

Interview with Jesse Robredo

Can we start with the issue regarding your candidacy for these elections?

In 1988, I was the candidate of the Villafuertes. It was presumed that I was a Filipino citizen and they asked me to run for mayor. In 1992, my opponent was the sister of Congressman Villafuerte and then they started questioning my citizenship. So in 1992, they filed a case with the immigration bureau questioning my citizenship. It didn't prosper. And in 1995, in as much as I didn't have an opponent then, there was no issue on my citizenship.

In 2001, when I returned after being term-limited, again the candidate of Villafuerte questioned my citizenship. This was *Fortuno vs. Robredo*. This case was decided by the Commission (on Elections) in my favor. The commission declared that I was a Filipino citizen and therefore I couldn't be disqualified. They appealed it to the Supreme Court. But the Supreme Court decided that the case was moot and academic in as much as it was a *quo warranto* case. And it had been resolved at the end of my term.

They filed another case in 2004. This is the case that has remained unresolved and I don't know what will happen. I presume that these elections in 2007, they'll again question my citizenship. Because suddenly...that case in 2004 after not being decided in the last two and a half years, they're trying to resolve it now.

So in response to the possible disqualification case that I am facing, most especially because I belong to the opposition, my lawyers advised that me that my wife should also file a certificate of candidacy for the mayorship just in case that the legal processes will not work. So we're expecting that they will file another disqualification case. I just hope that the Comelec will be impartial and be very objective in as much as they've already decided on this en banc. But just to make sure that they will have an opponent, or in the event that they disqualify me, we filed another certificate of candidacy.

So what's the basis of the citizenship issue?

My grandfather was born in China, but he migrated to the Philippines. My mother is from Navotas, Rizal. My father is presumed to be a Filipino citizen. They're just saying that when my grandfather came from China, he did not apply for Filipino citizenship. But you know, this was during the Spanish period, if I recall it right. No one has even bothered to take a look at my citizenship until I decided to run for public office and until I opposed them. It's very ironic because when I was their candidate, I was a Filipino citizen. When I became their opponent, I was not a Filipino citizen anymore.

My sense is that if this goes to the Supreme Court, it will be decided in my favor. But I am not very sure what will happen in between. Suddenly, should they decide to disqualify me...I think a similar case is that of Harry Angping. They filed a disqualification case against him. From the people who took a look at the case, all of them said, or most of them said, that at the end of it, the Supreme Court reversed the decision of the Comelec. But unfortunately when they reversed it, Miles Roces was already elected congressman of Manila. So even when they reversed it, he had already been disqualified, there's not much that he can do.

I'm afraid that it might happen to us also. In the process of deciding, the issue will be moot and academic because I was already disqualified.

To many observers, the move was quite unthinkable that you're letting your wife run. Is there an issue of building of a political dynasty here?

Of course, my opponent will say that it's building a political dynasty. But we must remember that in 1998, when I left office, they were asking my wife to run. And we decided that no one in the family will take over my post. Not a relative, not my wife, not anyone who has blood relations with us. If we wanted to build a dynasty, then it should have been in 1998.

In 1998, I could have run for congressman, and probably I could have won. My wife could have been the mayor of the city. We told everyone that this is the last local election that a Robredo will run for mayorship of the City at least, in my lifetime, or probably in my generation. So I suppose they can always say that it's towards building a dynasty but records and circumstances will tell you that we've decided and we've always been anti-dynasty.

It's ironic that the people who are saying this are the ones who have built a dynasty in the province. I think there are five Villafuertes running for public office. Of course, all of them are not in good terms anymore.

You yourself are related to the Villafuertes, right?

My grandfather and the mother of Congressman Villafuerte are half brothers, half sisters. In fact, the son, when he was asking for my help when he ran for mayor here, LRay, was even calling me *pinsan* together with his mom. I think this is more of a political issue than anything else.

Let's move on to governance issues. What do you think were really your lasting legacies. Well, there are so many achievements you've done for Naga. But if you're going to rank the Top 5, what are these achievements?

