

Aquino's 'Transformational Presidency': What Change?

Without social consciousness and the will to change, transformational leadership will remain elusive – not under the present state of the nation anyway. From the way he has shown his “leadership” so far, the country has already seen the rest of Aquino's presidency. Without even being understood by the people, “transformational presidency” has lost its appeal.

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When President Benigno S. Aquino III delivers his 3rd state of the nation address (SONA) on July 23 people will expect to hear the truth: concrete signs of qualitative change in their lives, in the national economy, and positive results of his other much-touted policy reforms. Otherwise, he will just be repeating what he said two years ago upon assuming the presidency or even echoing the same promises and programs that the people have heard year in and out for the past 26 years.

In July 2010, Aquino III pledged a “transformational presidency” that would free the nation from the quagmire of corruption and poverty and set the pace for reforms in governance. Why he or his communication specialists coined the term “transformational presidency” when no institutional reforms have been made beyond the removal of the Supreme Court chief justice and the arrest of former President Gloria M. Arroyo needs to be explained. Two years of the Aquino administration shows nothing that will give flesh to “transformational presidency” except that the state of the nation today looks no different from where we were 26 years ago.

What change does the President Aquino want to achieve during his term of office? To what direction of change does the present occupant of the highest seat of government intend to lead the country? Will it go differently from the road of failed policies under past presidents - or will it go the same path, with just a patch-up here or fixing there to cover up for a lack of substance?

Since Corazon C. Aquino in 1986, the SONA of every President at the start of term talks of grim economic and political scenarios, crises, and bankruptcy – a clear

reference to their predecessors – with a pledge to change things through what they call “institutional,” “structural,” and “radical” reform. Corazon C. Aquino promised “structural reforms,” “people empowerment,” and a centerpiece comprehensive agrarian reform to put an end to land tenancy. Fidel V. Ramos talked about “pole vaulting” the economy and a “social reform agenda” for the poor. The country heard a “radical restructuring” (not just reforms) and a decisive end to corruption from Joseph E. Estrada but time was not on his side: he was ousted from office after only two years. Gloria M. Arroyo's 9-year term pledged “long-term structural reforms,” one million jobs every year, food for every family, and a “strong republic.”

A quick look at the SONA of all presidents during the period shows a national situation with no meaningful change whatsoever but, in fact, more signs of retrogression. Poverty level just fluctuated from 60 percent in 1987 to 51 percent at the end of Arroyo's term with a caveat to the Filipino, however, of statistical manipulation being done to suit every president. Unemployment stood almost the same: from 10 million of the labor force without jobs in the late 1980s to almost 12 million as of 2012, with a further increase in underemployment and poor quality of jobs created. From \$23 billion in 1987 the country's foreign debt has ballooned three times to \$63 billion today. At times, there were signs of GDP growth but government economists gave no answers as to why such growth does not trickle down to the poor. Three years ago, the net worth of the Philippines' 25 richest Filipinos (\$21.4 billion) is equivalent to the combined income of 11.1 million families or 56 million Filipinos.

The avowed commitment to address the dire national conditions fell short, however, of what all the Presidents were drumbeating as comprehensive reforms. Every program was defined according to the term limits thus is devoid of the strategy and continuity needed. Every short-term solution was essentially palliative and subscribed to so-called development or modernization models – such as privatization, deregulation, and structural adjustment programs (SAPs) – now being repudiated in many parts of the world for their disastrous results. In varying degrees, corruption, patronage, economic plunder, and vicious attacks on human rights defined every presidency with governing institutions irreparably weakened and a deep mistrust in government irreversible. All previous presidencies began with relatively high or fair trust ratings but ended with a low or, in the case of Estrada and Arroyo, a negative one. The surveys clearly indicated widespread public disillusionment over the failed presidencies and the misuse of vast executive powers.

Unlike the previous regimes, Aquino III, who was elected with a big margin of votes under a defective automated election system, tried to raise hopes that he will be a “transformational” president with a straight road (“daang matuwid”) for social change. The “social contract” that he promised to fulfill, however, was made nebulous by a series of blunders and indecisiveness from Day 1 until the end of 2011 as his trust ratings began to dip alarmingly. It was at this point when decisions were made for the arrest of the former president for electoral fraud and the impeachment of her close associate, SC Chief Justice Renato Corona, for violating the constitution. The presidential moves created public perceptions as being the “change” that the nation long wanted to see. Where this first step of his “daang matuwid” (straight, uncompromising path of governance) will lead to in terms of wide-ranging institutional reform in governance and justice begs an answer.

