

The Importance of being ERNIE

By FRED D. MANALO

IT IS not true that the Iglesia ni Kristo is the most sought-after group in the country. A hitherto unknown fact is that two or three other blocs have been known to exert tremendous influence on political fortunes and have therefore been religiously courted by political leaders and kingmakers. I was privileged to have a talk yesterday with the head of one of these blocs, the politically-potent *Samahan ng Mga Sidewalk Vendors*.

The SSV has a regal building — temple would be the proper word — in a quiet suburban town. I had difficulty entering the edifice at first for the burly guards would not believe that I had an appointment with Manong Ernie, the head of the Association. But when I showed me washing the feet of Big Brother, they readily let me in.

Manong Ernie is an unassuming man with a quiet air but with a voice of authority. He knew what I went there for so he immediately cleared the ground for me.

"The Iglesia is a much-ballyhooded group," he said. We prefer to keep our political activities a secret. However, some of the members feel that too much importance has been placed on the INK and it is time the nation recognize the power of our group."

"And how would you define that power?" I asked.

"Politics," he replied, "political power. Our voters number 500,000 which is more than you can say for the Iglesia. We have chapters in all cities and in a large number of municipalities."

"I see no visible signs of your power," I said.

"You must be blind," he said. "We're strong, we're indestructible. Look how we continue to dominate sidewalks and sidestreets. The politicians cannot do anything against us.

They know we're powerful. They would rather make the people suffer than evict us."

"I see what you mean. You seem to own half of Manila, for example. What about the much-publicized moves of the Mayor to throw you out to the streets, I mean, to evict you from the sidewalks?"

"You choose the correct word. It's all publicity. That's simply the Mayor's way of placating the people. A show of eviction here, an attempt to drive some of our members there, and the people are happy. Then we slowly return to where we came from. And this is true in other towns and cities."

"How did you manage to get this power?" I asked.

"We vote as one," he said. "We back only selected candidates and make sure they win. The winners are grateful of course. They repay us. Then those who have heard of our power come to us. They court our favors. Of course we ask something in return. But don't quote that."

"Are the favor-seekers as fawning as those who court the Iglesia vote?"

"Are you kidding? Well, I'll tell you: last year, I decided to hold my birthday party at a Pacific atoll that was condemned because it was once the site of an A-bomb test. Well, guess who came to dinner. Everybody who was anybody in politics. The atoll has to be completely condemned because it sank by several feet below sea level. So many people came."

"There was no publicity of course."

"Like I told you, we keep our doings a secret! And the politicians were just as discreet too. Their slavishness to the INK and to the Americans are bad enough."

"How do you choose your candidates?"

"Well, we assess the chance of the candidates and back those who are most likely to win. Then we announce our choice at a meeting before the elections."



"Can you also order political kingpins which candidates to nominate?"

"Of course. We tell them, 'You back this SOB and we'll back you.' And they listen to us. They've got to. Otherwise—" and he sliced his neck with a stiff forefinger.

"Well, now that you've decided to publicize your group, what do you think will be the reaction of the politicians?"

"They will deny their connections with us of course but we won't mind that. But if you could only post a photographer at the gate, the public will see how they come to me even during ungodly hours in the morning."

"I understand there are other groups that are equally influential with politicians."

"You must be referring to the Kapitiran ng Mga Squatters. It's a so-so group, actually."

"Well, I appreciate your candor, Manong Ernie. I think the public will respect you for this. Well, thank you very much." I shook his hand and started to leave.

"Didn't you forget anything?" he asked with a quizzical look in his face.

"What was that?"

"This." He made the sign of the blessing and then waved me on. I felt proud just then, basking in the spiritual glory of this great man. FM

