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## Two Versions of the Philippine Political Economy<sup>1</sup>

*The only serious threat to the real interests of our people can come from a failure of leadership, failure to address age-old problem of poverty, wealth creation and distribution and failure to adjust sensibly to new challenges. Let us hope that this is only a passing nightmare.*

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There are many ways of looking at the political and socio-economic situation in the country today. It may rightly, for instance, be seen as martial rule, without official proclamation, but with all trappings of warrantless arrests, detention without due process, official assent to extra-judicial killings, dictatorship under a so-called democratic shell.

### The Malacañang version

Or it may, for instance, be seen through the lenses of President Arroyo, her press agents and political allies, that we are becoming a modern state whose economy will soon turn us into one of the newly-industrialized nations of Asia. Moreover, the government has been winning the war on terror, and has finally silenced the political opposition. With the artifacts of prosperity so readily at hand, ordinary people in the Philippines now have a higher estimate of their endowments and broader conceptions of their entitlements than ever before. There can be no doubt that a rosy future awaits the Filipino people. No less than President Arroyo herself has announced the week before she left for Vietnam that majority of our people are “upbeat about their economic future.”

In the economic realm, the President and her dream team economists have informed the world that the Philippines economy will soon be the best of all centuries, in terms of sheer growth and advances in standard of living.

According to government statistics, the economy during the past two years has grown by 5.5 percent. Every year over a million jobs have been created. Thanks to the OFWs, their remittances have reached \$10 billion and are still flowing in. As a consequence, domestic liquidity growth was recorded at 16 percent - the highest so far this year. The peso has appreciated against the dollar from P55 to P49 to the dollar (\$1). This has led to record high Balance of Payment this year and has reduced our debt obligations significantly. Only a few months ago, tax collection, which has reached a new altitude, and “tight expenditures” have reduced the fiscal deficit to P115.5 about P9.5 billion below the P125 billion target ceiling in 2005. The Department of Finance promises to reduce the deficit further and will make it much lower than the target ceiling of P105 billion this 2006. Moreover, inflation rate

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has been held to a single digit. Phenomenal economic growth has taken millions of our poor out of the poverty line, hunger no longer stalks the land, delivery of health services has never been more efficient than now, subsidized free meals for school children have reduced the number of malnourished and dropouts.

The roadmap for further economic development of super regions is in place. Precisely because of these developments, foreign financial houses have upgraded our credit rating from negative to stable. China, Japan, the EU, Australia, and even India have pledged to extend loans to help further develop the country. Foreign direct investment commitments have reached new heights. The Filipino people, like their boxers and billiard players who now stand side by side with world champions, will soon be among the richest people in the developed world.

### Wonder worker

Numerous Malacañang publicists tell us through government-owned radio and television stations that in view of these extraordinary achievements, virtually every Filipino looked up to President Arroyo as a wonder worker who brought them a self-esteem hitherto reserved only for the rich and powerful. Arroyo indeed is the most popular and adored presidents, surveys by Pulse Asia and SWS to the contrary notwithstanding.

Just a few weeks after the enactment and implementation of the extended value added tax (e-vat) law, our economy has taken off. This means that the economy of the Republic is growing at a faster

rate than the two fastest-growing economies of the world, China and India. After all, it took the two countries more over twenty years to attain their respective phenomenal economic growths.

In the delivery of social services, the Department of Health tells us that SARS and Bird Flu have been successfully halted from entering the country. Statistics on cases of deaths due to Dengue, Malaria, Meningo Oxemia, and Salmonella compared to previous years have been reduced significantly. The equipment and services in public hospitals and rural health centers have been extensively upgraded. Thanks to PhilHealth and the Botika ng Bayan, the costs of medical care and medicine have been reduced dramatically.

Many young people are employed in call and medical transcription centers due government support and endowment of IT and nursing schools, drawing hundreds of thousands of citizens away from rural towns and urban neighborhoods.

The delivery and care of the poor such as the provision of potable water and low-priced power have never been carried out in more extensive and comprehensive manner than under the Arroyo administration. If good governance and caring government may be measured by how high a valuation the leadership places on the poor and powerless, Arroyo's claim to being the best and greatest president ever should be clear and unchallenged.

Everywhere in the Republic, Filipinos are getting basic commodities like grain, instant noodle, salt, vinegar, sugar, meat, and fish at affordable prices from the Palenke ng Bayan.

### **Terrorists and destabilizers**

In the campaign against terrorists and political destabilizers, GMA and the AFP reported that they have broken the backs of the political destabilizers and the rebellious NPA, MILF, MNLF, and the Abu Sayyaf group. All the AFP needs now is more intelligence funds, more money to increase the number of the police force in order to conduct an all out coup de grace (war) to end their rebellion. Indeed GMA's anti-terror strategy, according to our envoy to Vietnam, Ambassador Benjamin Defensor, has been chosen as the model for anti-terrorism campaign in the region. Presumably, the Ambassador must be talking about joint military exercises with the U.S. troops, the exchange of intelligence information about Jemaah Islamiya (JI) infiltration in the region, and opening out of their training camps to the Philippines, above all the use calibrated preemptive response and Proclamation 1017 to quell political protests in the streets. The campaign against terrorism serves another security goal, too. The current war against terrorism is an example of our determined resistance against the "Muslim extremists who represent the forces of meaningless destabilization." It fits well into the mold of the far older struggle between good and evil.

