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Alon: Journal for Filipinx American and Diasporic Studies

Title

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Journal

Alon: Journal for Filipinx American and Diasporic Studies, 2(1)

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Publication Date

2022

DOI

10.5070/LN42156448

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FINDING THE RAINBOW, NOT THE POT OF GOLD: A TRANSPINAY'S EXPERIENCE IN THE PHILIPPINE ELECTORAL SYSTEM

Benz D. Benedito

Cliché as it may sound, everyone is still in search for the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, but for a transpinay who is constantly fighting for my rightful spot under the sun, the struggle is not so much the pot of gold, really; it is in finding the rainbow. The Philippines is the oldest democracy in Asia. Every three years, the citizenry gets to exercise their power—with one vote. We get to choose our local leaders. And every six years, we get to choose our national leaders.

To start with, the issue of LGBTQIA+++ is contentious in the Philippines. The SOGIE Equality Bill has lingered in Congress for decades. Issues are discussed with medieval views, and steeped in deep religiosity and bigotry. Such is the background and environment that a transpinay like me lives in—day in, day out. Oh, and not just any transpinay, by the way, but an activist transpinay who also has to contend with rising hate crimes and hostile conditions, living in the heart of a country that Dan Brown, in his book *Inferno* (2013), called “the gates of hell.” Aptly so? You tell me.

ANG LADLAD

I am privileged to have seen and become part of the electoral process from both ends – as a voter, and as a candidate. The country has a party list system that gives marginalized groups a chance for representation. Coming from a family that revolved around politics, and having worked with government officials, it is natural for me to gravitate toward, and hope to bring my advocacy to, this juncture—a fighting shot for me and my kind; thus, Ang Ladlad Partylist.

Ladlad was founded on September 1, 2003, precisely as a future party list group that would support the filing of the Anti-Discrimination Bill in Congress (now filed as the Sogie Equality Bill).

The vision of the Ladlad Partylist is to be an inclusive, sustainable, and responsive national LGBT organization that endeavors to consolidate, empower, strengthen and represent the LGBT community. Our mission is four-fold:

- 1) To protect and promote human rights and access to justice for LGBTs;
- 2) To raise awareness and educate Philippine society about LGBT issues and concerns;
- 3) To address the health issues and concerns of LGBTs, and
- 4) To initiate economic and social support projects for LGBTs

We pursued this mission with our trademark good cheer and sense of purpose because we want to help in shaping a better society. In our wish list in the future, then, is a society free from gender and sexuality-based oppression, prejudice, discrimination and stereotyping. Some people say that our work was directed towards social development—and so be it. We were fighting for equal rights, not special rights. Along with this fight for equal rights is a plank directed towards the development of society's most marginalized—the poor, the old, the physically challenged whose oppression is twice over because they are also lesbian, or gay, or bisexual, or transgender. It's like being in a double bind.

Why did we choose to name our group “Ladlad”? In Filipino, “magladlad” means to unfurl the cape that is used to cover one's body as a shield. It means to come out of the closet, to assert one's human rights as equal to that of the next Filipino. Thus, it means to take one's place in the sun, with dignity intact.

In the end, we did not secure a spot. The elections unfolded with those who triumphed and those who were defeated. The dust has settled and proclamations are done. While every loss is heartbreaking, it also taught me acceptance and humility, and to be grateful for the trust, confidence, support, love, and prayers for Ang Ladlad Partylist. A lifetime will never be enough to show such deep gratitude. Those past three months have been very challenging and also rewarding because of the acceptance and belief in the advocacy and political work of Ang Ladlad. The 100,700 or 0.37% votes (a partylist needs at least 2% for one seat) cast for Ang Ladlad in 2013 were honest and untainted. We worked hard, dreamed relentlessly, hoped for the best, and prayed even harder; but God has revealed that there is another direction for me and the team, and I yielded to His plans. It was still a remarkable and empowering journey.

