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Man with a vision for the Philippines

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RICHARD Gordon hit the headlines last July when he barricaded himself inside the Subic Bay industrial enclave after being removed as chairman of the Subic Bay Metropolitan Authority (SBMA) by Philippine President Joseph Estrada.

Insisting that he had a six-year term ending 2004 granted by the previous Fidel Ramos administration, Gordon defied a government decision to give up his post to former congressman Felicito Payumo, an Estrada ally.

Barbed wire ringed the Subic Bay administration office, the surrounding streets were blocked off with garbage trucks, while hundreds of his supporters milled outside the building.

Estrada sent 500 policemen to storm the administrative office to evict Gordon which led to bloody clashes with 22 policemen and about 200 civilians hurt. Gordon later relented and ended the protest and left the decision to the courts.

In September the Supreme Court upheld Estrada's decision to remove Gordon and the latter handed over Subic Bay's administration to Payumo.

If anyone had thought that the episode marked the end of Gordon's meteoric rise as a politician and administrator they were sadly mistaken.

"It is a minor setback. I am getting ready for bigger things. The Filipino people know how I managed to transform Subic Bay into its present stature. They know my capability and have confidence that I can successfully finish whatever I begin.

"I envisioned the success of Subic Bay many years ago. I intend to continue to play a major role for the area. I am not going to sit down and do nothing since it is my dream and vision for this place that has made it an economic success.

"I also have a vision for the whole country and when the time comes I will be in the forefront to see it come through," he said during an interview at his home in Subic Bay.

Asked on his decision to resist his removal as SBMA chairman he said the situation warranted it as he had a valid appointment and it was unfair to end it prematurely just because "Estrada and I do not see eye to eye".

"It was unfair for the President to send in the troops. But it showed that I would not back down under any pressure. I always stand up for my rights and principles," said Gordon who was elected the mayor of Olongapo at the age of 34 in 1980.

The Subic Bay base was one of America's biggest foreign facilities before its military withdrew from the Philippines in 1992. Gordon then announced that Subic Bay would be the springboard for growth not only for the province but the nation as well.

He fought hard to gain it freeport status and went on to map out a strategy to bring in foreign investment.

"As a first step I recruited 3,000 volunteers from Olongapo and set out to sell Subic Bay as an investment haven. I had all these shell buildings and facilities left behind by the US Navy.

"Today they have become hotels, offices and factories. We have an expanded airport, port, two industrial parks and a long line of international investors," he said.

He said the presence of Federal Express of the US, Taiwanese computer maker Acer, Malaysia's Metroplex Bhd which is in the hotel business and

investments from many other international firms is proof that Subic Bay has transformed into an industrial and tourism centre of repute.

The SBMA has also tapped two foreign firms to help transform the Subic freeport into a "cyber city" over the next five years. The deal involved Siemens-Nixdorf of Germany and Microcircuit Corp of the US.

With such infrastructure in place and with proper administration Subic Bay has a very bright future.

He said he was a happy-go-lucky youth until his father's assassination in 1967 which turned his life around. He had to abandon plans to study in the United States and instead took up law at the University of the Philippines.

He then returned to Olongapo and ran for mayor, a post he won and held for about a decade until he gave it up in favour of the SBMA. His wife Kate is currently the mayor of Olongapo.

He plays his cards close to his chest refusing to reveal what his immediate political plans are although his close aides believe he will go for a Senate position before vying for the vice presidency or even the presidency when Estrada's term ends in June 2004.

He said currently he was concentrating on the business arena but would soon take a major political step.

"I have many good people in my administration who feel I have a bigger role to play not just in Subic Bay but for the country as a whole. They are willing to become part of my political scenario.

"I am not going to say which political position I am aiming for but I can assure my supporters that I want to institute changes which will benefit the nation.

"I am not going to lay quietly by when the country has not achieved its full potential. In the meantime I will continue to monitor the present leadership to ensure it does not squander away what has been achieved all these decades," he said.

He lambasted the Estrada administration for being Manila-centric thus not allowing local governments much say in the running of their areas, preferring instead to parachute Manila-based bureaucrats and politicians to fill provincial positions.

He said the Philippines needs to make a quantum leap in educating its people so that a "quality population" could be created which would encourage more investments and help the people improve their livelihood.

"With economic clout we can be influential in the region. We need integrity and strong personalities with a good platform and good leadership qualities to succeed," he said.

Speaking of strong leadership, he said, he admires Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as an influential leader who takes up issues affecting Malaysia and the region.

"I have had several meetings with Dr Mahathir. I plan to visit Malaysia before April and hope I will have the opportunity to have fruitful discussions with him," he said.

Gordon is also full of praise for Malaysian investors, since several major Malaysian corporations have made multi-million ringgit investments in Subic Bay.

"The Malaysian investors are very straightforward and ready to put their money when they find a project is viable. I want to see relations between the two countries improve further.

"Better people to people contact will ensure there is a healthy respect between the population of the two countries," he added.

He said the people have been able to bounce back from many setbacks including the withdrawal of the US military and the eruption of Mount Pinatubo which made 250,000 people homeless and killed over 800.

"Not only did we bounce back, we managed to achieve our success without compromising our principles of protecting nature, keeping the ocean clean and ensuring systematic development.

"It shows that we are a resilient lot, so it will be premature to count us out ... we are not merely ambitious but hardworking as well and we can but succeed in our endeavours," he said.

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