

## **WOMEN AND POLITICS**

Speech of former Senator Leticia Ramos Shahani at the Eminent Women in Politics  
Lecture Series of Miriam College Women and Gender Institute, Claro M. Recto Hall,  
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I should like to thank the Women and Gender Institute of Miriam College for inviting me to open this series of lectures entitled “Eminent Women in Politics”. The College, true to its pioneering tradition, is to be congratulated for daring to enter a controversial and complicated field of endeavor for women. It is certainly an honor to share the podium today with one of our respected Senators of the land – Senate President Manuel Villar – who is a shining example of what we expect our Senators to be – honest, experienced, dedicated to the progress of our people and country and it should be mentioned, a gender advocate. But Senator Villar does not really need this election plug from me since it looks certain that, with three weeks away from voting time, he will be one of the topnotchers in the coming election for Senators. It is also fitting that Miriam College uses this occasion to commemorate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Filipino women’s right to vote and be voted upon, a victory of those dynamic and patriotic women of the suffragette movement who enabled Filipino women to enter the mainstream of our nation’s political life not only to cast their vote but to stand for elective office. I do not forget that it is they who enabled me to run for public office when my own time came. Let us give them a collective memorial salute this morning.

The sponsors of this important event have asked me to speak about my political career and experiences with a view to finding ways of encouraging more young women to play leadership roles in politics. In order to do this, let me use as a general framework, my family and the history of our country as it coincided with my personal life.

### Family

I grew up acquainted with the rough and tumble of politics because my father, Narciso Ramos, served for five consecutive terms in the Commonwealth National Assembly and in the House of Representatives of the Republic of the Philippines. My brother, sister and I daily witnessed my father and my mother, who was her husband’s most loyal supporter, serve unselfishly the people of the 6<sup>th</sup> congressional district of Pangasinan. Politics, during my father’s time (1932-1947), was an honorable calling; corruption was unheard of – a situation hard to believe these days, but true. My father and his family were proud of his untainted record as an honest and able member of Congress. But we also experienced first hand the financial anxieties and uncertainties of a family whose main breadwinner was an honest politician. When the offer was made to him in 1947, as one of the founders of the Philippine Foreign Service in the legislature, to be the Deputy Chief of Mission in the Philippine Embassy in Washington, my father accepted the offer, apprehensive that as an elected official he would not be able to give his children quality college education. However, that early daily exposure from my father and my mother of politics as service to the people and not as a means to enrich one’s self through ill-

gotten wealth and abuse of official power remained a profound influence all my life. My father left politics for good and became a career diplomat. But politics would not leave him. He asserted something at a 1957 UP convocation for which he was pilloried by some members of Congress to the extent that they withheld for several months his confirmation as Chief of Mission Class I in the Philippine Foreign Service. My father on that occasion said: "Politics is the main industry of this country; unfortunately, it is a non-productive industry". This statement said fifty years ago, perhaps readily explains why after so much promise and hope, the Philippines remains a disappointing laggard among its neighbors in Southeast Asia.

### Education and Professional Background

I call myself a politician by accident because never in my dreams as a girl child nor a young woman did I think that I would ever serve in the Philippine Senate. I wanted to be a teacher and had a long preparation for what I thought would be an academic career. Fortunately, I had a global background for my education – my college years were spent in the United States, interrupted by a teaching stint at the UP and then on to France for a Ph.D. I mentioned this varied educational background because serving in the Senate requires a broad intellectual orientation – writing, speaking, articulating national problems are musts in a political institution whose main task is to debate and clarify national issues in order to craft appropriate and timely laws for the progress and welfare of our people. It is obvious that a woman Senator has to be more prepared, better read than her male colleagues if she is to be taken seriously by them in what is still, essentially, a male institution.

Without wishing to be self-serving and intellectually arrogant, I sympathize with those Senators who are elected to the Senate on the basis of mere popularity and celebrity status, based on jueteng royalties, cinematic glory and the like. Much as we admire Manny Pacquiao, we wonder what legislative knockout he can render in the House of Representatives. It would, indeed, be a pity if a world class champion like him would be reduced to doing shadow boxing with former Commissioner Garcillano. Showbiz people must be bored to death by long-winded debates on the fine points of the law or by technical issues relating to global warming and the Scarborough Reef. Am I being elitist when I say this? I don't think so. To be sure, there have been outstanding exceptions in local government, Vilma Santos, being one of them. But she could be one of the women politicians you could invite to speak at this series. My point is, to be an effective Senator, one needs a passion to understand current events and history, plenty of native intelligence and a heart in the right place in order to respond to the needs of the people. Without these qualities, the Senate becomes debased and stunted as a political institution. Instead of articulating solutions for national problems, "no talk, no mistake" becomes the accepted wisdom. The Senate for me was some kind of a post-doctoral educational institution. With the likes of Jovito Salonga, Neptali Gonzales and Teofisto Guingona as colleagues in the Eighth, Ninth and Tenth Congresses, the Senate was an exciting and demanding place to be in. Let us not also forget the high standards of public service, nationalism, eloquence and concern for the common "tao" set by Senators like Manuel Quezon, Claro M. Recto, Lorenzo Tamara and Jose Dionne.

