

In Search of Filipino Unity

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The Philippine Independence Day Council, Inc. (PIDC) is undergoing a critical period.

The scheduled election of officers was nearly halted due to internal maneuverings by competing groups within PIDC. Initially, the competition for official posts was rather lively. This would have been an opportunity for the candidates to bring out to the public important social issues affecting the Filipino community. The campaign would have revealed which of the candidates had clear programs of action that go farther than simply preparing for the Philippine Independence Day parade next year.

As the PIDC election drew closer, however, political double-talk, personal attacks and a fair amount of muckraking began to surface. Emails popped out of nowhere, sowing intrigue in its vilest and most malignant forms among PIDC candidates. And before one could even ask how things got this bad, the matter had been brought to court.

The cracks within the PIDC have widened. Even as the court eventually allowed the scheduled election to proceed, the air within the organization reeks of disunity and personal conflict. Where do we go from here?

This situation brings to mind a similar incident that happened more than 20 years ago in New Jersey. An election for community leadership posts in the United Filipino American Association was likewise strongly contended. The protagonists were Santiago Muzones, Jr. and George Barber. Some 3,000 people voted in the election which, under the circumstances, was an overwhelming turnout that was potentially volatile.

Eventually, the protagonists saw the bigger picture. They realized that titles like "president," "chair," "vice president," "vice chair," etc. do not necessarily make them leaders. They eventually discovered that to lead, one does not need such titles appended to their names because titles do not a leader make. And in an unprecedented act of leadership and mindful of the importance of unifying the Filipino community, they yielded to the mandate of the constituency.

I think true leaders see the bigger picture as well as its details. Here, the bigger picture is that the Filipino community needs political empowerment, and such empowerment can only happen when the community is united. Persistent challenges to community elections are highly divisive and counterproductive. A fragmented Filipino community will be unable to pursue changes that could benefit every individual Filipino American and Filipino migrant. Ultimately, we all lose.

I regret to note that the leadership of the PIDC continues to be hotly contested. It is ironic that this lies at the core of our failure to heed one of the declared purposes of PIDC, which is, "to foster and strengthen mutual cooperation, unity and collaboration among all Filipino American organizations."

There is a reason why the founders of PIDC vowed to dedicate the organization to this purpose. The long-term objective is to obtain political empowerment so that the Filipino community may have a clearer voice in American society. We cannot just let things happen to us. We must be direct and active participants in shaping our future in America. How can we achieve this if we could not even get through a single election without petty squabbles?

In finding the answer to this impasse in PIDC, we simply have to remember two things—first, we must keep the Filipino community intact at all costs, and second, there will be another

opportunity to lead the PIDC in next year's election. It is time we put personal differences behind us and focus on strengthening PIDC and the Filipino community.