

Philippines: Bonfire of institutions

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MANILA, Philippines — Because it is easier to imagine it, corruption has taken center stage in the public's appreciation of the current national crisis. Against the backdrop of mass poverty, the quantities are truly mind-boggling: \$130 million in kickbacks for a government project worth \$329 million, a bribe offer of P200 million for a single signature, cash gifts of half a million pesos each for politicians who attend a breakfast or lunch meeting with a President facing impeachment, half a million pesos in pocket money for a government functionary who flies to Hong Kong in order to evade a Senate inquiry, and many more. But it would be a mistake to think this is just about corruption. This is, more importantly, about the long-term damage to a nation's social institutions.

The damage to government institutions has been the most extensive. Far from being a neutral arbiter of disputes and a source of normative stability, the justice system has become a weapon to intimidate those who stand up to power. Far from being a pillar of public security, the military and the police have become the private army of a gangster regime. Instead of serving as an objective referee in electoral contests, the Commission on Elections has become a haven for fixers who deliver fictitious votes to the moneyed and the powerful. Instead of serving as the steady backbone of public service through successive changes in administration, the government bureaucracy has been turned into a halfway house for political lackeys, misfits and the corrupt. Instead of serving as a check on presidential power, the House of Representatives has become its hired cheering squad.

The erosion of these institutions, no doubt, has been going on for a long time. But their destruction in the last seven years under Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo's presidency has been the most comprehensive since 1986. This is due not only to the particular gifts of Ms Arroyo as a politician — her survival instincts, her callousness, her readiness to set aside higher goals and principles for short-term personal gains. It is also due to the peculiar confluence of events that attended her rise to the presidency.

In a reasonably fair contest, it is my view that Ms Arroyo would not, at any time, have been elected president — not in 1998, or 2004, or in any snap election between those two presidential election years. She never commanded a constituency or party machinery, nor did she possess a charisma that would compensate for this lack, to fetch her the presidency. The only way she could become president was precisely by the route she took — to be elected vice president and then succeed to the presidency before the incumbent's term is over. Edsa II made that possible.

Having risen to the presidency in the most improbable way, Ms Arroyo could not have been seriously expected to give it up in 2004. She was determined to keep it, and indeed everything she has done since 2003 (a few months after declaring she would not run in the 2004 election) has been part of a calculated effort to keep her in office — indefinitely. The imperatives that this boundless ambition triggered constitute the strongest pressure upon our institutions today.

But the damage is not confined to government; it has fanned out like a shock wave from the epicenter to the periphery. We have thus far only seen the debris of government institutions that have lost their standing in the public esteem. Now we are seeing how the tension is passed on and threatens other institutions. This happens when issues that are left unresolved by the institutions of law, politics and government spill over to other spheres of society.

The tremor spreads out and tests the strength of the remaining credible pillars of our society: the churches, the media, the universities, the business community, the family. Each one of these institutional spheres has their own unique operational system, code and medium. They are not organized, nor are they suited, for the processing of legal and political questions. Yet, they are compelled by the developing situation to address these questions from their own specific standpoints. Their members are called upon to lend their minds, their voices, and their bodies to a movement whose trajectory is still uncertain.

Consensus will not come easy under these circumstances. Yet a crisis can often appear so urgent that institutions are stampeded into making a stand for or against, in the process stretching the limits of their institutional codes, and, worse, exacerbating existing internal dissensions. This is the collateral damage that can be created by a runaway crisis — the importation of an unresolved political-legal dysfunction into our churches, schools, editorial rooms, board rooms and homes. If we don't handle it well, we could all end up collecting debris to build a bonfire of institutions.

This is not a plea for the "social peace" that Romulo Neri belatedly proposes. All of us must contribute to the shaping of the public consciousness, whether as individuals or as communities, but we can only speak for ourselves. We must take care we don't destroy the institutions to which we belong, for that will only mean we are no different from those who have abused the institutions of government. In self-defense, we must keep the pressure on the Arroyo regime until it releases its grip on our government. At the same time, we must continue to admonish the custodians of our Constitution to do their work faithfully and urgently, and thus spare the rest of the country from the continuing nightmare of a destructive presidency.

P.S.

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