

Belmonte: Aiming for top QC post and 'everything trapos don't like'

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Quezon City Vice Mayor **Joy Belmonte**, who is hoping to be elected mayor of the country's largest city this May, may be a difficult politician to read.



Two of the women she looks up to in politics, Vice President Leni Robredo and Davao City Mayor Sara Duterte, are molded from entirely different clay. Belmonte, a threeterm vice mayor, was a member of the opposition Liberal Party (LP) before switching to President Duterte's ruling Partido Demokratiko PilipinoLakas ng Bayan (PDP-Laban). While candid about the advantages she has enjoyed as the daughter of the former Quezon City mayor and Speaker, Feliciano "Sonny" Belmonte Jr., she would like to believe that her governance style is, in many ways, very different from her father's.

"He doesn't like offending people. He is such a sweet man, that is why he doesn't have any enemies," she said in an interview with Inquirer reporters and editors on Thursday. "I'm more [his] opposite."

Not on speaking terms

Belmonte has no qualms about taking unpopular policy positions if she believes people would ultimately come around, she said. In the cutthroat world of local politics, where officials rush to curry favor with power brokers, her earlier work in the private sector had taught her the liberating power of saying "no," she added.

Almost casually, Belmonte revealed that "the mayor and I [are] not on speaking terms, which is really not an ideal situation."

She could not pin down exactly when her working relationship with Mayor Herbert Bautista, whom she had served as City Hall's No. 2 since his first term in 2010, began to sour.

But one exchange easily came to mind. When Bautista asked her to be his running mate, she recalled telling him: "OK, but I'm a reformist. I'm anticorruption. I'm for good governance. I'm everything traditional politicians don't like."

"He told me he, too, was all of those things."

The first three years of their partnership in governance were "very good." But soon Belmonte's administrative legroom, particularly in relation to her work with the city council, had significantly shrunk by the time she and Bautista were on their second term. As

she found herself being dropped from various committees, for example, she surmised that this was due to fundamental differences between her and the mayor's leadership style.

"The final nail in the coffin," she said, was when she conducted a hearing on an allegedly wasteful project that erected traffic and antidrug campaign signs in schools and public areas across the city. The inquiry came across as a "witch hunt" to those made nervous by her questioning, but "I take my job [of maintaining a system] of checks and balances in the city very seriously," she said.

Independent audit

Should she win, Belmonte said she would order an independent audit of all the bigticket projects she would be inheriting from Bautista, purely for the purpose of deciding which ones to continue.

Before she can get there, however, she must first defeat two rivals, Rep. Vincent "Bing-bong" Crisologo and former Rep. Chuck Mathay III.

Belmonte has tussled with the camp of Crisologo, the PDP-Laban Quezon City Council president, over who really had earned the distinction of being Mr. Duterte's anointed one for Quezon City. Both have claimed that they have this advantage.

She might not be PDP-Laban's official candidate, but Belmonte said she could cite two occasions when the President "raised my hand" for the cameras as a sign of his endorsement.

Doable projects

With the city's P21.5-billion budget, Belmonte said, she has a list of "doable" projects in mind should she win, including building a high-quality hospital per district, providing free maintenance drugs for senior citizens, and meeting the infrastructure needs of the K-12 education program.

She also hopes to administer social services similar to the first project she implemented in Quezon City: a one-stop help center for victims of domestic violence and abuse, for which she earned an award from the Philippine Commission on Women last week.

Among her most ambitious plans is the establishment of the city's first tuition-free public university.

Belmonte and her vice mayoral candidate, Councilor **Gian Sotto**, are running under her local Serbisyo sa Bayan Party, which is allied with Sara Duterte's Hugpong ng Pagbabago party.

Her switch from LP to the ruling PDP-Laban in 2017, Belmonte said, was on the advice of her father, a Liberal, and had the blessing of Robredo, who now chairs LP.

It was a "very difficult decision," she said, on account of her close relationship with Robredo.