

Lila Shahani - Filipina writes up a storm

A woman who started a blog after a deadly typhoon is an unlikely voice of the powerless.

May 08, 2010 | By [John M. Glionna, Los Angeles Time](#) - john.glionna@latimes.com



Reporting from Seoul — Call her the accidental blogger, because Lila Shahani certainly never planned on becoming one of the Philippines' most controversial Internet voices.

All she did was write a letter to her uncle last fall expressing disappointment over the government's response to the deadly Typhoon Ondoy.

Granted, her uncle is former President Fidel V. Ramos. But supporters say the letter contained such elegant, well-reasoned arguments about what was wrong with her country that when the 42-year-old academic posted it online, people took notice.

Now, as the Philippines prepares to pick a new president Monday, Shahani has left her Manhattan home for her political and ethnic roots. She's back in Manila, writing [Notes From an Insomniac](#). In the post-midnight hours, she composes her thoughts about the intrigues of a nation where many live on less than a dollar a day.

She doesn't just riff off the news, but hits the streets to do her own reporting on topics often ignored by the mainstream news media. She's taken on clan warlords in the restive south, and questioned the culture of impunity for the nation's elite.

"My subject of interest is the disempowered," Shahani said. "I write what's in my head and I don't pander to the market, because I want to remain a social critic, nothing more."

Shahani was born into political aristocracy. Her mother, a distant relative of the late Ferdinand Marcos, is a former senator and diplomat who helped oust the dictator. But Shahani's illustrious lineage doesn't stop her from offering scathing insights to the sometimes unsavory world of Philippine politics, getting attention for her investigation into allegations of perjury by presidential hopeful Sen. Manny Villar, a self-made property developer millionaire.

A vocal critic of outgoing President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, Shahani despises what she calls the "power brokers full of hubris and a sense of entitlement, sycophants currying favor with all sides, self-righteous and embittered pseudo-leftists, political candidates peddling truth and enlightenment even as they sold off the country to the highest bidder, misogynists of every cast and temper, and vicious gossip as the one unifying thread throughout."

Shahani supports Benigno Aquino III, the front-runner and son of the late democracy icon Corazon Aquino. She thinks he can repair the nation after Arroyo's tenure, which has been marred by allegations of graft and election fraud.

She praises Aquino for speaking his mind "even at the risk of displeasing monolithic interests, whether they happen to be the administration, the Catholic Church, legal circles or public opinion itself."

Her postings have won the support of human rights activists and even brought marriage proposals. They've also brought a backlash.

She's been hounded by blog squads backed by various political candidates. One blogger dismissed Shahani as ignorant and "brazenly disingenuous."

Calling her "a disgrace to the Ramos clan," another said she "makes a big fuss about shoving her credentials in front of everyone simply because she knows she can't prove her points rationally."

Shahani doesn't flinch. "It's the nature of public discourse in Philippines: nonintellectuals incapable of engaging with you on the merit of your points," she said. "I'd welcome a spirited debate. Instead they just call you names."

Supporters say Filipinos need people like Shahani.

"The way she dived into the blogosphere, into the rough and tumble of Philippine politics, and her willingness to work with people on every social and economic level are just what it's going to take to change this country," said Mac McCarty, a Manila writer.

Shahani, born in Newark, N.J., has lived all over the world. She returned to the Philippines to work as deputy director of the Cultural Center of the Philippines and teach at her country's national university. She left in 1993, when her uncle was president, to visit India, her father's homeland.

For years, she shunned political life. Then last fall, while in Manhattan working on her doctoral thesis for Oxford University, she saw the images of the typhoon ravaging the Philippines. Ondoy, known outside the Philippines as Tropical Storm Ketsana, left about 300 people dead.

She felt compelled to write what she calls the "love letter to the Filipino people," and sent it to her uncle. Although she praised his accomplishments, she also questioned his support of the nation's political status quo.

"Our government was as much to blame for the colossal loss of life and habitation in the country as was climate change," she wrote of the typhoon response, signing the letter, "Love always, Lil."

Shahani posted the letter on Facebook, where the response prompted her to start the blog, which has received thousands of hits.

She continues to expose those aspects of Philippine society that break her heart, including the rigid class system and "astonishing arrogance of the landed elite," she said in an interview.

Calling her countrymen "forgiving to the point where we don't have any historical memory," she rues those who would vote for Imelda Marcos, who is running for a lower house seat.

"It's a frightening spectacle to see people here genuflect to prestige and power," she said. "The Imelda allure is the glamorous clothes, Ferragamo shoes, lofty wave of the hand. Even the upper classes think it's prestigious to be around her."

Although her blog signals hope for the Philippines, Shahani cannot shy away from the reality.

"All the hopes and dreams we had after getting rid of Marcos — it makes my heart heavy every time I come back to the Philippines," she said.

"I open the car window no matter how smoggy and look out and examine the road from the airport to our house, to see if there are more lights, more improvements. And it just gets worse."

Look more here: www.Literature.PhilippineCulture.ph