

A NATION IN DARKNESS¹

Mr. President:

I rise on a point of personal and collective privilege. I stand here on behalf of a beleaguered institution, the Senate of the Philippines. It may be apparent to those of us who sit in this chamber as nationally-elected, and thus, nationally-representative lawmakers, that the President of the Philippines has embarked on a systematic policy of casting into disrepute, or failing that, causing confusion and suspicion among, all who have decided to speak out in favor of accountability and responsibility on the part of Mrs. Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.

Those with a certain standing and prestige among our people, such as former President Aquino, some Bishops or our colleagues in the Liberal Party or the party lists in the House, upon their having decided to take Mrs. Arroyo to task, have had the most craven and oftentimes, ludicrous attacks made on their reputations, upon the instigation of the Palace and its propagandists. Institutions, whether schools, clubs, or civic societies, who have exercised their collective discernment in arriving at publicly-expressed positions uncomplimentary to Mrs. Arroyo have been subjected to relentless attacks on their integrity by the president's people. And every institution, whether it be the bureaucracy, the armed forces, or this chamber, has had its independent-minded, law-abiding, and Constitutionally-insistent members assaulted by all means at the President's disposal.

¹ *Privilege Speech of Senator M.A. Madrigal on 24 October 2005*

But most of all, Mr. President, I stand here on behalf of the many thousands of our countrymen who have taken it upon themselves, to borrow the words of Jose Rizal, *not to sleep during the nation's period of darkness*. For no one can deny that an oppressive darkness has engulfed our land; no one can dispute that in that darkness, our government is being transformed into a sinister mechanism for tyranny; and no one can contest that in that darkness, an attempt to extinguish the precious liberties of our people is taking place. Citizens who want the light of truth to shine forth, brightly, have instead been answered with lies, rewarded with misleading information or simply denied any information at all, and, when finally driven to the streets in order to engage in collective acts of protest or prayer, been met with truncheons, steel shields, tear gas and water cannon.

Mr. President: the conduct of peaceful assembly is a part of democracy. So long as they are peaceful, they are protected by the Bill of Rights. As long as there are people who have grievances, there will be demonstrations aimed at petitioning the authorities to right perceived wrongs. And while, in normal times, for every nay expressed as a vote of no confidence in the status quo, there will also be yeas expressed in favor of it, the nays must be entitled to express opposition: the yeas cannot always have it. By this I mean that in a democracy, no particular party, or class, or portion of the population can either claim or maintain a permanent hold on power. Today's majority must always suffer the risk of being tomorrow's minority. It is for this sensible reason that even as the rights of the many are protected, the rights of the few who dissent must be protected, perhaps even more: for it is the only means by which a society can ensure the safety and liberty of all.

If in normal times, the many must respect the few, all the more in abnormal times, such as the present time of trouble our Republic finds itself, must the rights of dissenters be protected, safeguarded, and left unmolested. The President of the Philippines, having deprived her people of every constitutional opportunity to hold her accountable for questions that the nation overwhelmingly has judged as requiring answers, still has the temerity to claim that all is well with the nation.

Cocooned, perhaps, in the oppressive, bunker-like presidential palace, surrounded by sycophants, pandered to by ruthless propagandists, protected by officials who, in their servility towards her, have forgotten they must first and foremost be the servants of the people, Mrs. Arroyo lives in a perpetual stage of siege, a permanent state of moral and psychological crisis, and creeps along, inch by inch, toward the only means she has left to ensure her political and even personal survival: the enslavement of our government, and the binding in manacles and chains of our people. There are quite a few of my colleagues here, and a significant portion of our people, who instinctively know that a person who claims to be a president, and who asserts a genuine mandate from the people, and yet surrounds herself with phalanxes of soldiers who guard, in turn, a palace that belongs to the people but which has been placed beyond their reach by a meticulously planned network of steel gates, barbed wire barriers, and barricades manned by policemen, that by hiding from her people, and ruthlessly assaulting them, she belies every and any thing that might serve to prove she continues to be the legitimate leader of our people.

