

## Chapter VI

### GENERAL SANTOS CITY: ON THE THRESHOLD OF THE 21ST CENTURY

This final chapter puts an end to the story of General Santos City from a pioneering community to one of the urbanized cities of the Philippines today. The previous chapter narrates its saga after the war until the community attained a cityhood status in 1967. Since then, transformation has been so rapid that within a span of less than three decades, tremendous changes and development have taken place. These changes: socio-cultural, economic, physical and political emphasize a community which had the rare opportunity of directing and shaping its own destiny.

Also discussed in this chapter are the issues and challenges, foremost of which is the spate of bombings, kidnappings, and mysterious fires which destroyed several malls facing General Santos City at the turn of the 21st millennium which, if not given attention, could derail its development. Moreover, such evaluative study should at best be considered exploratory and could be the subject of a more in-depth study in future researches.

#### **A. From a "City of Pedicabs" to a Highly Urbanized City**

The sixties marks a major watershed in the transformation of the hitherto settlement area into a highly industrialized city of Southern Philippines. The decade covers three administrations, the Royeca, Velayo and Acharon administrations. Informants attributed three factors as instrumental in this transformation - the Chinese, the multinational corporations, and the growth of the area's fishing industry.

Ramirez (1994) mentioned the Chinese as a vital part of the immediate post-war rehabilitation and recovery. It should be recalled that one of the guidelines established by the late General Santos for the settlement was the banning of the Chinese in the settlement areas. Thus, the first stage represents Buayan, later General Santos municipality, making full use of its strategic location and port facilities to be an important center of trade for the rich Koronadal and Allah Valleys of Cotabato. In this phase of Buayan's growth, the Chinese played a major role.

The next stage was the entrance of big capitalists like DolePhil into the area. This stage made use of Koronadal Valley's agricultural potential. Thus, the UDAGRI established a cassava plantation at Conel in 1961. Flour was produced by the General Milling company in 1964. DOLE Philippines and its sister company, the Standard Fruits Company (STANFILCO) were also established this decade. On May 1, 1967, the Coca-Cola Bottling Company was inaugurated. A fire department; the opening of various elementary and secondary schools; the establishment of local newspapers and a radio station; and an annual income of 600,000 pesos (1964) all contributed to the foundation for cityhood status which materialized in 1967.

Although drier than other parts of the SOCSARGEN area and having a soil quality considered the worst in the country, the farmers of the area showed that with proper cultivation and irrigation, it is possible to produce and process high value crops such as mangoes, jackfruit, durian and other fruits, hardwood trees, baby corn, mushrooms, loofah and other vegetables, and medicinal plants. Its 1988 production made the area the country's top corn producer. In 1989, the city displaced Pangasinan as the country's top producer of cotton (Philippine Graphic, December 3, 1990: 3).

The third and perhaps most important factor is the phenomenal rise of its fishing industry which gave the city the name *The Tuna Capital of the Philippines*.

### **The Making of the Tuna Capital of the Philippines**

General Santos City faces Sarangani Bay that has access to Moro Gulf and Celebes Sea, a rich source of commercial fish yielding its prime catch, the yellow fin making General Santos City the *Tuna Capital of the Philippines*. Local commercial fishing firms number 34 commercial deep sea fishing with a combined fleet of over 600 commercial fishing vessels. Complementary to this are five canning plants which exported 19,332 metric tons of canned tuna valued at US\$30.8 Million in 1992.

As mentioned in the earlier chapter, the area was the *domales* area of the Muslims from other parts of the Koronadal-Allah Valley to picnic and to fish during the pre-1939 days. When the Christian migrants came the fishermen from among them fished in Sarangani Bay using the same methods they learned in their home places of origin. Thus, the Leyteños and Boholanos brought with them the *bansig* (bagnet), and *sensoro* (ringnet). The Ilongos and Cebuanos, on the other hand, brought the *baling* or beach seine (Releva, 1998:2).

With increasing demand for fish spawned by the increase in population, the fifties and sixties brought the motorized fishing into the area resulting to the increase of catch from 150-300 kilograms per fishing trip. This further improved with the use of a pumpboat which could carry a load of 800 to 1,000 kilograms (Business Resource Center, 1994: 2-34).

The advancement of fishing technology in the sixties to the present owe much to innovative individuals who took risks in trying out new creative ideas in catching fish. Foremost among them is Dominico Congson. He perfected a method called *unay* described in the following manner:

A motorized launch (locally called "lantsa" derived from the Spanish word *lancha* carried the net, powered by inboard engines. Another motorized skiff boat is used to pull away the "payao" or fish aggregating device from the periphery of the net; then a light boat which is a carrier of incandescent lamp powered by a mounted generator used to attract the school of fish; the needed net for this purpose is three times the size of the "sensoro"; while a service boat with bigger ice boxes is used to transport fish to the seashore for marketing, while the "sampana" ( a non-motorized banca with outriggers carrying the net to the fishing area) carried the nets and towed by motorized bancas (BRC as quoted by Releva: 14).

Among the fishing vessels, the biggest is called *unay* or mother boat. This is equipped with big fishing nets and "payao." A "payao" is a heavy object made of steel which serves as fish sanctuary in the high seas.

The new method was considered a big leap forward in fishing industry. It saved time and effort in hauling the net on and off the *sampana* (a non-motorized banca with outriggers carrying the net to the fishing area) after each operation. An average *unay* or purse seine has a capacity of 30 tons of fish with more or less 40 *payao* and about 33 workers.

The nineties brought another headway to fishing technology. As explained by the Business Resource Center (1994):

"A super seiner is a large, highly sophisticated fishing vessels with communications equipment, built-in cold storage and brining facilities on board."

The use of a super seiner enabled big fishermen of General Santos City to construct large carriers with at least 300 metric tons capacities. Further, the Japanese demand for "sashimi" graded tuna in the mid-seventies served as further impetus in the growth of fishing industry (Vice Mayor Flor Congson, in an interview). Thus, the General Santos City export book reflected an amount of \$7.2 million worth of frozen chilled tuna in its business transaction with foreign buyers, particularly the Japanese.

