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A Political Education in the Philippines

A priest turned policy maker finds that owners of diploma mills have powerful friends

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Manila

No one was more surprised than the Rev. Rolando V. de la Rosa when he was plucked out of relative obscurity a year and a half ago and appointed by the president of the Philippines to be chairman of the country's Commission on Higher Education.

As a priest and a philosophy professor, he had little political experience. He had once known the president's father — political jobs in the Philippines have been handed out on less — but his appointment was still a puzzle, not the least to Father de la Rosa himself. Lecturing on church teachings and holding Sunday mass were hardly qualifications for a cabinet-level position.

Nevertheless, Father de la Rosa embraced his new calling. He believed the Philippines' higher-education system, once considered the best in Asia, was in perilous decline. With so many businesses starting up for-profit training institutes, education was no longer a public service. It was now for sale.

The soft-spoken priest did not have a reputation for being a radical, but in his new position, he would have an opportunity to shake things up. So Father de la Rosa took off his robes, put on a *barong*, the white embroidered Filipino formal shirt, and left the halls of academe to head for the corridors of power.

What happened to him there serves as a cautionary tale for anyone who tries to enforce educational quality in a political environment mired in favoritism.

Though he had once served as his university's rector, Father de la Rosa still regarded himself as a political virgin. (Perhaps it is the reason he got the job, he jests.) Unlike most politicians in the Philippines, he had no allegiances and owed favors to no one. Having taken a vow of poverty and chastity, he was not easily led into temptation. Father de la Rosa did not even pocket a government salary. He returned each night to his simple room in the seminary at the University of Santo Tomás and ate communal meals with the brothers in his order.

But once on the commission, which is charged with regulating the country's universities and colleges, Father de la Rosa wasted little time. Even during his swearing-in ceremony in October 2004, he spoke of the need to tighten supervision of the poor-quality educational programs that were mushrooming across the country.

Within weeks of his becoming chairman, the commission began to clamp down on the so-called diploma mills that had sprung up in recent years here. Flimsy programs were told to raise their standards or be shut down. Permits of those that had been warned were revoked. Owners were outraged. Members of the Philippine Congress with angry constituents and their own vested interests told him to back off.

But not until a warrant was issued for Father de la Rosa's arrest did he finally give up the fight.

It turned out that the reform-minded priest was more vulnerable than he might have thought. Shortly after he testified to Congress in April 2005 about shoddy courses, the owners of a chain of computer-training institutes filed a complaint of malicious libel against him. Several days later, an accommodating judge issued a warrant.

"I was treated like a criminal," says Father de la Rosa, in a rare moment of bitterness. "I was fingerprinted, and my mug shot was taken. And all this because as commission chairman I had presented data to Congress. It was on this basis one of the owners accused me of libel."

Nearly one year later, while having dinner at his seminary here, Father de la Rosa retells the story with an occasionally incredulous smile. Mostly he is heartsick. Nearly every nursing course that he had tried to close down remains in operation. And many of the hundreds of accounting, teaching, and engineering programs that have failed to turn out a single graduate who could pass those professions' licensing examinations have stayed open. Students, unaware of the abysmal pass rate of program graduates, keep forking over their money for tuition.

What happened to Father de la Rosa offers a lesson to others here, not just about how powerful the players are but about how far they will go to protect their interests. Academics and some reform-minded politicians fear the nation's entire higher-education system risks losing what's left of its credibility because the government is allowing, even encouraging, dubious degree programs to flourish.

Fed to the Lions

Disheartened and unable to afford a lawyer to defend himself — the company filed the complaint against him as an individual and not as the commission chairman, so the government would not cover his expenses — Father de la Rosa resigned as chairman of the Commission on Higher Education on April 30, 2005.

There was no public mention of his run-in with the law. The official statement from the Philippine president, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, said only that he was being recalled to his priestly duties. In one of Father de la Rosa's rare public comments on the issue, he said that he would rather work for God than for the government.

"Reverend de la Rosa was fed to the politicians," says Ester A. Garcia, acting president of the University of the East and a former chairwoman of the higher-education commission. "This was his baptism by fire. He had no idea how politically explosive [shutting programs] would be."

It is a question of political will, says Mario Joyo Aguja, a member of the Philippine Congress and vice chairman of the committee on higher and technical education. Many of these institutions are owned by politicians or by the friends of politicians.

"They can't be closed down because of political interference," says Mr. Aguja. "It's a reflection of how the government sees higher education on the whole. The proliferation of diploma mills is a shame for a nation that values education so much."

For years the Philippines produced graduates whose skills were in demand around the world. In some fields, like nursing, a degree from the Philippines has been equivalent to one earned in the United States. It was not just a ticket up, it was a ticket out — of poverty, and of the country.

As the demand for degrees has grown, so has the number of private colleges and universities. Just about anyone with an empty building and a couple of teachers can get into the education business, where quick profits are being made. Even some maritime colleges now teach nursing.

The number of public institutions has also grown. Eager to spread business contracts around and make constituents happy by creating places in colleges for their children, local politicians have been rapidly building educational institutions with public money. Between 1999 and 2004, the number of state colleges and universities increased from 219 to 360. Many educators have expressed concern that there is simply not enough expertise in the country to support such a rapid expansion.

Almost every year, the percentages of students passing their professional-licensing examinations in such subjects as medicine, dentistry, and teaching — an imperfect yardstick, but the only one available — get smaller.

