45-member staff has reached over 3,000 rural women in over 125 barangays, the largest project of its kind in Mindanao. The concept sounds simple but the whole program is replete with guidelines and rules and a methodical, rigorous process of weekly meetings and repayment schemes. It is not just a matter of proffering a small amount with which to start a rudimentary project (fruit/vegetable vending, raising chickens, having a vegetable garden), but a way of giving poor women a chance to see themselves as individuals with the capacity to earn, and be valued – and even become leaders – in their community. As we built a track record, we were able to access more loan funds domestically (from public as well as private sources) and from abroad.

Our work with the Grameen system was about finding some of that "meaning" inherent in the lives of the women and communities we were reaching. Government-led credit schemes have had a dismal record of failure – money is disbursed but programs are hardly sustained over time. While we were presenting our work as NGO-led, the fact that my mother, who was then a congresswoman, was openly supportive of it made some people see the program at first as another quasi-government enterprise of sorts. Government is, after all, seen as dispenser of largesse; why repay what is in the main perceived as a dole-out? So this mindset was a barrier that had to be handled or hurdled.

Discipline, as has been pointed out by some social theorists, can be anathema to the Filipino who largely operates within a personality-driven and personalistic context. Rules can be circumvented – "puwedeng mapag-usapan, ma-areglo." Command-control mechanics are detested – "mahirap pakisamahan" is the lamentation intoned when speaking of a leader who refuses to ignore flaws or faults. The pakikisama trait can be taken to mean the slackening of sanctions or disciplinary parameters; the less structured and formal a system, the better the dynamics for pakikisama. In this light, how were we to set in place a discipline-oriented structure like Grameen Banking?

The first steps were arduous. We organized two groups of about 20 women each with the initial support of the Agricultural Credit Policy Council in 1990. The whole idea of microcredit centered on very poor women was novel and untested in Bukidnon. While successful in Bangladesh, we were not sure if the stringent mechanics of capital build-up, training, group savings, a mutual assistance fund, weekly meetings, weekly repayments of 25

pesos (for an initial loan then of a thousand pesos) would sit well with destitute women, some of whom had never been part of any organized social unit outside their own families, apart perhaps from membership in a church or religious group. We employed two community organizers who would meet with the groups weekly and monitor their progress. Project BULIG's history is rather long, but it plodded on despite setbacks and major pitfalls to be where it is today. Operational and financial problems persist, and there is constant need to be adaptive to the needs or conditions of particular communities or areas, but the now 45-strong staff are better-trained (five were sent to Bangladesh for intensive training in the last three years), more committed and focused.

While adopting the Bangladesh scheme, we sought to modify certain components to suit the local conditions or culture. As soon as groups were organized, the women would look for a vacant lot in their village and have a makeshift "center house" built (mostly of bamboo and cogon) as a venue for their meetings. In our initial training or projection meetings, as we called them, our project assistants would speak of discipline in terms of family, parenting or raising children, instead of something akin to military boot camp or a cold, impersonal official edict. We would say that we want the best for our children – teaching them well, not neglecting them, being firm about correcting mistakes or wrongdoing so that they could in time fend for themselves.

The idea of an organization keeping them in line, overseeing their participation in this program, monitoring their projects and repayments had to be appreciated in this light. To make weekly meetings more focused but animated – and more than just a weekly collection of repayments – a "center chief" and "deputy chief" were elected among themselves and a customary program was followed: prayer; some singing, sharing of local news (what they heard from radio broadcasts, mostly); news on how their families were doing; what they saw their local leaders as doing or not doing; reporting on their respective livelihood projects; and learning the rudiments of accounting and management (as simple as talk on being punctual, having schedules). While there certainly was the building of trust and camaraderie – again, the elements of pakikisama – a basic structure, a layer of discipline or a commonly understood way of doing things was also being set in place.

