Relationale: Conversations with Culture Changers

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Interviewer: As I've said, the interview is about culture and arts and humanities. Culture in the presidency, the [attitude towards culture] of the [previous] presidency, and of this current presidency. Because you did work in museums before, you must be the best person [to ask].

Usec. Manolo: Yes, I've worked for two presidents. There's a bit of a difference, of course. I've also, in both jobs, been exposed to [the government's] cultural agencies as well. They have their issues, many remain the same and many change. So, yes, there is that contrast. I suppose the interesting thing is really the ability of any chief executive to have to really define the direction, not only [of] the government, but those working in the government. And even the eventual decision of what to concentrate on is profoundly influenced [by the president], but not necessarily by any sort of policy direction set by the president, or whoever the president may be. Simply—in many ways, there's a lot that is done in government and this is picked up in media and by the population at large in a kind of osmosis. What the president feels interested in or not interested in gets magnified all across the government. I'll give you concrete cases in point.

In the case of GMA [former president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo], for example, her approach was in many ways a very conscious restoration of the pre-Martial Law system. At least initially, in her own mind, having been there [and] lived there as a girl in the background of her parents. The story in terms of Malacañang before that had been the attempt of [Ferdinand and Imelda] Marcos to recreate it in their own image, starting with their decision to basically demolish the Palace in 1978.

Interviewer: Really?

Usec. Manolo: Yes. Essentially, Malacañang is about 80% new. So [Malacañang] was a physical recreation of the official space which [the Marcoses] made also their personal space. And the contrast to that was Cory Aquino's complete distaste for it, which is why she refused to live there, right, and why, for much of her administration, it was turned into a museum for teaching the excesses of Martial Law. [Then there were] the efforts under [Fidel] Ramos to gradually try to reclaim the Palace as both office and residence, to [Joseph] Estrada's sort of first step which was partial residence—he lived in the Guest House not in the Palace itself; to GMA's decision to be the first president since Marcos to actually live there.

And then much of her focus was very, very Third Republic, in living in the family quarters, restoring the Palace as much as possible, including many of the pre-Martial Law parts of it, reclaiming the old furniture, that sort of thing. That was a very conscious approach. She was the first one to hold the Rigodon in the Palace since 1981, which was the Inaugural.

It was a very conscious decision, but the end result of that was a kind of full circle in that the [present] president, when he was elected, returned to the ambivalent and, in many ways, hostile attitude towards the Palace. It took a while to convince him to even move out of Times Street.

Interviewer: Noynoy [current president Benigno Aquino III]?

Usec. Manolo: Yes. And then he was finally convinced that it simply would make it a lot easier for everyone, including security.

Interviewer: Yes, because he wanted to stay in Times Street.

Usec. Manolo: In Times Street, yes. And it's his decision to live in [*Bahay Pangarap*, which separate from the palace but is still part of Malacañang grounds]. Which, again, keeps the Palace at a certain arms' length, which he feels is necessary if you are to maintain a kind of objectivity about the job. In contrast to, let's say, GMA's stay, which [saw it as] really part of the whole thing, that you're expected to live there and try to have a family life there.

Interviewer: So [GMA's] conception was that the Palace was the proper setting for the president. I mean, that's where she's supposed to live...

Usec. Manolo: Yes, in keeping with the long line from her father and all his predecessors.

Interviewer: Yes.

Usec. Manolo: So it shows you which sort of approach are you adhering to. Even then [it] can bring up a whole lot of other things. That even though it was [GMA's] decision to try to adhere to those long-established traditions—the [current] president now represents a different tradition altogether which is sort of ambivalent...

Interviewer: Of course, that is culture, right, where the president lives is definitely already the kernel of our culture. Is that a kind of [political] message—what definition of political culture that the presidency is communicating?

Usec. Manolo: Yes, it suggests a theory that I put forward to students when I talk to them, which is everything is political.

Interviewer: Yes.

