

PNoy's SONA: Still the Amateur Hour

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The Philippine Constitution mandates the President of the Republic to deliver the State of the Nation Address (SONA) to Congress at the opening of its regular session. The President gives to Congress information about the state of the nation, the economy or people's livelihood such as employment opportunities, state of poverty, new infrastructure, and industrial projects. The President oftentimes uses the occasion to present the state of our national security and the direction of our foreign policy. The President then proposes to Congress, certain measures for legislation, usually programs or plans that he considers necessary to address the issues and problems of the nation.

The SONA as an annual practice began with President Manuel Quezon during the Commonwealth period of the Philippines.

President Benigno Aquino III's second SONA is a great disappointment to his supporters, not for his paltry accomplishments or his voluminous exposés of the supposedly corrupt practices of former President Arroyo and her staff, but for what he omitted. This shift in perception - from PNoy as political savior to PNoy as creature of Political cronies - can be seen in his falling approval ratings. In fact his inability to discipline intramurals among his cabinet members has become the butt of all jokes. Opposition leader Congressman E. Lagman claimed that "Kaibigan, Kamaganak and Kabarilan" rule the government.

Despite rumors about his "hands-on" participation in the crafting of the SONA and the new slogan about "*sagisag ng pagbabago... hindi lang sa kalsada kundi sa kaisipan sa lipunan*" (change, not only in the streets but also in national outlook), he refrained from addressing the much awaited controversial populist issues that needed immediate resolution: Hacienda Luisita, Freedom of Information Bill, detailed information on the Public Private Partnership program, clear definition of the direction of Philippine foreign policy and national security. It appears that he and his communicators have once again evaded PNoy's long-expected political and economic narrative. Indeed by keeping mum on the populist issues, PNoy gave his critics the opening to co-opt them and turn them against him. Which many opposition politicians did, openly and with great effect. They asked: "What has he been doing about these promises?"

Instead PNoy as with his Inaugural Speech and his first SONA, delivered a semi-campaign speech. Not his performance during the campaign and when he delivered his inaugural address won him a big following, but essentially they were – performances. He is still fixated with going after and jailing the corrupt members of the Arroyo administration. Clearly, he and his speechwriters can't tell the difference between campaigning and governing. In campaigning there is no need to prove that you mean what you say and

you can go on and on with hyperbole. In governing, the President must present concrete plans and detailed programs to address national issues and problems. Moreover the President must implement such plans and programs with moral clarity.

PNoy's SONA has three major themes: his accomplishments, exposés on corruption and electoral fraud under the Arroyo administration, and his agenda proposals for 2012 and beyond. He lingered longest on the exposé part and presented hardly any meaningful proposal to address the day-to-day problems of the peoples such as high prices of oil, food, transport and toll fares, electricity, and water. Worse he also failed to spell out definitively our foreign policy direction in today's world order and our national defense program given current security challenges. On the last two issues, PNoy only made vague generalizations, which are neither policy statements nor meaningful clarifications on the state of our foreign relations with other countries, specifically China and the United States.

This shortcoming shows that the highest echelons of the Department of Foreign Affairs have not briefed the President or that they have little or no understanding of the current world developments as well as the challenges facing the country. Thus on the contested Recto (Reed) Bank he can only declare: *"Ang sa Pilipinas ay sa Pilipinas; kapag tumapak ka sa Recto Bank, para ka na ring tumapak sa Recto Avenue."* (What belongs to the Philippines belongs to the Philippines; when you stepped on Recto Bank, it is like stepping on Recto Avenue.) Worse his position on our recent conflict with China appears to be based on rumor: *"Tama nga po kaya ang kuwento tungkol sa isang stand-off noon araw? Tinapatan daw ang mga marino natin ng kanyon. Ang ginawa nila, pumutol ng puno ng niyog, pininturahan ito ng itim, saka itunutok sa kalaban."* (Is the story I heard true; that our marines were confronted by canons. The marines cut a coconut tree, painted it black and leveled it at the enemy.) Whatever is his point, one never knows. It is only his ghostwriters who understand the PNoy's point.