The program in time gave the women a sense of self-value and esteem, as manifested in the periodic activities they would enthusiastically organize or participate in – fiestas, parades, Christmas song-and-dance competitions, cooking contests, sports fests, health clinics. The more active groups would be more engaged in parent-teacher associations or assume leadership roles in the community. Once we were able to establish a rough framework for them to interact with one another and benefit from the overall program, it became their own ballgame. They had to assume a sense of ownership of the program and infuse it with their own "meanings," that is, how they wanted to expand their projects and strengthen their civic engagement. Introducing health or environment-related programs after this became easier as the women seized opportunities to innovate and be creative in applying such programs in their communities. Tree planting in watershed areas or sponsoring a reproductive rights seminar in coordination with the Department of Social Welfare and Development or another NGO, for instance, were on a whole met with little resistance.

Even when I got elected to the Provincial Board of Bukidnon, I continued to devote much time to this program as executive director. The involvement of the BULIG women in their barangays' affairs became a force in itself which aided my entry into politics. I think that my working with them and helping instill the discipline of Grameen Banking and its attendant social components won me some respect. My mother's work and own record as councilor, mayor and congresswoman (the only Liberal Party member of Congress from Mindanao for three terms) for over two decades was without doubt a plus, and there is no denying the fact that 'name recall' was also a considerable factor in my making a successful foray into local politics. So while certainly not the sole factor in my winning the largest margin of votes for the Provincial Board in 1995, the "BULIG secret weapon" was, arguably, quite significant.

As the only Liberal Party Board Member candidate (which meant I was in the opposition and could be seen as being of a more independent mold), I did not have the support of the eight municipal mayors in our district, although many barangay captains offered to help me, if somewhat partially. In some ways, perhaps more so in 1998 when I ran for Congress, the communities where Project BULIG operated may have seen me not just as a candidate who had a host of promises made, but had an existing alternative program to speak of. The women and their families were my most vigorous campaigners. Yes, there surely was "utang na loob" on their part, but I gather that to a fair number of them my getting to public office was also viewed as an investment in their own security, in the socio-economic benefits they could directly accrue by continuing to be a part of Project BULIG.

The interface was established, in this sense, between an NGO-led program and some government support, as embodied in my being in public office or in the prospect of gaining more access to funding or "connections" for program expansion. Some have said, however, that this partnership carries its built-in disadvantages. Political opponents can use this – as they did in the 1998 elections – as an issue to accuse you of supplanting the existing local leadership structures and using such program as a political tool to get yourself to power – or to obtain funds from different sources. The points are not entirely without merit, but that is a matter for debate. I

make the argument that government and NGO work should not be seen as mutually exclusive. At the end of the day, you ask how innovative approaches in "managing meaning" have worked for those we sought to assist, how they are making it continue to work for themselves, and how communities and civic participation have been strengthened in the process.

Have a Good, Service-oriented Office

Any member of Congress will tell you that roughly two-thirds of his or her time can easily be devoted to "constituent affairs" – the perpetual deluge of requests for recommendations, jobs, money, transport fare, medicines, advice and all sorts of special favors. The overlapping roles of mentor, counselor, financial distress manager, or benefactor could overtake that of legislator or policy-maker. As far as possible, an administrative system should be devised where constituents are able to expect service in a more orderly, predictable and yes, less personalistic fashion.

Constituents are wont to seek the politician at home, where there is greater informality and a chance to make known their personal entreaties directly, but to be "alternative" should also mean having an office where business can be properly transacted and concerns can be addressed more professionally. Direct personal affinity with the politician should be transposed to a more formal administrative structure, if only to disabuse a common perception that politicians necessarily have oodles of money lying around, ready to be dispensed at every personal request, or unlimited influence to be wielded.

People must also begin to understand that assistance does not always have to mean a politician digging literally into his own pocket, or performing quick-fix miracles, but that a plea for help should also entail following a process, some procedures. This should help us move away from patronage and influence peddling to more effective and efficient delivery of services. Efficiency and cost-rationalization becomes imperative when concerns mount from different sectors because as public servant you just cannot be physically present for every request and plea for succor. Having an office and staff where constituents could go to and be accommodated actually gives the latter, I believe, a sense of the limits or parameters of charity or support – and the politician more time to focus on his other duties, like planning or implementing programs or studying policy issues.

The formality of an office, however, should not militate against some of the manifestations of personalistic politics – the kamustahan, kamayan, akbayan, the exchange of pleasantries over a customary merienda. Even in the absence of the politician himself, there should always be space created for the visceral sense of goodwill, warmth and comfort among constituents. An office's staff or aesthetics should, of course, unfailingly exude an air of welcome and openness to the needs of people. Its raison d'être is, after all, to serve the public.