Should we abolish the Senate? I don't think we should because we need the Senate to fiscalize the Executive and the House of Representatives. But I recognize the need to reduce the mandate of Senators - instead of being elected nation wide, they could be elected region-wide, with the fourteen regions having two Senators each.

May I go back to the qualifications required of an effective Senator. A varied professional experience can be very helpful for a woman Senator. Serving as a career diplomat and ambassador in the Philippine Foreign Service as well as an international civil servant at the United Nations gave me a grasp of where the Philippines could belong in the community of competing nations as well as insights into the fundamentals of good government and the requirements of sustained socio-economic development. I suppose a young woman preparing for a political career at the present time should have some background in information and communications technology if she is to understand the role of our country in a world that is not only globalized but, more important, digitalized and flat.

### EDSA I

But politics is unpredictable. My entry into politics was unplanned. I returned to Manila in late 1985, while with the United Nations, because our father fell very ill. My brother, Fidel V. Ramos, at that time the Deputy Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, requested me to look after our dying Father because his own hands were full with the problems spawned by the internal turmoil spreading throughout the country. In between tending to my father's needs, I listened to my oldest son's interpretation of the political upheaval agitating our people. Ranjit, my son, simply put it this way: "Mom, if you are for change, you have to support Cory". Not having met Cory personally but having faithfully read the New York Times abroad on what was happening in the country, I had a feeling Ranjit, a member of the young generation, was correct. I did not realize then how important it was for our people, imprisoned as they were by official propaganda, to openly hear the views of other Filipinos coming from the outside like me. When I went to our hometown in Asingan, Pangasinan to register to vote for the snap elections, I was anxiously asked by the local YWCA, whom I was supporting for President. I simply and honestly said: "I am for change; I am for Cory who can bring about that change". This direct, short reply reverberated quickly out of our sleepy town to the offices of the national broadsheets and the next day I made the headlines which screamed that a second cousin of President Marcos was for Cory. Without any TV ads, or a campaign machinery, I became nationally known overnight and remained so until Cory was installed President. When she was forming her Senate slate, a few months later, Cory invited me to join it as one of the two candidates – the other one, being Santanina Rasul - she had chosen to represent Filipino women. Somehow without much effort, I had fulfilled the requirements of a senatorial candidate in this country – a personality known nationwide, who was now accepted and approved by an electorate, hungry for change.

Even the conditions for the 1987 senatorial campaign favored a neophyte politician like me. Since the national mood was for Cory who symbolized change, those in her Senatorial slate did not have to fork out big sums of money in order to win because people volunteered to help pay for our sorties wherever we went. Alas, those conditions may never come back again. Yet, they represented Filipino democracy at its most honest and transparent – the people's sovereign

will was manifested and it prevailed. I sincerely believe that without those extra-ordinary events which catapulted me into the mainstream of EDSA I, I would not have been elected, under ordinary circumstances, as Senator and be given the legitimate power to serve our people. What gives me comfort and self-confidence as a woman, however, is that I was intellectually and spiritually attuned to the events of the times so that when the political challenge presented itself to me, I was able to respond correctly to it.

The Women and Gender Institute of Miriam College could study how conditions can be created to enable educated, middle-class women win elections on the basis of their capacity and integrity to serve as legislators rather than on the depth of their pockets or as was in my case, on luck and auspicious timing. Unless the amount of money required to win elections in this country is substantially reduced, women of integrity and talent cannot win elections against big and dirty money. Perhaps, Governor Grace Padaca of Isabela can tell us in this series of lectures how she won her position in 2004 without using jueteng or drug funds.

### Priorities in Law-making

Once elected, I asked myself for whom do I legislate and what do I legislate? I had no doubt that I had to legislate for women because I correctly felt that I represented them. Fortunately, my long experience at the United Nations, both as a Philippine delegate and an international civil servant, as well as my life as a widow and single parent for many years prepared me to focus sharply on women's issues. The first bill I authored which was made into law was RA 6725, "Strengthening the Prohibition of Discrimination Against Women in the Workplace, Amending the Labor Code of the Philippines". But a Senator cannot just be a class legislator. I also wanted to help the youth, the farmers, the men, the people, in general. There is, indeed, a plethora of choices for an incoming Senator. Although I was not just a Senator for women I never forgot that women's issues were my priority. It is important to have priorities because twelve years in the Senate, the period for which I served, may seem a long period but it is short in terms of the time required to pass basic legislation which invites controversy and prolonged debate. For instance, it took nine years to pass the centerpiece of my feminist legislation: the two laws on rape – one (RA 8353) which redefined the crime of rape; the other (RA 8505), which provided assistance to rape victims and their families.

