

# **PNoy's Style of Governance**

**Ben Lim**

*(Given during SOP July 22, 2011)*

Going over the governing styles of the past presidents, despite negative assessments by some historians, we have had a wide range of governing styles. We have strong presidents as Marcos, pragmatic presidents as Quezon and Quirino, nationalist presidents Osmena and Garcia, opportunist president as Arroyo. We of course witnessed unrealized and unfulfilled terms of Roxas, Magsaysay and Estrada.

Compared to the past presidents, Benigno Aquino III stands alone as the first president who simply does not lead in his first year of office. He is like a car that will not hold the road. His governing style is like his courtship of Shalani, the affair raised so much expectation but ended in a whimper.

On almost every major issue since he took office last July 2010, PNoy has turned over responsibility and accountability to one of his subordinates, keep his distance, and merely pays lip service to the issues, lets his communicators do the rest.

For his first year in office, the issues that have gotten the least, the most-distant or even no-leadership treatment from PNoy include: the hostage crisis which the IIRC blamed Mayor Lim, Ombudsman Gutierrez, the PNP and its chief and everybody else involved except PNoy. More questionable, PNoy did not implement the IIRC recommendations. And worse lets his assistants amend the substantive findings before it was presented as the final report. On the much talked about intramurals between Balay and Samar factions, no clarification was given. According to Malacanang there is no such thing. On the E.O. creating the Truth Commission which was supposed to be one of the centerpieces of his administration, when the Supreme Court declared that the E.O. was unconstitutional, PNoy's response was to attack the Court. The freedom of information bill, which he promised to submit as one of his priority bills during his campaign, has been left to languish along with other promises. Land reform for Hacienda Luisita until now is unresolved. According to PNoy Hacienda Luisita

unlike the ARRM, is not under Philippine sovereignty so it is beyond his reach. On the controversy between Secretary Ping de Jesus and LTO Chief Torres which now PNoy passes to Mar Roxas hopefully to provide cover for PNoy favorites who have real cause to fear prosecution. Passing the buck appeared most flagrant when he asked Vice President Binay to decide on the issue of whether to allow the burial of Marcos at the LibinganngBayani or not.

PNoy has set his pattern of exercising the least leadership early on. Aquino is too weak to be predictable but strong enough to be arbitrary. Rather than address the issues that concern our citizenry most, which are unemployment, stagnant wages, hunger, high prices of basic commodities such as energy (gasoline and diesel) electricity, water, transportation fare, toll fees, and food, he does the easy thing by simply allowing the economy to drift in the directions his backers prefer. He appears happy, just like GMA, citing statics that there are less hungry people today than during the Arroyo administration. As if 23 million hungry Filipinos is not as bad as 30 million. His Social Welfare administrator tells us that the conditional cash transfer handouts or the Millennium Development Challenge program to help alleviate poverty has reached over 2 million Filipinos and will, if Congress appropriates an amount to complement the MDC program, reach more beneficiaries. Accordingly the CCT is now the centerpiece of his anti-poverty program, it is so popular with the poor. They all want a piece of the pie. And why not? A handout of P1,000 to P3,000 per family is larger than what politicians give during campaign season.

What is not told to the public is that Millennium Development Challenge program which is part of the US aid to the Philippines was applied for in 2008 by former President Gloria Arroyo and which the US Congressional team for MDC program evaluated in 2009 and was recommended for approval and approved by US Congress in 2010 for release. Pnoy cut his state visit to Vietnam to travel to the US to receive the assistance program from President Obama.

PNoy is comfortable when talking about a range of issues from his balding crown to the latest stereo set he installed in Malacanang and even about fast second hand racing cars including getting rid of it without losing a centavo. But on

national issues, more often than not he adopts a vague or equivocal position (or no position at all) and fails to laen on the very people to he assigned to take action when they failed him and of course the Filipino people. Since he took office the biggest problem that confront his office is high prices of basic commodities such as gasoline, diesel, natural gas, transport fare and food.

When the price of petroleum went up unrelentingly, PNoy ordered revisiting, revising, and reducing the E-vat for petroleum to ease the price hike, which was welcomed by the electorate, yet after the order, we hear nothing about it. The expectation of the people is that he would put emphasis on controlling prices through various policies clearly indicates that the major short-term priority for the government is to manage inflationary pressures. This has led people to perceive him as a person who goes through the motion of doing something but really deaf to criticism or advice. Malacanang people, it seems, are blighted by selective amnesia..

The one specific proposal by PNoy since his inaugural address was a public-private partnership in undertaking new development projects for the country. While he claimed time and time again that there are so many private businessmen who are interested in such a project, yet after it was announced, the Filipino people were never appraised on the specifics of the partnership. It remained in effect a nebulous plan lacking in specifics such as spending baseline or obligation of contracting parties, and time frame of the projects. This has led many people to believe that its lack of transparency could be a source of graft and corruption. Meantime, he denounced the practices of Arroyo officials in the GOCCs for “overpaying and over rewarding themselves with enormous perks”. He proposes no specific terms for a mutually beneficial public private partnership program, once again declining to lead. The trouble with the people in charge of helping PNoy shape national policy today, is that they are only playing at the first level, their vision restricted to attacking the Arroyo oversights.

