

# OPINION & FEATURES

## Legacy mode

HER term does not end until 2010, President Arroyo said on July 27, and she intended to perform her job until her last day in office. She also never expressed a desire to extend her term, the President said in what, if constitutional term limits are followed, was her final State of the Nation Address.

The President is no Corazon Aquino, who made it clear in 1991 that she was delivering her final SONA and that a peaceful transfer of power, as scheduled at the end of her term in 1992, is democracy's "most solemn moment." But President Arroyo's reference to the end of her term next year, and implied lack of interest in extending her term, will have to do for those expecting leadership change on June 30, 2010.

The President pointed out that there's still a lot that can be done in one year. This is correct, especially with the economy projected to contract in 2009 and thousands of jobs already lost as a result of the global recession. These details were omitted in the SONA, obviously because they did not jibe with the boast that the state of the nation "is a strong economy." These details would also make it harder to defend the President's foreign trips, which she clearly intends to continue even in a year of recession.

With the President acknowledging that she has only one year left in her term, she should be focusing on her legacy. She must work to ensure that the 2010 general elections – the first to be fully automated in the nation's history – will be honest and orderly. She can build on the gains she enumerated in her SONA

yesterday: the roads, the schools, the infrastructure facilities built without corruption scandals, the low-cost housing, education and poverty alleviation programs.

She also made the usual noises about national unity, although she had a funny way of going about it: her final SONA will be remembered for its pugnacious tone and the potshots against two of her predecessors, a presidential aspirant and the man her allies ousted as House speaker after his son blew the whistle on the ZTE deal. The two former presidents still enjoy significant mass support, while the presidential aspirant has his own following.

President Arroyo delivered a spirited defense of her eight years in office. She has one more year to leave a solid legacy. Not a single day must go to waste. (*Philstar.com*)

### EDITORIAL

## State of the nation

IF the nation were a family, it would clearly be wrong to describe its state solely in terms of how sufficient its earnings are relative to its needs, or how strong the house is in which it dwells. To properly assess the state of a family, it would be necessary to inquire into the authority that family decisions carry in the life of its members, and the degree to which shared values and rules of fairness shape the family's everyday actions. Where the members cannot agree on anything, where bickering rather than mutual support is the norm, where alienation rather than intimacy reigns—such a family is in all likelihood a broken one.

Yet, in discussing the state of the nation, there is a tendency to equate it almost entirely with its economic situation. And even here the focus is on the sheer growth of the gross domestic product, rather than on the jobs and livelihood opportunities that are created in the process. Little attention, if any, is given to the sources of this growth, or to the various costs entailed to produce it.

In the past few days, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* has offered its readers different accounts of the state of the economy under the Arroyo government, showing the larger context in which recent economic data must be viewed. They portray an economy almost exclusively sustained by remittances from overseas Filipino workers, and



**PUBLIC LIVES**  
Randy David

driven mostly by a corresponding expansion in consumer spending and services. They depict a pattern of declining tax effort, borne mainly by the middle class and fixed wage earners, and yearly economic growth rates accompanied by worsening human development indicators. They show an economy that, for all its achievements, is unable to free one-third of its population from the poverty trap.

In light of this problematic economic picture, it seems unnecessary to even begin considering the other dimensions of the nation's current state. But it is important to complete the picture, if only to demonstrate the enormity of the challenges we face.

To many thoughtful Filipinos, the governance problem appears to be at the root of our national predicament. They blame the system of corruption that permeates every level of government for all our misfortunes as a people. But I would argue that corruption itself is only an outcome of the more basic problem of a dysfunctional political system. A functioning political system provides society with public officials who command enough respect and legitimacy to be able to enforce collectively binding decisions. Elections in such a system promote stability and legitimacy. In contrast, a dysfunctional political system produces the opposite. Instead of stability, it creates

uncertainty. Instead of legitimate leaders, it produces insecure power-wielders who do not hesitate to use patronage, corruption and coercion to keep themselves in power. Elections under such circumstances rarely become contests of alternative visions. They remain nothing more than naked power struggles among the moneyed and powerful.

The persistence of political dysfunction in our nation's life has been very costly. It has severely weakened the integrative institutions that regulate our relationships to society and to one another. When courts cannot be trusted to deliver fair judgments because they have been either politicized or bought, or when the police and the military are no longer seen as defenders of the Constitution but as protectors of regimes, then the regulatory fabric cannot hold the nation together. I think this is where the nation is politically and legally.

Instead of being contained and resolved within the bounded spheres of the law and politics, our recurrent national crises have tended to spill over to the other institutions of society. Thus religious and business leaders are routinely recruited as partisans in ongoing conflicts. The personal loyalty of soldiers and policemen is assiduously courted by politicians to the detriment of their professional commitments. And the mass media are prompted to weigh in with their own political agenda, thus blurring the line between informa-

tion and propaganda. Through all these, a young generation of Filipinos grows up internalizing a predisposition to resentfulness and distrust for the nation and its leaders.

The last eight years under Arroyo's presidency have only reinforced these tendencies. Her legitimacy as the nation's highest official has been suspect since day one of her assumption of the presidency. Had she kept her promise not to seek another term, and had she bothered to cleanse the electoral system in time for the 2004 election, she would have laid many of the nation's crises to rest. Instead, she chose to keep them alive by running in 2004, and worse, she compounded them by using people in the military and the Commission on Elections itself to cheat for her.