While in the office waiting for their turn to be accommodated, a little education or awareness raising should be facilitated – reading materials (mostly in illustrated comic-book form) on agriculture, health, nutrition, suffrage and elections, or the environment should be available. Brief informational, catchy video clips on any of these program areas could be repeatedly shown during office hours (with a tableau of the politician's work or projects included for "political mileage"). There could be a bulletin board with photos of completed or ongoing projects, as well as names of scholars, cooperatives, and livelihood centers benefiting from current programs. This is largely followed in all the four district offices we maintain, located in town centers where people can have easy access.

In the modest office building where Project BULIG operates, I had the walls of the training center/assembly area painted with colorful murals depicting the three focal programs for my district: Kabatan-onan (Youth, including education); Kapanginabuhian (Livelihood, particularly Project BULIG); and Kinaiyahan (Nature/Environment). Such innovations in dealing with "constituent affairs" could well bolster the image of one being an alternative politician who means business and takes the responsibility of engaging citizens seriously, but does not neglect empathy, humor or the "meanings" of people.

Generate Goodwill, Build (Political) Capital

People will always respond to a kind word and modest demeanor. As public servants we become public property and our every move is watched, with a number of interpretations read into our actions. Hauteur and arrogance will always be disdained. In the highly personalistic nature of Philippine politics, the "madaling malapitan" impression is, as surveys have shown, always a trait people value in a candidate or leader. Sometimes it would seem like you need to be immutably nice – with a wide grin pasted on your face and a reflex action of patting everyone on their back, never to show a scowl or frown. This does not mean we should be pushovers, at the mercy of the irate or fastidious voter who seeks revenge at the ballot box for our failing to meet every expectation set. Such expectations could be as seemingly puny, if preposterous, as having their names acknowledged in a speech you deliver during a barrio fiesta. A village leader, I recall, once took my failure to

recognize him publicly as an affront. Surely, you cannot please everybody and we do not have to be unfailingly amiable to all. (As every politician knows.)

There will always be hangers-on, sycophants, hustlers and a motley of other vexations to the spirit we have to avoid.) That aside, the point is that generating goodwill is essentially about building trust, because it is trust that will help you accrue political capital to govern or lead more effectively. When bolder initiatives for change are taken (investing your political capital), there will likely be more agreement or receptiveness when you have been able to build a reservoir of trust on the part of your constituents. A cardinal rule in this respect would be never to dish out sweeping promises of quick fix, instant solutions to problems, which trapos are wont to do. We can always say that the office (again, the 'professional' paradigm) can look into the matter being brought to our attention. Raising false hopes, especially among the very poor for whom shreds of hope are all they can really cling to, is a form of cruelty. Sincerity, as we may all well know, cannot be faked. And people even in the lowly barangays will just as readily see this. Others say that what makes a leader effective is domination, sometimes of the Machiavellian sort, the gripping mixture of awe and fear people have of the *"malalaki at makapangyarihang tao."* But I return to one of Nelson Mandela's reflections on leadership's paradox: just as people want to see their leaders as larger-than-life, they seek for them to be "one of us." To be larger-than-life is to evoke respect and admiration that flow from trust; to be "one of us" is to engender trust that springs from the constant generation of goodwill.

Chapter III
Alternative Pinoy Politics: Sketching Roadmaps
by Nereus Acosta

4. POWER AND PATRONAGE POLITICS: SIDESTEPPING LANDMINES

Getting Elected

That money is needed to effectively run for, and stay in, office is doubtless the grim and inescapable reality faced by every politician. But if money or the search and use of it dominate governance and pervade the practice of politics, corruption holds menacing sway, hobbles the system and destroys the practitioner himself. Marcos and Estrada provide jarring examples.

For the alternative, reform-minded politician, the need for money is perhaps the most dilemma-laden of political demands. Money is, as we know it, not free and those who offer it will want or expect something in return. To raise funds means raising the possibilities of compromising oneself, and making oneself vulnerable to the treacheries of politics. How do we negotiate this rough shoal? How do we sidestep landmines and avoid being blown to smithereens? How do we engage a world of power founded on the power of money? These are arguably the most wrenching of questions for a non-trapo to contemplate. There will likely be as many answers to these questions as there are politicians or political turfs.