Because of the material advances and in order to preserve the technological and economic bases of our gains from future political instability there is need to change our obsolete

presidential system. If the presidential system has brought about the age of decline, the parliamentary system will be a time of ascendancy. The terminal hour of the outdated presidential system has arrived and must be mercifully laid to rest. The Sigaw ng Bayan must be empowered to inform the Filipino people of the coming "new age." Filipinos were told that such a goal could be achieved in part with the consent of at least eight million signatories.

The campaign to change the constitution should not be reflection on GMA's performance as president – for her management is at present still in a class of its own in terms of economic achievement and in its all out-war against terrorism. But, she cannot avoid feeling the weight of system obsolescence, which holds back progress. And, since GMA and her House majority represent the spirit of ascendancy, they would like to establish new polities in which the Senate will be abolished and the same House majority will be become the new members of parliament. It should be indicated that since, in partnership with GMA, they are the purveyors and creators of a vast array of strategic programs of development, they should continue to carry on the legacy of economic growth and prosperity. In consequence, the new government will not have to cope with, so familiar under the old presidential system, the risks of instability and disorder.

### **Parliamentary system**

The parliamentary system would be a more stable and less contentious political system. Among others, there would be no more people power movements that disrupt effective governance, no more Senate investigations that discredit and therefore diminish the leadership's ability to govern. Under parliamentary system, the Supreme Court cannot be politicized, there would be no long drawn out court cases on constitutional issues as a new body appointed by the parliament will take over judicial review from the Supreme Court.

There are, according to the declarations of PI and Cha-cha promoters, many other equally important benefits under a parliamentary system. Political campaigns would be relatively inexpensive since candidates for members of the parliament would be limited to the district represented that they would represent. Any Filipino who aspires to be the leader of his nation need not spend an arm and a leg to get elected. There would no more nationwide campaigns for the Presidency, Vice Presidency and the Senate, which requires the solicitation of large sums of campaign funds that often leads to the payment of political debts, which is the root cause of graft and corruption in the land. The members of the parliament, who would be the true representatives of the people, would elect the Prime Minister, who would now be the leader of the Filipino nation. Direct elections or mob rule would be a thing of the past. With the institution of the parliamentary system, we shall soon be a modern political state. It is not at all impossible to suggest that, as with our Asian neighbors, we shall soon be among the strongest socio-politico-economic tigers of the region.

Moreover, in this new system there would be no term limits for the members of the parliament. Term limits, accordingly, will only deprive our people of the services of brilliant and exceptional statesmen, like the leadership in the House of Representatives today.

In the official rhetoric of the leaders of the People's Initiative and Congressional Cha-cha advocates, it should be made clear that GMA's all-out support for PI and Cha-cha is motivated purely by a desire to preserve her legacy of unending economic growth and prosperity than egotistical ambition to remain in office for life. In short, the GMA administration has achieved socio-economic gains far larger than the present presidential system can sustain. The demands and requirements of the future generation of Filipinos will outrun the capability of the presidential system and unless changed, the country will again face endless political turmoil and tragedy.

### The Other Version

Unfortunately for GMA, foreign financial evaluators, non-administration economic experts, newspaper, radio and television reporters joined by opposition leaders, human rights lawyers, historians, and the man in the street are giving a different story about our political and socio-economic situation today. Their evaluation appears to be in stark contrast to her claims of good governance and prosperity. Some even concluded that the administration of GMA is capable of any lie or extra-legal act just to squelch the opposition and to fool the Filipino people.

In their view, the Arroyo administration did not begin in 2005 on which she tried to paint her crowning achievements. She has assumed office since 2001 and until now has nothing to show except catastrophic ruins and abject poverty for our people. Indeed, they believe that assessing the political and socio-economic situation is like making the most out of the wreckage left by the Hurricane Gloria during the past five years.

For most Filipinos, the country is going through the worst of all historical periods, the martial law years notwithstanding. There is widespread starvation in the land. Non-government television and radio stations give regular coverage on the hungry all over the land. The latest surveys have revealed that over 10 million of Filipinos go hungry every year. More than 35 million are living below the poverty line. About 4.5 million are unemployed or underemployed. The Philippines has one of the largest numbers of malnourished children in the world. The Philippines ranks 83rd out of 177 countries in human development. Transparency International routinely lists the Philippines as one of the topnotchers in graft and corruption. The only people who denounce survey findings and challenge their methodologies are the cronies and beneficiaries of the Arroyo administration.

Except for the year 2005, actual GDP over the past four years of Arroyo administration was 4.1 percent well below the 25-year national average of 4.5 percent. Food, shelter and delivery of health services remain the foremost problems of most Filipinos.

