

The Noynoy Aquino Government and How do we Respond to It

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The May 2010 election was considered to be the cleanest and fastest elections in the Philippines since the restoration of elite democracy after the dark Martial Law years of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos. This is despite the controversies looming on the automated elections, the system glitches during the elections, the failure of elections in some towns, the reported massive vote buying, the reported pre-shading of ballots, the millions of disenfranchised voters, most of them first time voters, among others. These irregularities and actual election problems are seemingly left-out due to the convincing win, by a very large margin, of Noynoy-the expected winner according to pre-election surveys.

After the proclamation and formal assumption into office, along with fancy celebrations and parties, the new government of Noynoy Aquino is now starting to confront the challenges and problems of the country. Its cabinet is now almost complete and its policies and programs, though slowly, are taking shape out of the motherhood statements and broad campaign slogans. With the winning of Aquino, surveys showed that there is an increased optimism for a better life in the coming months among Filipinos from all classes. The promise of good governance have impacted the people and an atmosphere of relief from nine (9) years of mismanagement, illegitimacy and very corrupt governance is certainly in the air. This situation compelled various sectors, especially the Left, to discuss and debate on how we should deal with this new government.

The Victory of Noynoy and Its Character

Noynoy, being a former member of the House of Representatives and the Senate does not boast of an impressive legislative career. He was silent on some major issues of the country and was not a very vocal critic of the previous regime. He only rose to the limelight of the media after the death of his mother last year. Thus what made him won?

The election into office of Noynoy Aquino is certainly a conglomeration of various and complex factors. However, we can identify two (2) major factors that lead to this resounding victory: 1. the unpopularity of the previous regime of Gloria Macapagal Arroyo (GMA), and; 2. the heroic images of Noynoy's parents - his father, the late senator Benigno Aquino II is considered a martyr during the Martial Law years. His mother, the late president Cory Aquino is considered saintly and a protector of democracy owing to her role in the toppling down of the Marcos dictatorship and the restoration of democratic institutions.

The previous GMA regime was considered as the most unpopular regime, more unpopular than the dictator Ferdinand Marcos. Its popularity rating is constantly negative. Its nine (9) years in power is tarnished with many scandals like various anomalous deals worth billions, massive corruption from the top level down to the local units, abuse of power and increased patronage politics, warlordism and political dynasty. It is also notorious for its fascist and deadly approach to dissent. Its legitimacy was constantly under question due to the reported massive and systematic electoral cheating, even using the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) to serve its interest. It was a haven of US imperialism coupled with the intensification of fiscal and economic restructuring under the framework of neo-liberal globalization, which made the country crumble to the ground, making the people suffer from abject poverty and pushing them to go outside the country to be slaves in the modern world. Further, the GMA regime was constantly under threat of being removed from power. There were military dissent, attempted coup-d'état, several attempted popular uprisings, massive resignation of cabinet members, almost yearly attempts at impeachment cases filed in the halls of congress, and even a call from an influential section of the Makati Business Club (MBC)-the premier business club in the country- for GMA to step down from office. But all these pressures and efforts remained unsuccessful.

This seemingly hopeless project to put an end to a very unpopular regime, ironically, was given a new breath of life upon the death of Noynoy's mother, the late President Cory Aquino last year. Cory, a supporter-turned-strong critic of GMA, was very vocal against the GMA regime. Her death summoned the energies of the people, which was exemplified by the millions of people mourning her death and attending her funeral. This historical juncture was rightly identified by the analysts of the Liberal Party (LP)- her party and that of her son Noynoy - as a favorable situation to be maximized for political dominance. They hastily re-organized and replaced the LP Presidential candidate Mar Roxas (who became Noynoy's running mate) with Noynoy as the Official LP contender for the presidency after a much dramatic, yet clearly directed, turn of events.

