People Power and the Transition Council as Alternative
by the Gloria Step Down Movement*

In these times of political crisis, turmoil and uncertainty, one thing stands clear: Mrs. Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo (GMA) must go. However there is as yet no consensus as to how she will be made to step down and who or what must replace her government.

Indeed, there is some truth to the observation that had there been wide agreement on this, another people power uprising would have erupted and ousted Mrs. Arroyo by now. Putting it another way, the sooner a consensus is reached by the various groups calling and working for her removal, on how and what will replace her regime, the sooner Mrs. Arroyo will be removed from office.

Affirning people power

The government and its apologists and defenders warn the public against resorting to any "unconstitutional" means of unseating and replacing the ruling regime. They equate "unconstitutional" to anarchy, chaos, violence, etc. as though the current turmoil has not been caused both by blatantly unconstitutional anomalies and criminal acts perpetrated by those in power.

They deliberately obscure the fact that People Power 1 and 2 were themselves extra constitutional undertakings. Aquino declared her new government a "revolutionary" one and decreed an interim "Freedom Constitution". On the other hand, Arroyo insisted that her ascendance to the presidency was due to constitutional succession even as the ouster of Estrada was itself extra constitutional.

But there is a growing number of Filipinos who are open to the idea of a transition government that will do away with the constitutional presidential succession in case Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo resigns or is ousted from Malacañang.

There is as well a growing consensus among many groups calling for the ouster of GMA that the best and most plausible way to override or break away from the "constitutional" process is through the formation of a "transition council" that will pave the way for the creation of a new form of government, and the election of a new administration that would be more representative of and accountable to the people and thus more responsive to the people's interests.

It is an idea that has gained significant ground over the past weeks. This is because nobody wants to go through all the trouble of deposing Mrs. Arroyo just to install Noli de Castro, the supposed constitutional successor, as president. Neither is the option of a snap election under a transition government presided over by the Senate President acceptable, the people having lost all trust and confidence in the COMELEC; in fact, on the entire electoral process as we know it.

It is also an idea whose time has come. It springs from the widespread realization that more profound changes -- not merely of corrupt and unwanted leaders, not just of the rotten electoral process, but of the entire social, political and economic system – are necessary to lift our nation out of the morass of corruption, debt, spiraling prices, poverty, underdevelopment and violence. This sentiment is often expressed as frustration, disillusionment and even disgust over the governments installed by people power.

The people's realization of the need for systemic reforms has maliciously been misrepresented by the GMA government and its apologists as "people power fatigue" or the supposed rejection of people power as a way out of the present crisis. On the contrary, it indicates a simple yet profound understanding that people power must aim for more than what it has achieved in the past. It shows that the people's political consciousness has in fact significantly risen from the levels of Edsa 1 and 2.

We believe that what the people want is a people power that will lead to more substantial reforms. That will impact not only on their daily lives but also on the collective good of the nation and the future of generations to come.

On the People's Agenda

It is not people power that we are dismayed with or tired of.

The people are tired of paying taxes, whether these be direct income taxes or indirect taxes paid through ever-increasing prices of basic goods and services, only to see that government revenues are spent on ever-increasing debt service, fat commissions and kickbacks from government contracts, vote-buying and rigging elections and the pursuit of bloody yet fruitless counter-insurgency programs. We are revolted by the shameless and brazen graft and corruption up to the highest reaches of the Arroyo government, considering that the people had installed it in power through a people's uprising against corruption. We want a sound fiscal policy and a clean and honest bureaucracy that will not plunder the national coffers and bleed our people dry.

We are sick and tired of claims that our farmers are benefiting from the land reform program, when all around us we see supposed farmer beneficiaries being evicted from or dispossessed of their plots as these are converted into golf courses, subdivisions, commercial and industrial estates. We want genuine land reform that will free our tillers from serfdom and poverty, thereby vesting them with real democratic rights and liberate the economy from the clutches of feudalism.

We are dismayed by successive administrations' servility to foreign capital – accelerating the removal of protective tariffs and barriers in the name of "globalization", thereby stifling the growth and eventually killing off domestic industries and causing widespread joblessness. We are appalled by government's schemes to amend the Constitution in order to grant foreigners the same rights Filipinos have in exploiting and profiting from our national patrimony. We want a robust industrial economy truly free from foreign domination and control.

We condemn rampant criminality, especially the involvement of officials and law enforcers in criminal activities, and the use of extra-judicial killings and other brutal and illegal coercive measures to suppress civil liberties and democratic rights. We want peace and order to reign over our land, o that each one may enjoy the fruits of his or her labor.

