

- The Electoral Tribunal of the Senate of the Philippines unseated three Senators for overspending in their election campaign. It was the result of a humble lawyer's work.

EXCESSIVE ELECTION EXPENSES

With the probable exception of lawyers, law students and its employees, millions of Filipinos never knew until recently there is such a constitutional agency as the Senate Electoral Tribunal.

In the same manner, a great majority of the electorate did not know there is a law limiting the campaign expenses of candidates for public office within the one-year salary and other emoluments provided for the position.

For all its laudable intent to curb expenses and bring elective offices within the grasp of every qualified candidate, the statute against excessive poll spending was a "dead" law until last May 22 when the tribunal unseated Senators Raul Manglapus, Gaudencio Antonino and Maria Kalaw Katigbak for overspending in the 1961 elections.

It was the first time in its history that the tribunal

came out with such a decision — based on the election protest of Ernesto C. Hidalgo. The protestant garnered 1,878 votes in the 1961 elections and landed in the 20th place.

Who is Hidalgo, responsible for this precedent-setting decision?

This mild-mannered practising lawyer, war veteran and sometime newspaper correspondent was commended by the electoral tribunal of . . . "his tireless, resolution and praiseworthy efforts in prosecuting this litigation practically alone, in the face of every discouragement and obstruction that he has had to face in order that the law on election expenses should ultimately triumph."

Hidalgo, 49, is a native of San Pablo City. His father, Juan Hidalgo, a textile merchant, is a first cousin of the late Mrs. Paciencia Hidalgo-Laurel wife of the illustrious

Batangas statesman Jose P. Laurel Sr.

Why was he now asking the tribunal to declare him as an elected senator when he had said he was simply motivated by the desire to uphold the law on election expenses?

This question was asked of Hidalgo by Justice Jose P. Bengzon, a member of the tribunal, during the oral hearing last week on the three senators' motion for reopening.

Without any hesitation, the protestant stated: "would it be selfish self-interest if I could be accorded greater opportunity to serve our country and people by being declared elected as a Senator of this republic?"

It was an uphill struggle for Hidalgo during the six-year pendency of the protest. He had to forego personal and family convenience to finance the protest to the extent of mortgaging a small lot in Dagupan City to post a ₱1,000 bond.

He also encountered all sorts of criticism and was heckled as a crackpot and a Don Quixote battling against the impossible.

Hidalgo's difficulties were aggravated by the weekly hearing of the case in Manila. He had to give up his law practice in Dagupan and resided at an accessoria on Adeline St. in Sampaloc.

"I just want to prove that the law on election expenses is not dead letter law that it was interpreted to be by politicians," said Hidalgo.

Aside from the financial problems that dogged Hidalgo all the way, there were also the tempting offers of positions for him to abandon the protest after it became apparent to Nacionalistas and Liberals that the case was air-tight, he said.

These juicy offers were dangled before Hidalgo as early as 1963 and as recent as only several days before the tribunal promulgated its decision on May 22, he said.

Hidalgo was a member of the Hunters ROTC guerilla under Col. Vic Estacio which operated in Quezon province during the Japanese occupation.

He volunteered with the Philippine National Red Cross after liberation and was so engaged in helping war orphans and widows file their

claims that he forgot his own backpay claim.

Hidalgo found time to pursue his studies and finished law at the Far Eastern University and passed the bar examinations in 1948.

For a time he was employed with a sub-committee of the Senate blue ribbon committee which probed constabulary officers and men involved in the infamous Panampunan massacre in Tarlac.

He became correspondent of a metropolitan daily in 1948 and edited the "Pioneer Herald" in Dagupan, the first liberation newspaper founded in that city. It was founded by Ermin Garcia, murdered editor of the "Sunday Punch."

Hidalgo was so obsessed with the sanctity of the election that he initiated the organization of the United Crusade for Clean Elections in 1960. This organization was later headed by Hilarion Henares Jr., former chairman of the National Economic Council.

A sensible and reasonable individual, Hidalgo did not claim all the credit for his protest victory. He expressed gratitude to "my sympathizers" in government and private offices who assisted him in getting the evidence to prove the election expenditures.

He also singled out the moral support extended by Dr. Gaudencio Garcia, President Marcos' super investigator, who helped him secure important documents for the case. Dr. Garcia is a godfather of Hidalgo.

Hidalgo is married to Dr. Herminigilda Rozal-Hidalgo, chief of the social hygiene division in Dagupan. She has been elected president twice of the Pangasinan Women Medical Association.

The couple has a 17-year old son, a pre-medic student at the Far Eastern University.

Hidalgo is a member of the Pangasinan Bar Association and Batangas Lawyers Association. — *By David Bidan in Philippines Herald, May 29, 1967.*