Of course the peculiarities of a certain locality's politics – how much of it is dominated by trapo bosses and the guns-goons-gold-glitter dynamics – determine what sort of challenges the alternative politician would face. The reformist politician would presumably encounter more hurdles in, say, feudal sugar-dominated, impoverished municipalities in central Visayas, than in a more urbanized, media-exposed, better-educated, demographically-younger city like Naga where new ideas may be better received or some vigilance over the integrity of the electoral process expected.

In the district I represent, the more economically advantaged communities where the multinational pineapple producer Del Monte Inc. is based would require a different set of campaign strategies (more issue-based, varied discussion-forums) than in the southern Bukidnon logged-over towns of Pangantucan and Kalilangan where different ethnic groups have resettled and religious cults (like the Tadtads) proliferate in a political economy of destitution and dislocation. In a number of these latter areas vote buying has become rampant, perhaps even culturally sanctioned. Voters see elections as a chance to make a few extra pesos – aggravated no less by the fact that May, when elections are scheduled, is one of the driest months of the year and thus famine-prone.

As has been our experience in a number of these places, it matters little to many of the poor if you had conducted medical free clinics months earlier, donated money for a small footbridge or had given to their fiestas. The last candidate to offer another 50 or 100 pesos on election eve or election day gets their vote. The "meaning" attached to suffrage in a context of disenfranchisement is vastly different from the "meaning" this has for those of us who take for granted the fact that we eat three meals a day. Money, money and more money, in this case, along with muscle and machine, will carry the day. How do we combat this formidable phalanx?

In the elections of 1995 and 1998, we had to build upon personal goodwill we generated over time (forging ties and friendships in different barangays, initiating projects, attending fiestas and customary rites in communities) to marshal some loyal leaders to mitigate the onslaught of money for vote-buying from our opponents. We invested in forms of intelligence work, knowing when or to whom money would be distributed before election day and then work to foil these plans.

At the risk of having this sound like a declaration of piety or self-righteousness, our camp did not engage in the game of buying votes. (Even if you do, for argument's sake, you run the risk of getting into a bidding game, without so much of a guarantee that you would win; some voters will pragmatically view it as going for the highest "bidder.") Work and campaign funds were put into selecting and paying reliable pollwatchers (many of whom were youth) to guard the counting of votes, as well as tapping legal assistance (lawyers who would stand guard) to prevent brazen dagdag-bawas schemes during subsequent vote canvassing in various municipal halls. Our success rate in mitigating this sordid practice from overrunning the electoral exercise depended on how much money was poured by the other side. We still lost in some precincts, but not as heavily had we not invested in the countervailing measures we took to stem the flow of money intended for vote buying.

Room to Maneuver: Stride, Don't Sprint

A professor of mine liked using this phrase to denote the struggle for reform a leader must wage against great odds. I understood this to mean that when you become a "practitioner of power," you must assess your own capabilities, survey the terrain of battle, inventory your ammunition, and anticipate your enemy's actions. As a new entrant into a political arena dominated by old-style wheeling-and-dealing, you cannot lunge forward and be a firebrand, shooting aimlessly at every target. With goodwill, a personal core ethical compass, diligence and vision as "political capital," you work to build your space where you could maneuver and initiate change more effectively. There is, I believe, much value to taking things in good stride, learning the ropes well, and understanding that prudence, indeed, is the better part of valor. This is necessarily a longer, steeper route to take and Ron Heifetz, in his book Leadership Without Easy Answers, calls this adaptive leadership. Certain contexts and conditions just call for appropriate, if calibrated, responses.

One's room to maneuver has much to do with the alliances one is able to build. Our political system has hardly evolved over the years so much so that political parties, in the conventional definitions of any political science textbook, are largely non-existent. What we have are approximations of political parties, a veneer of platforms and agendas over the rough-and-tumble of electoral ambitions. The facility (or speed) in switching of party affiliations is almost laughable, with the persona of the titular head (normally the sitting head of state – i.e., Ramos for LAKAS, Estrada for LAMP) carrying sheer weight over any clear set of ideals, issues or initiatives.