Mr. President: when we gathered at Plaza Miranda just a few days ago, I was moved to reflect on how that public space became a tragic symbol of our Third

Republic's aspirations for democracy. Early on in our independent political life, a devastated Manila found Plaza Miranda to be the only public space left relatively unscathed by World War II. It thus became the foremost public plaza of our democracy. The sad tale of our doomed Third Republic began and ended in that Plaza. It began with the tragedy of an assassination attempt on President Roxas' life, and came to an end with another assassination attempt that wounded his son, Senator Gerardo Roxas, and the leadership of the Liberal Party. Indeed, the plaza was immortalized in President Ramon Magsaysay's immortal challenge, *"Can we defend this in Plaza Miranda?"* For that is what democracy is about: a government defending, not imposing, its policies before a free and democratic people.

We gathered at Plaza Miranda upon the invitation of three Catholic Bishops and other religious leaders to pray. After all, God is not a monopoly of any person, or party, though Mrs. Arroyo claims the Archangel Michael to be on her side. We gathered in Plaza Miranda to gather together and embark on a prayerful, peaceful, and yes, persistent pilgrimage to the Gothic, iron spires of San Sebastian Church, and from there, to the cloistered chapel of San Beda. We were under the impression, Mr. President, that much as the President claims to not only commune with, but be directed by, God, and makes appearance after public appearance at Mass, we too, her fellow citizens, have equal rights to pray to God and attend Mass.

We were wrong. The fullness not only of the executive, but it seems, also of divine power, have been claimed as a virtually imperial prerogative of the presidency. We clearly, publicly, and frankly explained what we had gathered together to do; the President, her people, and the officers under her control,

would not even grant to us the freedom or liberty of our convictions, but instead, set out to define what they had no right to define, and set out to do, what they had no right to do. While at every step, participants in the procession and pilgrimage dutifully and respectfully dialogued with the authorities, the authorities responded, instead, by presenting us with every possible legal obstacle, every conceivable physical obstruction, and finally inflicted upon us the full force of its marshaled forces. The shield-bearing police were not enough; the water cannon had to be brought out – and used.

And used upon whom, Mr. President? Bishops. A priest. A former vice-president. A former executive secretary and governor. A member of this chamber, and also, members of the House of Representatives. And upon others, too, whose only crime was to think that we live in a country in which we can practice the liberty with which we profess our Republic is imbued. I leave it to the clergy to determine if, under canon law, the physical attack on the prelates and the priest with us, constituted the grounds which Church law says incurs automatic excommunication for those who assault priests. But I know that the attack was an unquestionable and reprehensible attack on our people, on the Congress of the Philippines, on the liberties and cherished freedoms of a nation.

Mr. President, Batas Pambansa 880 which this administration itself is using to justify their action provides under Section 10 (c.) that, water cannons should not be used to disperse a peaceful assembly. And yet, they did so despite the fact that, there was NO clear and present danger to justify the use of the water cannon against us.

If the use of the water cannon was not enough, four (4) days after, our people again saw how unreasonable this administration has become. The Philippine National Police (PNP) in order to cover-up their assault on an innocent, non-violent, and prayerful group of people released a video purportedly showing a man picking up his service firearm after the water cannon assault. Mr. President, I have admitted before our people that, this man being used by the PNP to justify their assault on us is my security aide. The incident showing my security aide picking up his service firearm which accidentally fell cannot and should not be used as basis to justify the illegal use of the water cannon against us. In the first place, the service firearm fell AFTER the water cannon struck us. THEY SHOT THE WATER CANNON FIRST BEFORE THEY SAW THE SERVICE FIREARM. We are the victims here. They should not use this to exempt those responsible for their dastardly act. There was NO clear and present danger to justify the use of the water cannon against us. He is duly authorized by this chamber to bring a service firearm and to protect me at all times.

At the same time after the news story was shown on television, my other security aide, assigned to me by the Philippine National Police (PNP) and who was not the one who dropped his service firearm, received several threatening text messages from his superiors, asking him to report to Camp Crame in the dead of the night and to bring clothes with him. He was told by his superiors that, they would “help” him prepare a statement on the incident. Why they had to “help” him make a statement at midnight one can only guess. However, regardless of the purpose, the timing and use of threatening messages left a chilling effect.