This radical upward surge of Noynoy was strengthened by his perceived image as someone who did not aspire for the presidency but was given the golden opportunity with the stroke of "destiny". This was further enhanced by his campaign slogan, riding on with the perceived image of his parents, "Kung walang Kurap walang mahirap" ("If there is no Corruption there is no Poverty") and "Matuwid na Daan" ("Righteous Path") to mean good governance. Even though the campaign slogans were inherently problematic, like the simplistic analogy of poverty as solely the result of corruption, but it was able to strike a chord among a large number of Filipinos who were sick and tired of the GMA regime, effectively transmitting its message and bringing with it a surge of hope for change.

Not just the mass of the populace, but even the Philippine elite and the foreign Capitalists were weary of the GMA regime, especially those sections that were sidelined in the granting of political and business favors. For the local elites, the Philippine society was so fragmented and the system was so corrupted and taxes were high. Severe political bickering and constant threat of destabilization was simply bad and an unsustainable environment for doing business. For the Foreign powers, especially for the US, aside from a not conducive environment for business, having a very unpopular ally affects its interests in Asia, especially politically. In short, GMA no longer serve their interests but rather facilitated for the further disintegration of the system that they promoted. The regime should be replaced by a broadly acceptable one, which would stabilize the system to prolong its existence, committed to the furtherance of a neo-liberal-democratic regime and could unite the various factions in the country. Noynoy fits these criteria.

The failure of the GMA extension project, which seeks to extend the term of the GMA regime by various means and formulas, was due to the pressure of the United States, European Union, Japan and other South Asian countries for the Philippines to have credible elections to give way for the

new regime.

Thus, despite how large the number of votes Noynoy garnered, the meaning of the victory of Noynoy is not just the manifestation of the unpopularity of the GMA regime among the mass of the populace. More importantly, it is a reconstitution of a bourgeois liberal-democratic regime which was shattered and adulterated by GMA. It is a manifestation that the elite is willing to get rid of their own in order to preserve their system of domination and the election is their best instrument to provide a smooth transition.

Noynoy is the Perpetuation of the System

The Noynoy Regime is a continuity of the system installed during the presidency of her mother. After the fall of the Marcos dictatorship in 1986 by a popular uprising, Cory Aquino was catapulted into the presidency. The Cory Regime was able to re-institutionalize certain democratic institutions and instrumentalities, such as, but not limited to, the drafting and ratification of the new constitution, which among others provides and restores basic democratic rights and freedoms of citizens, the functioning of the Justice System and most especially the conduct of elections. However, what the Cory regime has done was only the reestablishment of bourgeois democracy and institutions, of course under the bourgeois framework. The promise of real change during the uprising was betrayed upon the assumption to power of the reconstituted elite, and the historical isolation of the Left.

Basically, the Philippine Elections cannot effect the desired fundamental system change in the Philippine society. Any elected president, including Noynoy, is logically considered the new representative of the ruling system and is expected to work for its continuation. He is bound by the Constitution which legally safe guards the system, unless, he makes a hard Left turn, which, is highly unlikely, means to betray the class he represents.

The constitution of Noynoy's cabinet and outline of programs and policies suggests no departure from the old system. The cabinet of the new government is composed of close friends and party mates, election supporters who contributed millions of pesos to his campaign fund, some old faces of the GMA regime who bolted out. There were also the former cabinet members of her late mother's government and personalities known for their unwavering pro neo-liberal stance, like Secretary Cesar Purisima of the Department of Finance.

The motherhood pronouncements of programs and policies of the new regime are problematic in nature and in essence. Further, this reflects the ideological framework that Noynoy and this system operates. The slogan "Kung walang kurup, walang mahirap" ("if there is no corruption, there is no poverty"), simply tried to hide the structural and real causes of poverty in the country. Certainly, poverty in the country stems from the monopolistic control of wealth and power of the elite few and the tying-up of the economy to the global capital. These were made possible during the previous regimes, especially during the presidency of Noynoy's mother. Upon the advises of technocrats during the Cory Aquino regime, the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank were implemented in exchange for, among others, financial aids and loans. The SAPs were notorious in destroying the local industries, the easing of tariff rates, the flooding of foreign products in the local market, and the imprisonment of the country to the debt trap.

