



23 of Cebu's Most Influential People

W A L K I N G W I T H T I T A N S

By Mayette Q. Tabada

WHAT is power but a genius for self-promotion?

I still wince whenever I remember what must be the most chilling (and at the same time, the most asinine) comment made indirectly about power: President Gloria Arroyo telling the Foreign Correspondents Association of the Philippines that, should the country shift to the parliamentary form of government, "I am the best person to lead this nation through the transition."

Fortunately for my education, Sun.Star Cebu had begun running since Nov. 22, 2005 a series on 23 of the most influential people in Cebu.

Editors of Sun.Star Cebu and Sun.Star Superbalita polled for individuals that had, by deed or by potential, an impact on life in these islands.

The series concluded last Feb. 27.

I may not agree with the list's lopsided representation of my gender (only three women leaders versus 20 men—or should that be taken as a compliment?).

But knowing what drove them, what irked them, how they relaxed after moving and shaking Cebu has made me relent in my view that an overweening sense of "I" hobbles the stride of titans roaming among us.

Voice

Reading the anniversary special has made me realize that the powerful do not speak with one voice. Except for one or two, the 23 leaders did not view their authority and influence as vested in their persons. The manifest destiny exuded by the author of the "I am the best person to lead..." quote was an aberration, not the rule, in the Sun.Star pool.

Leaders molded in the struggle to include the masses in governance spoke expectedly about power infusing the institution or sector they identified with. Tessie Fernandez spoke about the gains and frustrations of power from the perspective of the nongovernment organizations (NGOs) and the disadvantaged, never explicitly from a personal standpoint.

Trade unionism is the clout behind him, admits Democrito Mendoza, labor leader of over 50 years.

When governance researcher and academic Felisa Etemadi speaks of being useful as an “outside eye” in her collaborations with the government and NGOs, her contribution is not tied to her person but to the academe she represents, the ideal of the ascetism of the mind rooted in the needs of the real world.

As fifth-term House Deputy Speaker Raul V. del Mar noted, “The prevailing wisdom is to reject any notion of the trapo (traditional politician) type of politics, which is basically the use—or misuse—of power for anything but people and country.”

Common good

What is at the root of this institutional perspective of power, in contrast to the merely self-interested? Public service with a high degree of professionalism vouches Foreign Affairs Undersecretary Francisco Benedicto.

Others may leer at former senator John Henry Osmena’s contention that political clout is equated to opportunism and survival.

More mainstream is Cebu Gov. Gwen Garcia’s view that power achieves a positive valence only when it is wielded to effect changes for the public good.

Doing good may mean, for one, creating a climate of opportunity and optimism through education (the legacies of the Gullas clan, Augusto Go family, and Aboitiz foundations), employment harnessing the Cebuanos’ “world-class work ethic” (Aboitiz group of companies, the Norkis Group), tourism and nation building.

Jon Ramon Aboitiz advocates a culture of social equity, where corporate citizens plow back into the community part of their earnings. Industrialist Norberto Quisumbing Jr., chairman of the Norkis Group, believes business leaders should even support candidates qualified for public service.

Social pressure

Cebu Holdings Inc. president Rene Almendras believes in the principle of laissez-faire, with government intervening the least in entrepreneurship.

The power to keep the peace and bring order lies at the core of the top police officials’ influence.

An opposite variant of this power is to shake the status quo. This may be done by way of an informed citizenry educated by responsible media (advocacies carried on by the Gullases’ The Freeman, the Garcias’ Sun.Star network, and multi-media crusader “Super Bobby” Nalzar).

You can also speak out against political divisiveness and public apathy towards vigilantism if, like the Archbishop of Cebu, your very whisper can make other powerful men quake in their boots.

Self-perpetuate

If power has so many social uses, are the powerful justified in ensuring their perpetuity?

The congressman of the first district of Cebu, Eduardo Gullas, believes dynasties are “repugnant” for treating public office as “part of the (family) heirloom.”

“It is actually the people that create dynasties,” third-term Mandaue City Mayor Thadeo Ounao reasons. “Dynasticism is like a coffee product. If you like the product, you will be loyal to the product.”

In Greek mythology, the titans were a family of giants born of Uranus and Gaea. They ruled the earth until they were overthrown by the Olympian gods.

It may do well for modern-day titans to remember that personal power is enhanced, not diminished, by a public perspective. Or that “titanic” alludes to the colossal brought low by a small but fatal flaw.

A FEW THINGS need to be said again about Sun.Star Cebu’s special project “23 of Cebu’s Most Influential People”:

The 23 were not the most influential; they were only 23 of the most influential. There are many others who, we are sure, qualify. Why only 23? It was Sun.Star’s anniversary number.

The selection was made by Sun.Star editors in a newsroom poll. There were three in the original list but were not in the series; two begged off, saying they did not want the publicity, and one refused, saying he did not want to help the paper. More than a dozen indirectly sent word they would like to be in the list.

The listing was based not so much on actual accomplishment as on the 23 people’s capacity for public good.

Questions and answers were written and, when there was need for it, follow-up interview was made.

Aside from recognizing power and achievement, Sun.Star hopes the project will help encourage the 23 people—and others who see them as role models—to use influence responsibly and well. **PAS**