Today, General Santos city is the second port in the Philippines next to Navotas in terms of fish landings but the leading port for high valued fish such as tuna. Complementary to this are the five fish canning plants which exported 19, 332 metric tons of canned tuna valued at US \$ 30.8 million in 1992 (Gateway to Opportunity, 1992: 14).

Significant in any area development is the support mechanism for growth like infrastructure, roads, buildings, and the like. By the seventies, the city generally lagged behind in terms of infrastructure development as is true with all new cities. By then, General Santos City was described by a 1973 government report as a "city of pedicabs" aptly describing a young city in a rustic setting:

"General Santos is a city of pedicabs. They roar on wide Pioneer Avenue the whole day through. To residents of this growing metropolis, the noisy vehicles provide the most convenient means of transportation, even as they wait for the roads to become better and smoother. Except those around the city, the roads to Marbel, the capital of South Cotabato, and those going further north are rough. The people have to wait for the development of those roads before acquiring automobiles."

The fast infrastructure development came after the EDSA. These include a new international airport, a container port, an agro-processing center, a world-class fish port, and massive road building. The US \$50 million airport which started operating in the middle of 1996 is serviced by Airbus 300 and 747 jets capable of making international destinations. To complement the cargo handling capacity of the airport, the United States invested some 23 million dollars for the improvement of Makar Wharf (Non and Bidad, 1997: 28).

Massive road building as part of the Mindanao Growth Plan resulted to the city's interconnection with the rest of Mindanao. One major artery (GSC-Koronadal-Cotabato City National Highway) links the city with South Cotabato,

Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao, and the cities of Koronadal and Cotabato. The GSC-Digos-Davao National Highway links the area with Davao del Sur, Davao City, and northern Mindanao passing through Agusan, Cagayan de Oro City, Iligan City, and Marawi City. A third major road is the GSC-Maitum road which brings in the flow of goods and people from and to Sarangani Province.

Another way of looking at the physical growth of the city was the term "bayan ng alikabok" which newcomers to the place still used in the 70s, the 1970 version of "Dust-diangas" of the forties. This is so since while the major thoroughfares from the Central Business District in Pioneer Avenue to the national highway are asphalted, most of the side streets even in the poblacion area remained unasphalted and cogonal.

By the nineties, the city was able to shed off its image as a "city of dust" with the massive road development in South Cotabato-General Santos area in accordance with the Mindanao Growth Plan and funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) through the Philippine Aid Plan (PAP).

Improvement of road networks undeniably contributed to the growth of the community. It is this network which is responsible for the bringing of products of the fertile production areas to the market or processing center found in General Santos City. "Corn from Tampakan, palay from Norala, copra from Kiamba, coffee from Maitum, cabbages from Palkan, and fruits from Tupi all find their way to General Santos City for further processing or final use." Improvement of road networks resulted to the increase of the total number of registered vehicles in the city by at least 25% in 1990-91 and by 51% in 1991-92 (BRC Newsletter, March-April 1994: 4).

The city is accessible by land, air and water transportation. By land, it could be reached through four (4) major road networks. Through the road networks, agricultural products from the hinterlands of the provinces of South Cotabato, Sultan Kudarat, Maguindanao and the southern part of Davao del Sur could be transported via General Santos City to their destinations. The road networks radiating from the city make it accessible from the whole of Mindanao as well as from Manila via the Maharlika Highway. The new international airport which started in operation in 1996 could meet the air traffic needs of the area for the next ten years or more. Larger and more economical carriers such as Boeing B 747 and Airbus A-300 is capable of meeting the increasing demands for tuna and pineapple, particularly those to be delivered to Japan and USA. As for its sea travel, the port of General Santos City is found in Makar. Foreign and domestic vessels have generally been steadily increasing.

Continuing this fast pace of growth, General Santos City by the nineties was considered the fastest-growing city outside Manila joining the ranks of highly urbanized cities in the country "outpacing older cities like Baguio, Iligan and Cotabato" with an intercensal growth rate of 5.3 per cent considered "one of the highest in the country" (See Table 4).

The massive infrastructure development of the city is closely linked to the birth of SOCSARGEN as a growth area which started with the local government submitting to the United States Secretary of State, George Schultz, a plan to establish the General Santos-South Cotabato Agro-Industrial Development Center under the Philippine Aid Plan or PAP. Thus, together with four other demonstration projects (CALABARSON, Panay, Samar and the Iligan-Cagayan de Oro Growth Corridor) funds were allocated during the 1988 PAP pledging

session in Tokyo. Sarangani was added later when it was declared a separate province in 1992.

**Table 5**  
**POPULATION AND GROWTH RATE OF SELECTED**  
**CITIES IN THE PHILIPPINES (1990)**

CITY	POPULATION	AVERAGE ANNUAL GROWTH RATE (%)
Davao City	850, 000	3.4
Zamboanga City	444, 000	2.6
Bacolod City	364, 000	3.3
Cagayan de Oro City	340, 000	4.1
General Santos City	250, 000	5.3
Iligan City	227, 000	3.1
Baguio City	183, 000	4.4
Cotabato City	127, 000	4.2

Source: BRC Newsletter (General Santos City: Business Resource Center, Notre Dame of Dadiangas College, March-April, 1992), p. 4.

SOCSARGEN has the distinction of being first or second in the production of at least 8 commodities. It is the largest producer of corn, accounting for about 23% of the total Philippine yearly production. It is number one in cotton production contributing 75% of the Philippine output. It accounts for 20% of the total rice production. It produces 5% of the country's coconuts and copra and 40% of the nation's pineapple. SOCSARGEN is also the second largest livestock producer in the Philippines with a sustainable annual production base of over 250,000 hogs and 50,000 heads of cattle. Next to Navotas, SOCSARGEN is the second in the country in fisheries but first in high value fish like sashimi grade tuna producing over 7, 000 metric tons yearly (South Cotabato Sarangani General Santos City Growth Plan).

