

Humor as Enlightenment and Entertainment

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Review of
*Hello, Garci? Hello, Ma'am:
Political Humor in the Cellphone Age*
published by the
Philippine Center for
Investigative Journalism
(2005, 90 pages)



In October 2005, the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) published a compendium of selected political jokes that had been circulating through the short messaging system (SMS) and the Internet. The volume is aptly titled *Hello, Garci? Hello, Ma'am: Political Humor in the Cellphone Age*. Though primarily meant to “raise funds” (xi) for the PCIJ’s investigative reports, the 90-page collection apparently aims to provide light entertainment and creative enlightenment regarding the political situation, particularly on allegations of massive cheating in the 2004 elections and corruption under the Macapagal-Arroyo administration.

Hello, Garci? is divided into eight sections. Part I (Hello, Garci? Komiks, pp.1-14) reprints the anonymous graphic story of Macapagal-Arroyo solving the controversy caused by a wiretapped conversation by turning herself into Darna. This uses real photographs with make-believe situations and dialogues. On the other hand, Part II (Hello, Garci? Jokes, pp. 15-28) compiles selected jokes about the wiretapped conversations.

A special section, authored by journalist Alan Robles, is a humorous take on the identity of Garci. Blogger Loi Reyes Landicho also provides a hilarious annotation of Macapagal-

Arroyo's "I-am-sorry" speech last June 27, 2005. Part III (Anak ng Jueteng, pp. 29-38) has jokes on the involvement of the First Family in the illegal numbers game.

Part IV (Hello, Ma'am?, pp. 39-49) contains Landicho's "alternative cinema" – i.e., make-believe movies that highlight the national situation. It also has the anonymously written "Gloriang Buwisit!" which is sung to the tune of La Cucaracha. Part V (A Tale of Two Chickens, pp. 50-58) contains variations of the classic joke of why the chicken crossed the road, this time from the perspective of selected personalities.

Part VI (Elections 2004: Da King and I, pp. 59-64) pokes fun at the 2005 elections, particularly the late actor-turned-politician Fernando Poe, Jr. who was Macapagal-Arroyo's main rival in the presidential race. Part VII (Shame & Scandal in the Family, pp. 65-68) exposes the controversies hounding the First Family in a humorous manner. Part VIII (Pinoy Politics 101, pp. 69-90) is on various issues in Philippine politics like the impeachment case against Macapagal-Arroyo and the state of mind of selected politicians – in a humorous vein, of course.

Through humor, the book reinforces the argument that winning an election whatever the cost is every traditional politician's objective. He or she is therefore expected to do anything and everything to get the most (or even just the required) number of votes to be proclaimed winner in an electoral exercise. While there are cases of candidates actually conceding defeat, the more common refusal to concede both at the national and local levels tends to indicate that there are no election losers in the Philippines. Even as one candidate is proclaimed, his/her opponents are wont to claim that they were cheated of the victory they deserve.

At first glance, the 2004 presidential election is no different in that Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo is accused of cheating her way to the presidency. However, analysts like Isagani Cruz, a former justice of the Supreme Court, stress that the 2004 elections were the "worst ever since we became a republic" (Cruz, 2004). Macapagal-Arroyo's explanations, as well as those of her officials,

have failed to satisfy concerned groups and individuals calling for her resignation or removal from office.

Clearly, electoral fraud is no laughing matter. Concerned authorities take seriously all accusations of cheating and both the accusers and the accused tend to use the media to explain their side with the hope of getting the public's sympathy. At the center of media attention along with Macapagal-Arroyo is Virgilio Garcillano, former commissioner of the Commission on Elections (Comelec). Despite his denial, he is believed to be the person talking to a female with a voice similar to Macapagal-Arroyo's in the widely circulated "Hello, Garci?" taped conversations in June 2005.