Police brutality and extra-judicial killings; appear to be the order of the day.

### Lawless Gloria

While GMA commands us to obey the laws of the land, she herself does not abide by the same laws. This is clearly revealed by the series of decisions issued by the Panganiban Court that declared the CPR, EO 464, and P1017 or the use of police and military force to eliminate an imagined or invented threat, as unconstitutional. Indeed, despite the Supreme Court ruling, Malacañang legal advisers and many policemen rejected the idea of subjecting the rule of force to the rule of law. Indeed, with the widespread application of the Calibrated Preemptive Response against opposition groups that took to the streets, extra-judicial killings against the opposition in non-metro areas followed. Contempt for the rule of law has been the order of the day – despite the fact that even foreign investors, particularly the American Chamber of Commerce, the EU ministers and the Japanese business group have issued a joint declaration denouncing the practice of extra-judicial killings, could only dismiss such condemnations as unwarranted and interference into the internal affairs of the country. According Malacañang apologists, the quelling of rebellion always entails the possibility that things could go wrong. It is no more than natural for more powerful groups to dispose of weaker ones. The PNP like early tribal groups, must either conquer or be conquered. Above all violent and cruel repressions have been the only ways to prove the continued existence of hair on chest of the Philippine National Police.

The fact is, local and foreign media regularly carry TV footage on the use of unnecessary force by the police in dispersing legitimate assemblies, showing clearly the overwhelming disparity of force between police and civilians so that the hospitalization of demonstrators with broken skulls and broken limbs was a foregone conclusion. Ministers of friendly nations, including editorials against warrantless arrests, detention and torture without due process as well as nonstop extra-judicial killings, condemned such show of violence. But the Arroyo government appears undeterred. Malacañang apologists insist that the “destabilizers” have only themselves to blame for killing each other and for making themselves imminent threats to the very existence of the Arroyo government. Finally, there is need for GMA to show domestic and international critics that she is in control and could insure the safety of their investments at all times.

Commentators claim that the administration's announcements about its accomplishments do not comport with what the Filipinos see in their daily lives. If the average GDP growth rate was 5.5 percent in the five years of her administration and over a million jobs have been created every year since she took office, how come there is still much hunger all over the land. Every year nearly a million Filipino men and women want to leave the country in search of employment in other countries. Many of them are even willing to put up with uncertain and dangerous jobs, our women risk getting molested by their employers and our men risk getting bombed carrying out paramilitary work for the American troops in Iraq.

## Never heard jobs

If over a million jobs were created every year, how come nobody heard about them until the President announced them in her State of the Nation Address? Whereas so much publicity and fanfare accompanied the U.S. government's announcement that it was going to employ 15,000 Filipinos in Guam or that some U.S. Information Technology companies are going to outsource over a hundred thousand jobs for call centers in the Philippines. Our workers who recently left Kazakhstan did not seem impressed by OWWA's solicitude when they were unable to answer their most worrisome question: where can we get jobs here?

Moreover, they claim that job security in the Philippines has come to mean that if the workers asked for wage increase they told that they would lose their jobs either being fired or laid off. In the Philippines today there is great likelihood that after losing a full-time job one can find only a part time work replacement. Indeed, there may be a demand for their services, but the rates for labor are inadequate to attract even the unemployed. Transportation cost between their domicile and place of work would already eat away half of the day's earning.

There are obvious reasons for workers' resentment against the Arroyo government. Politicians still lectured the lower classes on the need for hard work, self-control, patience, and accept the government's scheme of things: Higher wages could only lead to inflation and layoffs. In truth, the unemployed and underemployed Filipinos have as much native intelligence and skills as do their governing politicians. Many in fact have impressive talents and are morally upright. They also know that the politicians became rich not because of hard work but because they helped themselves with the taxpayers' money and had not suffered hunger or other hardships. Majority of the electorate see political and economic problems mainly as a decline of moral values.

If the peso has appreciated significantly against the dollar and if our international debts in dollar term and fiscal deficit have been reduced significantly, how come the prices of basic commodities have risen drastically? The relatives of OFWs have asked why is it that when the exchange rate was P55 to \$1 a loaf of bread that cost P26 now cost P38. Indeed if you compared the price of commodities in your supermarket receipts between the periods when the peso-dollar exchange rate was P55 to \$1 to the P49 to \$1 rate, you may discover that despite the so-called 10 to 12 percent peso appreciation, the prices of commodities have been inflated by from 20 to 40 percent. This cannot be attributed to wage increases. The wages of our workers have been stagnant since GMA became President. Some claim that it is due to the e-vat, others believe that the police and tax collectors have perfected their tong systems, still others claim that while the peso has appreciated against the dollar, it has depreciated against the other currencies. And, since much of our consumer goods are no longer imported from the USA, we have to pay a higher price for these items. In short, GMA and her spin-doctors have been engaged in presenting one-sided news about our economic gains.

## Record-high debt

Others have asked if we have more dollars today to pay for our debt, how come our national debt has reached a record high of P4 trillion pesos? Within the span of five years, President Arroyo has incurred twice the combined borrowings of previous presidents from Diosdado Macapagal to Marcos, Aquino, Ramos and Estrada.