The Allah and Koronadal Valleys, the bulk of which belong to South Cotabato province, form the rice granary of Mindanao. Located in a typhoon-free belt with bountiful rivers, lakes and streams, South Cotabato's fields are serviced by four functional irrigation systems benefiting 16, 359 hectares and an additional 19 communal irrigation systems servicing an additional area of 4, 588 hectares. South Cotabato is also rich in natural resources. Proof to this is the seismic oil surveys made in the area by Petro-Canada in cooperation with the Philippine National Oil Company (PNOC) and the P20 million loan agreement forged between the Technology and Resource Center (TLRC) and South Cotabato-based Kematu Mills Inc. to operate Southeast Asia's first chemical-free gold processing plant. The gold plant which is 100% Filipino but with technology transfer to be undertaken by Alif Gold, an Indian firm based in Singapore, is located on a three-hectare lot at the foot of Mt. Kematu in the Municipality of T'boli, South Cotabato (The Philippine Starweek, July 24, 1994).

Sarangani Province constitutes the coastal areas of SOCSARGEN composed of the six municipalities of Maitum, Kiamba, Maasim, Alabel, Malapatan and Glan. Sarangani Province's natural orientation is fishing and

coconut production. Both Sarangani Province and General Santos City face Sarangani Bay that has access to the Moro Gulf and Celebes Sea, a rich source of commercial fish. This is particularly significant since at a ministerial meeting of ASEAN countries held on March 26, 1994, the Philippines - with its expertise and trained manpower - was identified as the leader in fisheries development. The EAGA thus provides the incentive for the development of Sarangani Province based on its fishery potential. Besides fishery, Sarangani possesses a great potential in eco-tourism. The American Mike Kingury has started operating a dive town in Maasim, Sarangani which he considers the "best dive site" for scuba aficionados and for big-fish sportsmen.

Now, with the advocacy of the General Santos City's gateway concept as part of the growth corridor of SOCSARGEN, the economic resources and potentials of this growth corridor define its comparative advantages as a development area. General Santos City's greatest strength is its strategic location at the southern tip of the Philippines giving it ready access to four export markets: Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore. Its accessibility from all points of the country and even from other countries by land, air and water transportation gives the city a comparative advantage in the growth corridor. Due to its strategic location, the city is the gateway of SOCSARGEN to sea lanes. An average of 800 domestic and foreign ships drop anchor at the Makar Wharf annually with an average of 110,000 passengers either embarking or disembarking at Makar every year (Malaya, July 9, 1993: 7).

Indeed, from a "city of pedicabs" of the 70s, the city has changed tremendously through the years with the popular tricycle ranking only third with a 19% share while utility vehicles are most numerous with a 31% share as of 1992. Today, competing for passengers are more than 100 units of air-conditioned taxis and L-300 vans cruising the city roads and the outlying municipalities of the previous "bayan ng alikabok".

Cityhood changed the landscape, particularly the commercial district. The asphaltting and concreting of roads, the construction of buildings made of concrete materials, the growing number of bazaars, theaters, eateries, stores and other business establishments dotting major boulevards and highways all contributed to the modernization of the place. The growing attractiveness of the place as a venue for meetings and seminars is shown by the mushrooming of hotels and beachresorts. By the nineties, the utilitarian and functional design of buildings gave way to aesthetic-looking designs. From two-story buildings, high-rise buildings took over. Department stores gave way to shopping complexes complete with its own wet market, hardware, dry goods, fast food, appliance and theater sections.

## **B. Political Changes**

The story of the growth of this "boomtown" is also the story of the changing of the frontier made possible by the growth of migrant communities. From these migrant communities sprung the present provinces of South Cotabato, Sarangani, the City of General Santos, and with the inclusion of Sultan Kudarat, the term SOCSARGEN Growth Area became the SOCSKARGEN area. At this point, a discussion of the political development is in order.

Twenty years after the first election, the second and third generations of migrant settlers to Southern Koronadal came of age. They are called in this paper as the Mindanaons since the land of their birth was no longer Visayas or Luzon but Mindanao. Or, even if their birthplaces were Luzon and Visayas but

having grown up in General Santos since the early age, they no longer respond to the same memories of the home provinces of their parents. Born and bred in Mindanao, they are infused with the unique socio-cultural environment of their places of birth in Mindanao. The mayors from 1967 until the present period may be broadly considered as the Mindanaons. Following is a brief account of the various administrations from 1967 until 1995.

**Mayor Antonio C. Acharon, 1967-1986**

Antonio C. Acharon, the son of Mayor Pedro Acharon, was born in Dadiangas in 1932. He studied at the Dadiangas Primary School, now the Dadiangas West Central Elementary School, but graduated his elementary education in Polomolok. The young Toning studied in various colleges which include Southern Island Colleges in Dadiangas, a college in Davao and the University of Santo Tomas in Manila but before he could finish schooling, politics beckoned.

Mayor Toning's political star started in 1951 with his election in the barrio level. He rose through the ranks as a barrio captain of Labangal in 1960. He was elected vice mayor in 1964. With the passage of Republic Act 5412 transforming the Municipality of General Santos into a city, Antonio Acharon, in effect, became its last municipal mayor and its first city mayor when he defeated the reelectionist Mayor Velayo. His was the longest term of office as mayor spanning 18 years from 1968 until his relief by President Corazon Aquino in 1986.

Mayor Acharon's greatest political strength was summed up by the policy intoned by his administration: "Una sa lahat ay tao." Just like his father before him, the poor people were given preference by his administration. His house was said to be open for anybody in need even at the middle of the night. This populist mayor maintained his image as a man of the masses through periodic visits and regular consultations with the barangay folks.

A more enduring testament to the giving capacity of the Acharon-Cahilsot family are the land donations which include the present sports complex (10 hectares); PC Barracks (9 hectares); Pedro Acharon Elementary School (1/2 hectare); Romana Cahilsot Elementary School; the Bliss Project in Calumpang; the City Cemetery; and what is now Silway area (Dr. Odjok Acharon, Mayor Antonio Acharon's son and presently a city kagawad, in an interview on August 4, 2001).