Born in the coastal town of Lingayen, Pangasinan I wanted to legislate for our fishermen, the poorest of the poor, as well as for the preservation and development of our marine resources. Thus I undertook to craft the Fisheries Code (RA 8550) which took ten years to pass into law. Conscious of the elitist orientation of our banking institutions, I sallied into the area of making loans accessible to our small and medium-scale industries and authored RA 6977 or the Magna Carta for Small- and Medium-Scale Industries. I also felt a deep obligation to legislate for the Philippine Foreign Service, being the only career ambassador thus far, to become a Senator. I, therefore, authored the Philippine Foreign Service Act (RA 7157) as well as another major law relating to foreign policy "The Bases Conversion and Development Act" (RA 7227). A law which has had impact on our cultural life is RA 7356 which created the National Commission on Culture and the Arts and of which I was its main author and principal sponsor.

### Frustrations

I submitted several bills in the Senate which never saw the light of day but I hope another lawmaker will discover their merits and resurrect them in the future. These pieces of legislation relate to the nature of our country as a compact and strategically-situated archipelago as well as a potential maritime power in Asia. Up to this day, I am convinced that we, Filipinos, cannot achieve our potential as a nation unless we understand and develop the diversified maritime nature of our country. I authored bills relating to: (1) The Creation of a Separate Department of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources; (2) The Creation of a Department of Maritime Affairs; (3) Drawing the Baselines of the Philippine Archipelago. Although these bills did not directly deal with women's issues, they certainly could have benefited women as concerned citizens of this country. I should like to stress here the critical need to draw the baselines of our archipelago through domestic legislation because by 2009, the International Seabed Authority will be in place to regulate an international maritime system. I am alarmed by the fact that no one in the Executive or Legislative branches of Government at present seems concerned about our partial loss of national sovereignty in the near future. Women should be militant and vigilant on issues dealing with sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity in the same manner that our heroines like Gabriela Silang, Teodora Alonso, the women of Malolos and the suffragettes of 1937 were.

### Committee Work

One of the most satisfying tasks of a Senator is committee work, either as Chairman of a committee or as a member. I had the privilege of chairing major Committees such as the: (1) Foreign Affairs Committee; (2) Education Committee; (3) Agriculture Committee. It was through Committee work that I had some of the most rewarding experiences as a Senator – that is getting to know the NGO's and personalities in our country invited to comment on pending legislation. This is the place where concerned citizens can lobby and press for their particular interests and advocacies. This is an area of vital importance to our political institutions for aside from casting votes, it is in these committees that citizens can freely voice their concerns – on condition that Senators are sympathetic and are patient listeners and if the NGO's know how to present their issues. On this occasion, I should like to plead for an improved process of dialogue and exchange views between legislators and lobby groups. Culturally, Filipinos do not seem to be programmed for patient dialogue and peaceful negotiations; our tendency is to let the approach of the "winner-take-all" prevail. I have witnessed NGOs, including women NGOs, express their demands in a shrill and hostile manner. I have also been shocked at the condescending and arrogant manner of legislators towards outstanding academics. Politics and lawmaking, after all, is the art of the possible. As citizens, we must learn to dialogue and negotiate with our public officials. And one of the best places to learn these is at some well-conducted Senate committee hearings.

### Priority Development Assistance Fund (PDAF)

The practice of allowing Senators and Congressmen have direct access to the annual

budget for development funds, through the Priority Development Assistance Fund (PDAF), a practice introduced during the Aquino administration, must be re-studied carefully, with a view to instituting controls, if not totally eliminating the practice. Senators and Congressmen certainly have a right to identify projects for their constituents under the Medium-Term Development Plan; in many instances, they, rather than self-satisfied bureaucrats, know best. But to allow lawmakers, who determine the budget, to use funds themselves, amounting in the millions of taxpayers' hard-earned money, is such a big temptation for first-class corruption in the name of national development and the welfare of the people. No wonder there is a proliferation of basketball courts and waiting sheds instead of, for instance, long-term goals in improving the quality of our tropical fruits and vegetables.

One piece of legislation I am particularly proud of, which I introduced during the debate on the national budget in 1994 was the mandatory annual allocation of 5% of the budget of every government department and agency for gender and development; I believe we are the only country in the world at present which has this legislative provision for women's programs through its annual budget. This section in the annual budget must be carefully guarded by all feminists and their friends as it could easily be wiped out by agents of oppression and fear.

