

Salas: The best president the PH never had

Written by JIMMY D. BLAS

Thursday, 02 October 2014 10:42



The late Rafael M. Salas won respect worldwide when he singlehandedly built the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) that is now the template for multilateral development organizations. Salas told associates that he accepted the U.N. post because of his disenchantment with the Marcos Government, The New York Times said.

Turned PH into rice-sufficient nation

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In the Sept. 10, 2014 edition of the *Manila Standard Today*, Tony Lopez singled out Dr. Cesar Aguinaldo Virata for his outstanding contribution to nation building as secretary of finance and subsequently as prime minister during the reign of President Ferdinand Marcos.

Lopez went on to describe Dr. Virata as the best technocrat the Philippines ever had.

With all due respect, I have serious reservations regarding the description of Dr. Virata as the best technocrat in the country.

From my perspective, so far no one has surpassed the domestic and global accomplishments of Rafael M. Salas.

He easily and aptly qualifies him as the Philippines' best technocrat and public servant.

Salas, as the *primus inter pares* in the Marcos cabinet, had the courage to defy the latter at the apogee of his stewardship of the country.

Salas abruptly resigned his position as executive secretary in the summer of 1968.

He came to New York to accept the standing offer of the administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) as the first executive director of the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA).

Salas enjoyed renown and respect worldwide when he singlehandedly built the UNFPA, an institution that is now the template for multilateral development organizations.

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In his stint as Marcos' executive secretary, Salas held the concurrent position as administrator of the Rice Program with the mandate to formulate and implement policies to solve the chronic shortage of rice in the country.

He mobilized the efforts and contributions from the public and private sectors.

Not only did Salas achieve his goal of producing rice to meet the domestic demand but also surpassed it enabling the country to export rice for the first and only time.

The brother of the former First Lady Imelda R. Marcos, the late Ambassador Kokoy Romualdez was instructed by the Marcoses to follow Salas in New York less than a week of his resignation.

They had breakfast at the Oscar's in the iconic Waldorf-Astoria hotel.

Romualdez conveyed the unqualified offer of the Marcoses for Salas to return to the Philippines.

Salas would be appointed to any position he desired upon his return to the country.

Salas thanked the kind offer but immediately and absolutely refused to rejoin the Marcos administration.

The Marcoses were not to be thwarted.

During the frequent visits to New York of prominent Philippine Government officials, including the former First Lady Imelda Marcos, the relatives and friends of Salas repeated the offer to rejoin the government but to no avail.

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Marcos did not take the rejection by Salas lightly.

He had his revenge when Salas sought the endorsement of the Philippine Government in his quest as the secretary-general of the United Nations.

The choice for the premier post at the U.N. was narrowed down between Salas from the Asian Group and Javier Perez De Cuellar of Peru representing the Latin American and Caribbean Group.

Many U.N. member states, including some influential permanent members of the Security Council, were inclined to support Salas provided he could get the endorsement from his government.

Unfortunately, selfishness and revenge won the argument.

Marcos declined to provide the pivotal endorsement Salas sought.

President Cory Aquino tried but failed to recruit Salas to be a key member of her cabinet when the former assumed the presidency of the Philippines in 1986.

Salas succumbed to heart attack in March 1987 in Washington, D.C.

To many of our compatriots, Salas was the best president the Philippines never had.

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(Editor's note: The author worked as a technical assistant with Rafael M. Salas. He lives in Westbury, N.Y.)