But perhaps Mayor Acharon's major asset was his reaching out to the indigenous inhabitants, now the cultural minorities. A popular tale was that he sucked milk from a Magindanao woman who took care of him as a child. Virginia Buhisan (1982) in a study made of the T'bolis of Kiamba discussed about the "adoption" of a baby by another when the mother's milk does not agree with him. This adopted mother is usually a close relative who becomes the "sociological mother" or a kind of godmother, of the child throughout his life. That this was practiced in the early frontier days by the T'boli and Christian mothers was described by Buhisan, thus:

A similar practice was followed by the Cebuano and T'boli mothers during their early frontier days, according to the writer's mother. Since there were not many Cebuano neighbors around, the Cebuano and the T'boli mothers themselves would take turns in nursing their babies. They made an alternate schedule during toiling their fields. If the Cebuano mother went to the field, the T'boli mother was left behind to attend to the babies. There will be one breast for each

during feeding time. This practice of caring for children strengthened their friendship.

Presumably, it was this "Magindanao connection" of Mayor Toning during the outbreak of the Mindanao conflict which spared the city from the vicissitudes of war of the seventies. It was said that there was a pact of understanding between the Muslim rebels and Mayor Acharon. Thus, the carnage and killings happening in other areas was unheard of in the city. "In fact, long before authorities from Davao del Sur moved to prevent the eruption of trouble in Balut Island (then a part of Davao del Sur), the mayor was already there to patch up the problem," said his son Dr. Odjok Acharon, now a city kagawad. More dramatic was what happened in Malapatan, Sarangani Province where the warring groups were the military, CHDF, and police with Mayor Toning serving as the referee. There is nobody with similar talent in peacemaking among today's group of leaders. In the face of the fire which gutted 2 malls of the city and the bombings and kidnappings perpetrated by suspected terrorists, an inevitable question cropped up: Could Mayor Toning be as effective today as he was in the seventies?

His political strength was dramatically proven by his reelection in 1971 while in jail charged with a double murder case (that of Adan de las Marias, the leader of the Octopus gang, and one Piding) filed against him by a powerful congressman whose wife ran for the position of mayor. Unable to campaign, his then seven year old son Odjok, used to bring two flags - one Chinese, the other Philippine flag- and approached the people saying: "*Nong, pili sa duha.*" ("Sir, pick out one.") The cudgel was taken up for him by his loyal supporters. One of them, Adelaida Yusay, recalled how he was called by the opposing side purportedly telling her "Paryente gali kita." ("It appears that you are my relative.") Despite claims of kinship relationship by somebody wealthy, Nang Diling became a very effective campaigner of the candidate Toning with her emphasizing the importance of character over wealth. Mayor Toning was eventually released from prison on September 1972 by order of then President Marcos.

The educational needs of the city were given emphasis during Acharon's time with the opening of several public elementary schools in six barangays (Aponong, Sinawal, Upper Labay, Labangal, Dadiangas Heights Lagao and Sitio Uhaw, Tambler). Two existing public elementary schools in the poblacion area, Dadiangas West and Dadiangas South, were divided and gave rise to two additional public elementary schools, the Pedro Acharon Elementary School and the Ireneo Santiago Elementary School.

Likewise, it was through the efforts of the then newly elected mayor, the parents of the 1966 graduating students of the Dadiangas West elementary School led by Mr. Vic Tajanlangit, and residents of the place, both Muslims and Christians alike, that the establishment of the MSU Community High School (now Mindanao State University-General Santos) in 1967 was made a reality. When MSU Community High School obtained the 2.5 hectare land (today's MSU-Dadiangas campus) fronting Notre Dame of Dadiangas college, Mayor Acharon continued his unwavering support to MSU by facilitating the construction of the building through loans of construction materials guaranteed by the mayor. Subsequently, the city and school officials together with the PTA invited the then president of the University, Congressman Ali Dimaporo, to the commencement of the school and asked financial assistance from him to be able to pay the debt incurred in the construction of the building.

**102 THE TUNA COUNTRY AT THE SOUTHERN EDGE OF MINDANAO:  
GENERAL SANTOS CITY, 1939-2000**

During the Acharon's incumbency, other important infrastructure projects include a government hospital, a new public market, the cementing of major city streets and highways, the building of bridges and dikes, the improvement of the Makar Wharf, and the start of the construction of the modern City Hall. The economic growth of the city was undeniable with its declaration as a first class city in 1975 by the Department of Finance based on its income.

Mayor Antonio Acharon's term is the longest spanning almost two decades. However, the EDSA Revolution came in 1986 and a wind of change swept the entire country. Mayor Acharon was a casualty of that wind of change.

The perception of an unchanging city in a state of stagnation may be blamed on the leadership who had stayed too long in power. Despite Mayor Acharon's populist image, he stayed too long in power that he received the brunt of the people's impatience over the long martial law years. The security on tenure spawned by martial law years led to complacency and alienation from the people's pulse. This is dramatically shown during the height of people power revolution in Manila. Impelled by his loyalty to President Marcos, the city administration under the leadership of Mayor Antonio Acharon celebrated the proclamation of Ferdinand Marcos and Arturo Tolentino as the elected president and vice-president, respectively. The pitifully thin crowd at the oval plaza underscored how far removed Mayor Acharon and other officials were from the changing times. The EDSA Revolution brought the political career of the populist mayor to an end until his assassination while delivering a campaign speech in an attempt for a political comeback.

With the advent of the revolutionary government under President Corazon C. Aquino, Mayor Acharon's fall from power was inevitable with the summary removal of the incumbent officials from office. Koronadal Valley as a whole showed increasing dissatisfaction with the administration following the assassination of Ninoy Aquino. These critical sentiments of the people of Koronadal Valley was implicit with the election of three oppositionists from the Koronadal Valley in the 1978 Interim Batasang Pambansa election.

**The OIC Mayors, 1986-1988**

When the KBL officials were summarily removed from office, Atty. Dominador Lagare, one of the persistent opposition leaders who fought and opposed the Marcos regime, was appointed the officer-in-charge of the city. Just like his predecessor, Atty. Lagare was a Mindanaon having been born in Barangay Conel in 1943.

During the Lagare incumbency, the city revenue went up to forty six million seven hundred thirty thousand one hundred ninety five pesos (P46,732,195.00), a phenomenal leap from the 1970 figure of one million, three hundred thirty three thousand, nine hundred forty seven pesos (P1, 333, 947. 00).

