

# Learning Ethics From a Man of Ethics

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Review of Salonga, Jovito R. *Ethics in Politics: Three Lectures*.  
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## I

"Ethics in politics" seems to be a contradiction in terms. And indeed, because of that seeming contradiction, very little work has been done on the topic.

Jovito R. Salonga's book of three lectures on the subject given at the College of Public Administration, University of the Philippines in late 1992 is one of the very few materials on ethics in politics. Lectures on the topic from run-of-the mill politicians may sound as mere political rhetoric or sheer hypocrisy, but from Salonga, they sound and read credibly.

Because Salonga is not just a public official. He belongs to that minority group of real statesmen who are respected for their nationalism, their courageous stand on issues, and steadfastness in their causes. To that honorable group belong the likes of the late Senators Jose W. Diokno, Lorenzo M. Tañada, and Claro M. Recto. Diokno, Salonga and Tañada who were contemporaries in the Senate, stood together in many causes, even at the height of controversy or unpopularity of those causes they espoused.

These three lectures provide theoretical discussions of issues affecting political ethics and weave them with examples from the field of actual politics.

## II

The book presents the lectures in logical sequence: "Ethics in Politics," where he defines the field and scope of inquiry; "Ethical Standards for Public Officials," where he delves on the legal and moral dimensions of ethics in politics; and "The Historic Senate Decision of September 16, 1991 on the RP-US Bases Treaty," where clear examples of ethical dilemmas are presented. The second essay is beefed up by an addendum on "The Ombudsman and the President: a Question of Ethics, a Matter of Honor," which discusses a specific case of conflict between what is legal and what is ethical or, in his words, what is honorable.

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Defining ethics as "a discipline dealing with right and wrong," Salonga amplifies:

Common sense tells us that the things that are right are the things that help people and society at large, such things as honesty, fairness, decency and accountability. To be sure, ethics has a practical dimension. It is based on what one might call reciprocity, something like the Golden Rule (p. 4).

An ethical politician, in Salonga's terms, remains loyal to his political party as well as to his own convictions. He criticizes famous Philippine Presidents who got into office by changing political parties. He holds the media ethically answerable in the sense that it sometimes presents distorted or untrue news. He expresses disbelief in the campaign expenses declared by the 1992 Presidential candidates in compliance with rules of the Commission on Elections, which showed unbelievably low expenses incurred by the richer candidates.

In the second lecture, Salonga underlines that "ethical standards impose a measure that goes beyond the standards imposed by law." To illustrate, he adds:

This is another way of saying that what is legal may not be moral, that what may not violate the law may nevertheless violate standards of honesty, fairness, propriety, decency, accountability, and compassion (p. 24).

Using as his example the Ombudsman's daughter holding a high position in the Office of the President, he explains: "Since it is wrong for a daughter of the President to work in the Office of the Ombudsman, it should be equally wrong for a daughter of the Ombudsman to hold a key position in the Office of the President" (p. 24).

Salonga also opposes what was then being talked about as a possible state funeral for the late President Marcos:

I am in favor of national reconciliation and unity. I am against the distortion of truth, the perversion of justice, and the repudiation of our long, continuing struggle for freedom and human dignity....Giving a state funeral for the late dictator, including military honors and a Palace wake, while 80 to 90 criminal and civil cases are pending against the Marcoses...would strip the Ramos Government of any moral authority to prosecute these cases to their conclusion (pp. 32-33).

More ethical dilemmas are discussed by Senator Salonga in his exposition on how the Philippine Senate defeated the move to continue the military presence of the United States in the Philippines on September 16, 1991. Salonga narrates how pressures from the Philippine and United States governments were exerted on him as Senate President and the 11 Senators who were against the treaty. On the side of the U.S., high-ranking emissaries were sent to his house and his office to influence his vote and those of the other senators.

The Philippine pressure was dramatized in the march to the Senate by a group led by no less than then President Corazon Aquino, House of Representatives Speaker Ramon Mitra, Secretary of Foreign Affairs Raul Manglapus, and Ambassador to the U.S.A. Emmanuel Pelaez. Ambassador Pelaez presented the 12 Senators voting against the bases treaty with the "technical yes formula" — get the treaty ratified, so it can be brought to the people by referendum. The pressure on Salonga was to abstain from voting as Presiding Officer. What was needed, Salonga quoted the words of one anti-bases Senator, "were five Judases."

From the original 14 who were shown in a survey as against the treaty, 12 ended up voting it down. Salonga cast his negative vote, knowing it would mean losing his bid later for the Presidency. (He was unseated as Senate President after that historic vote.)

### III

Salonga's lectures on political ethics are insightful because they come from his own experience as a politician who has observed the world of Philippine politics which was his milieu for decades, and has himself experienced the pressures in politics to compromise, to be "politically pragmatic." The examples he gave are those any keen observer of Philippine politics can relate to, knowing about political turncoats and expensive elections and the expediency of such practices among poverty-stricken, tradition-bound Filipinos. But beyond the obvious examples are the theoretical issues and moral lessons which Salonga teaches.

What impresses the listeners of the lectures and the readers of the book are Salonga's lessons in political ethics: the morality behind the legality of issues and situations; the uncompromising nature of principled convictions; the courage that should accompany each uphill struggle in public morality.

The listeners/readers are left with the enthusiasm and optimism of Salonga, which is at the end of each piece:

... Because of the powerful examples of a few leaders...countless people wake up to the realities of right and wrong, apathy ends, communities begin to change, reforms begin, until a new set of public officials emerge who conduct themselves in line with higher ethical standards (p. 20).

Salonga also stresses in each lecture the difficult formula for political ethics: "We cannot have a higher standard of ethics in public service unless we have it in the source—in ourselves as a people" (p. 46). If Jovito R. Salonga is able to remain optimistic, it is because he has proven, in his life and leadership, that it is possible to be a politician and remain ethical at the same time.

Students and practitioners of politics and administration will find Salonga's volume of lectures practical without sacrificing its academic value, and inspiring because he has shown that there is indeed ethics in politics; he has done it, so it can be done.