Usec. Manolo: There is no real clear demarcation of where the political ends and where pure culture begins. We are also a very politically-attuned culture to begin with. [This] is why many Filipinos take cues from our leaders. Basically, what is permissible and what is taboo is demonstrated

by the behavior of their officials. Well, for example, when the president made his decision on the *wang-wang*[1] that was a cultural statement as much as it was a political [one]. It represents what sort of view of [society the president has]. Previous presidents would have justified your [use of] *wang-wang* as we are a hierarchical culture, we are a culture that values and gives deference, versus we are a culture with egalitarian sort of aspirations.

And which is why the *wang-wang* was very interesting [in] that sense because it was really a clash of cultures. I think there were many Filipinos scandalized by it simply because, my God, it turns the well-ordered way of things on its head, versus a sort of a modernizing attitude, that those sort of things are cake and really counterproductive.

And again, it's an announcement, it's a choice. It cascades and starts having repercussions.

Interviewer: So you say it's a choice. So, therefore, was it conscious? Is it like a conscious cultural choice?

Usec. Manolo: Yes. And again it points to the mindset that the occupant brings to the office. Much of the contrast [is] explained [by the] place of ritual in all of this. A president—a supreme arbiter, in many ways, of taste, and as the authority that will dictate protocol and in all its many manifestations—has a choice of which past [traditions] they will bring [to the office]. All of this is based on an appeal to authority, basically. The president as arbiter of taste and arbiter of protocol is because they are [part] of the long line of previous heads of state, [the] personification [of] the country and all of that.

Interviewer: A question I always wanted to ask whenever I see [these things] on TV—is this like you, because you're the historian, the resident historian? Or is this like a kind of a conscious decision of the administration? In other words, is it you reading or—?

Usec. Manolo: It is part[ly] all three. That's a very good question. Your question really boils down to: what is the role of any sort of intellectual, a public intellectual or an academic intellectual, in a political administration? That role has always been, in many ways, like a lawyer's. A lawyer will find, depending on their level of personal scruples and that of the president they serve, the justifications for the policy that is envisioned.

In the case of culture and all of these other aspects of it, whether it is our policy for the office in cultural agencies, or the tone and direction an administration takes. [First,] it depends on the personal inclinations

[1] *A kind of siren for private cars used by supposed VIPs to part traffic. President Aquino banned their use during his first year in office.*

of the president himself. Second, [it depends] on those that the president chooses to take advice from. And third, [it depends] on the ability of those giving advice, to give advice that is both, for lack of a better word, doable and which will have the intended benefits.

So if, for example, a president takes, like GMA, [an] approach that–and this is again just sort of ingrained simply because of the circumstances under which she grew–that it is very important to adhere to the culture of the Third Republic with all that it represents, then she will naturally take advice that is geared towards the importance of that culture and what it represents, that approach.

Interviewer: Which is in line with her branding as a "Strong Republic," et cetera.

Usec. Manolo: No, because that's actually where it becomes complicated. This is strictly my opinion at this point. In the very beginning [of the GMA administration], there was an immediate sort of dichotomy there. There was a need to sort of undertake the reforms borne of the EDSA Dos circumstances which was modernized, actually shaking institutions to their foundations.

Interviewer: EDSA Dos?

Usec. Manolo: Yes. Because it was a revolution against the old, the *tayo-tayo* system, and against all of that.

So, in a sense, that's why civil society was dominant at that point, which is not traditional at all. And her instincts, as well as those of all the people she had grown up with and worked with, tried to put the genie back in the bottle and get us back to a structure–

Interviewer: I see.

Usec. Manolo: –more predictable...

Interviewer: Again, from the EDSA constitutional to the Constitution.

Usec. Manolo: And so part of that [situation]–you have this great ferment [but] then you revert to "let's stick to the old ways" and these old ways sort of circumspect–it's the whole justification of etiquette that it just makes life tidier and ultimate, right?

Interviewer: Yes.

Usec. Manolo: But then, you know, the whole thing is evolving. So then, you have the need for a strong republic. That comes later [in her presidency], remember?

Interviewer: I see.

Usec. Manolo: Because remember–ahead of the articulation of "Strong Republic" was the articulation of "*Bangkang Papel*," which was simply that your aspirations that brought you to the streets [in EDSA Dos] will find

fulfillment. Then it was getting out of hand, [so] we need a strong republic, and then after that, a different story.

