

For Filipinos, For Japanese: The Significance of Some of President Jose P. Laurel's Decisions to Philippine-Japan Relations

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Abstract - *As a president of the Republic of the Philippines, Jose P. Laurel acted as a true president and primarily thought of what is best for the Philippines. It is a fact that the period of his presidency was different compared to the period of other political leaders but he tried his very best to balance things. He faced the pressures given by the Japanese and thought of the rights of the Filipinos. These things were evident in his acts, speeches, messages, and statements.*

This paper presents some of those decisions made by Laurel that became significant to the Philippine-Japan relations. The decisions of Laurel were powerful during the time of his presidency. This paper covers only the period, 1942-1945. This paper does not cover all those significant acts and decisions done by Laurel. Thus, the researcher chooses only those, which are considered essential to show and justify the significance of the decisions, actions and words of Laurel to Philippine-Japan relations.

The compilation of speeches, messages and statements of Jose P. Laurel that was published by the Lyceum of the Philippines serves as the main reference. To further enhance the work, different books about Jose P. Laurel and other publications helpful to the study is utilized.

The leadership characteristics of Laurel are evident in his decisions. He was always after balancing things and favoring both Japanese and Filipinos. He was a proponent of peace, an economic stabilizer and a defender of human rights.

Keywords – *Laurel, Decisions, Philippines, Japan*

I. INTRODUCTION

It is good to become the president of the Republic of the Philippines. Many Filipinos are dreaming of this position. But being a president of a country is not an easy task. It entails a lot of responsibility. The rise and fall of the country largely depends on the president who is considered as the highest official of the land. Moreover,

in the doctrine of *parens patriae*, the president is considered as the father to all the citizens. A president is an official coming with big responsibility, big expectations, and huge numbers of works to do.

If this is the case for a president, then let us try to think of a president of the country under the occupation of another country during the period of war. Can we imagine how hard it is to move or make a decision during such time? A leader is likely to meet different kinds of dilemmas and everyday may seem to be a headache.

It is in this kind of situation when Jose Paciano Laurel became president. He became the president of the Second Philippine Republic and during this time the country was under the Japanese rule. This is the reason why many people thought that he acted and decided based upon the influences of the Japanese authority and thus, making him a puppet president of the puppet government. But there is no truth to this because his presidency was legitimate and he was a valid president who fought for the rights and welfare of the Filipinos. Isagani Cruz even mentioned "Jose P. Laurel led the Filipino nation, albeit a great personal risk to his life and name, during a time of grave peril to our country" (Jose, 1997).

President Laurel primarily thought of what is best for the Philippines. The period of his presidency was something different but he tried his very best in order to balance things, in facing the pressures given by the Japanese while saving the rights of the Filipinos. His decisions were fair and they were evident in his acts, speeches, messages, and statements.

Laurel wanted to maintain a good Philippines-Japan relation that is why every decision to make is critical. It is hard to please everyone but Laurel had to please both the Filipinos and the Japanese. He was always facing different dilemmas. He may make a decision that will favor Japan but destroy the Filipino nation or maybe a decision that will really favor the Filipinos but will destroy the relationship with Japan that will suddenly become the cause of destruction of the Filipinos.

This paper presents some of those decisions made by Laurel that became significant in the Philippine-Japan relation. In a sense, those acts or decisions were still connected with the kind of relationship we have as of today with Japan. This relation might be different if Laurel was not that careful with his decisions during that period.

The decisions of Laurel were powerful during his presidency. This paper covers only the years 1942-1945. This paper does not cover all those significant acts and decisions done by Laurel. It only covers those which are considered essential to show and justify the significance of the decisions, actions and words of Laurel to Philippine-Japan relations. To accomplish this work, the compilation of speeches, messages and statements of Jose P. Laurel published by the Lyceum of the Philippines serves as the main reference. The support of different publications about Jose P. Laurel further enhanced the study.