In foreign affairs PNoy, like his mother and former President Manuel Roxas, favors “following America’s leadership and seeking American protective umbrella”. This means he does not need to craft an independent foreign policy.

Thus in the Kalayaan island Group (KIG) conflict with China, PNoy sought American protection and followed American advice, which means that under his watch we will no longer craft our own foreign policy. PNoy seems to believe that by declaring that he embraces America, canceling his pre-scheduled state visit to China without informing China in advance, America would be pleased by his cavalier treatment of China and would thus hand over the KIG to the Philippines. Actually by his blunt assertions, our relations with China have been diminished by his needlessly crass behavior.

PNoy does not seem aware that the US is an offensive member of the international community. The US does not ratify international initiatives or agreements, whether it is on the UNCLOS, on climate warming, biological warfare, criminal justice, and women's rights. You may be interested to hear that the US is only one of the two states (the other being Somalia) that did not ratify the 1989 Convention on Children's rights. Yet the US claims to be upholding international law for the Southeast Asian claimants in the Spratlys. This inconsistent and opportunistic response to international organizations and agreements, some of which Washington helped establish, and then reject. PNoy should proceed from the firm ground of our claim and not from illusory belief that the American security umbrella could deliver to us, our claims to the KIG. Given the state of the American economy, the rise of anti-war sentiment in America (82% wanted Obama to bring home all American troops either immediately or within a year), the rise of China as an economic power, PNoy's belief that America will grant him all his wishes is a little naïve. Right now talks are taking place against the background of the US budget standoff, with Republicans and Democrats deadlocked over the appropriate means to reduce America's vast deficit. Parenthetically do you what is the finding of the Federal Bureau Justice Statics about people charged with protecting the people in their custody? They found for instance that 4.5 percent of women prisoners nationwide had been sexually abused at their current facilities with terrible frequency.

Given his performance for the year, PNoy is clearly a designator and convener. He calls for an agenda, lets his cabinet members sketch the broad policy outlines and then designates the implementer. PNoy's actual governing

style emphasizes delegation and passivity until things go wrong. The PNOy style, if it can be called a style, has advantages it is difficult to pinpoint responsibility. He has delegated leadership, initiative to his advisers and cabinet members. From the start of his Presidency, PNOy has displayed a governing style that, well, displays a distinct lack of leadership. His first major proposal, EO No. 1 was really just a hodgepodge of promises to expose and punish the corrupt people in the Arroyo administration. The EO he said would be the cornerstone of his first term in office, going after corruption, was drafted by Justice Secretary de Lima and guided by former Supreme Court Chief Justice Davide. Unfortunately the plan did not take off. When the Supreme Court declared the EO unconstitutional his only recourse was to attack the Court.

PNOy is President but is he a leader? Clearly the presidency has overwhelmed him. He may be the most straightforward Filipino, if there is such a person, a man pushed by fate and media gimmickry to the presidency, but he is not the person the country needs at the moment. He does not lead, he is not tough enough to discipline his own appointees, he is not imaginative enough, and he is not determined enough. He does not come out with a specific program, only vague, hyper-emotionally-inflated speeches. He does not pay a decent respect to opinions of majority of his countrymen.

Setting aside the intrinsic worth of any of the President's policy decisions, one has to admit that this isn't exactly an example of a President leading. Instead, he lets events and people, lead him. Yet none of these should surprise us. PNOy did not come to the Presidency with extensive leadership experience neither in the Lower house nor in the Senate. PNOy tells the people that they are his boss, the truth he lets others boss them around. Worse, he does not listen to them, cannot comprehend their problems, he is not connected with them – their pain, fear, and lost hopes.

PNOy has no clear vision, views or ideas on how to address the political, economic and social problems confronting the country. He is no big picture thinker, does not seek out new ideas and better solutions. Worse, the teams he builds around him are also without clear vision.

The only way for PNoy to become a good leader is to learn to listen and to address the needs of the people. Moreover, in view of his inexperience and lack of expertise, he needs to recruit capable individuals who are men or women of good will, who are passionate about creating structure in the midst of chaos, and interpreting and digesting information to support decision-making. Unfortunately we have not seen the passion in Cabinet members as they operated in their respective roles to establish the appropriate structure running Malacanang and unraveling the mess that has become our economy.

Such powerlessness in the face of economic free fall has emerged as a hallmark of the Aquino presidency. While Aquino and his staff believe that they are facing a more acute economic crisis moment than their predecessors, characterized by a near depression, the truth is that every president going back to Roxas, at one point or another, has had to campaign or govern in an environment dominated by the same cyclical and stubborn factors – recession, unemployment, rising energy costs. The challenge is: does PNoy have a better solution? As his officials came out to defend their indefensible lack of a concrete and viable program, they had little to work with beyond clichés. And so perhaps PNoy's presidency, as it reaches the second year, is best viewed as part of a longer and still undefined political moment.