I think it's making the Nagueño believe in himself. If there is anything that we've proven, first of all, when governance works, it means being able to deliver the services, deliver the outcomes, engaging with the citizens, making them achieve the best that they can be. I think if there's anything that we've done here, it's making the Nagueño proud, that, you know, I am a Nagueño, we can be as good as anyone, we can achieve many things that we have all along thought we cannot achieve. The recognitions, awards are mere affirmations of this belief.

And I guess all the benefits of it, infrastructure development, health services, education and the like, it's really governance. We're not really endowed, we don't have a lot of money. In fact, even typhoon rehabilitation is really governance — us having confidence in the private sector in their capacity to work with the people, not only the government. And I think that Reming has shown that despite the absence of national government assistance, we can move on, we can even be better than the other local government units. The reason is, people believe that they can do it. All the others are merely incidental.

Of course, you might look at it as a process. The achievements before are building blocks of building this city pride. And after achieving that city pride, there is that confidence and mindset that we can almost do anything if we're together. I suppose if there is one legacy that we leave behind, it's making the Nagueño believe in his capacity. Hopefully, the succeeding leaderships will be able to improve on it in making people feel good about their government.

Under your leadership, Naga was the first one to institutionalize people empowerment in governance...

And we have experimented on many things that have not been tried. We conducted a referendum here, Comelec-administered, to decide on development issues that will impact even after our terms. If I recall it right, it was in 1995 or 1996 when we conducted a referendum asking people to vote on whether they would allow the city to put up a new central business district, whether they would allow the city to borrow money to fund that central business district, whether they would like that we color-code the tricycles. That was a big step in the sense that it's making people decide on important development issues.

Of course, we have the Naga City People's Council, that's the first of its kind in the country, wherein unelected members of the community can debate with the councilors, be part of the body that will vote on policies at the committee level. And in fact it has evolved into a system wherein they are involved in almost everything that we do. Typhoon Reming rehab was chaired by Fr. Tria, not by the mayor. In fact, we were just one of the partners of that rehab task force. When we bidded out the central bus terminal, it was just the legal officer of the city representing the city government with Fr. Tria as chair of NCPC and the chair of the chamber.

The housing body is composed of, half of it are NGOs. The health board the same. So it is really a mechanism and a process where we feel it's important that the people get involved.

How hard was it when you became mayor the first time?

It was hard because I only had three councilors. There are 10 seats in the city council. Seven of the councilors belonged to the opposition. What I want, they oppose. What they want, I oppose. It was difficult in the sense that it took a long while before things were decided even if it was good for the city. When we ran for reelection in 1992, they decided to cast their lot on the whole ticket. Since then, Naga city has been managed by a single-ticket group.

And I think we've done well because we have fast-tracked a process that allows nongovernment intervention and nongovernment participation. The first term was really difficult. I inherited a deficit in city hall. We had to build confidence in the capacities of the local government unit. I was a newcomer, I was just a nephew of the governor. These were things that I had to overcome.

But I guess a lot of it was we were able to build confidence as far as the constituents were concerned on the leadership of the local government. So we decided to run after the symbols of bad government in Naga City — illegal gambling, lewd shows, 15-30s and the like. So maybe they realized that they should give us a chance to even do better in 1992. But the most difficult part really was the first four years.

And that was also the time when all of them were for (Ramon) Mitra and I cast my lot on (Fidel) Ramos. In this province, we were probably only two politicians who were for Ramos. All of them were ganging up on us. In fact, in 1992 it was us against all of them — meaning us, the locals (against) the group of (Raul) Roco, Villafuerte. The big players in the political arena joined forces in 1992 because they were with Mitra.

Looking back in 1988 to 1992, although it was difficult period, it was also an opportunity for us to show what we can do. It was also an opportunity for the people to realize that there is a different mode of governing the city. And although it was still unproven if it can be institutionalized, they voted us to city hall again. It became easier with all the councilors belonging to our ticket.

One of the problems the first time was the issue of patronage. Has it been totally cast away?

