

Sweet Victory

# The Saga of Jun Pala

Slain broadcaster Jun Pala (right) was a controversial figure. His murder left seven children orphan, including Louie Jane (opposite page, left) and the youngest, Mike Angelo, two years old.

SUNSTAR DAVAO



AT THE height of his infamy and notoriety in the late 1980s, radio commentator Juan 'Jun' Porras Pala would strut around Davao City with a hand grenade dangling from his hip and a .357 Magnum revolver bulging under his leather jacket. Armed supporters, including his own father, acted as his bodyguards at the radio station where he worked, whiling their time in a bunker surrounded by sandbags.

Two decades later, Pala would lose his army of bodyguards. But he never lost his strut, and he certainly retained his notoriety. Even after his demise last September 6, when he was riddled with bullets while walking home, Pala remains a controversial figure, his violent death sparking numerous debates among journalists in Davao.

Pala was the sixth journalist murdered in the country this year. He was also the nth person felled by motorcycle-riding gunmen in a city that seems to be reclaiming a title it gained 20 years ago as the Philippines' murder capital.

Journalists here were one on the issue of protesting Pala's murder. But many balked at the suggestion that his killing was an assault on press freedom. Those who knew him from the late 1980s were particularly upset. Pala, after all, had indirectly helped in the killing of hundreds of innocent civilians during that period, when the dreaded anti-communist vigilante group Alsa Masa roamed Davao. And after the Alsa Masa hysteria died down, Pala went on to become, many media people here say, one of the most corrupt broadcasters in the city, if not in the entire country.

"Think of the impact on the student journalists and young journalists," said some journalists when the idea of a march for Pala was broached a few days after his death. "Think of what the public will say."

"Expect a backlash from the public if we march just for Pala," said one reporter. "If there should be a march, then let's march to protest all summary executions, with Pala as the latest victim. And

let's not make this just a march of journalists. Get the others in."

The debates would continue even after the march was over. It now seems, though, that Pala's death has rallied journalists here not only in standing up against the increasing number of extrajudicial killings in Davao, but also in making sure that Pala's brand of journalism does not become the norm.

Dodong Solis, 38, station manager of Radio Mindanao Network's dxDC, echoes many in saying that Pala as a person and a family man was "buutan (good)." But like many journalists here, his view of Pala as a media person is the exact opposite. Says Solis: "He had a wrong start, (so) he ended up the wrong way, too."

Some of Pala's contemporaries may disagree with that.

PALA WAS only 33 when he first captured the imagination of Davaoños in 1987, as the mouthpiece of the Alsa Masa.

The group was set up in April 1986 by former operatives of the New People's Army (NPA) with the encouragement of military and police officials. Franco Calida, Alsa Masa's self-proclaimed founder, says it was formed in July 1986, a few days after he became Davao City's chief of police. But Alsa Masa did not invade the public's consciousness until February 1987, when Pala took up its "cause" with the blessings of the military and police. He used his radio program as the Alsa Masa's bully pulpit, resulting in thousands of villagers in communities supposedly influenced by the NPA trooping to the Davao City Police compound to "surrender."

That "surrender" was actually more an act of survival. "Surrender now," Pala's voice would boom over the airwaves during his early morning program, "or your houses will be marked 'X' and hundreds of fanatics—the Itomans, Putihans, Yellowhans, Greenans (and a rainbow coalition of vigilantes) will attack you."

Pala liked saying his idol was Joseph Goebbels, Hitler's chief propagandist and

the man who spoke of radio as the "eighth great power." Goebbels's dictum was that people would believe the lies if they were repeated enough, and that the bigger the lie, the better chance of it being believed.

With Pala as their guiding voice, the city's barangay set up checkpoints and conducted nightly patrols in search of "communists." Human rights advocates were up in arms as the body count rose, but Pala justified his campaign as "harassment for democracy" and "extortion for democracy." He styled himself as a fearless crusader. But he did find it prudent to arm not only himself, but also the men who acted as his human shields.