Those who traveled through the Philippines, even during times when there are no natural or man-made disasters, informed us that at every bus stop or even check point corners, you see children and adolescent boys and girls begging for money "to buy food," which should be obvious to government propagandists that growth, if there is any, has not reached these people. You may see signs of Governors, Congressmen, and City mayors proudly welcoming you to their fiefdoms, but the real welcomers are beggars of all ages by the drones.

It is easy to hear about the number of clinics in each congressional district, but it is difficult to find doctors, nurses or medicine in these places. So-called government projects such as health centers have no medicine and if there were, they are expired medicines. Yet when you go to small *boticas* (corner drug stores) you see medicines marked "free sample not for sale" or "donated by..." or "gift of the government of ... to the people of the Philippines." This is what words about moral decline in government service cannot convey: the reach and coverage of the number of people involved, and how little the politicians can reform them, since they are mainly political appointees.

Often TV viewers see special reports that showed poor families going hungry not only in the hinterlands but also in major urban centers, including Metro-Manila and its environs. Poverty, malnutrition and sickness exist side by side with brothels, beer joints, karaoke bars, and drug pushing. These joints place at your disposal the shapeliest and most glamorous women. Good times mean viewing the voluptuous women wiggling their shapely legs and revealing their prominent bosoms or trading on the flesh of poor adolescent girls, who have been saucily dressed to fulfill the fantasies of overpaid government bureaucrats, soldiers, policemen, depraved oldsters and adventurous youths out for cheap thrills or to attain their masculine dreams. These are the depressed urban areas that give birth to violence, drug addiction, rape, crime, and degeneracy. Some even called these areas the "smut of Philippine civilization" or "the places of shame" of the Arroyo government. Arroyo economic developers appear blind to these widespread urban ruins and community disintegration, which are testimonies to government insensitivity and indifference to national decay.

Worse, while these situations are as stark and real as any social issues and problems known to all Filipinos, they are not part of government priority reform projects. The sad state of the nation is best seen in conduct of rescue and relief work when natural disasters strike. For as the scenes of devastation unfold, the fault lines within the physical foundation of Arroyo's achievement get exposed before your very eyes. Arroyo's governance of the nation

has almost universally been inept and inefficient and at worst negligent and criminal.

### **Poor people's disasters**

Indeed typhoons, floods and other forms of natural calamity are known in the Philippines as the poor people's disasters. These disasters expose their poverty, their helplessness, and their abject misery. The Philippines they lived in is the opposite of what we read or see on tourist ads that the Philippines is composed of "picturesque and pristine islands and beaches of a tropical paradise." Most so-called pristine islands are little more than bare expanses, mud slopes and death traps, to be kept out of sight from tourists. Indeed tourists must be told that tourism in these places is profane. For in these devastated areas thousands of victims go hungry for months, remain sick and homeless, sheltered temporarily in dilapidated schoolrooms, town halls, and makeshift sheds with no potable water and with little food. And, despite handouts by their mayors, congressmen, and governors and sometimes even by the president, one sees no grandeur to the tragedy and no generosity of spirit in the men and women who distributed the doleouts.

In most cases when government rescue crews left the wreckage, usually after the necessary photo-shoots and TV footage were taken, the poor victims, accustomed to being abandoned by their political leadership had to take over the search and to dig out their buried dead relatives, neighbors, and friends. They were compelled by their poverty to confront, witness, and bear the pains of their personal tragedies alone and no presidential promise of help or handouts of a few measly sardine tins, instant noodles, and a kilo of grain can heal. Typhoons and floods obscenely expose the empress GMA without dress, who cannot provide the poor, even in their critical life and death moments, their intimate and basic needs. These oversights are silent testimonies to a catastrophe called the Arroyo administration.

TV reports made heroes of so-called aid or rescue officials do not include a juxtaposition of their comforts outside camera ranges. Though these officials made it a point to wear worn t-shirts, fashionable bush jackets, and mud-caked rubber shoes, to show their affinity with the poor, they made sure that they were out of harm's way when they were beyond the reporters' reach. These people, after photo-shoot opportunities, could not care less about the aftereffects of the devastation. For instance the stagnant floodwater would soon become prolific breeding places of malarial mosquitoes and salmonella, which would afflict the remaining survivors with fatal infections. Nor could they add to the ubiquitous piles of warped lumber, mildewed posts, broken advertising billboards, and twisted roofing sheets gathered like garbage refuse getting ready to be rebuilt and inhabited for lack of alternative building materials.

Makeshift construction, from garbage cans and wastes to housing asylum, gives substantiation that our people have found the concrete model for Jose Conception's slogan about the "Filipino Can." Television reports self-evidently negate the president's lies

and admonish in living color her careless, insensitive, and substandard management of the country.

Meanwhile the orgy of corruption continues in government offices as well as in government-owned and -controlled corporations, through inflated salaries, magnified maintenance and operating expenses, overblown pork barrel projects, overpriced purchases, ghost employees, ghost projects, and ghost deliveries.