I think, in a sense, no. But in many ways, yes. In City hall the bureaucracy here is based on merit. My role is always ministerial, when we fill a permanent position in city hall, they go through a selection process that involves a representative from the employees association. Ninety-nine percent of the time, the person they recommend is appointed. So my role most of the time is ministerial.

On the other hand, let me also say that we have not removed it totally. Because for instance, I do *kasal*, *binyag*, *libing*. But you know I don't give personal gifts to all of these. The *libing* thing is charged to City hall. The *kasal*, *binyag* is charged to my presence. The only thing I can give them is my personal presence. Beyond that, none. And I think most people know that when they invite me to be a wedding sponsor, baptism sponsor, it has been a practice that I just attend. I do not provide gifts to them. The *libing* thing is patronage in the sense that we provide burial assistance to people who need it. We allow free burial at the city cemetery.

Now in terms of hiring employees, all things being equal, we consider our political leaders. But you know we only have 900-950 employees here at city hall. It's a lean and mean City hall, not a lot of space for political appointees. Outside of that, we're not traditional. I go to wakes, I go to weddings but I don't spend my personal money to build a network of loyal followers. We can be relied on if it's for a public good. We cannot be relied on if it's for a personal benefit.

When you first ran for public office, like you said, you were backed by your uncle Luis Villafuerte, and then you severed ties with him...

Yes, we severed ties with him basically it boiled down to conflict on how we should run a local government unit. It started with the choice of the chief of police. He wanted somebody to be my chief of police. We were not very sure of his reputation. Because we were against illegal gambling in the city. I recall it was very unfortunate incident because I was being asked to sign a letter for recommendation. The letter was already prepared just for my signature. To recommend a chief of police, his own man. And the person being recommended was the one asking me to sign. I refused to sign. I said no. We will choose our own chief of police. But he got his way. Because you know he was *malakas*. So I decided to support the Archbishop and requested for his help, and he told me that he'd try to do something. Two months later on, the chief of police, the choice of Cong. Villafuerte, was replaced. And he felt very unhappy. That was the start of it.

Maybe it was wrong that we did not agree as to how we would run the city. Had he known, he would not have supported me. Had I known he wanted to control me, I would not have run for public office. So we decided to part ways. He decided to field his sister to run against me. And he joined forces with the Rocos. It's very ironic, my opponent was Roco. And in 1992, my backer and my opponent joined together to field a candidate against me.

It was really intervention as to how we would run the city. Between allowing that to happen and hanging on to the mayorship, I'd rather lose my mayorship than making them control the city hall. It was something that we will not allow until we're here.

Did you have to compromise principles when you became mayor?

Let me put it this way. There are limits to what you will allow. Let me think of a few examples. Hiring employees, you always say it's based on merit but then when you hire casual employees, it's sometimes a gray area. But we always say we'd like to do it on merit, merit, merit. There are some political considerations behind it. Fielding a ticket, the principle has been that the choices should represent a sector, the choice should be excellent in his profession. But sometimes we only consider winnability in some cases. I think we failed in that regard to stick with the parameters we've set for ourselves. But in general, the basic belief of good governance, the basic belief of...losing votes if...there are certain things we have strong feelings on, we'd rather lose votes.

When I moved all the bus terminals outside of the city, I said maybe this will cost me my election. But we felt that it was good for the city. So we decided to do it.

Other than that, the reason why we don't use our personal money in helping our constituents is because we really don't want to touch government funds. That's very basic here. In fact, even my employees know that we will not touch government money in city hall no matter what the needs are. That's why we're saying that let's just make government to pay for itself instead of us using personal money to do it.

Other than that, we have stuck to the basic principles that we have.

What has been the worst you've ever been accused of, or any criticisms with regard to your style of governance?

We did a lot of infrastructure work upland. So they're saying that we have properties in those areas. We don't and I've said it often, and always, that if there is any piece of land that I have illegally acquired or was given to me as a favor, they can have it as long as they can show that it's mine.