In the case of the president now, it would have been, in many ways, similar. Similar in the sense that the president's, if you look at President Aquino's statements, it's always the reference is also to the Third Republic in the sense of what did Marcos do—he's had to smash the thing rather than allow change. Since then, we have come full circle and [Noynoy] became a candidate because there seemed to be a second Marcos on the scene. In that sense, the [narrative] was sort of similar but [also] very different. President Arroyo herself spoke Spanish with her parents, really belonged to the old society in many respects, as well as her husband, that sort of thing. [While the current] president himself really doesn't have much of a tolerance for that sort of thing.

Interviewer: Although he belongs to the same [social] class.

Usec. Manolo: Yes, but, again, it's the same thing with his mother and his father, that they were just beyond that. In his case, it's the sort of arbitration he wants to make, a very clear turning back on ostentation and ritual as much as possible. Although he can be insistent on ritual as well, for example, in the case of Jesse Robredo's [funeral rites].[2]

Interviewer: The other question I wanted to ask was, are you that arbiter of culture—not culture [as it was] in Imelda's hands or, at least, the CCP's hands, but culture in the [sense of the] enactment of who sits in the Palace and the traditions that come with it? Is that you?

Usec. Manolo: I suppose the role I serve is [that], and then that's why that's one of the mandates of the position I served under GMA and also here.

Interviewer: Has there always been [a Palace historian]?

Usec. Manolo: It's to provide a kind of institutional memory.

Interviewer: The thing is, has there always been someone like you in our short history?

Usec. Manolo: That would have been—yes. The problem is really like this: From the time of the Commonwealth up to the early Marcos years, it was one person. It was Manuel Zamora, the father of Ronnie Zamora. One protocol officer for all seven presidents. In that sense, there was great institutional memory. And also, many of those who permanently staff the Office of the President all started in the 1930s and were there until the 1970s. It's very interesting to me but this would require, actually, more research. But at the [same] time [it is] the regular changeover [of staff]which

[2]*Jesus "Jesse" Robredo, Philippine Secretary of Interior and Local Government and former mayor of Naga City, was considered an exemplar of good governance and leadership. He died in an airplane crash last August 18, 2012.*

actually builds your institutional approach. It's never regular turnover of top officials. It strengthens the ability of the subordinate officials to say, "Well, this is how it's done."

But all that came to an end with Martial Law, which was about the time that the careers of those who had staffed these offices all those decades came to an end as well.

Interviewer: I see.

Usec. Manolo: So you have, in many ways, a clean break. All of a sudden, there's an increasing number of young people, military people, that sort of thing, filling these offices.

Interviewer: Were you feeling out of place in that entire machinery of government, the intellectual historian?

Usec. Manolo: There's always a need for one.

Interviewer: Yes. But then, was it like a kind of floodgate at first during the death of Jesse Robredo? That suddenly, not that it's really forced, [but] suddenly [we need rituals and protocols]. But then it became very natural for this kind of state–

Usec. Manolo: No, not floodgates. It's simply I think a validation of whether a president is interested in protocol and rituals and that sort of thing or not. And chances are most will not be because it's really not the highest priority. There always comes a point where a president realizes [ritual] has a role to play. It has a role to play in many spheres. It has a role to play politically in terms of rewards and punishment. It has a role to play in terms of your general articulation of a vision for the nation. It has a role to play in the projection of the identity of that leader. It has a role to play in your relationships with other governments, other officials and your countrymen.

So by the time an event like this happens, most presidents would have realized that the primary function which rituals serve is to help bring closure to a national trauma. And since we're a nation with our share of national traumas, we've all become heightened in our expectations. Remember, in a sense, expectations were built by the Cory funeral. And before that, the expectations on the Cory funeral in turn had been built by the Ninoy funeral, and at the time of Ninoy, it had been built by the Magsaysay funeral.

