

SONA: TRUTH OR SPECTACLE?

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By the Policy Study, Publication, and Advocacy (PSPA)
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The state of the nation address (SONA) is a discourse that mirrors the truth about the country's situation and lays down an agenda for change to be implemented by the President. The nation has heard numerous SONAs but generally these came across as self-serving, rendered in a denial mode with a list of promises remaining unfulfilled. Thus SONAs turned out to be the opposite; instead of inspiring the people they provoke disbelief if not public outrage. Rather than unifying, they promote divisiveness.

That is precisely what has happened since the SONA of Ferdinand E. Marcos that triggered the First Quarter Storm (FQS) of 1970. That year the true state of the nation dramatized oil price hikes, tuition increases, corruption, a bogus land reform, police brutality – but Marcos looked the other way around, feeding fallacies far removed from the social and economic realities. Converging at the old Congress, thousands of cause-oriented activists countered with their true state of the nation in radical language and cultural performances topped by calls for sweeping social reform. That was how the alternative SONA was born, shaking the nation and triggering massive indignation rallies nationwide.

Considered the first SONA is revolutionary leader Andres Bonifacio's "State of the Katipunan Address" (SOKA) at the Tejeros Convention of March 22, 1897 or one year after Asia's first ever revolution against colonialism and feudal oppression was launched. Soon, Gen. Emilio Aguinaldo who staged a coup to unseat the Katipunan leadership from Bonifacio, would deliver the "State of the Revolutionary Nation" (SORNA) on August 29, 1898.

After a period of similar traditional addresses by American governors-general in the U.S. colonial years, Manuel L. Quezon as first Commonwealth president delivered the "State of Commonwealth Government's

Affairs" (SOCGA) before the first National Assembly in 1936 as provided for in the 1935 Constitution. The constitution called for the president to inform Congress on the state of the nation and recommend bills deemed "necessary and expedient." The first post-war annual SONA was delivered by President Manuel Roxas before the first Congress in January 1947.

Critical junctures

Presidential SONAs have been delivered at the country's critical junctures that include the government's forging of special defense and trade ties with the former colonial master, United States, locking the Philippines to the latter's various wars of aggression and the U.S.-backed long-drawn counter-insurgency campaigns presently framed as Oplan Bantay Laya. The periods also consistently included the unresolved land tenancy problem, economic downturns, martial rule, strikes and armed conflicts, coup attempts, as well as specific issues like unemployment, corruption and human rights. All the presidents were at the center of these critical junctures where the vast powers that they control appear to have failed in addressing the country's basic problems and every turnover of the presidency seemed to have been marked by economic and political crisis.

Especially since the Marcos years, reforms and bright prospects underlined in various SONAs failed to hide the social realities that are etched in the minds of the people who are increasingly wrenched and victimized by poverty, unemployment, social injustice, human rights abuses, and other maladies. Both the president and Congress called for token reforms and palliatives in the form of laws and policies – even new taxes – hinting that however endemic the problems have become these can easily be offset by acts of state.

The two institutions thus loathe sweeping social and economic reforms, ranging from the increase of minimum wages to the junking of destructive globalization policies and pushing for genuine agrarian reform even if these echo popular demands from the masses. Instead of addressing the issues, the presidential calls for new laws and policies only aggravate the oppressive social and economic conditions. Thus, unemployment has worsened over the past 50 years, income inequalities have widened with a corresponding increase in poverty levels, and corruption has likewise worsened despite the number of laws already enacted and the agencies created to curb it.

In effect, SONAs have merely become messengers of myths, baseless hopes, and unsustainable programs when the extreme conditions already cry for drastic change. They market the institutions of power as the architects of reform when these effectively serve the narrow interests of the rich and powers that be. A traditional SONA that is neither grounded on nor assimilate the aggregate pains and minds of the people cannot inspire much less mobilize popular support needed for undertaking change. The typical SONA has failed to transcend the minute lens of the presidency – an appendage of oligarchic politics that promotes class interests – so that any agenda becomes irreconcilable with the broad aspirations of the people.

Aquino III's SONA

President Benigno S. Aquino III's recent SONA basically does not depart from his predecessors' mistakes. His address was long on corruption cases committed during the past administration. Yet it was short on concrete solutions and was silent on the prosecution of the former president, land reform, human rights, and other raging issues. There goes a President claimed to be elected popularly but does not echo the people's sentiments. Did Aquino III and his advisers deliberately avoid mentioning the fundamental issues and just focus on more peripheral issues?

A traditional SONA that is articulated by the state that has been weakened by financial crisis, bankruptcy, corruption as a result of which it has been increasingly isolated from the people has been reduced to an annual spectacle of sorts – all sound and no fury. Once delivered, it is easily forgotten.

This makes the alternative SONA an event that has increasingly gained a broad appeal and deserves greater attention by the mass media. The alternative SONA is replicated in key cities and towns all over the country – as well as by overseas Filipinos – and is made dynamic and interactive by the hundreds of thousands of activists and people from all walks of life joining it. The true state of the nation as expressed by the people themselves is articulated in streamers, speeches, cultural performances, and marches. The true state of the nation is in the people who live under the harshest of conditions in the margins of society yet see in collective strength the power to make their lives better. Aquino III says, "We can dream again." Well, he has no sense of history: The people are not just dreaming but struggling, putting their own dreams into action.

Several alternative SONAs have been marred by overzealous police and military forces out to block the rallyers from marching toward the Batasan complex which hosts the House of Representatives building. Reminiscent of Marcos fascist brutality, countless activists have been mauled and beaten up by security forces armed with truncheons as fire trucks throw water cannons on what otherwise would have been peaceful protests. Many protesters ended up being hospitalized.

More important is that the alternative SONA is not just an annual rally of social advocates but mirrors a national mass struggle that evokes shared dreams. It aims to empower the people toward pushing for comprehensive social, economic, and political transformation. In the alternative SONA, truth becomes liberating and collective action makes change more imminent.

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