Other than that...I think nobody has questioned how we run city hall in the sense that the unit cost of purchases here are lowest. In fact, sometimes, bidders don't want to bid anymore. Procurement here is open, transparent, it's clean, it's competitive. We always do things in the best interest of the city.

Of course, right now, the other issue they're harping on is that I had relationships with other women aside from my wife, which my wife does not believe. In fact, the other day, she received seven, eight

text messages saying that the reason why my wife filed her certificate of candidacy because she was mad at me.

I think, by and large, people here believe that we've struggled and strive to walk the narrow path of being straight as far as government funds are concerned. We have taken care of the people's money here. Most of the allegations are personal in nature — of course, my citizenship, my being *kuripot*, that's always an issue. Other than that, I don't recall any other important issue.

I have probably 50 cases in the Ombudsman. The cases are because I failed to put the name of my father-in-law as one of my relatives. Most, if not all, of them really are meant to harass us. The members of the city council have the same, probably of lesser number. But none of it claims that we've been corrupt and we made money out of the government, and we've taken advantage of our positions to enrich ourselves.

Do you worry that the gains you have achieved in the last years that you've been running the city will eventually be overturned when a new mayor comes along?

Probably in the long run, no. In the short run, maybe...I look at this from a longer-term perspective. Maybe it might happen in the future that they might make a wrong choice, probably for a term, but realizing that they made a wrong choice, they'll make the right choice the next time around. They might go on an up-and-down cycle but I'm sure that what we've done will benchmark the things that anyone will do in the future. And that benchmark will make the people decide and make the right choices.

Maybe after two terms or three terms, somebody will come along and will be able to convince the residents of the city that he will do better than his predecessors. And maybe people might believe but if he fails, I'm sure the next time around he will not succeed anymore.

Because I think the other part of the equation is getting people here educated into making the right choices. And this has been tested. Our opponents are well funded. They have a lot of resources. They spend a lot of money.

Of course, some people will be influenced. But at the end of the day, they will realize their long-term interest is more important than these short-term gifts.

Sir, you said this is going to be your last term as mayor. Are you aspiring for any public office eventually?

No, this is my last term as mayor, and probably my last term as an elected official. A lot of people don't know this. But you know I asked two or three of my councilors if they were willing to run for mayor this time around. Had they agreed that they'll run for mayor, my last term should have been that last term. They asked me to run again for one more time, in as much as I still have one more term. So I said this is my last term. And if there is anything that can be written in stone, that is it.

Of course, there's always one Jesse Robredo. You can't be duplicated. But in the far horizon, do you see a different batch of local leaders that will be most likely to replace you in terms of achievements?

I think given the opportunity that I had, I'm sure somebody will come along who'll not only equal but even surpass what we've done. We've only set a standard for them to measure themselves. I guess the more difficult part...you know there are two dimensions to this type of work. One is the political part of it. The other one is the managerial part of it. I think it's difficult to get somebody who's politically good and at the same time has the management capacity. So maybe what will happen in the future is that somebody will just have to learn the managerial side of it and be good on the political side of it. Or be an expert in the managerial side of it and learn the political ropes.

There is one city councilor who I feel has the political knack for doing, for being...I think we've succeeded because we have been able to combine performance and politics. I see him as somebody who has the political skills. Maybe an AIM training, DAP training will help him develop. In fact, I mention already that very likely in 2010, he'll be our candidate for mayor. So even now that they have not decided yet on 2007, we're saying there's no place for a Robredo dynasty here and we've named our successor this early.

You won't run for governor?

We do not vote for provincial-elected officials. Naga City is independent of the province. Secondly, I don't have the money to run for a bigger jurisdiction. In fact, one of the reasons why we decided not to entertain thoughts of running for Congress or running for governor is because first of all, the constituency is generally different. Second, we don't have the money to fight a contest of that type. It's really a question of resources also.

What lessons have you learned from your exposure to politics and government?