So there are these "coming-togethers" that happen in our society. And, in a sense, it helps bring everyone up. There is always something different. So in the case of Ninoy, simply attending–it [was] building [up for] all of us. The wake, the *lamay*, the funeral march, and everything had this particular edge of peril at that time because it was also a demonstration

against [the] government. [It was the] same with Cory's [death], in a sense. And also the kind of innovations you make, putting them in a truck, not a hearse, that sort of thing, becomes the contribution of each generation.

By the time you have something like Jesse Robredo's funeral, every one up and down the line, I think, has a sensitive antenna that this is a kind of national trauma that calls for national solemnity of some sort. The role of people like me comes in with providing option this and option that, schedule this and schedule that. For this to happen, you must do this, this, and this. It's like an events planner.

So the role you play becomes far less contentious and far more meaningful if, again, you can cite precedence and that you can give reasonable options and that sort of thing. Then it becomes a matter of execution and then that's where the cultural, the religious, the political—everything melds together because it becomes, in many ways, [how] the country wants to put its best foot forward, and [also] the individual choices that each leader makes about these things.

Interviewer: Yes. But what you have said validates what you had in mind for the longest time, anyway, the role of rituals and...

Usec. Manolo: Yes, because it's not my idea. It's really a kind of—I guess, it's the country; that because religion is a reality for most Filipinos, the need for ritual is a given. The need for a counterpart to religious ritual on the part of the state is a given. The question then is, will it be done to meet expectations or not, and in a way that adds dignity to all concerned. And then that's where you could either do it really badly or do it properly.

Interviewer: But every culture will be imperfect. So what do you think still needs to be improved, as far as political culture is concerned or the Malacañang culture is concerned? And what do you think is your role personally in that, to be looking at it from [or] as museum curator, now—you have a cabinet position?

Usec. Manolo: No, it's not cabinet. But, well of course, in officialdom I suppose that the uphill struggle has always been that anything that smacks of culture, or that can be considered culture, is considered an unnecessary luxury, a luxury, and, therefore, unnecessary. There is also the fact that even within [the] culture community, because of past experience, there is resistance to an official line on these things.

On the other hand, cultural workers are no different from any other kinds of workers in that they are equally susceptible [to] or dependent on patronage and all of these things, and, therefore, the dynamics are very political as well. With the difference that I think, personally, I believe that most cultural workers do not realize is that their expectations are

just as high, their needs are just as legitimate, but their clout is severely diminished simply because they are not an organized constituency that brings anything to the table politically.

So that [the] default approach [to the culture community], I would think, from most bureaucrats' and officials' points of view, is lots of headache and lots of arguments and very little tangible political benefits. I mean it's not going to get anyone any votes; it's not going to get anyone to win an election. It's not even going to get you to—

Interviewer: Protocol in itself?

Usec. Manolo: Well, protocol in itself. I mean it brings up so many arguments, *di ba*? I mean why do we follow a string convention and not this and whatever. There's that.

Interviewer: So what do you think your role would be in it?

Usec. Manolo: It's a very specialized one. Because again, an interest in the rituals of state for both the tangible political benefits that those bring and for what people like me would consider the sort of beneficial aspects of this in that it, by its nature, would put forward an institutional approach; one that can harmonize the yearning of every administration to set its own stamp but at the same time, to remind that administration and everyone in the government that they are temporarily here on the sufferance of the public. That's an ideological statement in itself that I'm making.

Not necessarily one that, for example, would have been shared maybe during Martial Law where the desire was to adopt the pomp and circumstance but of monarchies and not republics. So that's very different.

And it ties in with many things. If you are going to say that it is important to cross the T's and dot all the I's on these rich ones, it requires research. To do that research requires a certain carefulness and preservation of references because all of these are built on precedence. It also requires a certain [level of] cooperation because it often requires a multiagency approach.

So in and of itself, it ties into the general rubric of institutional memory. Now, like all things, like all protocol or even any rule or regulation that some can outlive their usefulness and it's the challenge and shows the healthiness of the body politic if it knows what to discard and when and what new to add and how to evolve and how to—

Interviewer: Reinvent new rituals.

Usec. Manolo: Yes.

Interviewer: We have always complained about the way we commemorate EDSA, for example. It's not like D-Day or Memorial Day. In England,

there's really such solemnity, with each group laying down the flower. [There] doesn't seem to be a kind of [commemoration here].