Coalitions are even more chaotic, as was evident in the scrambling for slots in the senatorial slates for the May 2001 elections. And national coalition arrangements do not necessarily obtain at the local level. Given this reality, we need to ask the basic question: Who are we comfortable working with? Which company of politicians will be less of a hindrance to the goals we set out to reach? Politics, indeed, makes for strange bedfellows if we go by the aphorism "no permanent friends or enemies, just permanent interests." Being an alternative politician, however, should also mean setting a limit to the "strange-ness" of the bedfellows we allow ourselves to get mixed up with, and that the permanent interests we identify should be clearly beyond the purely personal or selfish. (There will be those trapos one would have to refuse to sup with.) We should not expect kindred reformist spirits by the dozen, but we can look for a bare minimum of commonality of convictions on certain issues and work with that. If we are sanctimonious, sit on a moral high horse and be rather purist about our 'judgements of character' of fellow politicians, then we fail to enlarge the room to maneuver. At some level we still have to deal with or tolerate some of the scoundrels and charlatans in government to get some serious work done.

This all brings to mind the acrimonious and long debates on the Clean Air Act, which I authored and defended in the House of Representatives in 1998. The whole experience was a baptism of fire in many ways. In legislation – or politics in general – I learned that compromise does not always have to assume a pejorative connotation. Policy is often decided not simply on its merits or demerits, but is a result of a political process of balancing interests and reaching a minimum consensus on new ground. When stakes are legion and stakeholders span a spectrum of society (i.e., NGOs, families, schools, business, industry, government, media) you have to recognize that policy reform can rarely have total victories, only incremental gains that we can build on or refine. There are times when we have to be less intransigent and yield to certain concessions (like de-emphasizing a controversial provision or two or accepting an otherwise disagreeable proposal), if only to save the larger thrust. Moreover, you face the stark reality that at the end of a deliberative process, this is not a solo enterprise you could ram through a system. You need a majority (110 votes in this case) to ratify your proposed legislative measure, which means you also have to walk the tightrope of personal relations with your fellow legislators. I choose to believe that having an imperfect law like the Clean Air Act which we can sink our teeth in, as it were, and revise or fine-tune over time is far better than having nothing to work with at all.

Perks, Payolas, Projects

Many an ordinary citizen would stubbornly maintain the rather sordid visage of Congress as a place where fortunes are made more than laws. The impression may not always be fair, but the public cannot be blamed for this, given the number of scams related to 'congressional pork' – called CDF (Countrywide Development Fund), RUDIF (Rural-Urban Development Infrastructure Fund), 'special allocations' or what not – or the flashy lifestyles some of these public officials flaunt. If we were to follow the strict separation of functions of the branches of government as enshrined in the Constitution, legislators should have no role in the implementation of infrastructure and other projects.

Congress holds the so-called 'power of the purse' over the national budget, scrutinizing the allocations of government revenue, but formally, that should be where it stops. Not so in the peculiar realities of Philippine politics. Members of Congress partake of the national largesse, so to speak, because of the imperatives that inhere in the political culture. Constituents in the districts, for all intents and purposes, choose their representatives not so much as lawmakers but as conduits to the national coffers, where funds could be brought

to the localities to build bridges, roads, schools, and basketball courts, among others. In turn, the actual delivery of such public goods are seen to ensure re-election. Hence the vicious cycle of corruption and patronage.

It is in the budget process that this intensely political dynamic of "who gets what, when and how" is played out – sometimes in full gladiatorial fashion. As such, public works contractors, engineers and suppliers compete for a congressman's attention – and good graces. For an alternative politician, this is a quagmire of realpolitik he cannot escape from. The analogy I have in mind is that of someone who has walked into a minefield; he can only choose to defuse whatever landmines he can detect to ensure his survival, but if he proceeds to walk rashly, he risks losing life and limb. Politics is that minefield, the favor-seekers the landmines. You cannot deny the existence of the latter; you might as well use them to your advantage – not to enrich yourself and thereby negate any stride toward reform, but to ensure that your kind of politics bides some time and gets yet another lease. The real and present danger to all this, of course, is that one false move and you could be blown to kingdom come. If you are not careful you may compromise yourself too far and lose sight of the finish line.

