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Fall of those who pass judgment on others

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IT was in January when I had the distinguished pleasure of interviewing newly installed President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo in Manila as I covered the events which led to former President Joseph Estrada being ousted from power.

I also had the opportunity to shake hands with Estrada and listen to his fiery speech to his supporters where he lambasted the "people power" movement and claimed that Arroyo and her supporters were in collusion with the army and police had usurped power.

Estrada's staunch supporters stood on chairs, railings and even climbed up pillars of the building to chant "Erap... Erap... Erap" and there was no denying that they loved their leader very much and were willing to go to any extent to ensure he remained in power.

Last week, however, many of his supporters were fighting a different battle where they staged demonstrations and blockades in Manila in their unsuccessful bid to keep their beloved leader out of jail.

Estrada together with former US Vice-President Al Gore and former Indonesian leader B.J. Habibie were among the strongest critics of the Malaysian Government and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad over the "handling" of former deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim's dismissal from the Government and the subsequent sodomy and corruption trials.

While Gore and Habibie are said to be busy sending out their curriculum vitae as they seek gainful employment, Estrada on the other hand was watched by millions on television as he was driven to the police headquarters to be photographed and fingerprinted like a common criminal.

Speaking to television networks by telephone from his jail cell, he said the charges were fabricated and the evidence against him was weak.

"As far as I am concerned, I'm still the duly elected President under our Constitution. I was not given a chance to be heard. Right now I'm being oppressed without due process of law," he said.

This is not very different from the tune that Anwar sang when charges were brought against him.

The question now is whether countries in the region should send foreign observers to ascertain whether Estrada will get a fair trial.

One can hardly forget that a team led by no less than three Filipino Congressmen were at the Anwar trial to "monitor" it and their regular comments (not the proceedings of the trial) were the highlights of media reports in their homeland.

Previously, Estrada had also threatened to boycott the Apec meeting in Kuala Lumpur but later changed his mind and went against protocol to meet with Anwar's wife Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail at his hotel room.

When asked by reporters about the meeting, he had said he was to meet some Filipino overseas workers and "when I went up to change my clothes she was there, and I met her in the room".

He also held several meetings with Wan Azizah, her daughters and aides at Malacanang palace where they discussed Anwar's condition.

Apart from ensuring that Estrada gets a fair trial, it is hoped that the Manila administration takes due steps that the former President's supporters do not resort to anarchy by creating chaos and destruction in the name of "right to assemble".

Thousands of police and marines had to swarm the former movie star's

home in suburban Manila to arrest him to stand trial for economic plunder and police had to fight off hundreds of supporters who hurled rocks, pieces of wood and bottles.

Stern action and tight control is needed when Estrada is brought to the courthouse and steps need to be taken to ensure that opportunists and thugs do not take this as an excuse to indulge in violence which may disrupt the peace that the people have been enjoying since Arroyo assumed power.

While measures are in place to turn the economy around, encourage investments and bring stability to the nation, Estrada's trial should not hamper or stall these pro-active measures initiated for the well-being of the nation.

Sitting in the 3.5 metre by 5.5 metre cell not far away from drug dealers, rebels and thieves, instead of thinking about a title for his memoirs, he should ponder how he had let down millions, especially the poor, who had voted him to power with the hope that they would enjoy better times.

He should realise it is the people "who maketh a leader" and not the other way around and leadership is all about contributing to society and not merely basking in glory as people hero worship you.

Leaders who are committed to improving living standards and work tirelessly for society are bound to have a special place in the hearts of the population despite the countless allegations and innuendoes that are flung at them.

On the other hand those who sit on a pedestal and pass judgment on others, while totally disregarding the filth that had gathered around them, are bound to fall like Humpty Dumpty and all the King's men couldn't put Humpty Dumpty together again.

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