President Laurel was a true leader. He lived with his own words. According to him “On many occasions, I have insisted that the times today are perilous and that, therefore, there is a compelling need for the righteous and courageous leadership, a leadership that is at once sincere and God-fearing. For, to my mind, only a true leader can impart vigor and vitality and inspire the highest obedience from the people.” (Laurel 1953, 8) The leadership characteristics of Laurel are evident with his decisions. He was always after balancing things and favoring both Japanese and Filipinos. He was a proponent of peace, an economic stabilizer and a defender of human rights.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This paper aims to assess the impact established by Jose P. Laurel during his presidency on the Philippines-Japan relation by way of evaluating some of his decisions provided in some of his’ speeches, statements and acts. This is also an attempt to correct the misconception that Laurel was a puppet president.

III. METHODS

The compilation of speeches, messages and statements of Jose P. Laurel, which was published by the Lyceum of the Philippines, served as the main reference of this paper. The different publications on Jose P. Laurel were also utilized to further enhance the study. After the archival work, the researcher evaluated the gathered data through the use of the some of the principles of discourse analysis.

IV. RESULTS and DISCUSSION

Proponent of Peace

There was an existing war during the presidency of Jose P. Laurel and peace is something that is absent. The Filipinos were not directly involved in war but war was going on in the country. During its duration, it cannot be avoided that Filipinos were getting involved especially when they were becoming the victims of the chaos. Due to this, resistance groups arose and different guerilla movements came into picture. These things gave additional headache to the president, but what was more painful to his head was the thinking of the solution on how to attain peace and at same time, compromise with the guerillas. Laurel wanted this to happen in order to maintain peace in the country and to assure that the Filipinos will not be involved in war. This was hard for Laurel for if these resistance groups will continue, then there is a possibility that the Japanese may also directly involve the Philippines in war. This post a dilemma for Laurel because people might again think that he was following whatever the Japanese rulers wanted him to do. Laurel wanted a solution that will satisfy both parties. In facing the issue, Laurel acted on the following manner; “President Laurel, with the sanction of the High Command, declared amnesty to all guerillas who would surrender, within a given period, to military or civil authorities, and pledge allegiance to them. An intensive campaign is being launched to invite the misinformed elements to return to the peaceful life in their homes, and collaborate in the reconstruction of the new Philippines” (Labrador 1989, 186).

This act became advantageous for both parties for aside from the fact that the Japanese will feel good, the guerillas might be tired already of playing hide and seek and many civilians are affected including the innocent people. This act of Laurel became appealing to most of the resistance groups but it cannot be avoided that others will stick with their principles and continue their fight in the mountains. To further elaborate his campaign, he delivered this message for all Filipinos still engaged in guerilla activities; “now we should be at peace with our conscience, for we have proven ourselves true to our own selves and to our native soul. But are we at peace? Are we at peace with one another, are we at peace to live and prosper, to work and progress, to love and labor as we ought to?” (Lyceum of the Philippines 1997, 53). This time, he was already appealing to the emotions of the persons involved, and he wanted to emphasize the importance of peace in one’s life and community.

One of the most controversial issues faced by Laurel during his presidency was when the Japanese government pressured him to declare war against United States due to the bombing done by the Americans in Manila. Laurel considered declaring war as unnecessary but it was hard to say no to the Japanese. This became critical for Laurel to the point that joining the guerillas in the mountains or committing suicide became some of his options. It was good that he did not consider these options for after some moment of thinking he was able to arrive at the best thing that to do in order to weigh the situation. To escape the pressure without any heart feelings and to escape war against the United States, Laurel executed Proclamation No. 30 declaring the existence of war. The Japanese did not expect that Laurel might come up with such decision because they thought there were no loopholes with the pressure that they gave Laurel. But the President was smart enough. To further explain the intention of the declaration, he told this in a radio speech; “This declaration of a state of war is an official confirmation or recondition of an existing condition. This war is not of our own making. We did not will it. When the Republic of the Philippines was inaugurated last year, I appealed to all the nations and peoples of the world for amity and goodwill...” (Lyceum of the Philippines 1997, 228). It is wonderful to discover that due to the decisions of Laurel we did not only attain peace but also maintain a good diplomatic relationship with other countries. Laurel was an example of an effective public servant. Aside from being a peaceful man, he promoted peace not only to his people but also to people around his people.