Unfortunately, we did not manage to secure a seat, and even had to fight for our legitimacy with the Commission on Elections (COMELEC), who called my party immoral and a threat to the youth, while some people say that LGBTQIA+++ was not a legitimate marginalized group. Though we failed to secure seats, and the fight was uphill, it was not all for naught. We won our COMELEC case, even reaching the top tribunal of the land, the Supreme Court handing out a favorable decision, writing us into the annals of jurisprudence, enriching it. We were celebrated as the first LGBTQIA+++ Political Party in Asia. What we lost in terms of representation in Congress, we gained in recognition worldwide. It paved the way for other groups to

organize as well, and for people to seriously consider us as a voting bloc—the Pink Vote. It opened conversations that were then taboo, amplified voices, and hopefully, has made it a little bit easier for those after us to pick up where we left off. It did spurt out and proud LGBTQIA++++ Filipinos running and winning local elective posts, localized LGU Ordinances of Anti-Discrimination based on SOGIE, and continues to do so to date. It isn't too shabby, if you ask me. And the rest is, as they say, well, history.

FINDING THE RAINBOW

All that said, what has a transpinay activist like me to show for this? Was it worth all the aggravation? After all, it was not even the pot of gold we were after. It was the rainbow, first, that we sought. Amidst accusations and blaming, I was not spared the dirt of politics. You have to take it all for what it's worth. So, yes; I will admit that the experience has enriched me. I was enriched beyond finances. It enriched me in insights and takeaways. These realizations have made me an even better and stronger person.

It is difficult to comprehend, but there is no solid LGBT vote, because even our party allies have their own LGBT collective. We may not have a solid Pink Vote now, but surely, there will be, and it will not be long.

With the past 2010 and 2013 elections at the frontline of the political battlefield, I needed to capitalize on my political experience, to go back to base, to my hometown for voter support; and true enough, most of our votes came from friends, family, and allies. It has, in the most trying of times, become my indefatigable source of nourishment and strength, and I am blessed to continue to tap into that reservoir.

The layers of challenges during the elections were overwhelming because you have to explain to an electorate what the rainbow community is, and what my difference is, as a transpinay or transgender person, compared to the more acceptable gay or *bakla*. It still is a challenge, but I see the community continually pushing borders, erasing hard lines, and breaking glass ceilings. Not all is a loss. Everything is a gain.

Solidifying a fractured LGBT community to support a common rainbow party was an illusion, itself, thus making the political race doubly painful and problematic. But, as John Lennon puts it, "You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one." And yes, "I hope someday you will join us, and the world will be as one ("Imagine," 1971)."

In an old political culture like the Philippines that treads on patronage politics and entrenched political dynasties (who have hostages the partylist system as their backdoor entry to remain in power), advocating for LGBTQIA++++ rights while campaigning makes one distant from the electorate or its realities of winning the much-needed votes. There is much to be desired, but there are things that

you have to give away and there are things that need to be said in a campaign. We may not be perfect nor even close to ideal. I am not perfect, nor ideal, but we did give our community a fighting chance. We ignited hope. We fanned the flames. To me, this should be enough for now.

RAINBOWS FOREVER

In the end, we not only found the rainbow, we pointed it out to everyone, and we painted it loudly and boldly across the skies. We cannot ask people to look up and see it, but it is there, right in front of everyone's eyes. But such is the nature of rainbows. It can only come after a hard, soul-drenching rain. And yes, it is ephemeral. It can only last a few moments, and only when the sun strikes at the right angle. But it was there, even in the briefest of moments, and to those who saw, it changed their lives forever. That rainbow need not be in the skies. Because it has and will live on in the hearts and souls of everyone who cared to see for themselves. The future remains bright and hopeful. Someday soon, stronger transpinay and LGBTQIA+++ will remember that rainbow. And maybe, one day after a heavy downpour, when the sun strikes right, it will appear once more, and this time, people will seize the moment and maybe recognize that, more than just the rainbow, there is a pot of gold at the end. But that's another story for another day. As for me and my kind, we will keep together with the hopes we have burning in our hearts, and we will continue fanning the flames. We owe it to ourselves and our humanity. We shall not abandon all hopes, even if—here we are—at the gates of hell. We remain...Rainbows forever!