

Public Lives

November 28, 2004

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Alternatives to a dysfunctional government

Two venerable national figures this week offered blunt solutions to the problems confronting our society. National Artist and novelist F. Sionil Jose called for a “revolution” in a lecture at the University of the Philippines. Business leader Washington Sycip told a forum of the League of Corporate Foundations that the country might benefit from a switch to authoritarian rule at this time. In their separate ways, they have publicly articulated views that many thoughtful Filipinos are expressing in private gatherings.

The specifics of such solutions are seldom clear. The two are not known to be ideologues. I was present at Jose’s lecture, but I am only relying on newspaper reports of Sycip’s intervention at the Makati briefing. Jose argued that mass poverty is the principal problem of our society. He ascribes this to three factors: the loss of our ethical moorings, our lack of a sense of nation, and the betrayal of the nation by its leaders. The *masa*, he says, must free themselves through a revolution launched by their own leaders and guided by their own creed.

Sycip’s comments were prompted by a paper read by UP Professor Ben Diokno on the current fiscal crisis. He said that he was realistic enough to know that Diokno’s recommendations would be ignored by Congress. “There is nothing wrong with the Filipino,” Sycip was quoted as saying. “But there is nothing right in our political system. We follow blindly the things that work in western countries but do not work in Asian developing countries. What we have right now is not working.”

I agree absolutely with Jose that mass poverty is our society’s biggest problem, but I am not certain that a *masa* revolution, whatever it may mean, is feasible today or even that it is the best approach to solving poverty. My doubt stems from the belief that what is referred to as the Filipino *masa* today, unlike in Bonifacio’s time, is not a politically or economically coherent force that is capable of mounting its own

revolution. I also believe that mass poverty in our country is only partly the result of the unequal distribution of wealth. Its basic cause is the underdevelopment of our economy – the lack of dynamism in the technological front, the low level of skills of our people, the paucity of new investments, the lack of jobs, the slow pace of modernization in agriculture, etc. The experiences of China and Vietnam show that these conditions are not necessarily corrected by a *masa* revolution.

Washington Sycip's argument about the dysfunctions of our blind adoption of the western political system, on the other hand, seems so commonsensical one can hardly disagree with it. Definitely, we should find a mode of government that works for us, that is consistent with the culture of our people, and appropriate to the urgent problems we confront today. But, again, the question is: what form shall it take? What makes us think that President Arroyo can pull a trick like Martial Law, or that anyone can seize power by extra-constitutional means and impose an authoritarian regime? I believe only those who imagine scenarios outside of history can seriously think that Filipinos would be willing to give up their liberties again and try another dictator.

Our problem is not that the presidency lacks powers. Our problem is that we have an incumbent who cannot exercise the powers inherent in the office. This situation arises from the deeply flawed manner by which President Arroyo rose to the presidency in 2001 and in 2004. In both these instances, the stabilizing and legitimizing role of electoral majorities was not allowed expression. The vacuum was filled by political operators and organized groups that successfully manipulated the public's need to quickly restore normalcy. It is to these power brokers that the president feels beholden. Lacking in moral authority, she is unable to demand sacrifices from a public that did not vote for her. Weak and having no constituency of her own, she finds herself kowtowing to fellow politicians and predatory syndicates that could turn against her anytime. The role of the public must be restored.

Three steps at least are needed to turn the country around. First, a large and articulate constituency for reform must assemble itself from the countless fragmented voices and social movements that are

already making themselves heard in our society today. Its first task is to draw and agree on a realistic roadmap to national recovery, carefully marking out the main obstacles and dangers and indicating the immediate priorities to be tackled. Second, the document must be explained and debated in public fora all over the country, refined, and then presented to the President and Congress for action. And third, depending on the response of the present political leadership, the reform movement may either call for new elections or a constitutional convention or both.

As important as drawing such a roadmap is the whole exercise of forming a public consensus in which the vast majority of our people can participate. This is what the last presidential election should have achieved if the political discourse had not been distorted by the fears and resentments arising from EDSA II.

Our problems may seem awesome but they are not insurmountable. The opportunities for social transformation are already to be found in our present milieu. However, we must contend not only with the forces of reaction but also with those whose idea of change is limited to what the writer Roberto Unger calls “an all-or-nothing, cataclysmic regeneration of society.”

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