

Philippines : A Response to Ferdinand Marcos, Jr.'s Second SONA - Rebranding and glorification of a name in an unequitable society where people have no glory, is a Farce !

mercredi 2 août 2023, par [Mindanao organizations](#) (Date de rédaction antérieure : 31 juillet 2023).

A week after the second State of the Nation Address (SONA) of President Ferdinand Romualdez Marcos, Jr., increases in fuel prices were announced. This movement in fuel prices would eventually affect the price of all commodities while various areas of the country have been swept by typhoon Egay (Doksuri) and the looming impact of El Nino is expected in the coming months of this year.

In his report to the nation, BBM (Bongbong Marcos) boasted about the low prices of the commodities and that the country's situation is « sound », but the common people cannot simply agree to this “out of this world assessment.”

But the second SONA was very revealing because there was no mention of the wage increase for the workers to recover from the Covid-19 pandemic and economic challenges ; there was no mention of the Indigenous Peoples ; on how to improve the human rights condition and how the majority of the poor and working people would cope up with the polycrisis that the country is in right now.

He boasted of billions (US dollars) of investments coming in from his international trips but those (trips) were purposely done mainly to regain prestige and glorify the name of his dictator father, Marcos Sr. (Usually, these claimed investments are just Memorandum of Understanding or MOUs (prospects), hence, no concrete projects or investments are coming in. Mostly if investments come, the returns are disadvantageous to the Filipino people.)

The lack of concrete evidence to support these investment claims raises questions about their validity. Additionally, it is important to consider the potential motives behind these investments and whether they are truly aimed at benefiting the country and its citizens. Without a clear and transparent approach to these investments, it is difficult to determine their true impact and value.

Data shows that there are 2.18 million unemployed and 8.17 million underemployed. As of May 2023, the Philippine debt is at 14.1 Trillion Pesos. That means every Filipino family (26.4M families) has a debt of Php534,021. Inflation according to Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) dropped to 5.4% from 6.1% in May 2023 and from 6.1% in June 2022 but remains to be the highest inflation rate in the Southeast Asian region as of the latest data available.

In 2022, the National Government boasted 7.6% GDP growth and reported that the unemployment rate eased down to 4.8% in early 2023. However, the high growth can be explained by the fact that the country was emerging from a depression in 2020-21, having the service sector as its leading economic driver with OFW remittances on top followed by the borrowings and the informal economy.

As per the results of the series of consultations launched in Mindanao by various organizations and communities, it is clear that political accommodations and favored elites and relatives dominate the halls of Congress down to the regional and provincial bureaucracies. New favored economic elites or the new cronies have been in the front seat in its socio-economic programs. It is a reinstatement of Marcos and his favored friends' control over the country.

As part of the rebranding, two major policies signed days before his second SONA were RA 11953 and 11954 - the New Agrarian Emancipation Law and the Maharlika Investment Fund Act respectively ; to showcase his 'love' for the agriculture sector and his economic recovery initiative.

The railroaded Maharlika Investment Fund (MIF) creates a new layer of bureaucracies among the Government Owned Corporations by creating the Maharlika Investment Corporation. The three main sponsors of the MIF are close relatives of President Marcos, Jr., that is, Speaker Romualdez (cousin) and Rep. Zandro Marcos (son), and Tingog Party-list representative Yedda Romualdez (Speaker Romualdez' wife). At the Senate, Senator Mark Villar, the son of the second richest family in the Philippines (former Senator Manuel Villar and Senator Cynthia Villar), sponsored MIF. It is no surprise that real estate is one of the areas for investment of the MIF.

Providing quality services for the entire population is a challenge for a country that spends more than 30% of its national budget (automatically) on debt servicing. This often resulted to take out more loans, locally and nationally. With a national debt of more than 14 trillion Pesos, many have expressed concerns about the creation of an investment fund that draws from existing resources that are already allocated to (social) services. There is no wealth surplus. MIF is a suicidal program in the middle of a crisis. Another crisis or disaster waiting to happen.

The New Agrarian Emancipation Law, on the other hand, is a promise to condone 610,054 Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries (ARBs) from Estate Tax and debts allocating Php57.56 Billion. A promise to help these farmers from the burden a long time ago, but how many of these ARBs are still in control and in possession of their lands ? Will the fund be purely to liberate the ARBs or the concessions and developers now in control or waiting to control over the lands ? Without the fund included in the recent General Appropriation Act of 2023, this remains a promise at least this year. Likewise, it is important to ensure that the intended beneficiaries are the ones who will benefit from the program, hence, accurate beneficiary validation is another serious concern. It must also be assured that agrarian reform in the country must not diminish the right to ancestral domains of the Indigenous Peoples.

To extract down the far south, Marcos, Jr. has recognized the economic boost of the new BARMM but only about the prospects for fuel and mineral explorations to model development in the region and the whole country through these extractive industries.

As he mentioned to fulfill his father's 'land for the landless' propaganda and his tours for foreign investments and without ensuring the shift to sustainable, ecological, and pro-people rural development, the agriculture sector and ancestral lands and domains of the Indigenous Peoples remain highly at risk.