We oppose the Arroyo government's blind support for the US-led "war on terror". We shall continue to resist attempts to institute and employ draconian repressive measures to suppress protest and the bill of rights under the guise of countering "international and domestic terrorism". We shall continue to seek and demand justice for the victims of such measures, including extra-judicial killings and harassments of mass leaders, journalists, and activists. We want peace based on justice.

We want no more of sham elections with rampant violence, vote buying and the wastage of government funds; where consequently only the rich and the powerful can win and the people are left with no real choices. We want an electoral process and political system where the poor and marginalized have a fair chance of being represented and their concerns heard and addressed by government.

We seek a government that would be truly representative of the people, especially the majority of the toiling masses and responsive to their needs in these difficult times—one that could unite and lead us in our arduous quest for freedom, democracy and social justice.

The "transition council" can pave the way to such an alternative government.

On the Transition Council as an alternative

There is as yet no consensus on the concept of an interim or transition group/committee/council as an alternative form of government. This is a matter that must be addressed cognizant of the fact that without the requisite consensus on how to remove Mrs. Arroyo from power, all talk of alternatives is at best premature; at worst, divisive.
Yet there is need and basis for describing the kind of transition council the people will identify with and embrace.

Such a transition council or government must necessarily be composed mainly of representatives of those groups that had worked the hardest for the ouster of the current regime, with due consideration to their size and political significance. Conceivably it will consist of representatives of the opposition, the militant democratic mass movement, the organizations of professionals, patriotic businessmen and other middle forces, and some of the retired military and police officers who enjoy the confidence of the active military and police forces.

It is perforce a civilian authority that is supreme to the armed forces and the police. Consequently any form of military or civilian-military junta is unacceptable and must be ejected.

Representatives of workers, peasants, women, youth and national minorities should be adequately and properly represented but this is something that must be struggled for by these sectors of society and must gain adherents from the middle classes and the political forces they lead.

But we must be realistic and come to terms with the fact that the ouster or resignation of Mrs. Arroyo cannot, by and of itself, dismantle the system of elite rule in this country. Thus it will not be progressives and mass-based leaders of the people who will be dominant in the transition council but traditional politicians and their allies who retain their basic allegiance to the status quo. In effect, the ouster or resignation of Arroyo in favor of a transition council will not resolve everything but it can be a good beginning.

This is especially so if the transition government is able to put up and unify the country on a program that is pro-Filipino, pro-people and biased for the poor, deprived and oppressed. It shall then prepare for and oversee, in a fixed and reasonable length of time, a free, fair, honest and truly democratic election process that will allow the people to choose their new executive and legislative leaders.

It can also call for the election of delegates to a Constitutional Convention (ConCon) that would in no way be similar to the "chacha" scheme of Mrs. Arroyo, former President Fidel Ramos and Speaker Jose de Venecia to change the Constitution for their vested interests. Such a constitutional convention should draft a patriotic and democratic Charter that shall be ratified by the people.

The ConCon could institute wide-ranging reforms in the electoral and political system including a shift to a parliamentary form of government that would enlarge the chances of poor candidates to win a seat in the Legislature, favor the development of party- and program-based politics and reduce the gridlock between the Executive and Legislative branches of government. It can also strengthen the pro-Filipino and pro-people economic provisions of the Charter as well as its national sovereignty provisions such as the nuclear- and bases-free provisions that have been circumvented by new treaties and executive agreements like the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) and the Mutual Logistics and Supply Agreement (MLSA).

How will the members of the transition council be chosen? In the first place, the strongest and most effective parties and organizations in the movement to force Mrs. Arroyo to resign, or in effect oust her from power, will come to the fore through the large numbers of people they are able to lead and influence, most especially to mount the mammoth mass actions that will be indispensable, if not decisive, in deposing Mrs. Arroyo.

Negotiations are even now taking place among such parties and organizations. They must constitute a convenors' group that will then apportion delegates to a people's congress or consultative assembly. The latter in turn shall select and acclaim the members of the transition council in an open, transparent and democratic manner. This must be done even before the Arroyo regime completely crumbles as we know it eventually will.

Conclusion

Putting an end to the Arroyo regime is something we must all work for in unity, with determination and fortitude. We in the middle forces must take the side of the majority of our people and act now to tip the balance in their favor, for our good as well as for the good of the entire nation.#

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[*] Paper presented by Fr. Jose Dizon at the launching of the White Ribbon Movement, 23 July 2005, La Salle Greenhills.