

Taking on the politics of corruption

PRESSBOX
comment

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Ocampo



The longest Christmas celebration in the world (of course, you guessed it right, onli in da Pilipins) brings to mind a deceased colleague who used to say: wake me up when it's all over.

By the first week of December, you see a steady stream of people coming and going every which way, the boats and buses and jeepneys are filled to the brim, the malls are overcrowded and doing great business, the hustle and bustle practically everywhere envelop you in suffocating embrace, soon to climax in the ear-splitting burst of New Year firecrackers.

And thus comes to a soothing close the demeaning commercialisation and spiritual degradation of an event that has structured the route of human history the past 2,000 years.

The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it (John 1:5).

My colleague had a point. I empathize with him.

The doomsday scenario presented by the global warning phenomenon seems to have assumed a grim aura of inevitability.

As early as April of last year, *Time* magazine, in a special report, had listed 51 ways each and every member of the human family on earth can do "to make a difference" in combatting the inexorably creeping cataclysm that could conceivably obliterate all life in our planet.

Science fiction aficionados should delight in one scary advice, now under study, that follows:

"What if we could build a giant mirror in space to deflect the sun's energy? Or inject sulfur into the stratosphere to cool the earth? Scientists are examining such sci-fi methods as a gigantic Plan B should efforts to end carbon dioxide emission fail.

"Geoengineering, as the field



is called, involves rearranging the environment on a planetary scale. That these far-out strategies are getting a serious bearing in mainstream science is a measure of how desperate the battle against climate change is becoming."

My scientific neighbor has a brainstorm: just destroy all the world's vehicles and return to the horse-and-buggy era.

He might have something there.

President Arroyo has at her beck and call 54 advisers. With all these functionaries around her, how can she go wrong?

If you are doing good as a government functionary, in whatever level, in this country, you are putting your life on the line.

Take the case of Undersecretary Antonio Villar, chief of the Presidential Anti-Smuggling Group, who is now the subject of death threats from big-time syndicates and their powerful protectors after his raid on a high-end auto shop in Makati, where 81 smuggled luxury cars worth at least P110 million were discovered.

Legally registered with the help of conniving officials of the Bureau of Customs and Land Transportation Office, these luxury vehicles include

20 BMWs and Lamborghinis reportedly owned – expectedly – by some politicians. What better way to maintain their yabang so they can look down on the peasants while the peasants gape wide-eyed at the tin gods.

But Villar is not fazed despite the death threats on him and his wife as he vowed to relentlessly pursue his mission. He pleaded with the people, both in and out of government, for help by providing the necessary information that could lead to the arrest and incarceration of smugglers who sap the economy by not paying taxes. And he tried the soft touch of conscience with the syndicates' politician-protectors that include a town mayor reportedly claiming three of the smuggled vehicles:

"You have profited so much in the past years, it's time to think of our country, so let go. Your bellies are already bulging with profits from smuggling activities."

Villar's plaint, without any doubt, will be lost in the wind against the iron-clad legacy of gargantuan greed bequeathed by the Marcos dictatorship to this benighted nation. If miracles sometimes happen, it will not be in his lifetime or ours – but definitely – but it should not deter him from doing an excellent job.

Carry on, man.

According to the Department of Budget and Management, President Arroyo has at her beck and call no less than 54 advisers and assistants. With all these functionaries around her, how can Gloria go wrong? Do they give her bum advice, that is, if she ever consults them? A number of them just struts around pretending to be important but shallow as mud puddles.

Bhutto's partymates are calling for foreign intervention to probe the killing. But while a British team has arrived in Rawalpindi to survey the site, conclusive findings appear unlikely as Bhutto's remains were buried the day after her murder, in keeping with religious practice. Her family has also declined a post-mortem.

In the meantime, as the government's take on the killing shifts from day to day, and now that Musharraf has blamed Bhutto for the fate that befell her, the people of Pakistan continue to live in chaos and insecurity amid an unabashed thirst for power and the very real threat of extremism within their borders.

Amid the distress, a spot of cheer for us all in the new year

PINOYDIMSUM
observations

Hoping to start the new year by mainly writing about cheerful news, I've been stymied by tragic events around the globe.