The point is to limit your dealings with two or three contractors that have a fairly competent track record with project implementation, which the Department of Public Works and Highways can readily vouch for, and which people can clearly see. Just as there are some well-meaning, dedicated politicians desirous of initiating reforms in the system, there are still a number of decent people in the business of construction and supply that are not ravenous vultures out to shortchange government of every available peso. This latter point may stretch a jaded citizenry's credulity, but this is where one must begin. Identify people you can work or be comfortable with, and who will not be out to take advantage of your being of the 'non-trapo' mold. The bidding and evaluation process should, at the minimum, bear that out – and while the process is never fool-proof as politicians make known their preferences for particular contractors, a track record is what the winning bidder should be able to stand on – if any doubt is raised.

Many projects are left unfinished or of poor quality, and it would be disastrous for political mileage purposes if people see how decrepit a day care or health center is, thus reflecting badly on the politician who identified such project for funding. If one succumbs to the entreaties and temptations of various contractors and suppliers he ends up spreading his influence too thinly and creates competition and rivalry among them. In this respect you would need the support of the Regional Director, who should also be able to help rein in recalcitrant suppliers and contractors. In my district a prior understanding was made with the District Engineer and the Regional Director that we closely coordinate and consult with each other so that the less effective, if more predatory, contractors are kept at bay.

To make the few trustworthy contractors assume direct responsibility for community-related work and build their "respectability" in some sectors, I ask them to help fund small unprogrammed projects yearly – roughly 20 to 50 thousand pesos – for "considerable impact": a slide and few swings for the town playground; a makeshift wing of a health center; a barbed-wire fence for a tree-seedling nursery; food supplies for a scouting jamboree or a youth seminar; teaching materials for struggling teachers; sponsoring a barrio's free clinic for a day; supporting a feeding activity in some far-flung day care center. A more far-reaching thrust would be having them "adopt a cause, group or community" – helping subsidize a few college students, for example, or helping youth carry out sports programs As much as possible, I ask them to join me for some of these activities so that credit or recognition can be duly given them. It goes without saying that having such supplemental yet visible projects – instead of an instant renovation of your home or acquiring a swanky new vehicle, a lifestyle shift towards ostentation, as it were – boosts the standing of the politician in the community and wins him approbation (in daily parlance, "pogi points").

In my district I opted to identify the Department of Public Works and Highways as implementing agency for almost all infrastructure projects. This simplifies the projects' monitoring and reduces the "politicking" of mayors who lobby for such projects to be channeled to their municipalities for implementation. This decision was easier for me to make because I only have one Liberal Party mayor in the whole eight-town district; all the rest did not support my candidacy for Congress. If a congressman belonged to the same party as all mayors in the district or were beholden to them politically, then identifying the DPWH as the sole agency for implementation would be enough cause for an uproar. Mayors often pledge political support to congressmen in exchange for projects coursed through their local government units. If one were to rely solely on this kind of support – and not have an alternative base as was discussed previously – he becomes more vulnerable to the pressures of local political leaders. What would be an ideal situation, of course, would be for the congressmen and the mayors to share a common reformist vision and a no-nonsense program of government, complementing decentralized governance with sound legislation and negotiating the treacherous path toward reform together. Perhaps that remains a pipedream for the nonce. In the meantime, there are the sundry landmines we have to sidestep very carefully.

Keep to a Modest Lifestyle

The politician's lifestyle becomes emblematic of his leadership and character. In a political environment where form often substitutes for substance, the flair for the gaudy and ostentatious can even be culturally sanctioned. Even local cinema or the television sitcom genre tend to depict the "congressman" character as alternately bumbling and venal, pathetic and scheming – but always affluent, immodest and surrounded by bodyguards. To be an alternative politician means having to live up to expectations contrary to the latter image – and remain humble of manner and simple of lifestyle.

While there seems to be a widespread perception that Filipino politicians are corpulent and corrupt (note how Erap epitomized this), and thus disdained, I believe there is a clear flip side to this sneering, jaded observation. And it is that there is a real hunger for competent and credible leadership, a genuine yearning for role models who embody integrity and the values of hard work and honesty. That was the articulated cry of the multitudes amassed at EDSA and elsewhere in the country when Estrada's impeachment trial was aborted by people power. In an age when it seems de rigeur for a Cabinet member or lawmaker or mayor to move around in luxurious "hot cars," it was utterly refreshing for the public to know that the highly esteemed Chief Justice Hilario Davide still drove around in his old automobile. So it should be for those of us in public office. Heed the tenet of living simply and serving well.