## Goodbye to Aquino Promises

Ben Lim

“All power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely... There is no worse heresy than that the office sanctifies the holder of it.” Lord Acton

The question for President Simeon Benigno Aquino III after almost a year on office is whether his piecemeal, stopgap and limited scale approach to long-term problems like poverty, unemployment, stagnant wages and inflation will ever work. Filipinos no longer believe in much of the President's so-called programs to address the problems of high prices, jobs, hunger and poverty reduction. Worse, they know President Aquino's advisers, technical experts, classmates, relatives and cronies, blithely assume that the overriding goal of any program for the poor is to polish Aquino's image through the use of temporary handouts as the new propaganda campaign, believing that addressing the problem of poverty is a question of public relations and that the simple act of doling out is enough to subdue the demands of the poor for relief of their inferior humanity. They even calibrate the dole outs by announcing that they would soon reduce the VAT on diesel. They never gave a thought that the poor want higher incomes, better wages, jobs security and more interesting occupations.

Piecemeal and stopgap solutions were indeed what the President proposed when he announced in his first State of the Nation Address (SONA) that his 2010 budget proposal would mirror his “administration's commitment to lift the nation from poverty through. . . DSWD's conditional cash transfer and rice subsidy, DA's farm input subsidies, Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (PHIC) health insurance for indigents.” Stopgap measures have been instituted when country has been hit by a series increases in fuel prices; the President's cabinet met, labored, admitted that they are helpless to stop increases in fuel prices and thus proposed, instead, makeshift solution “to provide relief to jeepney and tricycle sectors” through Executive Order No. 32: “Instituting the Public Transport Assistance Program (PTAP) – PantawidPasada” that would allocate P450 million

from special funds of the department of Energy for subsidy program. However, funding subsidies of tricycles shall be subject to availability of counterpart funds from local government units. EO 32, accordingly was based on a study conducted by the Inter-Agency Energy Contingency Committee, which claimed that the PTAP is the most equitable and efficient form of intervention to provide relief to jeepney and tricycle sectors.

Unfortunately contingency plans as “conditional cash transfer” and “pantawidpasada” were not welcomed by the intended beneficiaries (the poor) for soon after they availed of the dole out, prices of other commodities and fees go up at even a higher rate. Worse, only a miniscule number of the poor are benefited by these temporary measures.

Majority of the wage earners insist that unless these stopgap measures are matched by corresponding increase in wages and salaries, abolition of the E-Vat, tax the rich, and followed by more comprehensive long range programs, these stopgap measures are not even credible propaganda for easing the President’s conscience about his “commitment to lift the nation from poverty”. With a quarter of all Philippine income going to the upper 10 percent, and today’s middle class actually facing lower incomes than before the Arroyo administration, there is only one way to raise more taxes: Tax the rich and the political class. Make the tax system fairer and more efficient at the top – eliminating the massive welfare and exemptions hidden in the tax system for the affluent and big business.

Even President Aquino expressed disbelief when survey has revealed that despite government claim about wide scale implementation of the CCT (conditional cash transfer), “more than one in five Filipino families, or 20.5 percent of respondents claimed to have gone hungry at least once in the past three months, while 51 percent considered themselves poor.”

And as usual, like their predecessors, both President Aquino and Secretary Soliman blamed the messenger. If instead government piecemeal programs were to be measured by how high a valuation the President and his cabinet members place on them, Malacanang’s claim to have undertaken great steps to lift the nation from poverty should be clear and uncontested. It seems the administration



is more interested in challenging criticisms labeled at their programs than to listen carefully and find out the good points as well as the bad points. Too often, Aquino scorns critics for bringing in the bad news, but he should recognize that bad news maybe the real news.

Yet the very fact of being lied to, abused and exploited by the political class generation after generation, Filipinos have learned more deeply about government corruption, indifference, incompetence, and deceit. Long ago, the American President Franklin d. Roosevelt in 1935, at the height of the Great Depression, had warned that stopgap, piecemeal, and dole outs, could lead to a culture of continued dependence: “Continued dependence upon relief induces a spiritual and moral disintegration fundamentally destructive to the national fiber.”

Indeed even the Catholic Bishop’s Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), an avid practitioner of charity par excellence, has criticized President Aquino and his advisers for being shortsighted in recommending the fuel subsidy program for jeepney and tricycle drivers. According to Chairman Bishop Broderick Pabillo, of CBCP-National Secretariat for Social Action, Justice and Peace (NASSA) the President was “ill-advised by his economic team on the fuel subsidy. He said that the recommendation “is also an indication that his team is biased, not for the poor.” Pabillo asked, “Will government always be able to give subsidies?” Reminding the President of his SONA statements “What use is a law if it is not put into effect because of a lack of funding? . . . We cannot continue with business as usual. We needed to evaluate not just whether the right things were being done but, equally important, whether these were being done right.”

Nearly nine months into office, the Aquino administration has been behind the curve not only poverty alleviation but also in the handling of the entire economy. His appointed cronies who invested in his campaign do not care whether they are fit for the job, as long as they can use their office to collect political debts, while using the communications people to tell the people that they have been working so hard figuring out solutions to problems facing the nation.