Usec. Manolo: Your general problem—and again, and this is strictly my personal opinion—[the] general problem with the EDSA Commemoration is, how do you make a ritual commemoration out of a spontaneous event?

D-Day, for example, was planned. It was an invasion and you can commemorate every step before and after. EDSA was a spontaneous outpouring, or that's how the narrative goes, and [in] such a particular time and place. It's not like a beach that you can go back to. It's the main road of an evolving metropolis. And therefore—I mean the big problem is not even really an official one but an attitude problem of the public, which is you do any commemoration and then it becomes an issue about traffic. Which shows you, that is the fundamental [struggle].

It's simply really, so in many ways, the public voting against—

Interviewer: A commemoration.

Usec. Manolo: A commemoration. Because any commemoration you do will be targeted by public opinion on the question of traffic.

Interviewer: But it certainly can use some improving?

Usec. Manolo: I don't know how you can improve, frankly. Because—

Interviewer: In terms of solemnity.

Usec. Manolo: Well, no, that brings up an interesting question. I don't know how you could make it solemn because it was not a solemn occasion. It was a heartfelt experience. It was a tension-filled experience. Maybe those who were there will tell you they had to [be] sort of grim at certain points but the rest of the time, they were telling me they were laughing and joking.

Interviewer: I was there.

Usec. Manolo: Right? I mean, how do you boil that all down into an official event? It was sort of—I remember having this discussion with Don Jaime Zobel a few years back, when they changed the Ninoy statue and I said, "Don Jaime, don't you know there's school of thought that says that the era of monuments has passed?"

Interviewer: You mean in Ayala [Avenue, Makati]?

Usec. Manolo: Yes. That happened. It makes you wonder if we're capable of [solemnity]. Contrast it. For example, something like a state funeral will work because it is a ritual that, whether the state is involved or not, is thoroughly ingrained into our culture, both the solemnity and everything. An event that, the moment it stops, is already receding in everyone's memory. It becomes an effort to try to retouch. I mean the same way that

[the National Historical Commission] have essentially given up on the Rizal Day lectures.

Interviewer: Rizal Day, in December...?

Usec. Manolo: Yes, a long-standing feature of that was always that you would have some sort of public intellectual giving a national address as part of the Rizal [commemoration]. A few years back apparently they just sort of stopped. Even the way we intellectuals get together and do things has changed.

The problem is that's where an institutional approach gets in the way. You have bureaucratic inertia because there is a commission. The commission must do something to justify its budget. It is populated by people who may or may not know anything about whatever it is that they're supposed to commemorate. And each administration will have a love-hate relationship with EDSA in the first place.

Interviewer: Is that one of the reasons why there's this [activity]...?

Usec. Manolo: Well, I mean–

Interviewer: ...not really defined as a ritual?

Usec. Manolo: Well, yes, because, again, you just simply have to look at the past commemorations and what sort of thing would mar them. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the problem was that many of the main protagonists were at odds, especially after the period of the coups. Therefore, how could there be any sort of meaningful commemoration if half were at loggerheads with the other half, even among the main players. Remember? That's one.

Then when that passed, the question was that EDSA would represent a threat to administrations that sort of felt that, God knows, we don't want another sort of thing like this, right? And so, how do you [commemorate]? So it becomes very, very ambivalent, to say the least.

Interviewer: Do you see your role as evolving or are you channeling the protocol officer or do you see yourself as an active role in forwarding the modernization?

Usec. Manolo: [I see my role as] active in giving everyone the means to do these interpretations and again, since every person's time, opportunity and resources is limited, we cannot have ambitions, let's say, to–

Interviewer: You know that you're only here when you–

Usec. Manolo: I have other things to do as well. I'm primarily a writer. And there are others who have specific mandates. There is a protocol officer. And anything I suggest can only be in the way of bringing to attention, and convincing by logic, by arguments or whatever, both the people involved and the principal–the President.