Recapitulating Random Thoughts, Setting Markers

As a way of summing up, we could use a mnemonic devise or two. In staying the course of alternative politics, it is important to remember three I's. Involvement in other activities rather than being entirely engaged in politics is key. Politics can set its own momentum and can overwhelm one on a swell, as it were. While the ride may be exhilarating at times, like the occasional rush of a surfer riding a wave's crest, it could hazardous as well. It is important to have some control over what we can do outside the passions of politics. Teach, work with civil society groups, do pro bono work, interface programs one initiates as a politician with schools, churches, NGOs or civic organizations. Make time for such – they help us maintain our sanity, a sense of equanimity.

Interaction with kindred reformist spirits, as it were, is necessary. One always has to be a part of a synergy of creative ideas, ideals, and innovations. Have a refuge, a watering hole, where you can likely be energized simply by knowing others who share in your own frustrations about the pace of reform on many fronts, and more importantly, in an overriding aspiration to have good sense and decency triumph in public affairs.

Finally, it is essential to have constant introspection. The vanities of politics have ways of "eating into one's soul." If we walk with feet of clay, we succumb too readily to the accoutrements of power. Sycophants are never in short supply in this business and guile permeates many dealings. In the last analysis, it is the individual practitioner of power who alone faces tests of character – in the recesses of his intellect, in the stirrings of his conscience. Know your core principles and perhaps have a sense of how much you would sacrifice to keep them in good stead.

Moreover, there are other practical guideposts to be on the lookout for. We can call them the three B's. Alternative politics is also about working on and strengthening a base, a set of structures and programs that somehow run parallel to existing structures in local politics, but which uses largely new and different methods of winning hearts and minds. Certainly, this entails a form of Sisyphean struggle. It is never easy making people undergo shifts from encrusted ways. To do parallel work that hews more closely to NGO modalities of community organizing and consensus building can be thankless, but the rewards in time are immeasurable. Empowerment thrusts unleash creative energies in people, who in turn work for the kind of alternative politics we all seek.

The other marker to establish is a more professional, more systematic and orderly way of conducting our constituents and official affairs – a bureau of sorts that should help us veer away from the convenient, patronizing practices of trapo politics. Perhaps a sizable chunk of the electorate would rather see politicians dispense largesse and favors with more alacrity. No one, of course, wants the tediousness of going through any semblance of red tape and cumbersome procedures. But having a more professional office to deliver better and more efficient service is integral to new, alternative politics. People have to understand the concept of having certain structures supplant purely personalistic dynamics – all the better for sustaining programs and rationalizing public services.

Surviving politics is also about "building political capital" through the generation of goodwill and trust. Reformist politics does not mean being 'loose canons, 'firing at various targets without so much as a clear aim or focus. There is always value in the 'soft sell' rather than the bellicose in-your-face lecture about the need to push for an agenda of change. You attract ants with honey, not with vinegar. In the final analysis, it is a reservoir of goodwill and trust that will help you set farther-reaching initiatives and lessen resistance to such. The corollary argument

here is that you develop a clear and focused message or advocacy – education, health, and the environment – and invest such 'political capital' on this.

The skills needed to engage a world of power – especially of the sort where some Machiavellian dealings hold sway – should be multidimensional. This begins with getting ourselves elected. One must have a measure of disciplined thought, anticipating snags and knowing where to troubleshoot, understanding what it is that people or the electorate respond to, what our detractors or critics are up to, and what resources we have access to or available to us. We should be able to Assess and Analyze where we stand in this metaphorical field filled with landmines – so that we tread ever so carefully as we seek to defuse some of these mines.

It is pressing for us to know what Alliances we can build so that we know what room we have for maneuver. Who are those who share our wavelength of ideas and ideals? Who can be strong allies in this alternative politics struggle? Who can we be comfortable working with? We cannot, however, be intransigent about this alliance building. There are those we need to work with despite certain personal or ideological differences. A gulp of one's pride every so often should not be too bad. Alternative politics is about increments of success, never total victories. It is a long uphill struggle; stride, do not sprint.