The incumbency of Atty. Lagare was too short to fully appreciate his impact to the development of General Santos City. Nonetheless, EDSA did bring rejuvenation and hope. Within his one year term of office he was able to do the following things: the construction of sewerage and drainage system in the poblacion area and some selected barangays; the cementing project of Papaya Street inaugurating the start of the cementing of the city proper, giving rise to the current modern appearance of the city and shedding off its image as a "city of dust"; and his no-nonsense approach against illegal gambling. Finally, it

was during Atty. Lagare's term that the construction of the unfinished city hall was completed in time for the Foundation Day Celebration of the city on February 27, 1987.

According to one informant, Atty. Lagare's removal from office even before the 1987 election was presumably caused by his support of a non-administration candidate. The political condition which removed Atty. Lagare from the mayoralty post brought to the fore the ascendancy of the first lady mayor of the city - Rosalita Tolibas-Nuñez.

**Mayor Rosalita T. Nuñez, the first lady mayor**

Urbanization and population growth necessitated a strong party machinery. A strong political party enabled a simple teacher like Mayor Rosalita Nuñez to win. Just like her two predecessors, Mayor Rosalita Nuñez is a second generation migrant settler. Strictly speaking, however, she cannot be considered a Mindanaon since her birthplace is not Mindanao but Leyte. For the greater part of her adult life she was an academician in various capacities as an elementary grade teacher, guidance counselor, acting principal, and college instructor from 1972 until 1987.

Appointed as an OIC mayor vice Atty. Lagare starting March 1, 1987, she is credited for the adoption of the symbolic slogan "boomtown Dadiangas" as a catchword to create an image of feverish economic growth in the post-Edsa period. The term "boom town Dadiangas" was in usage since the fifties. But more than a manifestation of the pioneering spirit of the people, the term assumed significance as a socially constructed word - born of the people, promoted and developed across time by the conscious efforts of the various segments of the community particularly the business sector and the local media.

The government's adoption of the term as a strategy for development was explained in the 1991 publication by the city government:

"It formulated a strategy to promote General Santos City as a "Boom Town" aimed at creating an image or even an atmosphere of feverish economic growth. In this, it has won the support of the private sector to embark on a program to attract foreign and domestic investors to the city. Furthermore, through private sector efforts, continuous lobby pressure is exerted on the National Government to push through with its plans and programs for the city at the soonest possible time."

What is apparent at the preceding quotation is the private sector - government interaction and cooperation, a tradition long established during the pioneering days. It took a lady mayor to make use of a catchword used a long time ago as a strategy for development. The city caught the attention of foreign leaders involved in the Philippine Aid Plan (PAP) who selected General Santos City as one of their first pilot projects. Under the city's \$2.2 billion development plan are two components financed by PAP. One includes agroport (fishport complex), telecommunications, airport expansion, and seaport expansion; another encompasses industrial estates, road networks, pro-people organizations, and environment. The development plan made General Santos City the "concentration of the largest infrastructure projects in the country today", a natural result of its crucial role in both the SOCSARGEN growth area and SOCSARGEN'S role in the East ASEAN Growth Area (EAGA).

**Mayor Adelbert W. Antonino, scion of Parent-Senators**

With the assumption of Mayor Adelbert W. Antonino, who won the May 11, 1992 election, the city continued to develop as a major economic center. This is further boosted by the implementation of the Philippine Assistance Program (PAP) Projects which include the International General Santos Airport, the Makar Wharf Fishport Complex and the Agro-Processing Center. General Santos City's incessant march to the 21st millennium is undeniable at the end of Mayor Antonino's first term.

The rivalry of Mayor Nuñez and Mayor Antonino would span a period of 12 years. By 1995, Nuñez was the city mayor in 1987 until her defeat by Adelbert Antonino in 1992. Antonino, on the other hand, was elected mayor in 1992, defeated by Nuñez in 1995; and defeated Nuñez, in turn, in 1998. But in the electoral rivalry of the two, Antonino appeared to have the edge with the wife Lualhati, serving as a congresswoman for the allowable three terms. By 2001, with Lualhati no longer qualified to run, the daughter, Darlene, won and ran in Congress. Former Mayor Nuñez, suffered a decisive defeat in the hands of the brother of the late Mayor Antonio Acharon, Engineer Jun Acharon, for the position of the new city mayor.

**C. Socio-Demographic Changes**

Demographic phenomenon is relevant in shedding light to the process of social interaction. In the pre-war settlement days when the original inhabitants were greater and the migrant-settlers fewer in number, the peaceful process of accommodation was exhibited in their interaction with each other.

Despite Japanese occupation in the 40s and the Mindanao conflict in the 70s, such framework of contact held out. This remained strong through the years despite the change in the demographic characteristics of the place with the newcomers taking over General Santos City as the new legitimate order.

The continuous demographic growth is manifested with the city breaking the qualifying mark for a highly urbanized city when it reached the population of 250, 389 people in 1990, more than 100, 000 increase within a decade. As Table 5 shows, the highest population increase was posted in 1960 which could be attributed to the fast migration of people from different parts of the country since 1939. The abnormal figure of 33 for the 1903 census indicates that the indigenous inhabitants outside the reach of census-takers were not counted. On the other hand, the unusual increase of only 1% in the 1970 census could be attributed to the separation of Maasim and Malungon from General Santos City in 1969 and of Alabel in 1971, the latter now the capital town of the new province of Sarangani.

The social composition of the people of General Santos City, a decade before the 21<sup>st</sup> millennium, shows youthful dynamism and ethnic pluralism making the city a "melting pot" of people and culture. This cultural strand is shown by the ethnic composition and the languages spoken by the people. Its ethnic composition represents practically all tribes in the country with the Cebuanos constituting the biggest group (36%), Hiligaynon or Ilonggo ranks second (25%), the Tagalogs as the next largest ethnic grouping (9.5%) followed by the Boholanos (7%), the Muslims (6%), and the B'laans (3%). The 1990 census shows the original inhabitants in the minority in the city.

**Table 6**  
**POPULATION GROWTH OF**  
**GENERAL SANTOS CITY, 1903 - 1990**

DATE	POPULATION	INCREASE	RATE OF INCREASE
1903	33	-	-
1918	9,787	9,754	99.6%
1939	14,155	4,368	30.9%
1948	32,019	17,904	55.9%
1960	84,988	52,969	62.3%
1970	85,861	873	1.0%
1980	149,396	63,535	42.5%
1990	250,389	100,993	40.3%

Source: NCSO, 1903, 1918, 1939, 1948, 1960, 1970, 1980 & 1990.