### Entry into Provincial Politics

With the end of my career in the Senate in sight, I thought of continuing my service to the people through politics – this time, in provincial politics. I ran in 1998 for provincial governor in our province of Pangasinan, a big province which consists of 49 towns and 4 cities, one of the biggest provinces in the Republic. In my innocence about the nature of provincial politics, I thought I could easily win election in a single province, having won twice in national elections. I underestimated the kind of micro-campaigning that was required in 1,355 barangays of Pangasinan where people were not interested in grand visions for the province but rather in being gifted with mono-block chairs and toilet bowls and having their pictures taken with candidates with instamatic cameras. I thought I could motivate my province-mates into a grand vision of being the gateway to China, increasing trade and exchange with China and the East Asian tigers, with our big province of Pangasinan facing the South China Sea. But I was defeated by a candidate who belonged to a family which had been entrenched in provincial politics for two generations. Success in provincial politics, however, should be another series of lectures from eminent women who have successfully served their provinces as chief executives. This would require another occasion for Miriam College to organize.

### Life after politics

Now in retirement from the Senate for nearly a decade, I have realized the truth of the words of my late father uttered nearly fifty years ago, which I shall quote again: "Politics is the main industry in the Philippines; unfortunately, it is a non-productive industry". In our obsession with naked political power and the pseudo-glamour of political high-visibility, we have neglected the development of science and technology, stunted agricultural research, discouraged our artists and inventors, sacrificed our academic standards, cheapened quality sports and

corrupted media. All of these could have been nurtured and developed, despite overwhelming problems, if we, like Thailand and India, had a more balanced view of politics as a public good rather than as personal, exclusive monopoly.

Tragically, politics as we have shaped it in this country is the destructive and selfish use of political power, which in the words of Henry Kissinger becomes the "ultimate aphrodisiac". Bluntly speaking, politics has become a profession, a business for many to make fast money from the people's tax payments with impunity. Certainly, politics in a democratic setting should not exist as a means to perpetuate the selfish interests of individuals, families and oligarchs but rather to widen citizen's participation to create a just, participatory and genderized society.

Women are equipped to undertake a two-pronged approach to achieve political reform and change in our country by participating: (1) directly in the political institutions of our country as elected officials at the barangay, municipal, provincial and national levels; and (2) by working for political reform as NGOs, members of think tanks, academic advocates, business people for social progress, members of media; all these individuals and groups who are committed. But the record of women in politics, worldwide, is a mixed one. We still have to prove that women, as women, can make a difference in governance and provide an alternative.

In a few weeks, on May 14, we shall go to the polls as a democratic nation. Two critical issues are at stake: (1) The people must elect honest and able representatives who will advance the progress and welfare of our nation which is fast losing its status as a genuinely democratic country among developing countries of the world; (2) Electoral fraud must be avoided so that the voice of the people will be heard. Let us hope and pray that we can achieve these twin goals.

I am grateful for the privilege and honor to have served our people in the Senate. It remains one of the most wonderful and interesting chapters of my life. But I am not permanently attached to this chapter of my life nor do I want to cling to the perks of politics. I remain committed to strengthening our democratic institutions and basic human rights, including the rights of women but doing that now outside the formal political process, and in a more modest way. As an NGO, I spend part of my time at present in my province of Pangasinan, helping in rural development, particularly in the production and consumption of local carabao milk and milk products. What has enabled me to continue to serve beyond the self and beyond the pursuit of power, as a senior citizen, is my insight, which grows stronger as I live, that the basis of human life is the spiritual and ethical. My heroes in politics are larger-than-life personalities like Mahatma Gandhi and Nelson Mandela who proved that politics can be spiritual, inclusive and non-violent. I have already mentioned President Cory Aquino.

I consider it auspicious that I am sharing this morning the platform with Dr. Patricia Licuanan, the gifted President of Miriam College. While in the Senate, I initiated the creation of a "Moral Recovery Program" a values formation program, essential, to my mind, for good government and politics. I said then in the difficult days of 1987: "We do need an economic recovery program; we also urgently need a moral, intellectual and spiritual recovery program". It was Dr. Licuanan who led a team of social scientists to do a seminal analysis on the Filipino character entitled "The Strengths and Weaknesses of the Filipino Character". To the credit of Dr. Licuanan, that study still remains relevant to up this day. The message of the Moral Recovery

Program remains compelling: we cannot create anything substantial and profound, especially in government and politics, unless the moral and spiritual values of honesty, cooperation and respect for each other's human rights are the foundation of our endeavors.

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A politician's life and career is like a seamless fabric – in its beginning is its middle and its end. In everyday political life, means and ends are closely interrelated; noble ends cannot be achieved through corrupt means. Means, indeed, are ends in themselves. In the justification of a political career, both for women and men, the personal, the political, the moral, the practical, the material, the spiritual, are all rolled into one and it is only when the politician unites and integrates all of these into her/his life and career for a transcendent objective to serve our people and humanity, can politics have a lasting impact on the community, the country and the world.