

Manila Women's Forum

A Network of Women Professionals

April 2006

Philippine Politics Demystified

By Shana Montesol Johnson

A lively group of Manila Women's Forum members and newcomers gathered at the art-filled home of Mara Pardo de Tavera on March 20 to hear Marites Vitug, Editor in Chief of Newsbreak magazine, explain Philippine politics and current events.

In 2001, Ms. Vitug co-founded Newsbreak, the Philippines' leading news magazine, which has been described by The New York Times as a magazine with "spunk and spice...and has more than demonstrated its independence from the privileged and the powerful." For her work with Newsbreak, Ms. Vitug, a journalist with more than 20 years of experience, was ranked 45 among 50 Global Leaders (mostly heads of states) by Eurasia Group, a leading global risk consultancy firm. She is also Philippine correspondent for Newsweek, author of three award-winning books, and serves on the board of editors of the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism.

In her talk, "Making sense of the news: GMA till 2010?," Ms. Vitug identified two threats to President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's (GMA's) likelihood of serving out her term until 2010: a restive military, and a Senate that may reject charter change.

A restive military

The recent coup attempt of February 23 and 24, in which two senior officers of the Philippine military expressed their intent to withdraw support from the President, ended peacefully after closed door deliberations. Dubbed by Ms. Vitug as a "coup de talk," it

nonetheless reflected the restiveness of the military. In addition, it was the first attempted coup with civilian participation. Leaders of civil society groups met with military rebels and promised to provide the non-spontaneous "people power" of 50,000 marchers. Vitug noted that in this bizarre alliance, even the Communists met with the military in the broadest anti-Arroyo alliance so far. She attributed this linkage to desperation on the part of civil society, and characterized it as a "cop out" for assigning people power to the military.

Why is there restiveness in the Armed Forces? Ms. Vitug identified two key sources:

(1) the military's participation in the 2004 presidential elections, the first time since 1969 that elections took place under a sitting president. Newsbreak investigations have established that the military was involved in cheating operations for the administration, including corruption and intimidation of election officials



MWF speaker Marites Vitug

(2) corruption among military leaders, some of whom own apartments in Trump Towers or Orange County, California despite their P25,000 monthly salaries, while the rest of the military barely gets by with very limited funds and equipment. Where the rank-and-file feel there is injustice, there is fertile ground for recruitment by rebel soldiers.

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Next MWF Meeting

When: 6:30 p.m., Monday, April 17, 2006.

What: Craig Burrows, who has established four NGOs in the Philippines since 1983, will speak about his work to provide education or educational assistance to impoverished youth throughout the country. Craig was made an Honourable Member of the Order of the British Empire by the Queen of England for services to Filipino children in 2005. **Where:** Natasha Davis' home, 10 Beaterio Street, Urdaneta Village, Makati City. **Bring:** Something to share for the potluck dinner. **Note:** There will be no meeting in May. The next meeting will be June 19.

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The lesson for GMA from this recent attempted coup, argued Ms. Vitug, is the need for political and institutional reforms, such as revamping the Commission on Elections (Comelec) and resolving high-profile cases now being handled by the new Ombudsman.

Dancing the cha-cha

Under charter change (dubbed “cha-cha”), the Philippine system of government would change from presidential to parliamentary. Ms. Vitug thinks this would lead to GMA staying in power through the end of her term in 2010, after which House Speaker Joe De Venecia would become prime minister. As Ms. Vitug described it, the two are “locked in each other’s embrace, dancing the cha-cha.” The problem is the Senate, which is “made up of 24 individual republics,” is likely to oppose charter change. De Venecia has proposed that only Congress can approve changes to the Constitution, which the Senate is bound to contest, sending the question to the Supreme Court.

Would a switch to a parliamentary system bring about needed change? Not by itself, according to Ms. Vitug. What is needed is to strengthen political parties (they should receive subsidies to help run candidates’ campaigns), punish politicians who switch parties constantly, and require greater transparency in campaign contributions.

No likely suspect?

Although GMA’s approval ratings are

dismal (a recent Pulse Asia survey reported that 65% of respondents believe the President should resign or be removed), she may survive in power until 2010 simply because there is no clear replacement. Twenty-three percent of survey respondents named Vice President Noli de Castro as the best leader of the country, while 17% opted for former President Joseph Estrada and 13% chose Senator Panfilo Lacson. This lack of consensus clearly works in the President’s favor. In addition, the economy has been resilient despite political turmoil, kept afloat by remittances from overseas Filipino workers. In a new development, Ms. Vitug noted, the economy is seen as resilient and separate from politics.

Stay tuned

Looking forward, Ms. Vitug enumerated four things that observers of Philippine politics should watch out for:

1) Results of the Mayuga report. Navy Chief Admiral Mateo Mayuga, former inspector general of the Armed Forces, has headed the investigation of allegations that some officers cheated for President Arroyo during the 2004 elections. The Mayuga investigation was triggered by the wiretapped telephone conversations of former Comelec Commissioner Virgilio Garcillano and is expected to be sent to the President in less than two weeks.

2) New Armed Forces chief of staff. General Senga, the current Armed Forces chief of staff, is set to retire in July. At that time, Army chief Gen. Esperon is likely to be named the new

chief of staff.

3) Planned impeachment complaint. In June or July, a new impeachment complaint may be filed against the President.

4) Developments within the opposition. Will they unite? Will the middle forces unite with the left?

These are interesting and fast-moving times and the Philippines – and the Manila Women’s Forum was fortunate to have a seasoned professional like Marites Vitug to help make sense of the news.

The Manila Women’s Forum

The Manila Women’s Forum (MWF) is a cross-cultural network for women. It provides opportunities to build friendships, to talk to women of various cultures, and to share information about resources. Our meetings are intended to provide intellectual stimulation and lead to personal and professional development. All women are welcome to join. The current officers are **Lisa Lumbao**, Chair, Programs, Treasurer, and Newsletter. **Cecilia Leung**, Programs. **Beulah P. Taguiwalo**, Newsletter, Website.

Cost of membership is P300 per year. Members receive a copy of the current mailing list in addition to the newsletter, which is also sent to non-members. A contribution is collected at each monthly meeting: P20 for members, and P40 for non-members. Please contact Lisa Lumbao at Tel. 812-3932, Tel/Fax 813-0168, or at lumbao@mozcom.com for more information about MWF.

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