More to the point, Aquino III's performance after two years flops and his pledge to stamp out corruption stands merely as a prop to conjure the image of “transformational leadership.” The “change” that he promised way back in 2009 before the election campaign was contrived from the nation's ICU state, lingering questions of illegitimacy, institutional breakdown, and deep public mistrust in government under nine years of the Arroyo regime. “Change” he promised to the masses of people who had geared for yet another people power uprising thrice or four times in a row against the former president. Amid this

high collective expectation another Aquino banked on the trapo culture of name recall, the support of the business elite, and clan politics to clinch the presidency.

The election was another feather to the Aquino cap; accountability must now take its course.

First of all, the non-performing Aquino III in his years of stint in Congress is now replicated in Malacanang. After two years of presidency not a single priority bill has been enacted into law. His new mining policy reverses decades of collective gains by the people: Local communities are now prohibited from stopping mining operations thus allowing transnational mining firms to operate at will.

Two days before the high court ruling on the TRO against Comelec's purchase of the defective voting machines, he declared the issue non-debatable. It was a clear political move on a sub judice issue that also thumbed down the opposition against the Smartmatic technology raised by some IT groups who helped watch Aquino's vote in 2010. Pressed by Freedom of Information (FOI) advocates to walk his talk on FOI as a priority, the chief executive is in fact undermining the constitutional provision on citizens' right to public information. Numerous exceptions inserted by Malacanang to the proposed measures will legitimize and codify state secrecy and confidentiality in the guise of national security, foreign policy, so-called privileged executive information, and so on.

The claim of GDP growth in the first quarter of 2012 was driven by a surge in government consumption and is therefore unsustainable. The main drivers of economic growth, productivity, and jobs creation such as agriculture and overall investment performed poorly. Unemployment has worsened alarmingly from 10.9 million in 2010 to 11.7 million today or 11.7 percent of the labor force; of those employed only 57 percent have regular jobs indicating the fast deterioration of work quality.

The economy will continue to rely heavily on overseas workers' remittances – the perennial rescuer of the economy. Compared with the daily outflow of 3,000 Filipinos seeking overseas jobs in 2010, the number has risen to 4,000 this year. Government is aggressively exporting labor: it aims to double the country's share of world seafarers from 25 percent or 347,150 seafarers to 50 percent by 2016. Yet Aquino has cut the welfare and services budget for overseas Filipino workers by close to

P800 million, leaving only about P262 million.

The social divide in the country has widened: the combined wealth of the 40 richest Filipinos more than doubled growing by \$24.6 billion (108 percent) to total \$47.7 billion this year which is equal to 21 percent of the GDP. The number of households who rated themselves poor increased from 9.1 million (2011) to 11.1 million (April 2012) or 55 percent of the population.

In contrast to the swift prosecution of the former SC chief justice, Aquino III exerts no political will in arresting top criminal fugitives and perpetrators of human rights violations. In two years, the number of extra-judicial killings of activists and social advocates has reached 81 with two foreign development volunteers – Italian Fr. Faustino Tenorio and Willem Geertman, a Dutch – among the victims.

Aquino III takes pride in tying the country's sovereign rights with the U.S. – from defending its territorial claims, to AFP modernization, foreign policy, and domestic counter-insurgency. Historical lessons are not in his plate and certainly the direction he is taking is the same dependency and “brown American” mentality that his predecessors took giving the country nothing but a loss of dignity and respect in the world community.

In December 2011, the U.S.-based Global Integrity and Political and Economic Risk Consultancy (PERC) of Hong Kong observed that Aquino III's high profile campaign on “good government and less corruption” lacks substance and performance, with both monitoring agencies rating the government poor in anti-corruption, judicial impartiality, and law enforcement.

The litmus test in Aquino's “transformational leadership” is in instituting sweeping reforms that will address the people's decades-long clamor for social, economic, and political changes – a state that ensures even just the basic minimum rights to life, employment and wages, housing, health, and other human development indices. The critical test is in giving up dynastic interests and not extending it horizontally and vertically as in endorsing the senatorial candidacy of yet another Aquino who – who knows – may yet take another shot at the presidency next time.

Transformational leadership requires the restructuring of systems and institutions, a strong ideological commitment, transcending clan interests and doing away with traditional patronage. It requires the will to fight, the determination to bring the presidency to the masses and linking up with their collective interests. It should inspire recovery rather than convey cynicism.

Without such social consciousness, being grounded on the real conditions, and the will to change, transformational leadership will remain elusive – not under the present state of the nation, anyway.

Not to lose hope, a vast number of community leaders and progressive political forces are showing the way for a just, lasting, and comprehensive change. It is potentially in this light that the people may yet see the fruits of their collective struggle.

From the way he has shown his “leadership” so far – where backpedalling is the norm – the country has already seen the rest of Aquino's presidency. Without even being understood by the people, “transformational presidency” has lost its appeal.

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