A significant demographic characteristic of General Santos City is the urbanization of the area with 72 percent of its population concentrated in nine barangays identified as urban areas - Lagao (now Lagao, San Isidro, and City Heights) Dadiangas (now Dad. East, Dad. West, Dad. South, and Dad. North), Bula, and Labangal. The remaining 28 percent are distributed in the sixteen other barangays (See Table 6).

**Table 7**  
**POPULATION OF GENERAL SANTOS CITY**  
**BY BARANGAY, MAY 1990**

BARANGAY	HOUSEHOLD POPULATION	PERCENT SHARE
URBAN:	179,793	
71.81%		
Bula	26,886	
10.74%		
Dadiangas	47,578	
19.00%		
Labangal	52,062	
20.79%		
Lagao	53,267	
21.27%		
RURAL:	70,596	
28.19%		
Apopong	12,128	4.84%
Baluan	3,471	1.39%
Buayan	5,650	
2.26%		
Conel	7,021	2.80%

**106 THE TUNA COUNTRY AT THE SOUTHERN EDGE OF MINDANAO:  
GENERAL SANTOS CITY, 1939-2000**

Katangawan	5,187	2.07%
Ligaya	2,424	0.97%
Mabuhay	5,805	2.32%
San Isidro	6,808	2.72%
San Jose	2,466	0.98%
Siguel	1,841	0.74%
Sinawal	742	0.30%
Tambler	11,273	4.50%
Tinagakan	4,111	1.64%
Upper Labay	1,669	0.67%
-----		
TOTAL	250, 309	100.00%

Besides urbanization, another important characteristic of the city's population is its youthful dynamism shown by the more than half of the population (54%) representing the 15 - 54 years age group, 42% representing the 14 and below age bracket with only 4 percent represented by the elderly or over 54 years old (BRC Newsletter, March-April 1994:5). As a former migrant community, most of the settlers seeking adventure in frontier areas were in the prime of their youth when they came to the valley. Of the first 62 settlers who came in 1939, only 6 of them brought along their wives. The others left behind their families who followed later. Most of the 0 - 54 years old were born in General Santos City and/or, if born elsewhere, grew up in the valley.

The language situation reflects the cosmopolitan character of the city. It was expected that the language of the numerical majority would be used as the lingua franca of the community. But through the years, with the Visayans outpassing in number the Tagalogs after the war, the language which evolved is the "Tagalog-Visayan" dialect. An example of such is the word "nagbili ako" which means "I bought". In Tagalog, it would have been "bumili ako" and in Visayan, "nagpalit ako". But in the melting pot community, a new word emerged - the Tagalog-Visayan variant : "nagbili ako". Sometimes one hears Tagalog being spoken by a Dadiangas speaker but with a distinctive Ilonggo or Visayan accent. The reality of the melting pot community is likewise shown by a Dadiangas inhabitant who could speak any of the three languages or a mixture of two or three languages, a reality in Mindanao.

Moreover, the great percentage of 14 years old and below exerted tremendous demand for education. The government responded by establishing more public elementary and secondary schools. Today, the city has one state university, the Mindanao State University. Besides MSU, there are 22 private schools while there are a total of 59 public schools.

One implication of the qualitative growth of education in the city is the growth of literacy rate from 3.4% in 1948, to 31% in 1960, 81% in 1970, and to 96.3% in 1990 . Qualitative growth in education is manifested by the labor sector report showing that almost 44% of the city's labor force has reached at least the secondary level of education with more than a quarter having earned a college degree (Comprehensive Opportunity for a Moving Economy, 1991: 23).

It was in the field of education that the earlier community solidarity of the pre-war days manifested itself. A 1952 report stated that “all public school buildings, with the exception of the WDC building at Lagao, were built by the active Parent-Teachers Association with very little help from the municipal and provincial government.” After the war, steps were taken to reopen the primary schools in Lagao and in old Buayan and the establishment of two new primary schools in Dadiangas. Other communities with no schools petitioned the government for the opening of schools. But in the absence of funds, the community had to take care of its education needs on a self-sufficient basis. A very fascinating account is given to us by Carlos Gomaling of Tampacan, Tupi:

“Mrs. Alejandrino tried her best to have elementary school here . . . a complete elementary school. But . . . the supervisor of Marbel, I am not so sure if he was Mr. Sindao, he gave a challenge to us; to the three barrrios namely: the barrio Maltana, Tampacan, and Bo. 7. “If whoever can build a semi standard classroom for the elementary will be given a complete elementary school,” the supervisor said.

We really tried our best to meet this challenge. We agreed to construct a complete elementary school with seven classrooms; one for the principal, another room for the clinic and one for the home economics. And so we made it. The floorings were all sawed roundwood. Luckily, during the inspection, the Tampacan school buildings were declared to have met the standard requirement. Bo. 7 and Maltana also built their own school buildings but these were ground flooring. So, we officially opened the first complete elementary school.

This tradition of self-reliance in the building of schools was duplicated many times over in other migrant communities. If the pre-war period was the period of settling down, the post-war period was the time to work earnestly for the realization of a dreamed future for the settler and his family. Education, which was not given much attention before the war, assumed tremendous importance in the post-war period.

Through the years, the strong private sector involvement in education made up for what the government was not able to provide. Today, taking the Dadiangas West Central Elementary School into focus, the beautiful tradition of the government-private sector cooperation persisted. During the first month of classes, the usual practice is to start with the organization of the PTA in every classroom. The identification of the problems met the previous year by the classroom teacher with regards facilities like ceiling fan, rugs, water pipes for the comfort room, and other needs was usually the first agenda of the meeting. In this manner, the Parents-Teacher's Association became an important partner for the school's development.

