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Arroyo and the Philippines’ “Unfinished Revolution”

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AMID an impeachment complaint filed by the opposition, Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo (GMA) delivered on Monday (July 25) her State of the Nation Address (SONA) -- her second since her re-election in 2004. But what a difference a year makes!

The mood surrounding last year’s SONA stands in stark contrast to heightened tensions and uncertainty facing the country today. The present GMA administration has been besieged by incessant demands for her resignation, numerous street demonstrations that almost culminated in another ‘People Power’, and more recently, the unexpected and dramatic resignation of 8 members of GMA’s cabinet on 8 July 2005. These officials, including the Secretary of Finance, comprised the core members of the president’s economic team.

It is interesting yet tragically puzzling that in just a year after foreign observers commended the Philippines for its holding of a ‘relatively peaceful and free elections’, the country has experienced a sudden reversal in fortune. The escalating political crisis is threatening to paralyse the country, given the current situation of an embattled president fighting to stay in power, a rambunctious Congress mired in political infighting and grandstanding, a troubled economy that struggles to keep afloat against these uncertainties, and a people deeply divided over the future of its beleaguered leader.

Against these developments, a nagging question that needs desperately to be examined is how the country has reached this stage of political incoherence. Listening and reading the political discourses in the country bring to mind the biblical story of the Tower of Babel. In the Philippines context, however, the Tower of “Babble” seems more apt given the heightened state of political incoherence.

The Unfinished Revolution

Many analysts have pointed to the paradox that beset the Philippines: While it was the country to first establish democracy and democratic institutions in Asia, dating back more than one hundred years, to the Assembly created by the revolutionary Malolos Republic in 1898 and to the democratic institutions created during the American colonial regime -- its democracy has been dysfunctional in many ways.

One can argue that the institution of democracy in the country is an ‘unfinished revolution’. This phrase is not new. Many Filipino nationalists, harking back to 1896 when Filipino plebeian Andres Bonifacio vowed to continue the colonial war against Spain, to

contemporary Filipino scholars like Renato Constantino, Reynaldo Ileto and others, have returned to this idea in their respective works. This notion is commonly heard in many discourses across the country at several points in time, and more recently at GMA's Inaugural Address in 2001, immediately after taking over from the toppled Estrada.

The salience of this idea is seen in its various interpretations. For many people, GMA included, the unfinished revolution refers to the fight against poverty -- the centrepiece of her administration's ten-point agenda. And, it is for good reasons. It can be recalled that it was in fact the dire state of the country's economy, increased poverty and misery -- that drove the dictatorial Marcos regime out of power. The sense of alienation brought on by poverty drove many Filipinos to stage its first People Power in 1986.

The 'unfinished revolution' also refers to the long overdue reforms of the country's political system, long dominated by elites and political clans. In her 2001 inaugural address, GMA had staked her political legitimacy on improving both the country's politics and economy.

Weak institutions?

Arroyo's call for reforming the structural and systemic problems of the country points to an important element oftentimes overlooked when one examines the nature of political crises plaguing developing states like the Philippines. This is the problem of weak institutions.

But are the country's institutions really that weak? Yes, many scholars argue, particularly when one looks at the nature of political parties in the Philippines which are often described as "patronage-infested". Since the evolution of these parties, much of the characteristics associated with them have remained till today. These include strong emphasis on personalities rather than credible political platforms; leading to lack of differences between parties, be it the Nationalists or the Liberals; and a high degree of *turncoatism* (movement from one party to the other) that are inherently destabilising.

Political parties are also viewed largely as "elite clubs", vehicles for political and economic elites to perpetuate themselves in power. In effect, families have superseded political parties as the main form of political organisation. According to a study conducted by the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, over 60 per cent of the representatives in the 2001 Congress had relatives in elected office and this trend has steadily risen since the post-martial law regime. Among the consequences of such a political order are the alienation of the masses and the failure to empower the marginalised, resulting in various types of so-called 'people power' demonstrations.

Interestingly, however, the weakness of certain institutions are also either aggravated or ameliorated by 'strong' or dominant institutions like the Catholic church, the military, the media and the even the judiciary. The highly influential yet also highly political Catholic Church has openly intervened in the country's politics. It played a role in bringing an end to the Marcos dictatorship with its support for people power in 1986, and in the ouster of former president Joseph Estrada during People Power II in 2001. In the current crisis, disparate members of the clergy had called for the resignation of Arroyo, until the highest catholic body -- the Catholic Bishop Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) intervened, and took a position to support the president.

Similarly, questions have been raised about the neutrality of the military given its history of attempted coups in the post-Marcos era -- at least 6 during the time of President Corazon

Aquino -- the attempted 'Magdalo' mutiny in 2003 during Arroyo's first term, and the persistence of rumours about possible coups.

Concerns have also been raised about the country's free media, which has been criticised by certain quarters as increasingly being too partisan in its approach and coverage, to the point of fuelling political instability in the country. Finally, the recent move by the country's Supreme Court in issuing a temporary restraining order (TRO) on the implementation of the extended value-added tax (EVAT) has been perceived as creeping interventionism by the judiciary at the risk of abusing the system of check and balance.

Thus, the dynamics of certain weak institutions *vis a vis* the emasculation of the others has tipped the balance against the executive and has weakened the centre. In effect, this 'battle of institutions' had been significantly destabilising the political system as seen in the way the current political crisis has snowballed.

What about Charter Change?

It is also this imbalance that appears to have led the on-going campaign to change the country's charter to pave the way for the adoption of a parliamentary system of government. First proposed during the Ramos administration, advocates of this change argue that this is the best way to resolve the present political impasse. This move has several implications, which include among others: doing away with an 'obstructionist' Senate, providing the incentives for politicians to stay loyal to party affiliations, and allowing for the streamlining and strengthening of political parties.

So far, the public opinion on charter change is deeply divided. It appears however to be a quick fix that does not really address much of the systemic problems that continue to plague the country and its people. If indeed the intention to change the charter is to strengthen institutions, the experience across the globe is however mixed on this one. To be sure, there are parliamentary systems in the developing world that do not have strong parties.

Whether charter change is the way to go, the Philippines has reached the point where new institutional changes need serious attention. The nature of the country's institutions had proven to be not only dysfunctional, but have also become disconnected with the new realities in the country. Paradoxically, the first democracy in Asia suffers from a democratic deficit.

The persistence of crises seen today is symptomatic of the deteriorating state of political affairs that beleaguer the state and its people. Hence, this current crisis could be the wake-up call for GMA's embattled government (or whoever takes over depending on how the current crisis unfolds) to work together with its people. Together, they need to put in place a new set of institutional innovations that can move the country away from its precarious state of political decay. Until then, it would be difficult for any new administration to gain the legitimacy of its people, and the respect of the community both within and outside the Philippines.

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