Economic Stabilizer

Another area that is hard to develop in a government under war is the economy. This was included in the struggles of Laurel during his term. We have to note that one of the reasons of Japanese in entering into war was to invade other countries to broaden their economy. This was even the main reason for putting pressures on Laurel in terms of developing the economy of the Philippines. Of course, the Japanese had other intentions in mind. But Laurel has to do his job as a president and must always think of the welfare of the Filipinos. There are some proposals for the enhancement of the economy but Laurel always considered their purpose and the possible results. During these critical moments, he must always be very careful with his decisions. There is one instance wherein he veto one of the proposals and sent this letter to the National Assembly, explaining his veto of Bill No. 268; “If the bill is to be construed as condoning interests on agricultural loans during the period of three years, the

Agricultural and Industrial bank would sustain a loss of about P3,000,000 and the Philippine National Bank would stand to lose around P6,000,000 in the form of uncollectible interests on their standing agricultural loans. Considering that, debtors, due to the prevailing easy money situation on account of the monetary inflation, find it advantageous their obligations at present, it would seem that the expected loss of interest receivable by these banks really overbalances whatever relief the debtors would receive under this measure” (Lyceum of the Philippines 1997, 113). Basically, Laurel wanted these if there were proposals for the promotion of the Philippine economy, it must be beneficially universal and not only for particular class of people. If he would become careless with his decisions then there would be no other expected result but failure of the economy which is equivalent to the failure of the country.

As the highest official of the country, he understands the Philippine situation and he would do things which he thought will be best for his people. He never failed to consider those things that, as much as possible, will maintain the balance. He must impress the Japanese to continue helping his people. By way of accepting the economic situation of the Philippines and asking aid to the Japanese government, he asserted during press conference at Malacañang the following statements; “Our problem in the Philippines is naturally production, the stabilization of our finance, and the revival of home industries. We are naturally under great handicaps, because we have had to take into account the exigencies of the war, including the needs of the Imperial Japanese Army. Our Pact of Alliance with Japan binds the Philippines to collaborate with Japan not only politically but also economically” (Lyceum of the Philippines 1997, 231-232).

Laurel knew the importance of good economy for the survival of the government. Economic development was one of his priorities and he never failed his people.

Defender of Human Rights

The very fact that Laurel did not declare war against the United States was an implication that he is promoting human rights. He definitely knew that if there will be war, the rights of the Filipino people could be violated. It is not only that he was avoiding a sour relation with the United States but also he wanted to protect the rights of his people. One of the things that he considered for not declaring war was to avoid Filipino soldiers to become conscripts. If this will happen, that would not only mean that the Philippines is already included in the war but the rights of the civilians will be put in a dangerous situation.

It was provided in Laurel's proclamation that Filipinos will not join the war if nothing threatens their lives, and for him to be safely understood by the Japanese, he expressed the following statements; "I cannot easily conscript soldiers with the conditions prevailing in the country. The people are of a temper for a revolution. All we need is a national leader to call them to arms. Conscripting may well be the spark to start conflagration. I cannot let my country to fight under the present circumstances." (Viana 2003, 106). In this particular statement of Laurel, it is noticeable that he was not only explaining the idea of proclamation of existence of war but he was doing it in a way that the Japanese will purely understand. His goal is for the Japanese to accept his will without any disappointment.

Throughout his presidency, Laurel always thought of the rights of the people. He also knew that since there was existing war in the Philippines, some forms of violation of human rights were happening in different parts of the country. He did not take them for granted, he reported them to the Japanese empire and the pieces of evidence were provided in the compilation of his selected correspondence. The Japanese government, due to pressures given by Laurel, was also doing their part. As a result, the bond between two countries remained tied. Laurel, in his manifesto to the Filipino people states; "I renew my determination not only to preserve the nation but also to lead the people to a full enjoyment of the rights and privileges to which they are entitled under an independent government." (Lyceum of the Philippines 1997, 92) No wonder in his definition of social justice, he asserted that "social justice means the promotion of the welfare of all the people, the adoption by the government of the measures calculated to insure economic stability of all the components elements of the society." (Jose P. Laurel Memorial Foundation 1962, 151).

