

Functions of Despair

As income groups in general, the Philippine upper and middle classes readily identify with the liberal concept of economic growth and development as one being led by foreign investment and unrestricted, even indiscriminate, privatization. Any discussion raised within the confines of this framework inevitably touches the sensitive issue of the role of government or the public sector in economic development. The Aquino government itself has not been lacking in its efforts, at least in the realm of projections, to identify those major programs which would spark growth through investments. But certainly, the wild optimism and bravado it has consistently displayed, crisis after crisis, since coming to power, is no longer shared by the majority of its constituency, much less the upper and middle classes. The government's misplaced sense of "seeing the brighter side" of things could indeed easily lead to hilarious extremes, as it has. A Cabinet secretary's statement that the devastating earthquake of 16 July could actually spur long-term growth may have been unconscious self-directed satire. To be sure, the 7.8 intensity earthquake was not one of the government's planned take-off points for its "new economic program".

True to its form, the Aquino government's artless grasp of political doubletalk was reaffirmed only days after the "earthquake-spurred growth" statement, this time in the President's State of the Nation address. The temblor which has awakened the nation was answered with a speech which put congressmen to sleep. In her address, the President illustrated the government's achievements

by impressing her listeners with the kilometers of roads built; this while the Kennon and Naguilian Roads which lead to Baguio remained useless because of the landslides triggered by the quake.

Countless are the instances when the well-off classes despair in their hope to see the government rise from its blunders and begin to wield power productively and with determination. The government is lucky and thankful enough for the fact that, as far as the upper and middle classes are concerned, the functional equivalent of despair is stretched patience, rather than conscious opposition, or worse, active belligerence. It is also interesting to note that these income groups remain satisfied with the increase in their economic consumption, which may have been made possible by the liberation of the economic front from the clutches of Marcos and his cronies.

It is without doubt that there has been a diffusion of economic opportunities for the privileged class since the 1986 redemocratization. To sustain this state of equity within a class, there must be unanimity in policy-making bodies to pursue growth at the expense of those institutionally powerless to transform despair into a more threatening and radical function, i.e., the poor and marginalized sectors of society. The "new economic program" only rehashes this policy, but dares to invite criticism from certain sectors of the intelligentsia by packaging it as essentially a "pro-poor" program for development. According to the UP School of Economics faculty in its recent "White Paper", the NEP has not

provided a comprehensive analysis on how the measures and policies contained in it could actually lead to a realization of its avowed "preferential option for the poor".

The new economic program of the government clearly exposes its anti-poor orientation as it reaffirms not only the long-standing policy of the government to honor promptly and fully all its foreign obligations, but other measures as well, which place the burden of economic growth on the poor. Who will suffer most from the former is no longer a question in macroeconomics. Public officials, who failed to realize the answer to this question, and, as such, continued to ignore the urgency of a debt moratorium or selective repudiation, have come to terms with those who did right after the widespread devastation wrought on 16 July. These people were more worried about the investment aspect of the problem since the destruction caused by the earthquake called on government to pour financial assistance into the sectors most affected, foremost of which is the private sector.

If we may venture a conjecture, the earthquake was a good substitute for the latent function of despair of the impoverished

majority. In a sense, the message of debt moratorium which the marginalized sectors cannot forcefully impress upon government was delivered more effectively by that singular jolt of nature.

But more than a debt moratorium or a "formal condonation of payments" is needed to stop the people's suffering. For many in the progressive movement, the government's attempt to look at the other side of the debt issue was a right step, but for the wrong reasons. Those in the private sector have suffered too from the earthquake, and it seems that the government had this particular sector in mind when it chose to examine its options on the foreign debt issue. The reason is simple. For these people, business and investment constitute growth; social service is charity. The former is a boon to development, the latter a burden.

It will take more than a temblor to compel substantial changes in the government's approach to and vision of development. It will take massive despair, both popular and threatening, not only to influence policies, but also to provide an alternative to a system which has only bred policies of continual impoverishment.