Unlike other areas of Cotabato where Christian teachers were viewed with suspicion by Muslim parents, the indigenous inhabitants of the area appreciated the availability of schools in General Santos. A retired principal attested to the cooperation and enthusiasm given by Muslim parents. “They (referring to the Muslim parents) were very cooperative. I did not meet any problem with them.” Ms. Jagna-an attributed this cooperative spirit to

the perception of fairness and equal treatment accorded by the teachers to their students regardless of ethnic groupings. One celebrated case was a salutorian complaining to the higher authorities of favoritism on the side of the teachers. Said complainant failed to prove favoritisms since majority of the teachers who gave the Ilocano valedictorian higher grades were Ilongos themselves.

Distinctive of migrant communities is the predominance of males over the females exemplified by the city's 1990 population in a 51: 49 ratio, "the same situation ten years ago." During the pioneering days, the menfolk were the ones who emigrated first. Once established in the place, their families then joined them. Today, with land long ago gone, business and employment opportunities continue to attract migrants to the city. It is interesting to note that by 1992, of the 76, 628 labor force of the city, 69.8% of these are males with only 30. 2% females.

The cultural pluralism of the place is shown by the presence of at least twenty-nine (29) religious groups. Three-fourths of the population are Roman Catholics while Islam has a 5.5% share. In the past, despite diversity in religion, the spirit of tolerance and openness prevailed. There was even a time when various religious leaders used to have a get-together at the public plaza to discuss and explain their religious beliefs to the other groups. While it tended to degenerate into debates, the idea of meeting together to talk and listen to other beliefs indicated an attempt by the pluralistic society in coming to terms with the area's diversity.

However, starting with the SPCPD controversy in 1997, the modern period brought apprehension on the ability of the pluralistic society in maintaining the earlier framework of accommodation and peaceful interaction. Thus, a pre-war settler who earlier recognized the peaceful process of accommodation and interaction during the early settlement years emphatically said: "I won't ever accept being placed under the Muslims." The idea of progress as an element of Christian coming to the region was enunciated by a congresswoman who stated in a radio interview: "We do not need SPCPD to develop General Santos City because we are already developed." As a reaction to these adverse comments, Reverend Absalom Cerveza, the Christian spokesman of the MNLF, said: "If bombings happened in General Santos City before, there would have been no "boomtown Dadiangas." The bombings in General Santos City in 2001 and 2002 indicates that the city is no longer exempted from the general malaise affecting the entire Mindanao area today - the problem of peace and order condition.

Moreover, one could only hope for a revival of that forgotten framework of accommodation on the basis of acceptance of the principle of cultural pluralism as a major framework for interaction in a melting pot community. Not until the various cultural groups are accorded equal status and responsibility in this "booming city," its full potential for growth would be difficult to attain since social disunity has always proven a negative factor in development.

#### ***D. Issues and Challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Millennium***

The high growth rate of 10.39% during the 1975-1980 period caused some quarters to worry that the high population growth caused by in-migration might be bigger than the economic growth which may cause overhead costs like strain in the competition for employment, housing, transportation, drainage, waste

disposal, and other social services problems. In fact, the following urban issues were identified by Louis Berger International, Inc. , viz: (1) the need for an updating and coordination of the zoning plan; (2) the need for community livelihood program; (3) the need for housing/squatter relocation; and (4) the need for circumferential roads including right of way.

Just like any areas experiencing a rapid growth, the people and its physical structures supporting this growth suffer a tremendous strain manifesting itself in urbanization problems which the young city is currently experiencing. Squatting is just one of them. The City Housing and Management Office estimated 35,000 squatter families by 1994 (Non and Bidad, 1997: 18).

Relocation of squatter families was always an issue faced by every administration starting the 60s. A case in point was the invasion by close to a hundred families of the area reserved for government buildings/public plaza at Barangay Fatima. About 50 families constructed small, one-room structures made of nipa and bamboos one weekend of November 1995. "Kadaming comfort rooms," one student observed upon seeing the houses. What is ironic is that Barangay Fatima itself is a relocation site settled by squatters from Barrio Tinago and areas along the beaches in Dadiangas during the administration of Mayor Antonio Acharon in the early 80s. Less than 15 years later, the resettlement area is experiencing a similar phenomenon of squatting. The lack of action by the local government on the squatters who invaded the reserved public land in Barangay Fatima emboldened some people from the urban poor sector to take similar action. A news item in General Santos' ABS-CBN program "Banat Visayas, Sulong Mindanao", on its December 14, 1996 editorial talked about the entrance of more than 30 families in the Employees Village, the area awarded to the city employees, also located in Barangay Fatima. Squatting as a major problem of urbanization, is keenly felt in the city today.

A study made by a non-government organization, the Freedom from Debt Coalition-General Santos Chapter, noted that despite the "boomtown" image of General Santos City, an increasing amount of data reveals that the members of the basic sectors in General Santos City, particularly the peasants, urban poor dwellers, fisher folks and the indigenous peoples wallow in poverty and want. The 1996 baseline data of the Minimum Basic Needs (MBN) survey results by the city reveal that 69.64% of the total population or 33,792 households have an income below subsistence level (FDC-General Santos Chapter, 2001:3). This poverty incidence ranks second in Region 11 (Non and Bidad, 1997: 19).

A manifestation of poverty is the extent of malnutrition in the city and the environs with the city posting a share of 38% in first degree malnourished children; 52.2%, second degree malnutrition; and 64%, third degree. Malungon of Sarangani Province follows with 27% ist degree malnutrition. Alabel, the capital town of Sarangani Province, follows with 17% first degree malnutrition, and Polomolok with 10.8 % first degree malnutrition (Table 7). The negative aspect of urbanization has overtaken the city.

**Table 7**  
**Number of Malnourished Children By Municipality, 1994**

City/ Municipality	Total Population	Total No. of Children	Number and Percent of Malnourished Children							
			Ages 0-14	Weighe d 1994 - 1995	1 <sup>st</sup> Degree		2 <sup>nd</sup> Degree		3 <sup>rd</sup> Degree	
					Numb er	%	Num ber	%	Num ber	%
General Santos City	103959	39364	1260 5	38	3741	52. 2	599	64		
Alabel	18509	7168	5511	17	771	10. 8	58	6		
Maasim	11879	4736	3111	9	381	5.3	50	5		
Malungon	26789	10558	9084	27	1312	18. 3	130	14		
Polomolok	38525	8937	2891	9	961	13. 4	102	11		
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>199661</b>	<b>70763</b>	<b>3320 2</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>7166</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>939</b>	<b>100</b>		

Source: For GSC-Socio-Economic Indictors (1984-1994) and for Municipalities: PPDO Sarangani Province. From Domingo Non, 1997: 24

Urbanization resulted in skyrocketing of real estate prices of the city. Commercial lots along Pioneer Avenue was reported in 1994 to be costing P5,000.00 per square meter, while in 1991 the selling price was only P 2,000.00. Lots along Lagao highway was only P 100.00 per square meter before Gaisano established its shopping complex. Now, the lots sell for P3,000.00 per square meter. But despite rising costs, buildings are still sprouting like mushrooms all over the city especially banking institutions which increased in number from 32 in 1990 to 54 today.