This segues to the point on Adaptive leadership – certain contexts, challenges and circumstances call for appropriate, calibrated responses. In dealing with bootlickers, the pesky contractors, the irascible local officials, and the persistent, beseeching constituents who make a regular stream to your office or home, you must be the adaptive leader: firm but flexible, personable but not patronizing, generous but grounded and not entirely without guile (one cannot be a pushover in this business). In the ultimate reckoning, it is always about a sense of reason and proportion, decency and a hale, hopeful outlook that should see us through – and yes, transcend – the travails of the prevailing political culture.

Anti-Political Politics: Spend Your Marbles Wisely

A friend once told me that political capital is like having precious marbles. You can choose to squander them by being brash and indiscriminate in your dealings with people or fellow politicians, or increase them by generating goodwill, earning trust, and working quietly and well. You can save up your marbles for the day when they will have to be spent wisely, for an issue you may fervently believe in and fight for. Or you can keep using a few marbles for every issue that you want to comment on for the sake of publicity or self-promotion and lose credibility over the long run. Saving marbles is also about understanding power not as domination over material and human resources, but about the capacity to inspire, to unleash creative energy, to mobilize talent and ingenuity. So when you do need to use this political capital – to initiate a project, launch a program, raise funds for whatever cause, or wage yet another political campaign – synergy and cooperation should, hopefully, not be too difficult.

On my office wall hangs a missive named "Anti-Political Politics" culled from the writings of Vaclac Havel – noted playwright, humanist, dissident and now President of the Czech Republic. It is my mantra of sorts, a philosophical guidepost for a struggling 'practitioner of power.' Much of what I have attempted to articulate in this chapter is almost seamlessly captured in his powerful prose.

If your heart is in the right place and you have good taste, not only will you muster politics, you are destined to it.

If you are modest and do not lust after power, not only are you suited to politics, you absolutely belong there.

The sine qua non of a politician is not the ability to lie; he need only be sensitive and know when, what, to whom and how to say what he has to say.

It is not true that a person of principle does not belong in politics; it is enough for his principles to be leavened with patience, deliberation, a sense of proportion and an understanding of others.

It is not true that only the unfeeling cynic, the vain, the brash and the vulgar can succeed in politics; such people, it is true, are drawn to politics, but in the end, decorum and good taste will always count for more.

Decorum and good taste – integrity, simplicity, commitment – will always count for more. The forces of money, muscle and machine may have worked in a largely benighted past, and may still continue to hold sway in various parts of the land, but the complexities of the world we live in today will inexorably push us toward new ways of thinking, seeing and acting. The transformations arising from advances in technology, mass media, information exchange, and travel will help us toward paradigm shifts in three new "Ms": mind, mediation and motivation – all of which should ground and guide us in our sketching of roadmaps to a fuller, more meaningful Filipino politics.

Chapter III
Alternative Pinoy Politics: Sketching Roadmaps
by Nereus Acosta

REFERENCES

Aquino, Belinda A. "Filipino Elections and 'Illiberal' Democracy." In Public Policy, II, 3, 1998.

Chikiamco, Calixto V. Why We Are Who We Are: Essays on Political Economy. Foundation for Economic Freedom, 1998.

De Guzman, Raul and Mila Reforma, (eds.). Government and Politics of the Philippines. Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Heifetz, Ron. Leadership Without Easy Answers. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.

Maxwell, John C. The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999.

McCoy, Alfred and Ed de Jesus (eds.). Philippine Social History: Global Trade and Local Transformations. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1998.

Osborne, David and Ted Gaebler. Reinventing Government. New York: Plume, 1993.

Politics and Governance: Theory and Practice in the Philippine Context. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1999.

Sidel, John. "Post-Marcos 'Personality' Politics." In Public Policy, Vol. II, No. 3, 1998.

Silliman, G. Sidney and Lela Garner Noble (eds.). Organizing for Democracy: NGOs, Civil Society and the Philippine State. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1998.

Timberman, David G. (ed.). The Philippines: New Directions in Domestic Policy and Foreign Relations. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998