In his inaugural speech last June 30, Noynoy focused more on populist slogans and calling on all the people to march with him in the "righteous path" with no clear direction as to where we are heading, aside from the vague concepts of "a good future". He proclaimed that this new government

is the champion of the poor. However, no mention was made on the questions of agrarian reform (he abstained on the Agrarian Reform extension when he was a lawmaker). Instead he was talking of the services and strengthening of the local agricultural market - a scheme to escape the decades-old agrarian question. Still, the basic question remains unanswered: how would the local farmers truly benefit from this if they don't own the land, if land and crop conversion in favor of the foreign investors and local capitalists is the standing policy, if imported agricultural products are flooding the local market, etc? Also, there was no clear pronouncement as to how we will industrialize and generate decent jobs at home. Instead, in his inaugural speech, he declared to the international community that "we are ready to take our place as a reliable member of the community of nations....we will be a predictable and consistent place for investment...". This statement is a clear declaration of the continuation of neo-liberal policies. This declaration, along with the anti-corruption drive, is the implementation of the wishes of the local and foreign Capitalists to make the country a stable instrument of the global capital, by making it work efficiently and perfectly along the line of the Capitalists' terms.

Prospects and Inherent Limitations

With the nature of the perpetuated system, the meaning of Noynoy's victory, the composition of his government from top to bottom and the shape that his programs and policies are taking, it is safe to say that there should be no illusions that this new regime would deliver us from the evils of poverty, marginalization and even corruption.

Surely, Noynoy would try to run-after the wrong doings of GMA, especially those very unpopular ones. But the kind of justice that will be delivered is another matter. Noynoy cannot simply ignore the clout of the Macapagal-Arroyo family in the government. Having family members in Congress and local governments, functioning appointees in the Ombudsman and the Supreme Court and a still considerable connections in the business community, GMA has formed a formidable political fortress. Intensely pounding GMA's fortress could irk the business community and the foreign Capitalists since this may cause disruptions of the strengthening and consolidation of the system. This is one inherent limitation of the system that Noynoy will be subjected to. Even Cory during her time, with tremendous power owing to the "revolutionary government" she was heading, was not able to persecute the Marcoses and their cohorts. The Cory regime succumbed to the bourgeois methods of reconciliation and compromises owing to pressures of the former Marcos cronies surrounding her. Noynoy's bravado and bluster can be put into the test; if indeed he will be independent minded from the, more or less, same brands of politicians surrounding him.

The May 2010 elections that made Noynoy President also created the limitations of what he could do as president. This is because the election also consolidated the power of more than a hundred political dynasties all over the country, both old and new. This included the Marcoses and the many warlords in the different parts of the country, especially in Mindanao. Including Noynoy's, these political clans are known as, either large land and agribusiness owners, land grabbers, key business players, notorious gambling operators, coddlers, if not leaders, of drug syndicates, and notoriously corrupt. Dealing with these local elites, many of them are members of Noynoy's Liberal Party, is already a hell of a challenge for his new government. In fact, one acid test for Noynoy is how he will implement his "anti-corruption" and "righteous path" drive to the local level. A mere "leading by example" in being righteous and in following traffic laws is simply not enough. Seriously implementing his drive down to the local level would mean a head-on clash with the local powers and the TRAPO (Traditional politician) system. Another acid test for Noynoy is how he will handle the Hacienda Luisita-the very large land holdings (4,000 hectares) of his family which was notorious of oppressing its workers and tenants, aside from the fact of escaping from the coverage of the

Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CAPR) implemented during his mother's term until the present.

The vague promise of a better life, so far, is nothing but an empty bag. Even during the election campaigns, Noynoy did not tackle in depth the problems of contractualization, the strengthening of local industries, the questions of social justice and the equitable sharing of the country's wealth and resources. These, along with his promise of decent jobs for the millions of unemployed Filipinos, cannot be realized without a radical departure from the in-placed neo-liberal policies. As the new government formally assumed office, the National Power Corporation (NAPOCOR) proposed a nation-wide increase of power rates. There is also a looming increase of water rates and fares of the Metro Railway Transit (MRT) and Light Railway Transit (LRT) in Metro Manila.

