

Office of Sen. Manny Villar

Rm. 503, Senate of the Philippines, GSIS Financial Center, Pasay City
☎552-6601 to 80 loc. 6507, 6508 and 6511 • 📠 552-6734 • www.senatorvillar.com

NEWS RELEASE

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Villar: Biggest election loss was my name – rappler.com

MANILA, Philippines – “If you can’t even raise one billion pesos, why even run?”

These were the famous words of then presidential candidate Sen. Manuel “Manny” Villar Jr. during the 2010 campaign. After all, the real estate magnate was one of the biggest election spenders, with his catchy jingles and slick ads dominating the airwaves.

Nearly 2 years after his defeat, Villar said his biggest loss was not the billions he spent. For the candidate who almost clinched the presidency, the cost of the campaign was priceless.

“Ang pinakamalaking loss sa akin ang name.” (My biggest loss was my name).

Villar made the admission in an exclusive interview with Rappler CEO and Executive Editor Maria Ressa on Thursday, March 15. After shunning the media, the exclusive interview was the first time he opened up about the presidential race, the Aquino administration, and life after the polls.

The former standard bearer of the Nacionalista Party explained that the most painful part of the elections was the mudslinging.

“Definitely up to now, masama ang loob ko talaga kasi hindi naman totoo talaga iyon eh. (I really felt bad because it was not true.) Some people are saying I’m corrupt. How can I possibly be corrupt?”

He added, “I was telling people where I got my money. I was building homes and I did a couple of IPOs (initial public offerings) where I raised my money. That’s where I got my wealth It’s all business and not from my salary.”

‘Media really biased’

Villar’s campaign suffered from allegations of corruption, his supposed ties to then President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, and reportedly false claims in his rags-to-riches story.

The senator said he was able to respond to all these but his explanations fell on deaf ears.

“Importante ang media. Kailangang walang bias ang media but I have to say this: biased talaga ang media noon.” (The media is important. It’s important for the media to be impartial but I have to say that the media then was really biased.)

Villar dismissed questions about his humble upbringing. He said he worked his way to become the country's so-called brown taipan.

"I was born in Tondo. Nagtinda ang nanay ko ng isda sa palengke. Bakit naman ako magtitinda ng isda sa palengke sa Tondo [kung] mayaman pala ako? And yet nilagay ng media, pinalabas na hindi daw ako mahirap." (My mother sold fish in the market. Why would I sell fish in Tondo if I were rich? And yet, the media made it to appear as if I were not poor.)

During the elections, Villar was rumored to be the secret candidate of the Arroyos. He strongly takes exception to the "Villaroyo" tag. He said that President Arroyo was even instrumental in removing him as Senate President.

Asked if he would have sent Arroyo to jail had he become president, he replied, "It might have been earlier. Ang tagal nga eh Two years na." (It took time. It's been 2 years.)

'Same families, same cycle'

Still, even before the campaign turned ugly, Villar already knew it was over.

"I started out as number 7 then I became number 1. And then President Cory [Aquino] died, I was back to zero then the elections was almost over at that time. But anyway, I said I might as well run because it's already there. If I lose, I lose," he said in a mix of English and Filipino.

Aquino's death on August 1, 2009 was a turning point that thrust her son, Benigno Aquino III, to the presidency.

Looking back, Villar said the elections affirmed his sentiments about Philippine politics.

"Talagang hindi na makakaahon ang mahirap sa atin eh. Paulit-ulit iyan. The very same families, sila nang sila iyan eh." (The poor really cannot rise from poverty in our country. It keeps repeating. The very same families, they are the ones always in power.)

'We need an alternative'

After the elections, Villar devoted his time to helping his children grow the family business, and to the foundation that he runs with his wife. The foundation, he said, helps the poor get access to housing and livelihood.

Ironically, the first post-war public official to become both House Speaker and Senate President no longer considers himself a politician. "I just want to become irrelevant."

Yet Villar still has his observations on the forces holding power. He said the country needs an alternative to the opposition, which has been identified with Arroyo.

"To be fair, it's time also for an alternative. I'm not saying it's me," said Villar.

"There are people who have legitimate complaints, grievances, objections to the administration but they cannot say anything because they will be accused of being pro-GMA. That's not fair. For a healthy democracy, we need an alternative, a legitimate opposition."

He may not consider himself part of the opposition but Villar disagrees with some policies of Aquino. He said the administration should not forego economic growth while campaigning against corruption.

“I wish him well. I hope the President succeeds for the sake of the people who are suffering now.”

‘What else will I do?’

Villar is finishing the remainder of his term, now sitting as a senator-judge in the impeachment trial of Chief Justice Renato Corona. (Read: Villar warns against persecuting Corona.) His term ends in 2013.

His son, Mark, succeeded his wife, Cynthia, as Las Piñas representative. Villar said his wife may end up taking his Senate seat.

“She can decide to run if she wants to run. She will be the one to decide. Of course, she will be asking for my view but if you ask me, she is very competent. I think she’s even better than me.”

Villar is not as certain about his own future in politics.

“What else will I do? I’ve experienced being Speaker, Senate President and a presidential candidate. Perhaps [it’s] destiny and to be fair with our President, he probably would not have really planned for and it just came and it’s his destiny. I can respect that.”

Villar said that the Philippines has a lot of problems but refused to elaborate to avoid being “very critical” of the Aquino administration.

“I offered my services and it’s fair that I was turned down and I have to accept that. So I don’t feel bad. In fact, at least it removed any guilt. Whatever I do now, I know that I did offer my services to the people.” – Rappler.com