

The Real State of Emergency

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There's been widespread uproar following GMA's proclamation of State of National Emergency last Friday. Civil libertarians, media practitioners, lawyers groups and business associations have come forward to severely criticize Arroyo's Proclamation 1017 and the accompanying General Order 5. Calling these unnecessary, illegal and unconstitutional, these groups have underscored that the environment created by these pronouncements-with the series of warrantless arrests and wanton charges of sedition and rebellion, the cancellation of 'permits' to rally and the violent dispersal of demonstrations in celebration of Edsa, as well as attempts to curtail freedom of expression, shut down critical outfits and control the media-is tantamount to martial law. Right now, there's escalating clamor to push GMA to lift this state of emergency, as groups point out the irony of imposing this 'creeping martial law' during the commemoration of people power and decry this as the ultimate betrayal of the Edsa Spirit.

As such, there's this curious recognition that the same instrument that afforded GMA an extended lease on her political clock may have served to expand the groups critical of her administration, breathing new life to what's perceived as a stagnant anti-Arroyo movement.

Certainly, GMA's state of emergency serves as a powerful blow thrown at the opposition. Not only did it allow her to survive another critical juncture in this continuing crisis, it also illustrated how the Arroyo administration has impeccably mastered the science of dispersing protest mobilizations, containing dissent and diffusing moves that might lead to its ouster. This position of strength has been regarded by some as a two-steps-ahead perch for Arroyo, allowing it to easily anticipate, dissipate and quash opposition offensives.

But then again, this demonstration of power also simultaneously exposes the flaws and weaknesses of GMA's regime. On the one hand, it underscored the serious state of paranoia exhibited by a regime that is afraid of its own citizenry. Like its previous incarnations such as the CPR and EO 464, GMA's chronic, exaggerated use of the full force of the state to keep the situation 'under control' is in fact a crucial manifestation and admission of how deep and out-of-hand this crisis has gotten for her.

Moreover, the state of emergency revitalized the ranks of the opposition, with the criticism and the discontent on its tail serving to broaden the groups seeking her removal. Student groups and the academe have utilized this new development as a springboard to consolidate university based actions, such as the University of the Philippines walk-out, with figures such as Prof Randy David, who was among those arrested that fateful Friday afternoon, at the forefront. Civil libertarians and other like-minded groups have also joined in the chorus to cry foul and swear to escalate the struggle in defense of the bill of rights. Lawyers associations such as the Alternative Law Group and the Integrated Bar of the Philippines are not only taking the battle to the Supreme Court to contest the legality and constitutionality of the proclamation. The sheer audacity of GMA's legal shenanigans seem to have prompted them to take the cause to the streets as well.

This should be a welcome development on the part of the anti-Arroyo campaign. The declaration of a 'state of emergency' is a positive turn to call a spade, a spade. Yes, there is a state of national emergency. And this declaration seems to have translated our criticism and discontent to something

more palpable and tangible for others, with its chilling closer-to-the-gut manifestations. In fact, recent developments seem to have heightened that sense of urgency in kicking GMA out of office for a larger segment of the populace. Of course, there is that danger that this might simply divert attention away from the real crisis at hand. Sure, I understand the outburst that came in the wake of the declaration state of emergency and its implementation. I just don't get why an illegitimate regime that refuses to step down does not elicit the same outrage from people.

Yes, there is a state of national emergency. And this emergency has little to do with the conspiratorial attacks 'from left to right' perceived by GMA and her cohorts. This emergency has more to do with the dead-end democracy of the catatonic Edsa state, as exemplified by the poster girl of Edsa. This emergency reveals the serious flaws of the institutions and the processes, even the brand of democracy, we have set up in its wake. This emergency reeks of the powerful interests entrenched in our society and the processes we have put in place that allow them to go about their business of legalized rape and pillage, thanks to a democracy that glorifies our right to life, liberty and estate. This emergency reflects the manner by which those in power are able to pervert our institutions to serve the narrow interests of a few as they operate to brazenly tighten their grip onto political and economic power. This emergency reinforces the conditions that permit trapezoids like GMA to lie, cheat and steal in the service of her political persistence.

And this is why I'm a bit wary of this new 'libertarian' turn of the anti-Arroyo campaign. We are not here to uphold Edsa's liberal democracy. We are here to show how it's become a potent instrument of the elite. What we would like to emphasize is the need to expand the quality of democracy beyond the civil liberties that we were able to restore in Edsa. What we want to stress is where we stopped short. What we wish to point out is that it's not just about GMA and her excesses, but the system that allows her to actually go over the top. What we want is to capture people's imagination as they connect GMA's abuses to this systemic glitch and expand their ability to assess its urgent, critical implications to our everyday lives and our collective life as a nation.

Yes, there is a state of national emergency. And this has a lot to do with our warped ability to just go about our business and simply move along. This emergency speaks of our capacity to resign ourselves to the sidelines as we, our growing race of couch potato citizens, passively watch history unfold right before our eyes.

State of National Emergency? I say, we refuse to be swept under the rug. I say, this resistance should not stand down. I say, I am not a 'situation' under control.

I do not want to be reduced to muttering my discontent under my breath while watching events pass me by from behind my bag of chips and my cold drink, as I sit in front of the TV. I want to be able to voice out my dissent and act upon it. I do not want to be relegated to the sidelines of history, dispersed even before I get up and risk anything in the service of my ideals. I want to take part in the processes that shape my community, my society, my future. I do not want my aspirations for a just and humane society to be confined in a blog. I want it chanted, splattered across walls and gradually effected by a growing, empowered collective that shares a similar devotion to emancipation, transformative action and thoroughgoing change.

I say, this is the only way we can really lift this state of national emergency. (1 March 2006)

P.S.

* From Institute for Popular Democracy (IPD)'s website.

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