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November 5, 2007

“Ready to Serve”

President Arroyo’s decision to grant executive clemency to former President Estrada, reinstating in full his civil and political rights, has raised a number of questions and challenges from those opposed to the decision. These challenges have basically been scoffed at by the Arroyo administration, as experts agree that the granting of pardon is a presidential prerogative that legally does not require public reasoning or approval by another branch of government. The administration’s position is that it is under no obligation to answer the calls and questions of the people.

Legally, the administration is correct: when granting pardon, the president is under no obligation to the people. Democratically, however, this logic is fundamentally flawed. **In a democracy, a president is *always* under obligation to the people, he or she is *always* under obligation to answer challenges to his or her decisions and his or her decisions are *always* subject to the will of the people.**

My uncle ran barangay kagawad this past election. The slogan of his lineup was simple: “Ready to Serve.” These small village elections and their similarly small campaign tactics may seem unsophisticated in the world of national politicians with their billions of pesos in campaign funds, intricate machinery, and party coalitions and rivalries. However, this simple slogan emits an insight lost on most national politicians. **Public officeholders are public servants.**

Filipino society seems obsessed with the idea of leadership. Ask the average Filipino how to fix politics and he or she will answer (in a range colors) by putting good leaders in place who are competent and moral enough to make the right decisions for the nation. “Leadership” in the Philippines responds to criticisms and challenges by urging the people to “trust us” and “give us a chance” as they somewhat arrogantly assert that they know what is best for the nation. When they are not able to quell criticisms, they urge the nation to “move on.” The people for their part, jaded and bitter but still ever aware of what is happening within the government, have resigned themselves to saying “well, the money and the power belong to them.” **I beg to disagree; the money and power belong to us.** We cannot blame our “leadership” for monopolizing our money and power if we refuse to control it; as Jose Rizal said, “there can be no tyrants where there are no slaves.” **Furthermore, public officeholders are not meant to lead; they are meant to follow.**

Let me apologize in advance for this nauseatingly classist analogy which I am about to offer: You are not particularly skilled at cooking and are too busy working to make a living to take care all that needs to be done around the your house. And so, you hire a *katulong*. If you stop to consider it, your *katulong* has considerable power over basically every part of your life: he or she has control over what you eat and thus has control over your health; he or she takes care of your house and its maintenance, and so has control

over your money; he or she could easily drive a wedge between members of your family or ruin your reputation in front of your neighbors, and so has control over your personal relationships.

Yet, does this mean your *katulong* has more power over you than you have over him or her? Of course not. You are still the owner of the house and the *katulong's* employer, and thus you have the ultimate power. While your *katulong* makes the daily decisions about what you eat, you have the right to say “*Ayoko itong ulam, luto ka ng iba.*” While your *katulong* maintains your house, you have the right to say “*Madumi pa ito, linisin mo.*” If your *katulong* unjustly rocks the relationships between and among your family members and neighbors, you have the right to say “*Hindi tama yan. Huwag ganyan.*” And if, after voicing your disapproval to your *katulong*, he or she is still not performing the job satisfactorily, you have the right to say “*Alis ka. Kunin ko na iba.*”

Of course, your *katulong*, as the one with more expertise in matters of the house, has the right to and should also contest your assertions when he or she feels that you are wrong. He or she has the right to refuse an unreasonable task as well as the right to protest that some things simply cannot be done without catching your ire. Your *katulong* is basically a micromanager, the body which pays attention to the needs which you are unable to care for, either because you are too busy or you admit that he or she could care for them better.

Public officeholders, including above all the President, are the *katulong*s of the nation. They micromanage the day to day affairs necessary to keep the country running in order to provide a service to the Filipino who does not have the time or the expertise to deal with such issues. **Their job is to facilitate, not exploit, the lives of Juan and Juana de la Cruz so that Juan and Juana may work, play and live with security and dignity.**

And so what the Philippines needs is not an angel of a leader, but, in the words of Malcolm X, “A revolution of the mind.” Filipinos need to realize that we, the people, are the owners and leaders while the officeholders are our managers and followers. Their job, their only mandate, is to help us, the intricate procedural and legal mechanisms which exist, are tools that exist only to help us. When are not able to produce the results we desire, the burden is not on us to “be patient” or “have trust.” **On the contrary, the burden is on them to perform well or be replaced. Unfortunately, we, the people, have not held them to this burden.** Would you tolerate and even revere a *katulong* who mismanages your household, steals from you, lies to you and kills you? Ridiculous. Yet, we tolerate public officeholders who do just that in broad, bold daylight to our collective household, our nation. *Pwede ba yan?*