To assure the Filipino people that he is not taking the country to war against China, PNoy declares that what he did was to let the world know that he intends to fight for what belongs to the Philippines. And as a safety measure, he has acquired the U.S. Hamilton Class Cutter to patrol our waters. PNoy intends, as with the Chinese, to bring the Philippine case on the Recto (Reed) Bank to the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea.

In the report PNoy conveniently left out his earlier reaction to the Chinese moves in the Recto (Reed) Bank conflict wherein he reflexively asked U.S. State Secretary Hilary Clinton and Ambassador Harry Thomas to come to our rescue instead of dealing with the Chinese as an independent sovereign state. As a consequence PNoy is now viewed as an Amboy whose foreign policy has been shaped in accordance with American dictates, but not in pursuance of Philippine national interests.

On national defense, PNoy's policy appears to help the Defense establishment acquire more logistics; buying more modern helicopters, patrol crafts, and weapons in bulk so he can get a great discount and avoid the need to bribe anyone. For most defense analysts these explanations may show that PNoy is a frugal person, however they do explain clearly the logic for modernization. The Armed Forces in previous years had been given large sums of money for modernization and precisely because they are not accompanied by a detailed plan implementable plan, the appropriated money according to the whistleblowers during the Senate hearings on graft and corruption in the military, went to the pockets of the commanding generals.

In PNoy's narration of his accomplishments for the year past, self-rated hunger went down from 20.5% to 15.1%. While the country may have 5% less hungry; unfortunately there are still more than 23 million hungry people in the Republic. By any measure there is nothing to brag about. The stock market index went up several times exceeding previous all-time highs. Yes the stock market index did go up but did not stay up there for long. According to most economists, "the impacts of ratings change itself weren't significant...But more important for the markets than the rating moves, are the country's underlying economic trends." Every broker knows that the index fluctuates everyday. Downgrades or upgrades are not that important according to the experience of most advanced economies. The message is never to lose the high rating status to begin with. Despite the exciting news that our credit rating went up by all rating agencies, PNoy admits in the same breath that the rating agencies have been found to be dishonest. No doubt they will try to give a semblance of being stricter but that is only to regain their failed credibility.

PNoy bragged that the government has saved 23 billion pesos from January to Aril 2011, which accordingly could be used as Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) funds for 2.3 million poor. He also claimed that he has instituted several corrective measures that would henceforth stop graft and corruption in the following government bureaucracies: Bureau of Internal Revenue, Bureau Customs, Government Owned and Operated Corporations, Laguna Lake, National Housing Authority, Bureau of Jail Management and Penology and in the different regional government bureaucracies. Meanwhile, the intramural between Ms. Torres and Mr. De Jesus, the corruption in the BJMP by a PNoy appointee which has been greatly publicized, has given cause to many Filipinos, that they simply cannot trust Malacañang to responsibly oversee such a massive bureaucracy.

PNoy made clear that his most significant achievement has been his Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program or Conditional Cash Transfer Program which, Secretary Dinky Soliman claims to be the centerpiece of PNoy's anti-poverty program. He is confident that he can add another 1.3 million family beneficiaries to the targeted 2.3 million families for this year. He also made clear: "*Personal talaga sa akin ang paggawa ng tama, at pagpapanagot sa mga gumawa ng mali – sino man sila.*" (It is personal issue to me to do what is right and make those who do wrong answerable). Yet he did not

acknowledge that the Conditional Cash Transfer Program, which is actually part of the Millennium Development Challenge Program of President Bush, was a legacy of the Arroyo administration. President Arroyo applied for the MDC in 2008 and was finally granted to the Philippines in 2010 during the term of PNoy. Parenthetically PNoy broke protocol when he cancelled his state visit to Vietnam without explaining why must go to New York to receive officially the MDC award from U.S. President Barack Obama. The findings on the handling of cash transfers by the MDC in Latin America and Africa are that they are only popular as long as there is money for the program. Once the money runs out and there are no complementary projects to provide viable livelihood or jobs to the recipients; the project does not help lessen the number of poor in those countries.