My PNP security aide, out of fear for his own life and the safety of his family, reported the incident to me. I then immediately took steps to place them under

my protection. The next day, I decided to reveal to the media the existence of the harassment and intimidation tactics employed by the Arroyo administration on this poor and innocent man just because he happened to be assigned to me. Afterwards, with media in full force, I accompanied my PNP security aide to Camp Crame, to ensure his safety. In a meeting we had at the Police Security Protection Office (PSPO), we were assured by Police Chief Superintendent Edgardo Doromal that nothing prejudicial would happen to my security aide. PNP Chief Superintendent Doromal also said in our meeting that, there was really nothing wrong with a service firearm being carried by a security aide in a public assembly in order to protect his principal.

Mr. President, if not for media's vigilance and our own decision to make this issue public, the strong arm tactics of this administration could have triumphed once again.

Mr. President, up to what extent will this Administration continue to repress, harass, threaten and intimidate the innocent?

Mr. President, our people are a reasonable people. Our countrymen have a profound faith in the rule of law. Our citizenry has an instinctive devotion to Constitutionality. As a people, we abhor division; we constantly yearn for unity; we are persistent in our hopes of achieving a society bound by mutual ties of affection and trust, instead of continuing to exist in a society marred by dissention, mutual suspicion, and violence. We are a people quick to forgive, with a tendency to be compassionate, and with a marked desire to share in communal achievements rather than wallow in misery. However we are also a people insistent on our rights, a national justifiably jealous of its democratic

prerogatives, a citizenry that takes its sovereignty seriously and expects those it raises up not to lord over them, but to lead them, unite them, and serve them.

The people, our people, that is, we, the people, are faced with a situation in which reason has fled the minds of our President; where the rule of law has been arrogated unto the hands of the administration as if it were a weapon of war and not an instrument for maintaining justice and peace; where our people's faith in Constitutionality has been negated by a continuing effort to thwart every constitutionally-ordained means to demand accountability. Mr. President, a presidency that thrives on division, can never permit the reunification of the divided ranks of our people. A government that thrives in an atmosphere of suspicion, that holds its people and the rest of the State in such low regard and demonstrates such frank contempt for us all, cannot, and will not, chart a path that will lead to a happy and contented population. Neither we, the members of this chamber, or the broader public, can even have a chance to forgive, if the President remains unrepentant, or take an opportunity to demonstrate compassion to a chief executive obsessed with unleashing the armed might of the state on us all.

This is why, Mr. President, we are a people walled in; a nation imprisoned; a country suffocating in the dark, damp, oppressive conditions fostered by the fear and loathing, the paranoia and the viciousness, of the present, undeserving, unqualified, tenant of Malacanang. Mrs. Gloria Macapagal Arroyo would prefer a country engulfed in civil war to a country embarking on the path to reconciliation and genuine justice. *She would rather we fight with each other, so she can continue to fight us all. She would rather the country sink beneath the*

waves, so long as until the final moment, she can lash herself to the wheel and sink beneath the depths, as the captain of the vessel.

Quem Deus vult perdere, prius dementat. **Whom the Gods wish to destroy, they first make mad**, the ancients tell us. Every one of us in this chamber wants a nation in which reason and reasonableness reign, in which freedom flourishes, in which the wounds of the past will heal and give way to a stronger, more united, more optimistic national community than the one we have now. We must fight the madness. We must stand for our liberties. We must remain the bulwark of our democratic way of life. Elected by the people, we must stand with the people; we must march and pray with the people. We must resist, as our people are resisting; we must be steadfast, as our people remain steadfast. We must acknowledge the popular will: and the people's will, is clear: a President who denies her people their rights, who corrupts our institutions, who flouts public opinion, and who actively thwarts every means to make her accountable to the people, is only a President in name, and not in fact; she is a pretender. She is a charlatan. A fraud. And until the day comes, when the people's will is finally obeyed, our nation can only continue to dwell in oppressive darkness.

I thank you.