The evidence of cheating as may be gleaned from the content of the wiretapped conversations, is so incriminating that Garcillano was forced to go into hiding from June to December 2005. Macapagal-Arroyo, for her part, issued a statement on June 27, 2005 in which she admitted committing a "lapse in judgment" for talking to an election official she did not identify. ("Statement on the issue of tape recordings," 2005) Since she did not explicitly confirm or deny that hers was the voice in the wiretapped conversations, Macapagal-Arroyo's statement raised more questions than answers, prompting concerned groups and individuals to renew their call for her removal from office.

Reminiscent of the movement for former President Joseph Estrada's removal from office, media- and techno-savvy groups and individuals have maximized



One of the cartoons found in the "Hello, Garci?" jokebook.

new media in getting their anti-administration message across. The ubiquity of cellular phones has prompted them to use the SMS to pass on information quickly and conveniently. The same is true for the Internet, as they use e-mail, create websites and post entries on blogs to express their views.

An example of what is commonly called Internet activism is the “Google bombing” of Macapagal-Arroyo. At the height of the “Hello, Garci?” controversy, techno-savvy groups and individuals sent messages to webmasters and bloggers to hyperlink the phrase “pekeng pangulo” (fake president) to the official website of Macapagal-Arroyo in order to affect the latter’s keyword search and ranking on the Google search engine. (“Google bombers attack Arroyo website,” 2005) In due time, a Google search using the words “pekeng pangulo” yielded Macapagal-Arroyo’s website as the top choice.

On the surface, this “Google bombing” could be perceived as being done in the spirit of fun, a joke delivered via cyberspace by people who have nothing better to do. What harm, after all, can this do to Macapagal-Arroyo who has apparently gotten used to being at the receiving end of flak whether both serious and hilarious?

A close scrutiny, however, of the actions of Internet activists would make one realize that Google bombing was not directed at Macapagal-Arroyo. Its ultimate objective was to make online users, particularly Filipinos, think about the reasons for Macapagal-Arroyo’s being a fake president and hopefully join the movement for her removal from office.

In other words, actions like this are meant to catch the audience’s attention, to give them a dose of reality in an amusing way. Humor is therefore employed as a means to both enlighten and entertain the intended audience.

Jokes resulting from the “Hello, Garci?” controversy also have the same objective as they serve as a constant reminder of the political situation, particularly electoral fraud and the current administration’s legitimacy. By poking fun at the powers-that-be,

citizens strip them of their political invincibility; they are empowered by their opposition.

The more astute mobile phone or online user may find some (or even most) entries in the PCIJ book as nothing new. The cellphone jokes, for example, have already been forwarded to mobile phone users and have been posted on several websites since the controversy broke in June 2005. The value of his book, however, is to record in print the materials circulated through SMS and the Internet. It makes permanent what used to be electronic.

Years from now, readers might not readily get the jokes' punchlines for lack of historical context. This situation is understandable, for the impact of jokes (political or otherwise) rests on their applicability to the rather fluid situation. Readers may even conveniently dismiss the joke book as obsolete if Macapagal-Arroyo were removed from office.

Be that as it may, the book serves the purpose of providing enlightenment and entertainment at the same time, as it employs humor to give readers an idea of the political situation. For those who do not quite get it, they are prompted to ask around (read: do research) to understand the punchline. In the process, readers also realize the political situation and hopefully the need to change it.

Indeed, political humor has been used since colonial times as a potent weapon against those who exploit and oppress. The book's introduction states:

Our national heroes used it in the struggle against Spanish colonialism. Jose Rizal poked fun at both colonial authorities and his countrymen who wanted to be more Spanish than the Spaniards. Marcelo del Pilar used political satire to hit at the Spanish friars who dominated Philippine life and the hypocritical Christianity that they preached. (x)

Unlike its investigative reports on corruption and other issues, PCIJ obviously does not harbor any illusion that this book will be used as a reference for scholarly pursuit. The joke book, however, can help jump-start the process of social awakening.

References

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