Just as lethal as the issue of poor governance is the issue of GMA's legitimacy. As reflected in the series of surveys conducted by SWS, Pulse Asia and Ibon, most Filipinos perceive GMA's presidency as illegitimate and looks at GMA as the woman who cannot avoid doing damage to the Republic. Like Cerberus, the gatekeeper of Hades, she seems to be doing things from two perspectives as a matter of course. She has even evolved two kinds of laws, one for herself and her cronies, the other for her political enemies. The former Secretary Hernando Perez despite findings within the Office of the Ombudsman that showed evidence of corruption has not been charged, while Metro-Manila mayors who are with the opposition and who are still being investigated for the corruption charges against them are being removed with the full force of the police.

Just look at her cabinet and other appointees, she seems to be more interested picking advisers and allies whose only virtues are loyalty, submissiveness and greed. She does not care even she had been told that their records have revealed that they were all flawed, born losers and had been charged with many cases of graft and corruption. They reached public life giving those around them every reason to believe that they would continue the sale for cash of power, influence, privileges and immunities of their offices.

### **Arrogant bureaucrats**

Some of the new Malacañang phenomena include presidential legal and political advisers, official spokespersons of the police and spin-doctors. They are arrogant bureaucrats in whom subservience to the commander-in-chief fuses seamlessly with avariciousness. While some have the wisdom after filling their coffers to banish into thin air quickly, others seem to have arrived at the resolve to be Malacañang's permanent clowns and shock absorbers.

The men and women, whom GMA appointed to positions of trust, betrayed their benefactor by rampant corruption and gross abuse of power. Worst even presidential programs such as those espoused in her SONA that supposedly to help alleviate poverty, such as the promotion of the underground economy, did not blind her own appointees from turning them into wealth making opportunities of their own. As a preliminary step, the governor of Metro-Manila reinterpreted to mean that he has the mandate to beat and drive out of the sidewalks the poor Filipinos who wanted to escape the poverty trap through the underground economy. Worst, the governor's "hulidaps" confiscated their goods and divested them of their hard-earned money and pocketed them. Even after the media has exposed all these abuses, the president turned her head the other way. In short, despite rhetorical

obedience to the poor, the Arroyo administration, and its allies in Congress and local governments have swept aside all concerns to help the poor, and fastened economic underdevelopment upon the political opposition.

This is not to suggest that were it not for the men and women around her, state of the nation could have been better. The truth is GMA does not belong to the tradition of nation builders, nor does she understand the vision of economic plenty created through endowing our youth with quality education, just distribution of wealth, establishment of productive industries, hard work, elimination of graft and corruption in government bureaucracy and judicious use of our natural resources.

Corruption is hardly new in our country - it is a colonial legacy. Arroyo's people only brought it to the state of the art. Corruption scandals corroborated an intuitive notion of many Filipinos that politicians are crooks. People respect honesty but they come to expect dishonesty in government bureaucracy. In effect, they distrusted their representatives, and this thought has been confirmed in surveys on trust ratings of politicians, above all they doubted the capability of GMA to govern.

There are winners as well as losers even in the so-called aid programs for the poor such as dole outs, artesian wells here and there, free health insurance cards, and free land titles, which are mainly publicity stunts than a genuine desire of GMA to lift our people out of the poverty line. Not all recipients who were bestowed dole out largesse have been set up for life. You must have seen, heard, and read of instances on how poor people were taken for a ride when after they were handed land titles to the government lots by the president, were thereafter ejected from these lots by the special police force of Malacañang. As it turned out, such charitable acts were only for show as the executive orders ordering such donations were unsigned. The fates of the widows of foot soldiers who died in combat duty were no better. They were publicly promised large sums of cash yet follow-up interviews by media people revealed that these widows were never given the promised assistance. When reminded about these offerings, GMA blamed "the few scalawags" in the bureaucracy for failing to implement her orders. Non-governmental media people, in GMA's view, not only report about the bad things in her administration but they exaggerate such omissions out of proportion.

But for GMA the larger media oversight is the failure of media people to appreciate the new parameters she has set for gauging government accomplishments. For instance, the media people have been criticizing her for overspending and incurring huge fiscal deficits since she took over the government from President Estrada. Instead of using the old economic parameters they should study how she changed these old parameters with new ones. If the deficit, no matter how large the amount, is within the stipulated target ceiling, she should be rated highly.

Using the same approach if the police in 2004 were unable to solve 3,000 murder cases and in 2005 were unable to solve 2,995 there can be no doubt that the police did very well compared to the previous year and is therefore in control of the peace and order

situation. Similarly, if in 2004 3,000 children died of dengue and malaria and in 2005 only 2,995 died, clearly the Department of Health also did well. In short, reporters must evaluate their accomplishments in statistical magnitudes. The inability of the police to solve 2,995 murder cases or the failure of the Department of Health to prevent 2,995 deaths due to dengue and malaria is beside the point. The exemplary nature of using statistical magnitudes for comparing outcomes is well recognized by all the modern institutions of the world.