But more serious than the “fast-buck” mentality prevailing in the city is the fact that the rapid changing of land ownership is negating the very objective for which the NLSA was created in 1939 - the settlement of the area by landless people from overcrowded and high-tenancy areas of Luzon and Visayas who would be transformed into small but independent farmers in Mindanao. That former small landowners would now become agricultural workers or employees in the giant corporations which bought or leased their lands is the painful reality for the former migrant communities of Koronadal-Allah Valleys.

Land acquisition by big agribusiness corporations including multinationals is clearly illustrated by DolePhil whose cannery and buildings are located in Polomolok but whose fields are rapidly spreading to the neighboring Municipality of Tupi. Thus one report stated: “DolePhil has managed to obtain long term leases on 10,000 hectares of land” (Alternate Resource Center, mimeographed copy). Added to this is the land leased through the National Development Corporation in 1963-64, the land it has leased from private individuals in Tupi and Polomolok, and the area of its latest acquisition, the Hacienda San Jose in General Santos City. It is no wonder that until today

nobody could be certain of DolePhil's total land holdings being one of the company's best kept secret. An impression by a priest who visited Dole Plantation is very revealing:

"The territory which Dole occupies is vast. You drive 20 to 25 miles along the main road with nothing but pineapple fields on either side, stretching as far as you can see. The very sight tells you that Dole monopolizes the land, the resources and the work force of the area. You can conclude immediately that the company, thereby, is providing a great deal of work and capital and growth for the area. But at the same time, you have an abiding fear of what this means in terms of power for control and what it means as far as the people being totally dependent upon this giant company and at its mercy. This fear and this impression becomes deepened when you witness such extreme poverty in the barrios of the area, and many of the shanty towns immediately adjacent to the plantation, which are absolutely frightening in their lack of hygiene and of safety—small wooden shacks leaning against each other like fragile matchboxes, inviting tragedy" (Concern, 1980: 2).

Passing through the territory and observing the workers in the fields, you wonder how they survive the heat, as well as the cramped positions in which they manually farm the pineapple bushes. I could observe no shelters in the fields, and one of our men there was mounting a campaign to provide some shelters in order to help those who are overcome by the heat, or are sick while stranded in the fields.

You have to wonder if the workers get their fair share of Dole's profits.

In talking to two of the middle-management men connected with Dole, I voiced some of my concerns about the welfare of the workers. They very politely told me that Dole pays better than a minimum wage there and also could not do better than it does because it would destroy the local economy and leave local businesses without any employees. Later on when I checked out this fact with other people in the area, they said that may be so, but the company could indirectly help the standard of living for their workers by ploughing back profits into social improvements in the area. I found these men, who are Filipinos, quite anxious to defend the company and also not so anxious to discuss in detail any of the possible problems."

Thus, from small, independent farmers, some former migrant-settlers and their children became agricultural workers in the company which now owns or leases their lands. This trend is shown by an exploratory survey made by the government in 1982 which showed that the combined number of share tenants and lessees combined in South Cotabato constituted 44% of farmers interviewed by the evaluators of the Province of South Cotabato made in 1982.

**112 THE TUNA COUNTRY AT THE SOUTHERN EDGE OF MINDANAO:  
GENERAL SANTOS CITY, 1939-2000**

But besides expansion and land acquisition by big capitalists, the issue of sustainability is raised in the fishing industry sector with the growing distance of the fishing grounds that "used to be reached in 24-30 hours but which now takes between 36 to 48 hours to reach".(Moro Kurier, 1993: 20-23). Correspondingly, this means bigger and better vessels, more fuel, supplies, ice, extra equipment and gears aside from the increase in the distance operating costs. In addition, the Louis Berger International Inc. found out that the extensive coral damage was caused by destructive fishing methods, erosion and siltation of rivers believed caused by the disappearance of forests showing at this instance the "interconnection of the web of life"(BRC Newsletter, 1994).

The city's low forest cover contributes significantly to its erosion problem made worse by the lack of sustained reforestation policy. As a result, flash floods occurring during heavy rains indicating the gravity of the environment problem.

Another vital concern is power supply which is significant for a modernizing city. The problem on power supply stems from supply unreliability brought about by an overdependence on hydroelectric power sources which proved precarious in the past due to drought and the knocking down of transmission lines by the rebels. Thus, while the city has a relatively better peace and order condition than Davao or Zamboanga, its interconnection with the rest of the island is shown by the effects of conflict in Mindanao.

NAPOCOR hopes to solve the problem of power supply unreliability through a plan to interconnect the Luzon, Leyte, Cebu and Mindanao power grids in 1997 for the purpose of exploiting the Leyte geothermal fields and allow power distribution from areas of surplus to those with deficits. Another way is through hydropower plants which will be commissioned in Mindanao. Areas planned for immediate implementation is Barangay Buayan and Siguel (both found in General Santos City).

Thus, lots of problems remain. However, these problems by themselves are not insurmountable. However, this author and humble residence of General Santos City believes that for an effective community to survive the modern era, its basic social unity has to be restored since people is the architect of its community, not the facilities and modern infrastructure. While modernization may have made it difficult to return to the days of a "conscious efforts of building a community" caused by the diffusion of such values due to impersonalism in an urbanized city, the capacity of its people to surmount problems of social unity remains highly possible if one has to go back to its track record of maintaining the framework of peaceful accommodation even in the turbulent years of the Mindanao conflict. Despite problems, the future remains hopeful for these people struggling through the intricacies of a melting pot community.