There is no simple one-shot formula to reverse the current state of our nation. The election of a new president will not revitalize our institutions overnight. Arroyo's long-awaited departure from the presidency by noon of June 30, 2010 may, however, jumpstart the process of renewal. But many things can still happen between now and 2010. One wishes change were as simple as Cromwell telling the English Rump Parliament of his time: "It is not fit that you should sit here any longer! You have been sat too long for any good you have been doing lately.... Depart, I say, and let us have done with you. In the name of God, go!" (*Inquirer.net*)

## Filipino teachers shine in America

MANY Filipino teachers have gone abroad for better-paying jobs. Are they happier where they are now? How are they

coping with a new environment and the world financial crisis? Will they ever come back to the Philippines?

I got real answers to these questions when I and my daughter Mariel recently visited Washington DC, for the Cherry Blossoms festival. We were invited by good teacher-friends Ben and Edna Sabino and spent the night at the new home of another teaching couple in Georges County, Maryland, Chax and Emily Chavez.

Chax and Emily, both former teachers in Naga City, refer to their home as "*Bahay ni Kuya*"—a name they got from watching a show of the same title on The Filipino Channel which is beamed to major cities in the United States. They rent their extra rooms to other overseas Filipino teachers and this helps them keep up amortizations on the house.

"There are quite a number of Filipino teachers here now," says Emily, who joined the first batch of 30 Filipino teachers who arrived in Georges County in September 2004.

Filipino teachers arrive in the US in groups, she said. "Maryland is a good place for immigrants because it does not have a quota...Immigration is open," she added. Some states

### ESSAY

Sylvia Europa-Pinca

limit the entry of immigrants to a certain number every year.

The growing number of Filipinos in Maryland has led to enterprises catering to their needs. Business-minded Filipinos have been bringing in Filipino food, seasonings, accessories, and other "old country" stuff to sell to them. Recently, concert producers brought in Filipino divas Pops Fernandez, Kuh Ledesma, Regine Velaquez, and Zsa Zsa Padilla. It was a big hit among the Filipino teachers.

#### Emily's story

Emily recalled the first time she reported to Gwynn High School: "It was a difficult and awkward time. We came in the second quarter. We were literally gawked at. We looked different from the African-American and Caucasian teachers they were used to," she said. Pretty and fair but petite, her students even called her names, like "Shorty" or "Tiny."

"Tears would well in my eyes but I tried hard to hold them back. I did not want to show them any sign of weakness on my part," she said. There were a lot of smart-alecky students and this was a big change from what she was used to in the Bicol region, where students looked at teachers with awe and respect. Emily admitted she was shocked when some students greeted her with the words, "Hi Shorty!"

Emily, who headed the English De-

partment in her school back in Naga City, was selected to be part of the curriculum writing team on her second year of teaching in Gwynn High School. It was a recognition of her capabilities as an English teacher and it was all the more significant because she came from a country where English was just a second language.

Emily's perseverance stems from her family. After all, they were the reason she decided to work overseas. When the opportunity to go to America came, she grabbed it. She wanted her daughter to live in a better environment and benefit from a Western education. Her husband Chax followed after six months. Daughter Peachy recently arrived with her maternal grandmother in tow.

In just four years, Emily and Chax have been able to buy themselves a house and a van. They are happy with what they have and are looking forward to a long stay in America. But Naga will always be in their hearts, they added. It will be a vacation place for them.

To cope with the financial crisis, they do not buy things on impulse. They plan their purchases well, said Emily. Like other teachers, she attends a lot of seminars where she not only learns new things but also gets paid extra for the hours spent attending these seminars.

#### Ben's story

Staying with the Chavezes in their home is Ben Sabino, a Math teacher also at Gwynn High School. Ben is still amazed at how he got the job in Maryland. He was doing odd jobs in Jersey City. He needed a regular job to make his stay in the US legal. So he took the US test for teachers. Passing that, he went to a job fair in Maryland and passed the interview. All he needed was a school to take him in.

Ben cannot forget the stress (panic, actually)—and timely miracles—of the day he met the deadline for the filing of documents for a teaching job in Maryland.

He had boarded a Greyhound bus from Jersey City to Georges County. It was winter and the thick snow was slowing down the bus. He was praying and calling on all the saints to help get him to the school before the 3 pm cutoff.

But everything seemed to be going against him. He got down at the wrong bus stop and got lost. After asking for directions, he hopped on another bus. He was starting to panic. Just then his cell phone rang. It was a Filipino he had met at the job fair calling to find out where he was and reminding him that his appointment was just minutes away. The Filipino volunteered to meet him somewhere and drive him to where he was supposed to go. He made it just in the nick of time. While he was talking to the officer of the day, a school

head came in saying a Math teacher was immediately needed at Gwynn High School. He was at the right place at the right time!

Ben felt that God was there beside him that day and that He had earlier sent all His angels to help him miraculously meet the 3 pm deadline. Because of this experience, Ben has become a man of strong faith.

Ben appreciates everything about what he believes is his "God-given" career. He had been warned about the tough kids but he takes it all in stride.

"If they call me names, I laugh with them. I do not think they really mean to insult me. I believe it is just the way they are."

He also laughs at the fact he had to adjust the way he speaks English to be understood by his American students. The other Filipino teachers had to do the same thing, especially those who had regional accents. Filipino-English won't do here, he said, laughing.

In a year's time, Ben has gained a lot of self-confidence. "I did not come from an exclusive school or a state university but I made it here in America as a teacher," he said. Back home, Ben taught in a public school in Antipolo and could hardly make both ends meet. In America, he has already bought himself a car. He hopes to buy a house next year. "When I have saved enough money, I still want to go back home and retire there," he added. (*Inquirer.net*)

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