I think good performance and good politics can go together. We've been politically successful in the sense that all of my candidates have won since 1992 at the local level. The candidate we supported for Congress has won in the last four, five elections. So politics and good governance can go together.

Engaging with the constituency is good politics. In fact, I've been telling most of my partymates that you know, at the end of the day, if the NGOs will love to work with us, they will vote for us also. So it's not just governing and engaging, it's also building a strong political network.

Secondly, there is a place for principles here. I recall people saying, telling me, that we should always look at the political dimension of the things that we do. On the other hand, I was also saying that you should first look at the principle dimension of the things that you do, and take a second look at the political dimension. If the political dimension is consistent with the principle dimension, then go. If the political dimension is not consistent with the principle dimension, you go but then you try to address the communication part of the problem.

I'll give you an example. We've raised the rental rates at the public market by 200 percent. That's bad politics but that's good governance because the public market has been losing money. So instead of

saying that it's good to raise rental rates, we talk to the market vendors' association. We told them, look at the books, be part of the committee study, see how the market is faring. And when you have the conclusions, let's sit down and decide on it.

So they realized that we needed to raise rental rates by 200 percent. The principle dimension is the public market should not be subsidized by the city government in as much as an income-generating concern. So I said we'd raise rental rates by 200 percent and they said 'Mayor, can you do it in two tranches?' The political dimension is doing it in two tranches. The principle dimension is the decision to raise rates by 200 percent.

We've raised property taxes in the city almost every term of mine. I said that the principle there is that those who benefit from the development and growth in the city should share the burden. That's the principle dimension. So we said, in as much as we believe that the city is growing, we believe that you benefited from the growth of the city, you should share the burden. The political dimension is how do we convince them that we should do it. So we ask the chamber to work with us, discuss with them. So they said, 'can you reduce the rate of increase?' So I said, let's compromise. They said the compromise is good enough, so we agreed. The chamber passed a resolution saying, go ahead, raise property taxes, but if we can calibrate it in this manner.

So we first establish what needs to be done. If it's politically difficult, we just go down to that level of engaging and coming to terms with those who oppose us or oppose the decisions that we're making.

Id like to go back to the issue of the people empowerment ordinance that Naga passed. How did you do it?

First of all, there is this NGO-PO Council that is not formally organized and formally structured. But initially they felt that I was *trapo*. They tried to get the feel of it. So I said maybe you can give it a chance, give it a try. Try to influence what we're doing. If we feel that your positions are right and correct, then we will adopt your positions. We started with urban poor. We told them, maybe you can do community organizing for us because when government does that, it's always, you know, 'they're just politicking.' So they tried and they felt there is much that we can do that they can't do. And they thought they can be successful in their advocacy if they leverage the authority of the government.

So we've negotiated with the property owners. Just to give you an example. There is one property here that has reached the levels of presidents — Magsaysay, Cory Aquino. This is the property owned by the Church. They've been there for the last 50 years but they have not owned the property. So they said, 'Mayor, can you negotiate for us?' I said, can you organize everyone because the property owner wants to talk to only one person? And wants that entity to pay in cash. We'll negotiate. We'll get the money. But make sure that everyone goes with this direction. So the problem of tenure for 50 years has been resolved with NGO participation and city government influence.

From urban poor, we moved down to environment, we moved down to many other concerns — transport. And they said, 'Mayor, what will happen if you're not around anymore?' So I said, let's pass a law that will institutionalize this. So we passed that People Empowerment Ordinance wherein the NGOs were federated, wherein they now can sit in the city council as members of the committees, not as members of the council. In fact, that law also allowed for sectoral representation in the city council.

The problem with the sectoral representation is there were doubts raised by DILG itself that there is no enabling law that allows city council sectoral representation. If that was allowed, we should have a city council sectoral representation here, similar to that of the party-list representation in Congress.