Non-Moro Indigenous Peoples have continued to suffer harassment and killings since the year 2020 and even earlier. The most recent (July 26, 2023) crime was the burning of the worship house of the Tedurays in Sitio Nungeng, Barangay Blanting, Talayan, Maguindanao del Sur which displaced 96 families (Moro and NonMoro IPs). In Upi, Maguindanao del Norte and South Upi, Maguindanao del Sur reports of soil sampling and information drive on mineral explorations are happening without proper consultation to the Indigenous Peoples Structure. The worst is, according to ground reports, the very office to serve the Indigenous People in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim

Mindanao (BARMM) - the Ministry for Indigenous Peoples Affairs (MIPA) is doing the said recruitment of the communities to allow mining inside the ancestral domain. The forced displacement or “relocation” of the Teduray communities in the coastal areas of Datu Odin Sinsuat (DOS), Maguindanao del Norte exposed after the death of 27 buried in a landslide in the relocation site at Sitio Tinabon, Kusiong of DOS. Malacanang must order as part of the priority demands to fast-track the passage of a NonMoro Indigenous Peoples (NMIP) Code in the region which has been democratically framed by the NMIPs themselves.

Several leaders of the Indigenous Peoples all over the country are still targeted by the anti-Terrorism campaign of the government because they stood up to defend their ancestral lands against harmful projects such as mega-dams and mining. The continuing harassment and endangering of the lives of the IP leaders, human rights, and environmental defenders is just one indicator of the continuing deterioration of democratic space in the country.

President Marcos, Jr. declared that there is already a New Philippines (Bagong Pilipinas). Perhaps this is true in his « alternative universe ». We say « There is no New Philippines », not until there is substantial decreased dispossession and impoverishment of the majority of the population. Not until there are qualitative changes in the following : the revocation of the Rice Tarrification Law (RTL), Oil Deregulation Law (ODL), Electric Power Industry Reform Act (EPIRA), Philippine Mining Act, Anti-Terrorism Law (ATA), Automatic Appropriation for debt service, 12% Expanded Value Added Tax and Regionalization of Wages. He must get rid of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) and the Regional Cooperation for Economic Partnership (RCEP). PBBM must genuinely take actions to eliminate graft and corruption across the bureaucracy and hold those responsible (past and present) accountable with no exemptions. Culture of impunity must end making Human Rights protection be the heart of his administration, and he (Marcos Jr) must start talking and listening to the fisherfolks, farmers, workers, women, LGBTQI, elders, Indigenous Peoples, and all sectors on how this country should rise from the pandemic and overcome the impact of the ecological, economic, and human rights crisis.

Labor Migration concerns must not limit to assurance of the protection of the democratic rights in the host countries but also to substantially resolve the socioeconomic conditions forcing these workers to go abroad.

Without that bold move to economic redesigning to a democratic and ecological nationalized industrialization, New Philippines is just a name-seek of his father’s bastardized New Society for the oligarchs.

Rebranding without going away from the old is a pure masquerade only to praise the oligarchs, nothing new at all for the vast majority of the Peoples.

The true measurement of progress and democracy is the Peoples’ sound situation, defined and validated by the people and communities themselves.

July 31, 2023

Signed

1. MindaNOW
2. Alliance of Tri-People for the Advancement of Human Rights (ALTAHR)
3. Kilusang Maralita sa Kanayunan (KILOS KA)
4. Kaagapay OFW Resource and Service Center (Kaagapay OFWRSC)
5. Ranao Women and Children Resource Center (RWCRC)

6. Alyansa ng mga Mamamayan para sa Karapatang Pantao (AMKP)
7. Lanao Alliance of Human Rights Advocates (LAHRA)
8. Mindanao Tri-People Women Forum (MTWF)
9. Alyansa sa mga Kabus sa Lungsod ug Syudad(AKLAS)
10. United Society of Bold And Wise LGBTQ+ (USBAW LGBTQ+)
11. Alyansa ng Kabataang Mindanao para sa Kapayapaan (AKMK)
12. Ranaw Disaster Response and Rehabilitation Center (RDRRAC)
13. Grupong Kababaenhan sa Dakbayan sa Iligan (GDKI)
14. iDEFEND - Iligan
15. Association of OFW Children (AOFWC)
16. Umpungan Nu Mga Babai sa Bagua 2 (UBB2)
17. Iligan Survivors Movement (ISM)
18. Mindanao Tri-People Women Resource Center (MTWRC)
19. Alliance of Bangsa Sangil Federation (ABSF)
20. LABAN Kababaihan !
21. Mindanao Peoples' Peace Movement - CARAGA Cluster
22. Inged Fintailan
23. Kahugpungan sa mga Mag-uuma ug Mangingisda sa Zamboanga del Sur (KAMAGMASUR)
24. Timuay Justice and Governance (TJG)
25. Kahugpungan sa Mag-uuma ug Mamumuo nga Kababayen-an sa Zmaboanga de Sur (KASAMMAKA)
26. AgroEco Federation of Lanao (AgroEco Lanao)
27. Teduray and Lambangian Youth and Student Association (TLYSA)

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