In this case, if you were to look at [a] sort of overall approach to things, it's simply that I always felt that one sort of weakness we had as a society was you cannot have a meaningful debate if your frame of reference is completely uneven. Therefore, whether you agree with the official history or not, it should be out there as a simple reference and taking-off point from a more productive discussion. You cannot move forward and by moving forward, you cannot sort of compose further change and you're not–you don't really identify what it is that got us here and why is it that this approach is there.

Interviewer: And so what is it then that you think is the rallying point?

Usec. Manolo: It cannot be that. It is precisely...

Interviewer: Is it an idea? It is not a person, therefore, you're saying?

Usec. Manolo: It is literacy. For you to be able to take advantage, for lack of a better word, of the opportunity, let's say, that a specific event will bring up. You would have had to have put in place a certain amount of education and preparation so that when that moment comes, everyone you talk to knows what you're talking about and why you are proposing what you are proposing.

To do that requires a relentless sort of search for every single opportunity to inform people this is what happened, this is why this is important–it builds consciousness. It builds consciousness and arms that consciousness–that's culture, common framework, a common vocabulary.

Interviewer: I knew that because I teach actually the philosophy of religion. It's about belief, existence of God. And I know that you have publicly professed agnosticism. Is that part of the, for lack of a better word, [evangelizing] enlightenment?

Usec. Manolo: No, no, no, because I think it's certainly not an aggressive pushing of a kind of secular [world view].

I do think, however, that, for example, you do have to recognize what [the basic level is]–it's like the basic [level of] operationalization of faith is the catechism. That provides your common ground. The first question is "Who made me," et cetera. "Why does the country exist? What is the country?" I mean you could take that there.

The role of ritual . . . as an expression of community and the sort of subordination of that community of its individuality to a larger [whole]–in that sense, yes. That's sort of your basic approach to things. But really, it's knowing that there are certain things that are [beyond a particular belief]–a good case in point was how non-believers were moved by the funeral of John Paul II. In many ways, you could say that was a validation of the insistence of the Catholic Church on ritual which is not shared by

other Christians, except maybe of the Eastern Rite. But in that case, it showed you the power of [ritual]—because it's an expression of community. In many ways, a kind of [community] that derives its identity from being able to claim it goes all the way back to Christ.

So, in that sense, we have a lot to learn. Your agnosticism may be in that there is a very big difference and a very big danger in [a] slavish sort of traditionalism, which is sort of a kind of pedantry, right?

The worst kinds of protocol people are the very inflexible, nit-picking ones. The very worst kinds of believers are the ones who simply do it out of routine and not understanding. The worst thing for a society is to be stuck in a certain way of doing things without that periodic refreshing.

Interviewer: And I hope that when you answer this question, you'll answer it as Manolo. Regardless of my position in the RH Bill, that seems to be the crux of the matter now that there's a kind of loggerheads between the Church and the administration.

What I want to ask you is your own position in the sense that since you are agnostic—no one has asked what religious convictions of the president, but it is not part of the interview. How do you see the impasse is going to be transcended?

Usec. Manolo: I, personally, have a very, very stark view of it. I believe this is the [choice] the country faces: the choice of whether either this will be the death knell of the Church's ability to dictate politics or not. Personally, for example, in my writings, I have always pointed out there was a kind of clear continuation of the view of the propagandists which were anticlerical all the way up to the [1950s]. With Magsaysay, the Church began to reclaim its sort of influence and space where leaders started to become more yielding. And I've also written that I don't think I'm unique in this—in the [1970s], because of the general sort of way [that] all institutions had been corrupted, the Church alone was able to provide a moral anchor for resistance.

But even the best of things can become counterproductive and it made the political culture far more vulnerable to the dictates of organized religion than is healthy for any class of society.

Interviewer: Then if the problem dates back to the Propaganda Movement, there's a point that really needs to be [learned]...

Usec. Manolo: I also believe, agree with earlier critics of the Church in the Philippines, that a lot of this is more a symptom of the inability of the Church to properly educate its members than of the state going on a dangerous path.

Interviewer: Yes, it sounds like that. But, for more innocuous subject matter—in terms of educating, education in democracy, can there be a time

when people would come to Malacañang the same way that they would go to the White House?