In his report about his fight against corruption, PNoy makes us believe that he has already won half the battle – thus for nearly a third of his speech he listed in detail all of the exposés that were revealed during the Senate hearings and by the media. The exposés ironically did not come from something like his failed Truth Commission but from whistleblowers that gave information of their own free will. Still these revelations are full of “he said,” and “she said” that have yet to be proven in the courts.

The SONA speech and his past achievements reveal that PNoy has not been the leader Filipino liberals and progressives dream about. He may appear to be more straightforward than most politicians but has shown in many of his decisions that he is not a transformational leader. He wants to be a man of the masses, to be a hero or savior and for contrast he attacks the Arroyo administration for treachery, lack of compassion, greed, graft and corruption that brought the country to its knees. Sadly he does not have the vision or the program to liberate our people from their terrible economic fate.

PNoy’s exclusion of the Freedom of Information bill (FOI) in his list of priority bills, which during campaign he promised that it would be one of his high priorities, but has become “a definite no, no” shows that PNoy does not believe in transparency. Worse that like any other politician he will promise anything just to get elected. What he wants now is an information bill that will shield him from scrutiny from the public by using national security considerations to cover up his wrong doings. In view of endless criticisms from media practitioners, PNoy’s communicators a few days ago said that he would sign the FOI bill if approved by Congress.

The basic or most important part of dissatisfaction with PNoy originates from what initially attracted his supporters -- the notion of PNoy being the son of a martyr and a very religious president can only be a hero to the people. Supporters were inspired by PNoy’s oratory to follow the road taken by his parents and believed he would care more about social justice, especially the poor in Hacienda Luisita. Indeed Hacienda Luisita workers expected him to be a hero. Unfortunately after a year in office PNoy bungled a historic opportunity to give land instead of paper to Hacienda Luisita workers.

More disturbing he also failed to appoint dedicated and honest experts as his co-workers. Instead he appointed friends, relatives and political allies who are more interested in collecting political debt and pushing their personal agenda and least interested in serving the people.

Politically, PNoy's administration has been losing all the good will he has earned during the campaign and at the start of his Presidency. Until now there is still no coherence in the government. The factions within his administration behave as if there are no national imperatives - only personal interests.

Except those who have already collected political debts from PNoy, it is hard to find any major group, which supported him during the presidential campaign that is happy with his one-year of governance. For those voters who have high hopes in PNoy's ability, change has not come fast enough; he has been behind the curve, worse, in most instances, not at all. Many are frustrated or exasperated. They don't understand why until now he and his advisers are still studying the issues and problems, when they are supposed to be the top experts of the land. Or why Malacañang has been unable and oftentimes unwilling to solve any of their problems.

Environmentalists and victims of natural disasters are concerned about the administration's failure to aggressively address global climate change; until now PNoy offers no concrete plans and programs to relocate the yearly victims of natural disasters to new communities and no concrete plans to reforest and afforest denuded areas, as well as rehabilitate flood prone areas, despite occasional announcements to do so.

The people are tired of incompetence, intramurals, indecisiveness, inaction, and the excuses and the arrogance. They suffer while the so-called top advisers are in knots when confronted by challenging problems.

Despite his promises to carry out the wishes of the people, PNoy singularly lacks moral courage to manage the country and to provide a vision for the nation's future. Yes, PNoy is still a likable man, but the country needs an effective and decisive president. Let us hope that in the second year of his administration, PNoy will evolve into a transformational leader and think of serving the majority of the Filipino people and no longer his political class. ###