



Issue Analysis No. 07
Series of 2012

Jesse Robredo and the “Death Zones”

In this era of government ineptness, neglect, and corruption people search for role models who can show the difference. Robredo became one such model. Amidst the ostentatious and scandal-ridden lifestyle of most public officials, Robredo's was special. Public service, however, is not only about transparency but bringing about lasting social and economic change.

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August 29, 2012

JESSE ROBREDO came from a rare breed of public servants among the national government's thousands of bureaucrats and local officials who tried to live up to what an executive is supposed to perform: Do what you're entrusted by the people to do. Tributes and testimonies told about his two-decade public life – 18 years as the city mayor of Naga, Camarines Sur in the Bicol region and, for two years, as Secretary of Interior and Local Government until he died in a plane crash. They told of how he practiced transparency in local governance, his immersion with constituents, being equal to the ethics of a true public servant including a simple lifestyle.

In a bureaucracy where reform is generally met with disdain and suspicion, Robredo naturally earned the ire of many politicians and powers that be. Some of them were members of the Commission on Appointments (CA) – including a relative political patriarch from Bicol – who for two years refused to confirm his appointment. His Cabinet appointment in an acting capacity was upgraded to a permanent one only in his second year by President Benigno S. C. Aquino III. Aquino had undercut the constitutional authority of the interior secretary by giving the supervisory powers of the Philippine National Police (PNP) to his shooting buddy, Undersecretary Rico Puno. One of the reasons, persistent reports said, was that Aquino never liked Robredo even if they belonged to the same political party.

As interior secretary, Robredo wanted to adopt an on-site resettlement of urban poor communities modeled after Naga's own relocation plan. Instead of forcibly evicting the city's slum dwellers Robredo as mayor had

implemented on-site resettlements within the city so that the poor – peddlers, pedicab drivers, and other odd-jobbers – could maintain their sources of income.

Thus, Robredo proposed on-site resettlement for the National Capital Region's (NCR) 5 million informal settlers including those living in danger zones. While the plan was up for approval, he also acceded to a demand by urban poor organizations including the largest confederation of urban poor peoples' organizations, Kadamay, and church-based groups for an immediate moratorium of all demolitions. But the moratorium was thumbed down by higher-ups in Malacanang supposedly because Robredo was stepping into what is purely a police matter – presumably the domain of Puno. How the public policy on the urban poor which involves their right to land and housing became a police matter is a puzzle.

Expectedly, Robredo's on-site resettlement plan was opposed by several NCR mayors including that of Quezon City, scene of many violent evictions of urban poor communities. Similarly, Aquino never supported Robredo's plan stressing that the only possibly available lands for such a plan are prime estates and should be reserved for investment. The plan did not sit well either with some Cabinet officials and Congress leaders who, incidentally, have some ties to real estate developers.

Somehow, Malacanang put a closure to these policy differences with Robredo. On the heels of recent rainfall surges in the metropolis, Aquino ordered the public works and highways secretary to “blast away” all informal settlements especially those found in waterways, creeks,

and bridges allegedly for causing the floods. At the same time, it was revealed that Aquino had canceled billion-peso flood control projects for the NCR simply because these were approved under the previous administration. Environment groups assailed the president for promoting mining projects that threatened to damage the country's remaining forests and watersheds resulting, they averred, in the complete loss of buffer zones against floods.

Meantime, with the interior secretary finally laid to rest, fear grips informal settlers as they await the inevitable – certain eviction as demolition crews and housing authorities launch a “clean up” drive to pave the way for commercial complexes, high-rise condominium buildings, tourism establishments, and shopping malls. They will be dumped in Rodriguez and other “relocation sites” where thousands of families – children and all – met untold traumas in the recent flash floods spawned by weeks of rainfall surge. Now called by the urban poor as “death zones” – an upgrade from “danger zones” – the recent inundation killed scores of people including children, incidents that the media never bothered to report. Where they will go from here, is anybody's guess.

More than a Robredo

To clarify, it would take more than a Robredo to respond to the distress call from the NCR's – for that matter, the whole country's – informal settlements. And it would take more than a Robredo to wage an effective drive against jueteng (illegal numbers game). The fact is, the former Naga mayor tried to show the way to the President's “daang matuwid” – the straight path to good governance – albeit a lone voice with no sign of support from Malacanang. Access to public information or the people's right to know was Robredo's standard of public service when he encouraged citizens' participation through a people's development council in the LGU or made public documents easily accessible. Strong political will and sensitivity to people's problems are vital public service virtues. But more than an individual leader's act should be the institutionalization of practices and system overhaul. Just a few days during the wake of the former mayor and interior secretary, media in Naga are now raising an alarm over the return of big-time jueteng in the city.

Was Malacanang trying to protect the business conglomerates whose interests would be threatened by

Robredo's programs for the urban poor? Were his efforts against jueteng being stonewalled by politicians including allies of the President – and by police chiefs in the provinces?

More than a tragedy, the passing away of Robredo derailed the reformist approach toward addressing social ills. His public management style showed that even the minimum basic reforms as a social response must grapple with well-entrenched powers whose interests are diametrically opposed to the poor. It also exposed the much-touted “daang matuwid” as a farce.

The concrete indicator of good governance, however, is not merely in transparency which is what architects of this doctrine like the IMF and World Bank expect as conditional to offering grants to both national and local governments. The true measure of public service is whether it serves to make people's lives better and eradicate social inequities. A socio-economic study by the Ateneo de Naga University showed that in 2007 – the last phase of Robredo's 18-year term as mayor – 62% of Naga's population rated themselves as poor. A higher 82% of the population belonged to the low-income groups while 42% or almost half were informal settlers. Despite international awards bestowed on the city's urban management, Naga has its own danger zones – floods, poor drainage and sanitation, unstable power supply, and traffic snarls, among others.

In this era of government ineptness, neglect, and corruption people search for role models who can show the difference. Because he was only doing his job with more visibility and against systemic odds, Robredo became one such model. Amidst the ostentatious and scandal-ridden lifestyle of most public officials, Robredo's was special. But it was nothing extraordinary. His brand of public service as being touted in media, is simply what is and should be expected of EVERY public servant – elected or appointed in government – in slippers or in branded pairs of shoes. Go to work and deliver for the people, not for media mileage or for entrenching one's political dynasty.

In the realm of real public service where the aim is not only transparency but to bring about lasting social and economic reform, there are definitely countless other unsung heroes even if they may not have the best education that Robredo had. Some of these unsung heroes such as town councilors and barangay officials have fallen

to politically-motivated state violence in many cases in front of their own families – doubtless a more tragic way of dying. Still others who have held high- and middle-level government positions or legislators like labor leader Crispin Beltran were dedicated public servants and died poor absent the media limelight that often ignores low-profile and quiet public service. The much-hyped “tsinelas leadership” of Robredo is nothing new – this has been for decades the signature lifestyle of thousands of nameless volunteer social advocates, street activists, people’s lawyers, and barefoot doctors and health workers who have immersed themselves among the masses in order to serve them.

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