In 2004 the commission published a detailed 446-page report that included the pass-fail rates of every university program whose students took the tests. Nearly 325 degree programs had a pass rate of less than 5 percent for four years running. And 78 did not have a single student who passed. (The report is not available to the public, and copies are difficult to get.)

"Why should we give a permit to a school that has no hope of passing students — that have no hope of practicing their profession?" asks Father de la Rosa. "One congressman said, 'Never mind, they can still be domestic workers.' It made my hair on my skin stand up."

Political Appeal

Even before Father de la Rosa took over the chairmanship in 2004, the commission had tried to get tough on nursing colleges. It was alarmed that the number of new programs had doubled, even tripled, for several years running. Meanwhile, passing rates on the national nursing exams had plummeted from 80 percent to below 50 percent within a decade.

Members of the commission's technical committee cautioned the programs' owners — many of them private businessmen and politicians — that they needed to meet minimum standards to stay open. They needed qualified professors; they needed a training hospital, not just computer modules. Most heeded the warnings and made the necessary changes, but some did not.

When Father de la Rosa came on board, he felt the programs had been given enough warning. On November 4, 2004, the commission revoked the permits of 23 recently opened nursing programs. The names were even announced in the newspapers.

The owners of Systems Technology Institute and AMA Education System, computer-training companies that had recently gone into nursing, were outraged.

They were also well connected. Amable M. Aguiluz, the father of AMA's founder, was a longtime friend and confidant of the Philippine president's father. (AMA would later file a libel complaint against Father de la Rosa.)

So when the companies were told to close their nursing programs, they went straight to Malacanang, the presidential palace. It came as no surprise when the higher-education commission's ruling was overturned. The nursing programs were allowed to stay open.

The decision sickened many who hoped the commission would be able to close some of the shoddy diploma courses. It was also a personal blow to Father de la Rosa.

"We announce a decision, and then an order comes from Malacanang overturning it," he says. This betrayal, even more than being treated like a criminal, was what wounded him most.

Mona Dumlao Valisno, a presidential adviser and an education undersecretary, insists that President Arroyo has never interfered in the commission's work. Nor has the president let her family affiliations influence government policies, Mrs. Valisno says.

(Throughout her presidency, Mrs. Arroyo, as well as her husband and son, have been dogged by allegations of corruption, though none of the charges have been proved in court.)

Mrs. Valisno stresses that the president, who attended Georgetown University and has been a university lecturer, is a major supporter of education. If diploma mills have remained open, the adviser says, it is only because the commission is not doing its job.

"Politicians do interfere," says Mrs. Valisno, who served for many years on the Commission on Higher Education. "But [the commission] has been mandated to close schools based on performance. ... They have enough power."

It does remain a puzzle as to how the palace ended up overturning a commission ruling, says Mrs. Valisno.

"Was the president privy to all this?" she asks. "I don't think so."

Others following the spat between the school owners and the commission, which played out in part in the local newspapers, were not puzzled at all.

If the palace "had cared, they shouldn't have interfered," says Mr. Aguja, the congressman. "They should have supported him. It was a slap on the face of de la Rosa." (Mrs. Valisno insists that the president did support the commission and Father de la Rosa, and she expressed surprise, when questioned about it, that that was not obvious.)

An Unrepentant Adversary

AMA's corporate leaders find nothing untoward about their decision to go to the palace. It was the obvious course of action, says Basilio C. Almazan Jr., chief legal counsel to AMA.

The commission is prejudiced against the new education companies, complains Mr. Almazan. He says most of the people on the review committee are from traditional nursing colleges, which are loathe to allow new players into the game. The commission made unreasonable demands on them, he says, so AMA felt it had no choice but to seek recourse.

AMA is unrepentant about filing the complaint against Father de la Rosa after he testified before Congress. Indeed, Mr. Almazan takes credit, almost proudly, for recommending the action.

"During the hearings ... they announced that certain schools of AMA did not have permits," he says. "That was a lie. We had to do damage control."

Panicked students were telephoning the company's offices asking if it was true, he says. The assertion that any AMA branches were operating without permits could destroy their reputation and their business. This was a clear case of defamation, says Mr. Almazan.

Technically Father de la Rosa was wrong when he said 23 nursing programs were operating without licenses. All had provisional permits, which they had regained after the appeal to the palace. The higher-education commission, however, had not approved them.

Was it was a risk to file a libel complaint against a respected educator and priest? Yes, says Mr. Almazan, but one worth taking: "We just wanted to prove a point."

And they did.

Point Taken

Because of the fear of arrests, it is unlikely the commission will take on any big names again soon. Commission officials are afraid of lawsuits, says Father de la Rosa, because they must pay for their own defense.

The new chairman, Carlito S. Puno, did not respond to requests to be interviewed.

The commission's authority has been so weakened that its orders are now largely ignored. The former chairman says that when the commission tried to shut down a degree program in which the students had a zero-percent passing rate on their national exams for several years running, the university turned around and sued the commission, saying it had no authority in the matter.

Father de la Rosa has resumed teaching, returning to the campus that he calls an oasis in the middle of the teeming city. On Sundays he holds mass and hears confessions. He does not miss that other life.

His experiences have shaken his faith in government and the future of education in the Philippines. But it was not his run-in with the law that undid him: When the politicians went after him like a pack of dogs, and the palace stood by and watched, that was when he lost hope.

"If you don't have the support of the politicians, you can't change anything," laments Father de la Rosa. "If they really wanted to improve a university, they would sit people down and say, Get your act together."

But for that for that to happen, many believe, it would truly take a miracle.

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