

DEVELOPING A POLITICAL STRATEGY IN THE POST PANDEMIC WORLD

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The world wide spread of the Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic is suspected by the intelligence community of some countries to be deliberately engineered. Probing this however, is not the focus of this paper.

There are lessons from pandemic related actions of government and Philippine society as a whole that can serve as basis for developing a national political strategy in the post pandemic world.

The Philippine Situation in brief

This is not the first time that the country has to deal with a bio threat. The Philippines had to prevent the spread of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic into its territory, from late 2002 to 2004.

Both SARS and COVID 19 originated from China. The difference is that during the outbreak of SARS, the Philippines was not a major geopolitical and commercial target of Chinese interest. Stopping the entry of SARS then was simpler as the Philippines had officially listed only fourteen cases with two deaths.

The situation with the current pandemic was vastly different. Thousands of Chinese nationals are roaming the archipelago, encouraged mainly by the very warm reception of the current national political leadership.

The first confirmed cases of COVID 19 in the Philippines were Chinese nationals who entered the Philippines without proper safeguards. It took weeks before government reluctantly closed air travel between the Philippines and mainland China.

A strong multi sectoral protest prompted the government to finally suspend the Philippine based Chinese offshore gaming operation, locally referred to as POGO. This government sanctioned gaming operation allows thousands of Chinese nationals to freely

come and go and be employed in the Philippines in a rotation scheme every three months. This is a practice done in circumvention of Philippine immigration and labor laws and surreptitiously used by Chinese firms that are established in the Philippines in recent times.

The beginning of March marked the end of the pleasantly colder weather in the Philippines. The total lockdown policy enforced by government is in keeping with the counter measure against the pandemic adopted worldwide. This creates a policy dilemma especially in the mostly poor communities in many major cities in the Philippines. Homes of the poor are located in very crowded neighborhoods, and severely lacking in livable spaces. Given the limited space and the oven-like temperature inside their homes, compelling the poor to stay home virtually exposes them to environmental conditions that is more conducive to acquiring the virus.

The role of local government in delivering critical services down to the smallest unit of Philippine society is on the whole laudable. Given the high level of corruption among politicians in the Philippines, it is heartwarming to observe the near universal distribution of essential supplies to local government constituents in many parts of the country. The Catholic Church for the first time however, has been effectively relegated by government propaganda as a poor second in this regard.

Issues Arising from the Pandemic

Despite the pandemic, political power play has not been set aside in the Philippines. Polarizing pandemic related actions of the central government are some of the cunning attempts to use the pandemic situation to consolidate support towards authoritarianism.

Local government, specifically at the level of the smallest or basic Philippine political unit – the “barangay”, proved their capability and efficiency to meet challenges of providing help to vast number of citizens, reaching even the remotest corner of the country. This political unit actually serve as the community backbone of Philippine democracy. Monopoly in the control of these local socio-political units by the Presidency under the guise of an ill-conceived emergency power that substantially eliminates normal government checks and balances, is an ominous development.

In established democracies, the presence of the army and the police are meant to provide a sense of protection and order against unreasonable or hysterical response to fear of the threat. It becomes alarming when these armed instruments are excessively used to bolster more the coercive power of the state.

It is important to recognize the shortage of sufficient and accurate information resulting from incompetence. A deliberate effort by government to hide aspects of the truth about the ongoing situation is possible. There are inconsistencies in official reports not only on the number of deaths and of afflicted persons, but also in providing acceptable degree of logic to justify its imposed restrictions.

Despite the clear absence of capable political opposition, the existence of opposition initiated plots of unconstitutional ouster continue to be floated by those in the highest authority of government. The consequence of these unsubstantiated coup rumors is the constant use of it as cause to employ more and more authoritarian measures.

Efforts to cultivate personal loyalties to the President in both the police and the military, give credence to the growing fear of many concerned citizens that democracy in the Philippines will be lost again.

The Catholic Church in the Philippines is historically known to respond and join calls to defend democracy and freedom during times of oppression. It is understandable why no government even during colonial times, have so maligned the Church except today.

In the case of a mostly Catholic country as the Philippines, the approval and blessing by the Church actually spells the victory or defeat of extra constitutional uprisings. There is however no credible opposition today to which the Church can relate to.

The Future of Opposition Politics

Political forces identified with the Liberal party and those aligned with former President Noynoy Aquino, presently has the lowest approval from the people. It is generally believed that the victory of the current President was due in most part to the extreme unpopularity of the former President and his administration. These forces are grouped and labelled as the “yellows”. Fully understanding the strategic value of this record

unpopularity of the yellows, government has labelled it as the opposition and conveniently labelling all other manifestation of dissent as yellow plots.

In truth, the present quality of politics in the country will be blamed if democracy is lost in the Philippines. The deterioration of governance, with corruption becoming the underlying system of public service can easily be attributed to the complete absence of clear political directions and proper leadership. The standard by which the people can measure political personalities and groupings is unfortunately absent. No political vision is available to challenge hearts. There are no models for idealism.

Prognosis

The threat of the pandemic has overwhelmed the country not just on the personal level, the economic structure in the Philippines have been severely affected as well. Economic power in the Philippines has been consolidated by a privilege few using wealth as leverage to also consolidate political power, thereby advancing their self-interests at the expense of the common good.

There are strong indications that because of the current onslaught by the pandemic, efforts to break the stranglehold of the Philippine economy by a privilege few, is now feasible. Consequently the political equation can also change, and the possibility for authentic politicians to challenge the stooges of the elite is possible.

And if the growing sentiment of the people is to be understood, this is a time for new politics, new leadership. Change, based on a true vision of the future can be pursued.

The inclination of the ruling clique not to even offer a token opposition to client statehood, can be exposed. There is golden opportunity to rekindle love of country, and trigger the rise of new leadership that can guide the nation through all of its hopes and fears. **END**