### Lying with statistics

No doubt our electorate are not convinced that the task of the presidency is to lie with statistics. Statistical magnitudes do not provide food, shelter, and jobs nor do they tell about the extent of our people's suffering and deprivation.

GMA's legitimacy, her capacity to govern, and the power-sharing scheme she forged with the majority in Congress and her AFP and PNP protectors have been the great moral issues of the GMA government. What is most disturbing is that these people are now making the policies and political decisions in the country. Indeed GMA's role as president, according to Senator Joker Arroyo, has been reduced from commander-in-chief to the commanded chief. She now takes on the role of a pathetic amateurish talk show interviewer who rides on the glory of Filipino achievers from captains of industry and taipans to beauty queens, billiard champions, boxing champions, child prodigies, and exam topnotchers in the different professions. Meanwhile, Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita, other top brass of the military and police as well as the leaders of the House majority have taken over policy decision-making on political matters. This has led many commentators to declare that her failure to speak out on important policy issues or her delegation of the task to Secretary Ermita represents an abdication of the preeminent presidential role. Many analysts believe that she has become a marionette of the military and the leaders of the House of Representatives.

Worse, these allies have foregone any effort to hide their newfound roles. De Venecia has been pushing for Cha-cha and no elections. And, in the case of Secretary Ermita, whatever disclaimers he would issue, the same commentators believe that behind the scene, he showed more energy, interest, cunning, purpose and command than the members of the Malacañang press understood in press conferences. Executive Secretary Ermita has been so comfortable as surrogate president that he now could weave seamlessly his personal views and opinions into presidential pronouncements. Whether this arrangement is deliberate in order to shield the president from facing her political oppositors or that she has been manipulated into agreeing to such a scheme, the fact is, she certainly is not in command. Worse, she has fully accepted the premises of her military allies. While she condemned death penalty, she praised the high priest of extra-judicial killing in her state of the nation address, which encouraged more killings.

Instead of continuing the peace talks with the NPA, MILF, MNLF and the Abu Sayyaf group, she and the military top brass turned the

AFP into a private army of the executive branch, ordering the men and women under their command to wage an all out war against all her critics and oppositors, whom she conveniently tags as “destabilizers.” She ignored the condemnation of her foreign allies about extra-judicial killings. She allowed Speaker Jose de Venecia to undermine the constitution with the move to cancel the 2007 midterm election, which would wreck our democracy. Given the strong evidence that her supporters and allies so often acted on their own, one may well wonder whether she understood the political ramifications of such policies. Indeed these people are responsible in a great measure for stirring up the political turmoil and raising doubts about GMA's concern about the well-being of the Filipino people.

By sharing sovereignty with the majority in Congress, the military and police, GMA obscures her personal part in converting the role of the AFP as protector of the people into a personal instrument for repression of the Filipino people. But the military and police have retained their uses for GMA, by eliminating the radical opposition and intimidating the moderate challengers. This enabled the President to reserve for herself the role of a person of peace. This explains why AFP excesses only increased her resolve to keep the unholy partnership. GMA's faith in the AFP produced mindless anti-people policies that exacerbated the political turmoil, angered foreign investors, and rebounded decisively against her approval rating.

### **Military as lethal bacterium**

In addition, by nourishing and pampering the AFP even more than the Marcos regime, GMA unleashed a lethal bacterium in the militarization of Philippine polity and life.

The other question centers on the problem of whose interest is served when presidential power is exercised, and whether that power can be altered or perverted to serve private and vested interests. Most Filipinos believe that presidential power should be employed for national interest, if it is to be legitimate.

The president's eloquent denunciation that political destabilization is what hampers economic growth rings true. And certainly those who contribute to enhancing evil should not enjoy impunity – among them the speaker of those lofty words, the police, and her loyal allies.

The combinations of her declarations to set up pro-poor economic programs and pursuit of peace with her reluctance to take any appropriate decisions required to achieve those professed goals leaves an impression, if not of hypocrisy, then certainly of an ultimate incapacity, that exposes her again as an illusionist rather than high caliber a stateswoman.

Clearly, we are now part of a new polity in which there are two countries in our Republic. One is the magical, illusory, statistically manipulated world of President Gloria Arroyo and her special interest groups. The other is a country in ruins, brought about by Hurricane Gloria, with the survivors making the most out of the wreckage. To see the extent of wreckage all one needs is to take

tour around the country. And if that is not possible all you need is to watch special reports by the media on disasters and hunger in the urban slums, rural and coastal areas, people dying in unhygienic, understaffed, and under funded hospitals and health centers, people dying everywhere due lack of medicines and potable water on non-government media. No doubt, the poor have been appraised, under the Arroyo scheme of things, of their inferior humanity.

These are then, the two parts of a divided nation: those who made it and those who failed under the Arroyo administration.

We can go on and on about the dangers and discomforts of life under the GMA administration – while ardent Malacañang loyalists can go on talking endlessly about an excessively critical media that exaggerates poverty and suffering and thus fails to appreciate her new interpretative approach to the issues and problems confronting our society, but debates will not stop the deterioration and decay of our social order under GMA.