We passed that law in 1995 or 1996. I recall some councilors were saying that we're giving them too much authority. My answer then was, you know, we'll not be in city hall forever. We should be concerned with what will happen to city hall once we're gone. Everyone felt that we're doing the right thing, we're okay, so it's not necessary. I said it's necessary because sometimes we need to have people who will disagree with us. But we will not question their motives. Because if you have people who have questionable motives questioning you, sometimes you say this is just a political issue. But when you have people questioning you who you do not doubt, are well-meaning, then you listen.

I'll give you an example. Somebody wanted to put up a golf course in the city. I recall it was during the Ramos time, 1997. The NCPC campaigned against setting up that golf course. They cited environmental concerns. I wanted the golf course. They campaigned, they talked to the city councilors. I lost. We don't have a golf course. Or we didn't have that golf course. Somebody is putting up a golf course in a subdivision. So that's another issue.

We wanted to transfer this landfill of ours to another site. I said maybe you can do this for us, do the consultation work. So NCPC did the consultation work. They failed. Because people in the area who will be affected said, 'No, we do not want the landfill here.'

So sometimes you win, sometimes you lose. But as I've said, when people who have good intentions do oppose you, I think you should listen. And I consider that people empowerment ordinance and the Naga City People's Council as a means by which we would be able to hear people whose only concern is making government responsive to those who will oppose it.

In that respect, I think we have succeeded in getting people to go on board, and getting the good people to oppose when there's a need to oppose.

Can you talk about another innovation, the i-governance?

When I came back from Kennedy School, the challenge then was how do we engage with the households. Probably, only 30 percent of the residents in the city belong to an NGO, or it might even be lesser. So probably majority are interested with what? Making sure that when they apply for a permit, everything is in order. They get it as correctly and as quickly as they can. They're interested with busted street lamps at the corners near their houses. They're interested with clogged drainages, etc., garbage being collected.

So I said, let's engage with them by coming up with standards and telling them what the standards are. So essentially, i-governance is providing them information hoping that by providing them with information, they would be able to respond to the kind of services we provide, set up higher standards for us when they are possible, tell us if we're not doing our jobs.

So i-governance is a charter and a website. A charter tells everyone these are the 150 things that city hall does for you. These are the procedures and the like, these are the response times, these are the

persons responsible. If you have complaints, just tell us.

The website tells you everything that you want to know about city hall — budget of the mayor's office, procurement and the like. We've been telling everyone here, if you're interested to comment on the budget, see if we are wasting your money, there is that website. And we realized that when people are informed, they are not suspicious. In fact, the budget of city hall is posted in that Naga City Citizens' Board downstairs.

The budget of the mayor's office is in the website of the city hall. The statement of quarterly financial operations, which a lot of local governments do not provide, is also posted every quarter telling everyone that this is the amount of money we've collected, the amount of money we've spent. These are the expense items and categories. We're just saying, let's promote transparency in governance. And in doing that, we'd be able to attract people and encourage people to engage with their government.

And the other benefit of that, by keeping ourselves transparent, it prevents you from doing something wrong. So we've set up mechanisms that will allow people to check on us. And by doing that I think if there is anyone tempted to do wrong here, we will always, at the back of our minds, somebody might be looking at it.

Have you any regrets leaving politics?

No, I think by the time I end my term...this term, I've been mayor in the last 16 years. Fortunately, if I get reelected, I'd be mayor for 19 years. I think I've done my part here in the city. I just hope that the succeeding leaders will continue what we've done. I think it's time to move on, after this term, hopefully...

Where will we see you next?

I've been working with Synergeia Foundation. I've gone as far as Jolo and Tuao, Cagayan. This project is towards improving the quality of public education in the Philippines. I'll put a lot of time and focus on this effort once I'm no longer mayor. So probably I'll work with Synergeia.

When I was out of the mayorship, I worked with CODE. This is the Community Organizers Development Enterprises. Their focus is on urban poor and housing. I was regional volunteer for CODE when I was not mayor. So that's another area. So it's housing, education, and hopefully governance. I'm doing part-time work with Ateneo School of Government. I was in Calapan three weeks ago. They have an off-campus public administration masteral program in Calapan.

So maybe doing the same work but not getting involved in getting elected anymore.