The appointment of Secretary Deles to the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP), the gesture of the new government to continue negotiations with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and resume talks with the National Democratic Front (NDF) were a "welcome" sign for the rebel groups, civil societies and peace movements. However, opening the door for talks and the content and conduct of the actual talks are different things. In the case of the Mindanao peace process, a widely consultative, coherent and institutionalized policy framework should be in place first, to pave the way for active participation of all stakeholders - from top to bottom. The new government should not do what the GMA regime has done with the process and the Memorandum of Agreement on Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD). Unfortunately, noted conservative politicians who view that the resolution of the Mindanao problem should be solely within the framework of the Constitution and national sovereignty, are also newly elected into power and is within the close circle of Noynoy. In the case of the talks with the NDF, the latter's unwavering antagonistic stance against Noynoy and unchanged tactical consideration of the Peace Talks, answered with the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) chief's recent pronouncement of finishing insurgency in three (3) years and Noynoy's promise of more funds for AFP modernization are ominous signs for things to come. It seems, no significant changes on the government's peace framework towards rebels and insurgents are forthcoming in the Aquino regime, just like his predecessors.

On the promised delivery of swift justice to victims of political killings and political persecution of the GMA regime, we still have to wait for the concrete actions to give life to the rhetoric. While we are waiting, the various political prisoners like the "Morong 43" are still in detention. Political and media killings are still on-going, despite the appointment of Secretary De Lima to the Department of Justice (DOJ) and the strong condemnation of Malacañang to the killings. The case of the Ampatuan Massacre, where 57 individuals were killed, majority of whom journalists, still have to show that it is moving forward, seemingly burrowed in a bog. These manifest how well entrenched and organized these people behind the killings are. Further, this shows how mere pronouncements, even by no less than the popular President, are ineffective and insufficient.

Responding to the Noynoy Government

With what we are seeing now, how should the Left, especially us with our modest forces, respond to the Noynoy Government?

Unlike GMA, Noynoy is legitimate and had a fresh and popular mandate. In spite of its being elitist, many of the masses have pinned their hopes to this new government. Whether this reflects the backwardness or hopelessness of the masses is another issue. The point is the high hopes of the many which could be a boon or bane for both the government and the Left.

Definitely, in this period, you cannot call the people for an outright isolation of this new regime, much more for an intensification of the People's War, as what the CPP-NPA-NDF has done. In fact, the NDF sounded its war drums upon the assumption into office of Aquino, but days later, its allied legal organizations shifted a little bit and instead put forward and challenged the new government with its version of the People's Agenda.

The approach of the so-called Social-Democrats to enter and join inside the government in order to advocate reforms in a trickle down approach and to influence policies while being backed up by the mass movement outside is rooted on their belief that Noynoy is an "arena for contestation". Assuming without conceding, this approach requires a highly disciplined cadre, which maybe theoretically possible, and an independent and large mass movement.

Perhaps the most favorable approach in responding to the Noynoy government should be based around the strategic view that this government is a perpetuation of the elite liberal-democracy and on the reality that the masses respond to this government. Thus, the tactical approach could be maximizing the huge mandate of Aquino in pushing for the concrete demands of the people and challenging it with its own slogan of "kung walang kurup walang mahirap" and "matuwid na daan". This means turning this government's own mandate and slogan into a pressure. The masses should be independently mobilized around this in order to test and expose the limits of this system and to enable the masses to go through a political experience to awaken their consciousness that this bourgeois regime is inherently incapable of answering the ills and evils of the society. This political experience should help shape the consciousness of the people that their emancipation rest solely on their own making.

The real challenge for us in responding with the new regime is how to maximize this situation with the primary objective of strengthening and expanding our mass bases and towards the weakening of the system. No matter how democratic and populist this regime could be, the fulfillment of the democratic demands of the people is not automatically given - it is earned the hard way. Thus, our strength should be considerable and our forces should be militant enough. In so doing, we should never forget even for a single moment that we should take shape into a revolutionary mass socialist movement, with an insurrectionary character in the opportune time.

By Andy M. Razil, KKK. With contributions from Ka Troy