The presidency never sank so low as it has under GMA. Clearly her struggle to remain in Malacañang is to share sovereignty with the AFP and the police. And they in turn took advantage of the opportunity by immediately marginalizing her capacity to govern. Under this arrangement, she has been reduced to a ceremonial head of state and a pathetic amateurish talk show host who seems to be riding on the reflected glory of Filipino achievers and entertainers such as the captains of industries, taipan billionaires, beauty queens, exam topnotchers, as well as billiard and boxing champions.

Perhaps the opposition has been wrong to think that she has been marginalized or to underestimate GMA's instinct for self-preservation – the best evidence of which lies in the fact that she is still in Malacañang.

### **The Political Opposition**

But before we talk of what lies ahead for our polity and economy, let me talk for a while about the current state of the Philippine political opposition.

If the years of campaign for GMA's resignation revealed anything, it is that the opposition has no winning strategy. Rather the leaders of the opposition are united by their common opportunism – the desire by each aspiring leader to take over GMA's seat in Malacañang for himself and for the accoutrements of power and glory. Arguably, the opposition leaders and their respective following see each rival as having a distinctive failing – some are “has beens,” others are “proven failures,” still others are trapped with interest groups that give money, without any particular ideology to gain access to power.

In the perception of the electorate, the personal motives of GMA and those of opposition leaders have never been very far from one another in which it is difficult to draw a clear line. This complexity explains in part why the move to take GMA out of Malacañang has failed. Both sides have been parts of the problem that it is difficult to see them as part of the solution. In recent years both sides have

pursuit the same ideological lines, and thus marking their competition on crucial national issues with posturing and superfluities.

Worse, many of the so-called powerful political organizations such as the Makati Business Club, the Bishops' Conference, religious organizations, retired officers' organizations in the AFP, chambers of commerce, and non-governmental organizations, cashed in and caved in so quickly and so willingly to a president whose approval rating for over five years has been lower than any other president since surveys were conducted. For them to win the confidence of the electorate, they need to exorcise this covetous political sin.

The secret of GMA's staying power is its reliance on the hard power of the AFP, its ability to buy off purchasable leaders, and the inability of the opposition leaders to get their act together as well as their tendency to split in view of personal ambition and animosity against one another.

Today, the ruins of these two great failures dominate the landscape of Philippine polity. The opposition that promised the electorate to unseat GMA has placed itself in limbo. It now appears to the electorate that the administration and the opposition stand close together in the middle distance, back-to-back, not really separate and distinct, but are two sides of the same coin.

This explains why the electorate who wanted GMA changed cannot find an "up to standard" replacement. There is no leader who can tell them what is wrong with the government's socio-economic program and what alternatives it has to offer. The opposition leaders hoped to finesse GMA by either trying to charge her with issues about electoral fraud, influence peddling in the case of the First Family, and graft and corruption in government bureaucracy. But, mere disclosure of these issues while legitimate and demand immediate resolution, appears ineffectual and cannot shame GMA into resignation. In short, it has led her to forge a political alliance with the top brass of the Armed Forces of Philippines, and to share sovereignty with them. GMA is not likely to forget the lesson that it was and still is the support of the armed forces that make or break a political regime under ordeal. And no administration, not even the Marcos regime, has the cultivation and spoiling of the military and police more apparent and rampant than now. The constitutional mandate, which prohibits political partisanship of the military except to vote, disintegrated with the Davide Court's legitimization of so-called people power movements brokered with the help of the military.

But whatever the merits of the charges hurled against GMA, the opposition, no more than its disparate leaders still cannot escape the most troubling of questions that confront them, the question that gets to the heart, by what principles are they going to govern the country, what standards of morality, what alternative program for the country and who among them will lead?

## United front

No doubt, the renewed case for legitimacy is in step with our democratic ideals, but without a united front, an alternative program of their own seems to give the impression that they are pandering to every conceivable constituency that is opposed to the Arroyo administration.

They seem more interested in waiting for the others to tell them what to think than to lead.

I have been asked again and again by local and foreign commentators: "If GMA is so unpopular and the electorate wants her changed, how come she is still in office?"

To most commentators the long drawn out people power movement to remove GMA from Malacañang since early 2005 revealed a lot not only about the anti-social conduct of the Arroyo government but it also revealed the irrationality and bankruptcy of ideas within the opposition camp.

The opposition clearly has little to offer in the form of sages – persons of wisdom and experience to whom the electorate may look for counsel and guidance. In many cases the temper of the mind and spirit of the opposition leaders have been no different from the current leaders in the national administration.

The opposition's platform if indeed there is one, aside from their common desire to change Arroyo, must be inferred and collected as fragments scattered mingled with personal ambition and animosity. Yet at the end of the exercise, you find that you are left with a few pieces that not only do not fit together but also do not fit anywhere.

