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The Czarina and the Priest

"...A battle royal is looming in the land of Cong Dadong Macapagal between his daughter, President -- and anti-drug "Czarina" -- Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and Gov. Fr. Ed Panlilio of Pampanga...."

SACRAMENTO, CALIF. Feb. 23 (PinoyGlobal) - A battle royal is looming in the land of Cong Dadong Macapagal between his daughter, President -- and anti-drug "Czarina" -- Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and Gov. Fr. Ed Panlilio of Pampanga. With all the government and political resources at her disposal, the Czarina has come down furiously at the priest-turned-governor through a series of Machiavellian strategies. But the priest is fighting back like David did to the mighty Goliath.

It all started when Panlilio and other governors were invited to a breakfast meeting at the Malacanang Palace in October 2007. During the meeting, a presidential aide handed brown envelopes to the guests without any explanation. The brown envelope that Panlilio received contained P500,000. After a few days -- not knowing what the money was for -- Panlilio went public and disclosed the money which he believed was a bribe. At about the same time, it was revealed in the news that brown bags were also distributed to about 190 congressmen who attended a separate meeting with Gloria in Malacanang. At that time, an impeachment resolution against Arroyo was pending in the House of Representatives. Soon after the meetings, the impeachment resolution was overwhelmingly rejected by the House of Representatives.

Panlilio's expose' of the bribery was tantamount to a declaration of war against the Arroyo regime. Pretty soon,

Pampanga's vice governor, provincial board members, and all the municipal mayors ganged up on Panlilio and openly opposed him on everything he did or wanted to do including eradicating jueteng and corruption.

Pampanga is known as the "Vatican of Jueteng" because the reputed Jueteng King of Central Luzon is believed to be a town mate and "kumpadre" of Gloria. With the influence of "jueteng power" over the people and political establishment in Pampanga, any attempt by Panlilio to stop the jueteng operations would likely fail. However, something good in a grand scale could be achieved in the process.

Unfazed by the resistance, Panlilio persisted and held his political enemies at bay. Last year, people believed to be associated with Lilia Pineda -- one of two candidates that Panlilio defeated in the gubernatorial election in 2007 - - launched a recall petition against Panlilio. Some people questioned if Gloria's son, Congressman Mikey Arroyo, had a hand in initiating the recall move.

The recall was stalled momentarily when the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) didn't have the funds to spend for the recall election. But in an unusual move, the Arroyo-controlled House of Representatives hastily approved a budget of P50 million specifically for the Panlilio recall election. Clearly, the Arroyo administration was hell-

bent in removing Panlilio from office. However, there is a small window of opportunity for Panlilio to escape the recall. If the COMELEC fails to conduct the recall election by April this year, then Panlilio could complete his three-year term of office.

The Arroyo-Panlilio war came out in the open when Panlilio accused Gloria and Mikey of “coddling” the jueteng protectors in Pampanga. But Gloria challenged Panlilio to “show proof that the President allows jueteng lords to operate freely in his province.” This “show proof” counter-offense has always worked for Gloria.

Panlilio wanted to replace Senior Superintendent Keith Ernard Singian as Pampanga Provincial Director. He accused Singian as one of the protectors of jueteng operations in Pampanga. He also claimed that Mikey together with San Fernando Police Chief Superintendent Benjamin Medina and a certain Fr. Jun Mercado had been protecting Singian from being removed from his position.

At one time, Singian declared that jueteng did not exist in Pampanga. He could be technically correct because jueteng, which is illegal, has morphed into “Small Town Lottery” (STL), which is legal. Jueteng and STL are basically the same. It’s interesting to note that the STL operators are the same people who operated the illegal jueteng operations.

Panlilio had repeatedly complained -- he said 18 times -- to National Police Chief Director General Jesus Verzosa that jueteng was still rampant in Pampanga and that Singian had been protecting the jueteng (aka STL) operators. Under constant pressure from Panlilio, Verzosa finally acceded and directed the regional police director to replace Singian. Senior Superintendent Gil Lebin, Jr. was appointed to replace Singian.

After Lebin took over, he was interviewed by the press and was asked how he would deal with jueteng? His

response was: “Does it exist here?” Whoa! Is Lebin a clone of Singian? Panlilio commented that “Lebin was recommended by the Pampanga Mayors’ League, who is chaired by the son of the alleged jueteng lord in Pampanga.”

The high-profile tug-o-war between Panlilio and Gloria -- and her surrogates -- has attracted a lot of attention in the country as well as abroad. Sad to say, it is contributing to Gloria’s bad image abroad. It’s no wonder that US President Barack Obama had avoided Gloria three times when she chased him around in the US.

Recently, Panlilio stated that he would run for President if God willed it. His base of support is growing fast in the country as well as in the Filipino global community. But should he decide not to run in 2010, he could become a strong catalyst for “change” and would be effective in helping to bring down the corrupt ruling party.

Almost a century ago, the powerful Romanovs of the Russian empire were deposed in a bloody revolution. The weakling Czar Nicolas II and his strong-willed wife Czarina Alexandra were oblivious of the suffering of the Russian people. Protected by the military led by corrupt generals, the royal family lived in pompous splendor while the people lived in abject poverty and hunger. And behind the Czarina was a mad monk. His name was Gregory Rasputin. He ill-advised the Czarina who virtually held power in running the corrupt czarist regime. In the end, the evil Rasputin was one of the causes -- perhaps the catalyst -- of the Romanovs’ downfall in 1917.

In the case of Czarina Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, another holy man -- the good priest Among Ed Panlilio -- could play a pivotal role in the 2010 election, an election that could eventually bring “change” to the country. Indeed, it could be a “change” that will bring forth -- albeit belatedly -- the true spirit and meaning of the unfinished “People Power” revolution of 1986. #