CAROLYN O. ARGUILLAS

Yet for all his work for the Alsa Masa, Pala's teamup with Calida was through by June 1987, reportedly because of money. Pala then formed his own "Contra Force," continuing his anti-communist crusade. Believing his own hype, he thought he was popular enough to win in the 1988 mayoralty race. After he lost, his anti-communist rants on the radio began to lose their effect on his listeners, too. He shifted to lashing out against the business sector, particularly the Chinese-Filipinos, who, he said at one point, were worse than the U.S. imperialists. But the tactic wasn't attracting as much of an audience as he did before, although he was still king of Davao radio.





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*(Above) In the late 1980s, when he was the chief propagandist of the Alsa Masa, Pala was armed to the teeth. (Opposite page) Surrounded by vigilantes, the broadcaster (center, foreground) strutted around Davao City strapped with bullets.*

Pala soon found himself dropped by the same people who had propped him up in the early days of the Alsa Masa: the military, police, and the businessmen. As far as they were concerned, he had outlived his usefulness. But by then, Pala already knew all the tricks of the trade. Even radio commentators from rival stations say that his power to convince his listeners was legendary. GMA radio commentator Nelson Canete goes to the extent of describing Pala as “very dangerous,” because “whatever he dished out on air would seem like gospel truth.”

At the time, Pala’s program still consistently rated number one in the early morning radio shows. Several colleagues would later attest that he took full advantage of that, and almost perfected the art of “AC/DC/IC journalism”—attack and collect, defend and collect, interview and collect.

Instead of reining him in, the industry seemed to goad him on as he continued to rake in profits for the stations he worked for. Solis recalls how a radio station would drop Pala once he became “too hot to handle.” But there was always another station waiting in the wings to take him in, because he was a sure moneymaker. The Kapisanan ng mga Brodkaster sa Pilipinas (KBP) banned him for life twice. Pala, however, never had a hard time finding a ready mike, even in KBP member stations. Ever defiant, he once even stormed a KBP meeting, brandishing an Armalite.

Pala became the highest-paid radio commentator in Davao City, earning at least P40,000 a month. But he earned more from other sources, his popularity giving him the power to name whatever sum he wanted from his “donors.”

Solis remembers how Pala would open a wallet containing no cash, just cards—not credit cards but calling cards of politicians, as well as military and police officials—and how these cards would, within the day, yield cash for him.

After his radio program, Pala would collate the cards of those based in, say,

Davao del Norte, and then start calling the officials one by one. When the collectible amount would reach P20,000, he would hire a car or cab and proceed to del Norte where he would make his collection round. Then he would return to the city and pay the cab driver whatever amount he whipped out from his pocket.

“He was loved by taxi drivers,” says Solis. “Imagine getting P1,000 for a fare to the casino?” (From wherever Pala was coming from within the city, the fare would not even reach P100.)

Several other colleagues who knew Pala up close say the popular radio personality had the misfortune of being surrounded by people who saw him only as a money source. But then Pala seemed to see people the same way, and was never apologetic about it.

One favorite “trick” was to have someone approach a businessman with a message of solicitation for an ad placement. Pala set the fee. If the businessman said he could not afford the amount and offered less, he would promptly become the subject of unsavory reports aired during Pala’s show. Once the businessman wised up and gave Pala the “ad fee,” the attack would stop, with the commentator saying “negative, negative,” meaning the previous reports had turned up false. The wonder of it all was that his listeners always believed him.

But just as easily as the money came in, so did it disappear. Pala’s gambling, initially a pastime, became habitual. He also had a growing family to feed (seven children in all, including those from his and his second wife’s previous relationships), aside from relatives and other hangers-on. His second wife, Louise, says he had only P2 in his pocket when he died. The three-bedroom home that he left her has yet to be fully paid.

Louise Pala says it was easy for her husband to get money. She denies, however, his ever being into extortion.

Those who knew him as a young journalist, in fact, say he began his career full of idealism. The Jun Pala most



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Davaoeños encountered and now remember barely resembled that promising young man.

**A** VALEDICTORIAN in high school, Jun Pala proceeded to college and then became a school registrar in Surigao del Sur before joining the Davao City media in 1984. Those who knew him then say Pala began his media career as one of the “progressive” reporters who were allied with the anti-Marcos movement.