Usec. Manolo: I've always been pushing for it and the opposition is always the same reason also given in the White House–security. I do think one sort of very healthy result of having [Jesse Robredo's] wake in the Palace was [that] everyone realized that it's doable. In fact, I think it led to a more welcoming and accommodating attitude on the part of officials and agencies that in the past would have just dismissed any sort of proposal like this out of hand. I think it planted the seed of an idea because it proved it could be done. So that in the future, on National Holidays and that sort of thing, it may be possible to do it. And this was a big step that had been impossible in previous administrations.

Interviewer: When did the distancing begin–of Malacañang from the people?

Usec. Manolo: Martial Law.

Interviewer: Martial Law?

Usec. Manolo: Martial Law. [Before Martial Law] the [distance from] presidents in Malacañang [were] just [like] our local [politicians]. If you go to the provinces in particular, the way that people feel they can just show up at the doorstep of their mayor and everyone, up to now.

Interviewer: Yes, we do that.

Usec. Manolo: Yes. It's really the way it used to be. When you talk to people, in the past, people just felt that they could just go to Malacañang and [they] would be received. It's with the First Quarter Storm onwards when you start having things [like] clamping down. And after that, we just changed circumstances drastically because there's a security element to everything.

Interviewer: But it's doable also? What will be the steps that [could be taken]? Would that be incumbent upon you?

Usec. Manolo: There would have to be greater public interest as well. There ... really isn't, because it's been such a long time and in many ways, you already [had] a cultural shift. It's no longer an expectation. It's the way someone who would've been alive in the 1950s would know the difference between their generation's sort of public expectation that they have a right and I think [for] anyone born after the 1980s, simply, it's not even on their radar that is a sort of civic right.

Interviewer: Well, it is, right?

Usec. Manolo: It should be, I think, yes.

Interviewer: Because it's a symbol for them?

Usec. Manolo: It's a symbol and it goes to the heart of representative democracy and everything. I'm amazed that we do not have [this] incul-

cated into us. I mean, this is something my father did very consciously when I was young. He took me to all our public institutions as a matter of civic education. I remember being bored to tears when I was about 16 because we went to watch Joker Arroyo's Question Hour and [my father said], "You have to watch. This is what being a Filipino is about." You go watch a congressman explain all. Of course, you're bored to death.

But, no, it was very exciting when we were actually there, I found it interesting when I was 16 because it was Question Hour.

Interviewer: Your dad was?

Usec. Manolo: My dad's Manuel Quezon, Jr. and he was also [a journalist]—he wrote in the [Philippine] Graphic in the '60s.

Interviewer: So where did he bring you to be [exposed to] the civic—

Usec. Manolo: His was a very determined thing. And you could sense the priorities. My earliest memories are [of] what he deliberately called "Pilgrimages." And the very first was to Aguinaldo's house, that's the first one I remember. Followed by a year later—every year, he would do a pilgrimage. First to Aguinaldo, then to Malolos, then Corregidor, things like that. And later on I even got to ask him, because he was a very religious man, "why would you use that word 'pilgrimage'?" This whole thing, in a sense, that's sort of the heritage of his father's generation—it is that sort of "secular religion" [which] is just as important as the religious one.

Then, after EDSA, we were in the United States. Because in [1983], we moved abroad because he said, "This is not a country to raise someone anymore." So he put me in a school in the States and even there, I had to watch the Republican and Democratic conventions every night in [1984] because [he said] "I want you to see how a democracy works."

So there's this very deliberate [effort], no? And then after EDSA [we returned to the Philippines], he took me to the Senate, he took me to the House. He would make me watch things. Whenever there would be an event—like there was one in Club Filipino to mark the first year after EDSA, things like that, he would bring me there for the specific purpose of "I want you to meet..." I remember, the first one, "I want you to meet J.B.L. Reyes." That was supposed to be the *kapit* there. "I want you to meet Lorenzo Tañada. I want you to meet so and so. These are the people you must..." So the basic idea was these are the names you read about. You must see them as living, breathing people because they affected your life.

Interviewer: Hopefully, that would come back and these civic centers would become accessible to [all].

