

Opinion/PUBLIC LIVES

## The nation in Arroyo's eyes

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MANILA, Philippines — A State of the Nation Address (Sona) is interesting not only for what it says but also for what it does not say. The nation hears not only the speech but also its silences. Every Sona reveals a president's way of seeing, and there is no way of excusing its blind spots by referring to the speaker's limited time.

In a speech lasting 56 minutes, Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo took her listeners on an archipelagic tour of the Philippines. She hopped from island to island, identifying regional growth centers by their main political players and sponsors, and cheerfully acknowledging their presence in the audience. You realize that what is being described is not merely a location map of the new infrastructure, but the whole terrain of political patronage — the path of the gravy train.

Unseen and unmentioned is the state of the people living in these regions. Do they have jobs? Do they have enough food on their tables? Are there enough schools and teachers for their children? Are they adequately sheltered? Do they have water, electricity and basic medical care? Are they safe in their homes? How did they vote in the last election, and what messages might they be sending out by the way they voted?

What set the 2007 Sona apart from the past Sonas of this administration was the bravura and callousness that attended its entire delivery. Ms Arroyo sounded as if she was the winner of the recent election. She spoke as if the problems that have troubled our society over the past years — the political killings, the mass hunger and unemployment, the threat of renewed conflict in Mindanao, the government's continuing dependence on massive foreign and domestic borrowings, etc. — are nothing but figments of her enemies' imagination.

For the first time, Ms Arroyo gave the nation an idea of what she thought defined the limits of her powers: none. "From where I sit, I can tell you, a President is always as strong as she wants to be." I think only a dictator can say that with a straight face. Do we still wonder why our institutions are weak?

I used to think that former Chief Justice Artemio Panganiban's rebuke of Ms Arroyo's Presidential Proclamation 1017 was sharp. Justice Panganiban had written: "Some of those who drafted PP1017 may be testing the outer limits of presidential prerogatives and the perseverance of this Court in safeguarding the people's constitutionally enshrined liberty. They are playing with fire, and unless prudently restrained, they may one day wittingly or unwittingly burn down the country." I now think it was too subtle, and that it had fallen on deaf ears. This president is not in the business of testing "the outer limits of presidential prerogatives." She recognizes no such limits.

The wonder of it all is that Ms Arroyo could, in the same breath, talk about her vision of a modern Philippines in the coming years. "We will have achieved the hallmarks of a modern society, where institutions are strong. By 2010, the Philippines should be well on its way to achieving that vision." This is empty rhetoric. She said nothing that would substantiate that vision. Modernity is not just about physical infrastructure. It is about institutions, a way of running the complex affairs of a

nation.

But all these blind spots and omissions should not surprise us anymore. The key to Ms Arroyo's rise to power and political survival has been precisely her ruthless disregard for institutions. She justifies it as a normal survival reaction to the demands of a "degenerated" political system. (That clumsy word comes from one of her previous Sonas).

She knows that what has worked for her is not the rule of law but the system of patronage that permits her to buy the support of politicians and generals. What she may not know is the brittleness of any form of authority that rests chiefly on remunerative and coercive power. It breaks as soon as the resources run out. Worse still, this style of leadership tends to invite reprisals, while offering no protection against them, once the ruler is out of power.

"It is my ardent wish that most of the vision I have outlined will be fully achieved when I step down," she said toward the end of her speech. Almost every one noticed that she did not say when that was going to be. Under the Constitution, her term ends in 2010. But, once we consider how she managed to get this far, it becomes easier to understand why a lot of people don't believe her and why they think a push for constitutional change is likely to be attempted again.

She doesn't even need to demand Charter change on her behalf. Someone is bound to say it for her, to shout to the world how we cannot live without Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. Mass demonstrations and posters will suddenly appear on our streets to bring this message of great urgency to the public. This theme will be picked up by a chorus of columnists and commentators who, even as they sing hosannas to Ms Arroyo, will note the absence of worthy leaders among those currently waiting in the wings.

Nothing, perhaps, can be more wretched than the future of a bratty autocrat about to lose power. "They say the campaign for the next election started on May 15, the day after the last. Fine. I stand in the way of no one's ambition. I only ask that no one stand in the way of the people's well-being and the nation's progress." But who is she to expect anyone to subscribe to her pre-modern notion of "the people's well-being and the nation's progress"? Isn't this what is supposed to be debated in a democracy?

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