But then Pala underwent a major tragedy and he found no one among his oppositionist friends who could help him.

His second child—his first boy—had fallen ill and Pala needed money for the child’s hospitalization. But financial help apparently didn’t come, or if it did, it simply wasn’t enough. The boy died. Too poor to afford a coffin and burial

fees in the city, Pala placed his dead son inside an empty carton of milk cans, took a bus to a town somewhere in Davao del Norte and there, in an empty lot, buried his baby boy.

The tragedy, though not known by many, appears to have been a major turning point in Pala’s life. Not long afterward, he joined a group of senior journalists who saw promise in the young reporter. These senior mediamen were aligned with the then dictator Ferdinand Marcos and always toed the official line. They also had a penchant for ordering coffee or meals in hotel restaurants and then charging the bill to politicians or lawyers taking a break from the nearby courts.

Although they were a small group, they were powerful. Their major activity, though, was not news gathering, but deciding what “issue” they would

tackle simultaneously, and how they would afterwards divide the spoils of their “efforts.”

Solis also says that soon after Pala visited Malacañang with the group, he began carrying a gun.

Yet while he became known in media circles as an “AC/DC/IC” commentator, Pala also took up causes that required no payment, causes that were close to his heart.

In June 1993, Pala stormed the Davao Medical Center (DMC), slapped a doctor, and poked a gun at him, on behalf of Armelin Ceden, an 11-month-old baby who was gravely ill but had been pronounced by the resident physician as “normal.” Pala caused a scandal, but it also prompted doctors to reexamine the child, who was later diagnosed to be stricken with bacterial meningitis. Although many frowned on the method



Pala employed, some DMC personnel admitted his act saved a life. Quite a few even said his only mistake was that he slapped the wrong doctor.

Gifted with such a convincing prowess to rally people to whatever cause he chose, Pala would have made a good advocate for good governance and the like, had his talent been harnessed positively. Unfortunately, many of those in the Davao media say, Pala became a victim of exploitation, of the frailties of a

rating-conscious, profit-driven industry.

Pala and his highly questionable ways were tolerated by the industry mainly because he made money for the stations. And he allowed himself to be used by anyone—station owners, media handlers, politicians, military and the police, businessmen—anyone who could either afford his price or get others to pay him. He once boasted in an interview, “I have talent, so they come to me. The others don’t have talent.”

City information officer Alex Roldan, who administered Pala’s 1984 audition at DXRH, reiterates that the late broadcaster had a sense of mission when he started. But Roldan says, “He was a victim of a rotten system.”

“There was no journalism (in Pala’s case),” he adds, “just manipulation.”

Worse, Pala even became an inspiration for the *warik-warik*, or the pseudo-journalists who buy airtime and embark on the AC/DC/IC journalism patterned after Pala’s. “He was their model,” says Roldan. But he says the *warik-warik* will fail because they don’t have the stature Pala had. Still, to this day, many Davaoños think the media need to be paid before they report anything. “Sakit (That hurts),” says Solis.

But Canete and Solis say the post-Pala period is a “positive” period in the history of broadcast journalism in Davao City. Says Canete: “We can now put broadcast journalism on the right track. At least now, issues are being discussed. The discussion of issues may not be as deep as we would want it to be, but at least there is discussion now.”

Today media corruption is discussed and even exposed, while those in the broadcast industry have become more conscious of the need for professionalism. As a station manager, Solis has made it a point to implement reforms, including making correspondents from the neighboring towns regular employees and providing his staff social security and health benefits, which he himself did not enjoy before. He has also stopped the practice of beat reporting, which he says is a temptation to corruption. “Reporters,” he says, “now don’t know where they will be assigned for the day.”

Solis knows it will take some time before reforms in the broadcast industry are fully implemented. But he argues, “At least I am doing something so that the next generation will not ask, ‘What did you do during your time?’”

*Pala was an unlikely hero of press freedom, but his death mobilized the Davao media whose members marched in his funeral to protest the killings of journalists.*



GENE BOYD LUMAWAG/MINDANEAWS