

The dead-end of state charity

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MANILA, Philippines—President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo seems everywhere these days distributing rice, money, scholarships, and other forms of assistance to the poor. She calls these “katas ng VAT” (“juice from value-added tax”), a cynical appropriation of the phrase “katas ng Saudi” that adorns tricycles, jeepneys and taxis bought with remittances from overseas work. But there is no similarity here. The first is nothing but sop from a burdensome tax pegged on rising prices. The other is a product of hard work and great sacrifice.

Where poverty is rampant, it is indeed a duty of government to help those left behind by shifts in the economic system. The most significant economic change in our country in the last 30 years has been the shift from a relatively self-sustaining economy to a globalized one highly dependent on imports and exports. The poorest of the poor today are precisely those who are unable to survive in a regime of rising prices because they have neither products nor skills to export. What they have are their frail bodies and whatever organs can be harvested from them for medical transplants. Yes, their despair has come to that.

The situation of the Filipino poor is of such magnitude that Ms Arroyo’s doles practically trivialize it. They are not even band-aid solutions; there is just not enough tape to cover the wound. The relief they offer is for a single day; at best, a week. Their reach is so limited many wonder how the beneficiaries are chosen. Even those who have regular incomes are dying under the weight of inflation, and they ask why they should not get some relief too. If beneficiary selection is as careful as the Department of Social Welfare and Development claims it is, one can only imagine the bureaucracy it entails. Given the speed with which the recipients have been produced, it is more likely that the identification of beneficiaries closely follows the lines of political patronage.

The noble idea of compensating the disadvantaged through direct state action has its limits. If not carefully designed and implemented, a social program soon runs out of money, or out of law. This is the hard lesson that European societies learned when the original idea of compensating those disadvantaged by industrialization evolved into an unwieldy welfare state that tried to address every conceivable need and disadvantage. The result was an overextension of politics.

We are certainly very far away from such a state. The Philippine government can barely secure for its population the minimum requirements of human survival, let alone a decent existence. Yet, this government has not been above politicizing basic needs. What it lacks in resources, it has made up for in grandiose propaganda, styling itself as a caring government that attends to the needs of its underprivileged citizens. In this role, it imagines itself as the people’s voice against predatory firms, imperiously ordering the latter to moderate their greed on pain of being investigated.

Unfortunately for Ms Arroyo, her regime can hardly wear the colors of social responsibility. One only needs to take a look at the expenditures of the Office of the President to see that the profligacy of this regime is equaled only by its corruption. No one is fooled anymore by this seasonal explosion of state charity. And Ms Arroyo’s own people know it—this is no way to win political support. But everyone agrees it is a clever way of dispensing state funds: there is no reliable means of checking

whether or not all the money has gone to the intended beneficiaries.

Ordinary Filipinos know all this; we hear them every day on call-in radio talk shows. They are aware of the dead-end to which bad government has led the country. But, they are losing hope that we can still find our way out through the conventional electoral route. They know how the electoral process itself has been corrupted and manipulated. But more than this, they have witnessed the continuous depreciation of political leadership itself. And so, what should have been a perfect ground for the growth of political options in a functioning party system has become for them nothing more than a desolate cemetery of failed visions.

The last 20 years bore witness to heroic efforts to keep alive a romantic vision of social change. The hopes on which these efforts were anchored are fading in the wake of the disappointing outcomes of the people power transitions of 1986 and 2001. It is not to say that extra-constitutional solutions no longer hold any appeal. But, we are now more aware of the hard work of reforming institutions and altering mind-sets shaped by centuries of inequality.

It is interesting what this is teaching us about the nature of social change. Our nation is the kind of society it is because of the kind of people we are. We have been shaped by our unique history and circumstances; the interplay of the qualities and traits we possess as a people is what in turn defines our society. We cannot change this society without changing the way we conduct ourselves, but we also know we cannot change ourselves without changing our society. The question is not where to start, as this paradox may suggest.

What matters is how we can make positive change enduring. And here I am struck by what the Chilean biologist-philosopher Humberto Maturana once said: "Social change takes place as a permanent phenomenon only to the extent that it is a cultural change: a revolution is a revolution only if it is an ethical revolution."

P.S.

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