Somebody said that the leaders in the opposition are like the amoeba they keep on dividing, giving little thought to the principle "E pluribus unum;" out of many, one. Instead of one Philippines, there are the Arroyo Filipino People, the Estrada Filipinos, the Lacson Filipinos, the Amboys, Chinoys and Muslim terrorists.

## 2007 mid-term elections

Still, all is not lost. The opposition still has the 2007 mid-term elections to escape total marginalization and political oblivion.

The 2007 elections is perhaps the most important, or crucial in the lifetime of the presidential system. Our people are never more concerned, uneasier, more discouraged, even more frightened about the future of the country. They expressed apprehension that the fragile threads that bound the republic had reached a breaking point; that the nation's very constitution had been diverted for political advantage and would now be changed to maintain and protect these advantages. They want to remove the mechanism its citizens had created to protect themselves from one another and from others had been in years of Arroyo administration systematically dismantled and in the second sacrificed to an enthusiasm for the fantasy of building a perfect system to

perpetuate their own kind.

Fortunately, the electorate's vote remains to be the coin of the realm in our democracy today. Our people should not allow nor tolerate COMELEC's "dagdag-bawas" methodology for deciding electoral outcomes. The 2007 elections will be a critical moment for the opposition to press their concerns upon the electorate, which had seemed during the past five years moving in their direction, the polls over a four-year-period had consistently revealed that to the majority of the Philippine electorate, the President has no credibility, they want her changed and that they are disappointed with the failure of the opposition to put up to successful challenge. The 2007 elections will give them a chance, if they learned from the lessons of the past about intra-party divisiveness, individual opportunism, uninhibited greed of some religious leaders who took refuge in spirituality, COMELEC cheating, and media betrayal, to press their concerns upon the electorate, that have expressed the view that the country should not continue in the direction of the President set out and needs to move in a new direction. The electorate is in search of a just a replacement for GMA but a credible and competent leader.

Fortunately for the President, the polls have also shown that the electorate is not comfortable with the leaders of the opposition. Many saw self-defeating divisiveness among the established organizations such as the Catholic Bishops' Conference, the Makati Business Club, other chambers of Commerce, and NGOs. Accordingly, she broke the unity in the Bishops' Conference by handling millions of pesos of taxpayers' money to church groups that perform social services – or what her counterpart, President George Bush, called faith-based social services. Faith based social services in the Philippines mean supporting GMA's fight for political survival.

### Alternatives

Filipinos have passed the point of just replacing any leader with an unknown measure or any one who is just taking political free ride out of their dissatisfaction with GMA. They want to know what alternative social, political, and economic programs they have for the country. They do not like opportunistic leaders who only wait to ride on the discontentment of our people as reflected in surveys.

They also do not want leaders who are uniquely vulnerable to police bullying, bluff and brutality that is the administration's default tactic.

They want candidates who can take GMA to task on specific issues in the pressure of campaign and who can bar her access to the national treasury and neutralize her reach in the media. They have to have "message, substance, and make clear what they stand for." The opposition cannot afford another incoherent disaster. Opposition candidates are unelectable if their only issue is GMA and they skirt the tough issues on the economy, birth control, and human rights violations. People love a candidate's sunniness, optimism. In politics, hope beats anger and fear every time. "Pessimism never created a job." They must bring hope and

optimism to the Filipino people. They must show that they can build a stronger and more prosperous Philippines. They must believe in good paying jobs and disagree with the administration's fear and pessimism that good paying jobs mean inflation. Make health services accessible and affordable to the Filipino people. You can talk of how lousy GMA is but you have to show how good you can be.

In short, the task facing future leaders over the next decade, is to recognize the issues and problems confronting our society, including the broad trends that are underway, that there is need to have a comprehensive database of our human, natural and other resources and to put an end to so-called development projects which bring merely short-term advantages and instant wealth to politicians and their cronies, that ultimately lead to long-term disadvantages. This involves an appreciation of the executive and downward, the legislative and the judiciary, that technological and therefore socioeconomic change is occurring faster than ever before; that the local communities are much more politically, culturally, and intellectually diverse than has been assumed, and are defiant of simplistic remedies (such as modernization of the country through call centers) offered by the leadership to their problems.

This means that the only serious threat to the real interests of our people can come from a failure of leadership, failure to address age-old problem of poverty, wealth creation and distribution and failure to adjust sensibly to new challenges. Let us hope that this is only a passing nightmare.

To arrest the decline of the Philippine society means that our leaders not only formulate collective goals but also reach out for collective collaboration.

Over the course of our history, there have been significant gains in human rights and democratic traditions in our society. Still these successes have not been the achievement of great leaders. They have historically been won by popular struggle with blood and tears of the entire citizenry.

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CenPEG is a public policy center set up shortly before the May 2004 elections to help promote people empowerment in governance and democratic representation of the marginalized poor in an elitist and patronage-driven electoral and political system. It conducts research/policy study, education and trainings on governance and people empowerment. To pursue its programs in research and education-training, CenPEG taps a wide pool of political analysts, public policy experts and academic scholars for their expertise and experience in public governance as well as in grassroots empowerment.