

No-holds-barred forum

Madrigal steals show at PDI debate

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MANILA, Philippines—Like the Filipino delicacy balut, the first Philippine Daily Inquirer presidential debate was not for the faint-hearted.

Pointed and witty queries ranging from the price of “galunggong” and salted eggs to Charter change and the budget deficit, sharp

brickbats and a lively

audience marked the event at the jampacked University of the Philippines Theater in Diliman, Quezon City Monday.

Senators Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino III, Richard “Dick” Gordon, Ana Consuelo “Jamby” Madrigal and Manny Villar, Councilor JC de los Reyes, environmentalist Nicanor “Nicky” Perlas, ex-Defense Secretary Gilbert “Gibo” Teodoro and evangelist Bro. Eddie Villanueva faced a tough grilling by nine panelists, who also read questions from Inquirer readers, and several members of the audience.

The forum lasted more than two hours and was aired live by dzBB, the AM radio station of GMA 7, which is the Inquirer’s election coverage partner.

Madrigal stole the show by sniping at Villar at every opportunity, blasting him for his extensive advertisements to his group’s boycott of the Senate’s last session day when senators were supposed to vote on the recommendation to censure him for the C-5 controversy.

Madrigal was on a roll when she seemingly flunked the test on how much a kilo of galunggong and salted eggs cost.



Villar, at the receiving end of brickbats from Madrigal and Gordon, lashed back when he emphatically declared he was spending his own [money](#). He suggested that people might be voting for the anonymous backers of his rivals who depended on campaign contributions.

No to Charter change

Villar, who has caught up on survey front-runner Aquino, also offered the day's most defining issue—that he won't call a constitutional convention or constituent assembly to amend the Charter.

“Charter change will not be my priority; I believe it is not that important,” he said in response to the question by foreign business and political analyst Peter Wallace. He said he'll leave it up to the people to decide in a referendum.

De los Reyes, the youngest among the aspirants, said that while he might be open to reviewing the constitutional ban on foreign ownership of land, he was still for a nationalist policy. He also stuck to his stand against the reproductive health bill which he described as “really dangerous.”

Villanueva had to defend his dual role as a religious figure and a politician, but he also earned points for advocating real development for Mindanao.

Perlas, who shrugged off his low survey ratings, declared that one of his first acts as president would be to create a Department of Civil Society Affairs.

A confident Teodoro came out strong on doing away with corruption in the bureaucracy, by reducing temptation and increasing incentives for performance.

No new taxes

Teodoro's cousin Aquino, the consistent survey topnotcher, stood by his position that he would not raise taxes if elected.

This drew a strong rebuke from Gordon who said those promising no tax increases were lying because there simply was no way to address the budget deficit with no additional revenue.

Also on the warpath like Madrigal, Gordon hit the filing of rebellion cases against the Ampatuans for the Nov. 23 massacre of 57 civilians and journalists in Maguindanao, saying the rebellion was meant to weaken the crime of murder.

Deposed President Joseph Estrada paid for his absence by being slammed in absentia.

When debate organizer and Inquirer columnist John Nery announced that he would not make it, the audience laughed and some even applauded.

Gordon drew the absent Estrada in by hitting his pro-poor stance and lamenting the Filipinos'

kind of “political maturity” and values by accepting and forgiving a candidate who had been convicted for plunder.

All about character

Nery laid down the Inquirer debate’s purpose, saying this would show the candidates’ “character or lack of it” and expose his or her “confidence or lack of it.”

The debate was rendered lively also by naughty and witty questions, which made some candidates flinch and others shine.

Teodoro made sure there would be no domestic quarrels by putting his mother-in-law No. 1 on his list. Aquino had to assure that while he was an “indulgent” brother, he would not be under the dictates of his popular and “ostentatious” sister Kris.

Could Madrigal say something good about Villar? His dyed hair looked good.

Madrigal was unflinching in her anti-Villar crusade when a reader dropped in a surprise quiz for her: Do you know how much a kilo of galunggong and red eggs cost? She was way off-mark but got off by saying she’s a vegetarian. (We checked; she is.–Ed)

Madrigal and Gordon apparently enjoyed being the debate’s hecklers, and the crowd applauded when they sniped at Villar, who tried to keep his cool on the far end of the stage. (They were positioned in alphabetical order.)

But Villar had his own share of supporters in the crowd, who applauded when he offered no apologies for his rags-to-riches story and for unabashedly spending his own money on ads.

Crowd favorites

From the applause, the crowd favorites were Aquino, Gordon, Teodoro, Villar and Madrigal.

The candidates were allowed to have 20 supporters in the theater to applaud them.

The candidates fielded questions from nine panelists: Inquirer columnists Raul Pangalangan, Fr. Joaquin Bernas SJ and senior reporter Fe Zamora on law and politics; columnists Rina Jimenez-David and Michael Tan and Inquirer youth section editor Pam Pastor on social issues; and columnist Cielito Habito, Inquirer opinion editor Jorge Aruta and Inquirer business editor Raul Marcelo on economic issues.

In addition, there were questions from the floor by Katribu party-list’s Beverly Longid, dean Roland Tolentino of the UP College of Mass Communications, Peter Perfecto of Philippine Business for Education, UP student Franz de la Fuente, Gil Salazar of Philippine Business for Social Progress, Sylvia Claudio of Watch Out When Women Vote, Makati Business Club’s Alberto Lim, Reuters reporter Manny Mogato and Wallace.

Pangalangan opened the debate by asking Aquino about his statement that he would not recognize a Chief Justice appointed by President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.

The other questions included how to address the restiveness in the military, corruption in the Bureau of Customs, political dynasty, private armies, arming the media, the separation of Church and state, the Asean charter, mining, how to solve the peace and poverty problem in Mindanao, the division of congressional districts, the environment, the elderly, education, urban housing, divorce and sex education, the Internal Revenue Allotment of local governments, the pork barrel, the Arroyo administration's stimulus package, debt payments, even the Sangguniang Kabataan and of course poverty.

Shaping public discourse

Inquirer president Sandy Prieto-Romualdez, in her welcome remarks, said the Inquirer debate was the paper's contribution to the "country's most important election in a generation" and marked the first in a series of activities for the Inquirer's 25th anniversary this year.

She said that despite widespread pessimism, the candidates have at least made themselves available for such debates where the public can learn about their platforms. Noting that the official campaign period begins on Tuesday, she said that "we in the Inquirer hope that this event will help shape public discourse today and the next 90 days and beyond."

Romualdez thanked the Inquirer's co-presenter of the debate—Globe Telecoms represented by Jaime and Fernando Zobel de Ayala—and the UP College of Mass Communications and 14 partner organizations.

Inquirer chair Marixi Prieto, editor in chief Letty Jimenez-Magsanoc, Inquirer founder Eugenia Apostol and publisher Isagani Yambot led the Inquirer family in the event, which was also graced by some diplomats and members of political parties and supporters of candidates.

Madrigal's husband Eric Valade, Villar's three children and Teodoro's wife Rep. Nikki Prieto-Teodoro were among those who came to watch.

Tickets ran out for the debate as around 2,500 people filled the UP Theater.