Maintaining the Balance

From the beginning, Laurel knew that being a president during war and during Japanese invasion is something extraordinary. He must act and decide as a president but he must think twice in every decision because he has to consider two parties. This responsibility absolutely demands sacrifices but he needs to comply with these in order to serve his people. In one of his essays, Vicente Pastrana praised Laurel; "He believed that country comes not only before us but even before our honor. I know of at least two instances, perhaps three, when Laurel did not mind risking his honor if only to safeguard the paramount national interest -- our survival as a nation. And when the crucial test

came, let it be said that he did not flinch nor budge an inch" (Pastrana, 1991, 64).

Laurel cannot turn his back from these responsibilities. He had to obey the call. By way of accepting them, he had plans for the Filipinos. This was provided by his daughter in one of her books; "Father outlined what his administration hoped to accomplish: maintain peace and order; work for national self-sufficiency; improve the individual welfare of the poor who constitute the bulk of population; economic equilibrium between all classes of society;..." (Avencena and Maramag 1980, 105). Given this, we can also see his characteristics as a proponent of peace, an economic stabilizer and a defender of human rights. These are things he used as weapons in all his struggles without being unfair to anyone including the Japanese.

It is now unfair if we call Laurel a puppet, especially if the one uttering it does not know anything about things that Laurel did during his term as a president. He became loyal to the Filipinos. He seemed to be collaborating with the Japanese but the true purpose behind this relation was in order to compromise for the welfare of the Filipinos. Agpalo in one of the chapters of his book exposed proofs of these. He said in an introduction to a chapter; "It is the thesis of this chapter that Laurel did not commit treason or treasonable collaboration. In the first place, Laurel was a patriot who sacrificed his talents, time, energies, prestige, peace of mind, and selfless service to protect the Filipinos from the oppression, exploitation and brutality of the Japanese occupation when Laurel was the President of the Second Philippine Republic" (Agpalo 1992, 224).

It is a fact that we were under the Japanese occupation during that period. Laurel cannot escape this reality. All he got to do is to protect the Filipino people and he thought that one of the best ways to do this was to please the Japanese so that they will not do any harm to the country. It was hard to do this task but since he is intellectually capacitated, he was able to balance things. He expressed in his message on the Anniversary of the outbreak of the Great East Asia War; "We cannot but marvel and glory in this brilliant exploits of the Imperial Japanese Forces. For, after, the Japanese people are our brothers, not merely our neighbors and our friends. Geographically and historically, Japan and the Philippines have been closely intertwined for countless generations. And during the Philippine Revolution, the Japanese people, convince that we were fighting a life-and-death battle for our freedom and independence, offered to lend us her aid." (Lyceum of the Philippines 1997, 266). These are sweet words coming from Laurel

and this became contributory to a good diplomatic relationship with Japan, and which is also equivalent to saving the Filipino nation.

V. CONCLUSIONS

This paper wanted to assess the impact established by Laurel during his presidency on the Philippines-Japan relation by way of evaluating some of his decisions provided in some of his' speeches, statements and acts. All those quoted in this paper revealed the answers to this problem. Jose P. Laurel personally mentioned most of them. By a thorough evaluation, some of those he uttered were realized but others were not for some reasons or another. People keep on saying that "action speaks louder than words" but I also believe in the philosophy that "from the abundance of the heart, the mouth speaks". While Laurel was having these feelings in his heart, he really wanted to execute all of them. He is always saying that he loves the country and that he has no ambition but to serve Filipinos faithfully and well. In my personal evaluation, I do believe that he cannot be a liar while he was the president. He really became faithful to the Filipinos. This is manifested in his will for Filipinos. Laurel once said; "I am determined to do all that is in my power not only to prepare my people for independence but also to make that independence once attained, stable, lasting and real (del Castillo 1949, 211).

Laurel's speeches, statements, or decisions were not that spontaneous since most of them were prepared beforehand or there could be a possibility that what he was saying was from the influence of his advisers. But as the highest official, he still has the final say in all speeches, statements and decisions.

As of today, we had this good diplomatic relation with Japan. Whether we accept it or not, Laurel had done

great contributions to make this happen. If he did not become smart during his presidency, that kind of relation might be different. Moreover, if he was not careful with his decisions, the Philippines may not be what it is today. Laurel's qualities of being a proponent of peace, an economic stabilizer and a defender of human rights were very much influential with his decisions and these decisions became beneficial for the safety of the Filipino nation.

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