

RAISE YOUR PLACARDS

Understanding the powers of activism in a society that disempowers it

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“Mananatili tayong rebelde—matapang at matalas sa pagtugon sa mga isyu sa loob at labas ng pamantasan. Dahil anong klaseng publikasyon ang Kulê kung hindi ito rebelde?”

This was how Beatrice Puente, the outgoing editor-in-chief of the Philippine Collegian, the official student publication of the University of the Philippines Diliman, ferociously described how the integration of student activism in their publication shall continually champion its mandate to serve the Filipino people through outspokenness of issues that concern every citizen of the country. For these *Iskolars ng Bayan* are notorious for being the most active and committed antigovernment activists that emerge from the youth faction. Every graduation ceremony, it becomes an annual spectacle that the graduates would valiantly set free placards containing words of resistance as if these were their guns with their voices as their bullets shot to the core of social injustice.

But these activists whose aim was to empower the powerless are being disempowered, as well. They are dismissed as nothing short of an assemblage that knows nothing but become rabid *reklamadors*. When in truth, this diverse group of bold individuals don't just *reklamo* in the very sense of the term. And to the misinformed, misguided and the typical internet troll, statements like Puente's making mention of their publication being 'rebelde' holds a negative connotation of what activism is all about.

In his *Inquirer* article, “An Invitation to Understand Activism,” Dom Balmes described his subject matter as “the collective engagement to pursue and bring about liberating, transforming and empowering social change for the good of one and all. An activist is both a catalyst and agent of liberating, transforming and empowering social change” and that “freedoms and rights are not always secured by being prim and proper.”

Not needless to say, this pursuit of a liberating, transforming, and empowering social change cannot possibly be achieved without airing one's indignation against the evil forces that hamper such a noble pursuit to be fully realized. It is important that the public are vocal of their grievances for the government to know their pulse—if a great many are angry of a proposed legislative policy, the executive department must consider vetoing the bill or furthering the debate to come up with a decision that is acceptable enough to not be met with rampant public disapproval.

Sadly, activists are unsuitably portrayed as enemies of the state because of how boldly they project themselves in a manifest act of democratic defiance against an administration's missteps. The public often see, or are misguidedly taught to see, opposing the government's policies as a seditious act of plotting to oust the President or the government itself. In effect, they generally see activists as violent communist rebels—a perilous stereotype that enables such a misconception to thrive in the public consciousness.

But to formally talk about it, no—to be an activist is not to be automatically an armed communist rebel or a member of the New People's Army. And no, the aim of activism is not identical with that of terrorism. To raise a placard is different with raising a gun—that is, what activism is trying to symbolically kill is injustice, bigotry, prejudice, oppression; and not necessarily the people they deem responsible behind these perceived injustices, bigotries, prejudices, and oppressions.

Case in point, the people have to ask themselves a question before jumping into a preconceived notion: Why are activists protesting anyway? What triggers the democratic rage in them that finds comfort in the inviting of the streets as their most convenient venue to rally their grievances?

You see, activists along with other militant and civil society groups don't just march in the streets without any justifiable reason to back up their antigovernment activity. Why do they always seem so discontented, dissatisfied and angry of the status quo, and unyielding as they are with what they think is right and just for the *masang* Pilipino? Because former president Ramon Magsaysay is so spot-on when he said these noble words: “He who has less in life should have more in law.”

Hence, the reason why activists are activists in the first place: instead of enacting pro-poor policies that would unshackle impoverished Filipinos from poverty, they are presented with laws that only foster their plights and struggles, urging activists to utilize their powers through their audacity to inform the masses of the anomalies fomented by no less than their own government, appropriately without fear and objectiveness.

Moreover, it must be recognized that activists are not a group that came from a single, exclusive sector—activists can be a group of public school teachers fighting for higher compensation; farmers and workers demanding a higher and just minimum wage; the LGBT community lambasting the Congress for its failure to pass the SOGIE Equality bill; human rights advocates condemning the government for the extrajudicial killings, among many others.

For at crucial times like this when laws like the Rice Liberalization Law burdens our local farmers, should we blame the activists for joining the farmers with their cries for support? When bills like the necessary SOGIE bill are not passed,

should we blame the LGBT community for being disappointed and angry, channelling their wrath in an annual pride protest? When the incumbent administration's bloody drug war proved to be anti-poor and subject to human rights violations, should we blame the United Nations and other concerned international organizations for choosing to meddle to investigate on the killings?

Should we blame them for protesting when the very people tasked to protect the masses from oppression are actually the ones that enable it?

We are raising these questions for the public to understand that activism is instrumental, and not detrimental, to the attainment of a nation's emancipation from the shackles of injustice masterminded by power-hungry and wealth-obsessed government officials.

On a different note, activists need more Vico Sottos both in government and in the public at large who, in the midst of a group striking against their employer, backed the former with a justification that bordered on the following words: *Hindi sila magpo-protesta kung wala kayong ginawa para mag-protesta sila.*

But whether demonized or extolled, there is no denying it that activists will be just as unyielding and stubborn as they are with what they advocate for. Not even a billion of internet trolls could dampen their spirit as the courageous spokespersons of the society's underrepresented sectors.

And to answer the last question above is to rephrase Bamboo's classic antigovernment song: *Habang may tatsulok, at sila ang nasa tuktok, hindi matatapos itong kanilang aktibismo.*

Dahil sa panahong ang kasalukuyang administrasyon ay isang gobyernong pinamumugaran ng mga korap at kriminal na opisyal, anong klaseng mamamayan ang mga Pilipino kung hindi sila magrerebelde?