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The Battle Royale Begins

SACRAMENTO, CALIF., Sept. 30 (PinoyGlobal) - Now that Defense Secretary Gilberto “Gilbert” Teodoro Jr has been selected by the Executive Committee of Lakas-Kampi-CMD (PaLaKa) as their party’s presidential candidate, the battle royale between Teodoro and Sen. Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino III begins. Teodoro and Aquino are second cousins and belong to the rich and powerful Cojuangco clan of Tarlac.

I had an opportunity to talk to Teodoro in 2003 during the State Dinner at Malacanang Palace honoring then President George W. Bush during his State Visit. I was seated next to him and we chatted for a while. A bar topnotcher in the Philippines and a member of the New York state bar, Teodoro and his wife were residing permanently in New York when his uncle Danding Cojuangco asked him to go back home and enter politics. He said that he wasn’t particularly interested in Philippine politics but his uncle persisted and in the end he prevailed.

In 1998, Teodoro ran for Congress under his uncle’s Nationalist People’s Coalition (NPC) and won. He served three terms until 2007. He was Danding’s favorite nephew then and was, at one time, his “political heir.” Teodoro became the leader of the powerful NPC bloc -- with more than 60 members -- in the House of Representatives. That was then.

In the same year, Aquino was also elected to Congress under the Liberal Party. Like Teodoro, he served three terms until 2007. In 2007, he was elected to the Senate for

a six-year term. Aquino held several leadership positions with the Liberal Party. He is currently serving as the party’s Vice Chairman.

In 2007, Teodoro accepted Gloria’s appointment as Secretary of Defense. He left the NPC and joined PaLaKa several weeks ago. Speculation is rife as to who would Danding support between his two nephews. A news report said that Danding’s son Mark Cojuangco indicated that his father would not support either Aquino or Teodoro. He said that Danding is committed to support NPC’s presidential slate. Sen. Francis “Chiz” Escudero is presumed to be the standard bearer of NPC.

If Danding would indeed support Escudero, it would split the Cojuangco clan between three candidates: Aquino, Teodoro, and Escudero. With this scenario, Gloria would presumably get behind Teodoro while Danding would stick it out with Escudero.

But First Gentleman Mike Arroyo and Danding have interlocking business interests. And since politics and economic interests are intertwined in the country’s political culture, Danding and Mike -- and Gloria -- would somehow have to agree whom to support in order to protect and preserve their economic empire.

It is interesting to note that prior to Teodoro’s selection, Gloria had “anointed” Vice President Noli De Castro to be the standard bearer of Lakas-Kampi-CMD (PaLaKa). But

De Castro declined because he viewed it as a “kiss of death.” That was his official explanation. But does anyone believe that De Castro would really be scared of “Gloria’s kiss of death” -- concocted by a journalist -- and abandon his presidential ambitions? A few days ago, I received a reliable but unconfirmed “scoop” which alleged that the real reason why De Castro withdrew from the presidential derby may have been that Sen. Manny Villar offered him P1 billion to withdraw from the race.

Being the cold-blooded Machiavellian operator that she seems to be, I would not be surprised if Gloria would abandon Teodoro, secretly, and support Escudero, secretly. If that would be the case, then the Arroyo and Danding Cojuangco business conglomerates would be protected and preserved should Escudero win. But can Escudero win with the Arroyos, Danding, and possibly some of the Marcos and Romualdez cronies bankrolling his campaign? Absolutely. However, Escudero’s problem is that he is perceived as too young to take over the presidency. And this could scare his backers, including Danding, from supporting him and, thus, abandon him.

And should Danding abandon Escudero, he’d most likely get behind his erstwhile “favorite nephew,” Teodoro. The Arroyos would most likely follow suit and Gloria would then try to put her army of shady election operatives working overtime to “improve” Teodoro’s one-digit popularity ratings, and engineer his victory in the same manner that several of Gloria’s generals did for her, as exposed in the celebrated “Hello Garci” election cheating scandal during the 2004 elections. For Danding and the Arroyos, it’s going to be all or nothing... and a win, it must.

It is interesting to note that Teodoro is perceived by the people as an “elitista” while Aquino is not. Teodoro’s political handlers tried to shake off Teodoro’s “elitista” image by giving him a “common tao” moniker -- “Gibo” -- to replace his elitist-sounding nickname, “Gilbert.” They tried very hard to make him appear like the late president Ramon Magsaysay, whose “common tao” persona endeared him to the people. His campaign slogan “Magsaysay is my guy” caught fire and he won by a stunning landslide.

Aquino, however, has been “Noynoy” all his life. He has a guy-next-door personality that could easily win the people’s trust and admiration. So far, he has been successful. Since he entered the presidential derby three weeks ago, his initial popularity rating was 50% in Luzon and 33% nationwide, a feat that Villar, the early front runner, would have difficulty overcoming. The question is: Can Villar recover his lead and beat both Noynoy and Gibo?

The battle, as I see it today, is down to Noynoy and his cousin, the newly minted “Gibo.” After his selection by PaLaKa, Gibo said that “he would make use of the achievements of her (Gloria’s) administration in pushing his platform of governance.” Huh? With 60% poverty; 40% of the people hungry; 30% of adults unemployed; Gloria tagged as the most corrupt president in Philippine history; the Philippines labeled as the most corrupt in Asia two years in a row and among the 10 most corrupt countries in the world; and unabated extrajudicial killings and forced disappearances, does Gibo know what the real state of the nation is? Or, does he just want to believe every word of Gloria’s State of the Nation Address (SONA) as the true state of the nation? If that was the case, then he hasn’t really come out of his sheltered life and ventured into the slums and barrios to feel the pulse of the “common tao.”

Sen. Mar Roxas, Noynoy’s vice presidential running mate, spoke on behalf of Noynoy (to avoid direct confrontation this early with Gibo) and said: “Sen. Noynoy does not want the crooked, the wrong. He does not want mulcting and plundering. So, he will do what is straight and true. That’s their difference.”

Indeed the difference between Noynoy and Gibo is as wide and deep as an ocean. Their battle will be “common tao” vs. “elitista,” change vs. status quo, democracy vs. kleptocracy, and people power vs. oligarchy.

Finally, the 2010 elections will give the people -- the common tao -- a grand opportunity to vote for the change they have been dreaming about... and hoping for. Or, would they, once again, fall prey to the empty promises of those who want the country to remain in the deep abyss of poverty and corruption... and perpetuate in power those who have plundered the country in the past nine years?