Foremost is the assassination of Pakistan's Benazir Bhutto, something that's surely sending shivers of dread among female politicians around the world. It revives memories of the 1984 murder of Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, as well as the 2003 stabbing death of Swedish foreign minister Anna Lindh. Sri Lanka's Prime Minister Chandrika Kumaratunga survived an assassination attempt in 2000, and two former Bangladeshi female premiers, Khaleda Zia and Sheikh Hasina Wajid, were charged with corruption and have become cell-neighbors in jail.

Closer to us in Southeast Asia, Burmese leader Aung San Suu Kyi's freedom has been curtailed for 17 years, 12 of them in detention, after her 1990 election victory was thwarted by a military junta.

Do I, being female, find the murders and detentions of members of my sex more shocking than those of males? Surely not, especially since there have been, throughout history, many more male politicians assassinated (think of Ninoy Aquino, JFK, Martin Luther King). Had Suu Kyi been male, would he have



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our country and escape into mindless merriment?

Weary of the endless depressing reports from home, many of us simply retreat into the old bahala na attitude, while others store up their rage. The commodification of our people, especially women, has resulted from the globalisation which produces human trafficking and the export of cheap labor. The rampant consumerism in developed countries has bred much resentment among the have-nots, as the greed and acquisitiveness of the few on top of the heap of struggling masses go heedlessly along in the pursuit of power. Obviously, many human beings today have such skewed values that they can't distinguish between right and wrong. The new year should therefore be the time to redress all these human errors.

Many people in depressed circumstances often turn to religion,

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been assassinated instead? Certainly the pervasiveness of today's media magnifies all these crimes, bringing them right into our homes and impinging on our consciousness.

Journalists too have been victims of assassinations in these turbulent times. The prominent Russian investigative reporter Anna Politkovskaya was murdered in 2003, and many journalists have died during the Iraq war. In our own country, a handful of women journalists have been assassinated along with large numbers of mediemen. Almost all those murders are still unaccounted for, further staining the present administration's record (even though some journalists likewise were assassinated during past administrations).

With all this horror everywhere, how can anyone write an upbeat piece to try to spread some cheer for the New Year? Shall we just ignore the continuing conflicts around the globe, blot out the depressing assassinations, as well as the natural and man-made disasters that increasingly plague the planet today? Will we say these occurrences are part of life's cycles, trusting that good times will surely come?

During festive times, shall we shut our eyes to the continuing poverty in

which sadly only encourages them to pray, not think sensibly. Others escape through mind-numbing entertainment, with the avalanche of TV, films, radio, comics and the like, which have engulfed both the poor and the rich. The sad commercialisation of Christmas has so distorted its real meaning that too many people think only of amassing more goodies, while the poor merely hope for hand-outs.

So do we extract some cheer from all the turmoil and unhappiness around us? Surely by taking stock and resolving to help our kababayan in any way possible.

The Pinoy penchant for merriment during the holiday season is well known. Our reputation as smiling, hospitable folks sometimes strikes foreigners living in dour places like Hong Kong as both charming and incongruous. Is the tendency to be merry amidst hardship and uncertainty a virtue or foolishness? Shouldn't our New Year wish be, not just to demand morality in our politicians, but to hope for a sense of purpose and less tribalism among ourselves? Only thus can we achieve a genuine sense of nationhood.

Meanwhile, Masaganang Bagong Taon to migrant workers everywhere struggling for better lives.

Horrific price ordinary Pakistanis have to pay

There would have been a general election in Pakistan today had it not been for the death of former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, who was running against the incumbent president. Violence in the aftermath of her assassination has killed 50 more people and moved the polls to Feb. 18.

For the first time since the assassination of his opponent, President Pervez Musharraf said Bhutto may have been shot before the explosion, contradicting an earlier official statement that she had banged her head on the car's roof as she ducked for cover.

Musharraf did not stop there. He said: "For standing up outside the car, I think she was to blame alone.

OTHERVOICES
what they say

Manila Standard Today



Nobody else." He said he did not have anything to do with the attack.

Government reports earlier said the killing had been ordered by a tribal leader and a known Al Qaida figure, Baitullah Mehsud. Musharraf further claimed he had given Bhutto enough security to ensure her safety.

Each word Musharraf utters only contributes to his unpopularity.