Usec. Manolo: Yes, but again, like all our institutions, there's a give and take. The natural instinct is to exclude as much as possible, because the public is inconvenient. So, it's only when the public makes itself [felt],

when inconvenience cannot be ignored, then public institutions make an accommodation and that is how [it can be done].

Interviewer: I'm targeting two last questions. The first one is, I would think that the state has to become strong and that's where the rituals and the protocol and the state has to be strong. But then how do you balance that with the liberality that is the banner of this administration? That's the penultimate question.

Usec. Manolo: Okay.

Interviewer: Because that's from what you said, the institution really needs to keep people out, but then you need to balance that with the democracy that you also are protecting.

Usec. Manolo: It's certainly not easily solved because it requires, again, a common frame of reference. A society that is aware, not only of its rights, but its obligations, is one that can make the distinction of when it ought to demand and when it ought to find a compromise.

Absent that, the natural tendency is to remind, certainly because we've lost so much in the past. Although I think that has also changed because as the period of Martial Law and EDSA in the 1980s and 1990s and even the GMA period recedes, the craving for a sort of normality is all-encompassing.

I also think it requires the state to have a more disciplined approach. One of my personal obsessions, which drives my staff crazy, is the need to have a definitive official calendar, which is impossible to put together, simply because there is such a vast amount of official issuances that no one quite knows where they are. So again, it's this huge sort of tidying-up effort that no one has really done and/or if people have [ever] done it.

Interviewer: And your definitive calendar would be...

Usec. Manolo: That's what defines all our lives—birthday, anniversary. So it's the same for your country and that gives you a starting point where these are the community moments and the rest of the time, right?

Interviewer: Just like the Liturgical calendar?

Usec. Manolo: Exactly. And there's a purpose [for] that.

Interviewer: So my last question would be, what was the trigger point for the agnosticism? It's a philosophical question. When you say you're an agnostic...

Usec. Manolo: Simply, I do not claim to know one way or another.

Interviewer: Okay.

Usec. Manolo: And in the absence of knowing, I would prefer to focus my energies on what is possible. I mean you try to keep an open mind. But just by that statement, there is not enough to make for conclusive thing, right?

Interviewer: So in my understanding, that made you a realist?

Usec. Manolo: No, no, no. That perhaps you have more of that there is not enough to justify an articulation of faith. It is not from an active denunciation of someone else's faith but it is not enough to sustain what you had professed. So it's not atheism, right? Definitely, I'm not there. Neither is it a convinced articulation of belief. It is doubt.

Interviewer: But do you have belief in the state?

Usec. Manolo: No. Commitment. I use the word commitment, it is not faith. It is something that is the product of human efforts. Therefore, you have a commitment to make it work or to make it not only work but, I suppose, [make it] meaningful and productive. But everyone reaches the point where is it an all-encompassing commitment, perhaps, let's say, in the case of foreign invasion or something like that. But if your country were to turn against its own people, then, would you [stand by your country whether right or wrong?].

Interviewer: The question I'm asking is, do you have hope for the [country]?

Usec. Manolo: I'm profoundly filled with hope. I believe this is a very exciting point because it's a tabula rasa. I really believe that. I do believe that there are some very exciting things happening–for example, the old sort of modes for transmitting culture have all broken down. And what is taking its place, I don't know if anyone has a full handle on it, I do think it is going to be, in many ways, very different, probably a lot freer than anything before. Precisely not because it's not dependent on anything legal or anything like that, it's because people are really tabula rasa, they are detached from the old ways of transmitting culture which was church, club, and school. All have broken down.

And so, what is taking its place is [a radical break]–and I believe this is a moment that has not been there since perhaps the time of the arrival of the Spaniards. I mean in terms of just how a radical break it could be. And no one knows and no one could know if anyone really cares.

Interviewer: Thanks, Undersecretary.

Usec. Manolo: Thanks.

Manuel Quezon III, more popularly known as Manolo Quezon, is an essayist and blogger. He is currently an Undersecretary of the Presidential Communications Development and Strategic Planning Office (PCDSPO). Prior to his appointment as undersecretary, he served as host of *The Ex-*

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