

"A Nation for Our Children" was delivered late in 1984. At that time Pepe was deeply involved in trying to unify the opposition against the fascistic but failing regime of Ferdinand E. Marcos. This important and crucial task did not prevent him from delineating in near-lyrical language his dream of a nation for all Filipino children- a just, humane and free society. - Priscila S. Manalang

A Nation For Our Children

By Jose W. Diokno

There is one dream that all Filipinos share: that our children may have a better life than we have had. So there is one vision that is distinctly Filipino: the vision to make this country, our country, a nation for our children.

A NOBLE nation, where homage is paid not to who a man is or what he owns, but to what he is and what he does.

A PROUD nation, where poverty chains no man to the plow, forces no woman to prostitute herself and condemns no child to scrounge among garbage.

A FREE nation, where men and women and children from all regions and with all kinds of talents may find truth and play and sing and laugh and dance and love without fear.

A JUST nation where whatever inequality exists is caused not by the way people act towards each other but by differences in natural talents; where poverty, ignorance, and hunger are attacked and every farmer has land that no one can grab from him; every breadwinner, a job that is satisfying and pays him enough to provide a decent standard of living; every family, a home from which it cannot be evicted; and everyone, a steadily improving quality of life.

An INDEPENDENT nation which rejects foreign dictation, depends on itself, thinks for itself, and decides for itself what the common good is, how it is to be attained, and how its costs and benefits are to be distributed.

An HONORABLE nation where public powers are used for the public good and not for the private gain of some Filipinos and some foreigners; where leaders speak not only well but truthfully and act honestly; a nation that is itself and seeks to live in peace and brotherhood with all other nations of the world.

Is this vision attainable? Or is it just an idle dream? If we base ourselves on today, we would be tempted to conclude that it is an idle dream. For our country today is in a mess. There is no other way to describe its condition.

Our economy is bankrupt. We cannot pay our foreign debt. Within the next two years, whether or not our foreign loans are restructured, prices and taxes will continue to rise. The peso will continue to fall. The domestic market will contract further. More workers

will lose their jobs; more students will be forced to drop out of school. Hunger will spread, and disease will not be far behind. Crime will continue to stalk the streets even more menacingly. Anger, resentment, and frustration will escalate. Dissidence will propagate, and repression will intensify. The government has lost all credibility, yet it refuses to do the decent thing: return power to the people. Instead it continues to deny the people their basic rights and freedoms. And the calloused behavior of some of its leaders mocks and defies this cherished Filipino value.

Yet we must not give up our dream because of today. For if we look at ourselves, we have all the resources — human and natural — to become what we Filipinos choose to be. Our population is about 53 million, and that's the 17th largest potential domestic market in the world.

We are a literate people. Our adult literacy is 75 per cent, the 40th highest worldwide. Sixty-three per cent (63 per cent) of our young people in the 15-19 year age group are enrolled in secondary schools, which is about 50 per cent higher than the average for countries like ours. And 27 percent of the 20-24 year age group are enrolled in colleges and universities, which is twice the average of countries like ours and more than that of some developed countries like the United Kingdom, West Germany, Australia, France, Belgium, and Switzerland.

Our land area is 300,000 square kilometers, the sixty-third largest in the world. It is rich in natural resources. Less than half of our land has been systematically surveyed for mineral but commercial quantities obtained of the thirteen basic raw materials required by a modern industrial economy have already been discovered: bauxite, chromium, copper, iron ore, lead, manganese, nickel, phosphates, zinc, natural rubber among these. And we also have the human drive to develop these.

Encounters with nations which invaded and occupied us or traded with us have made us open to change and quick to adapt to it. Our people are ingenious and fast learners, competitive and achievement-oriented, rational and practical, and dedicated to freedom and independence. We are, let us not forget, the first Asian people who revolted against a western imperial power, Spain; the first who adopted a democratic republican constitution in Asia, the Malolos Constitution; the first to fight the first major war of the twentieth century against another western imperial power, the United States of America. Since 1972, we have suffered the brutal repression of martial rule, but freedom still burns bright in the hearts of most of us.

So there is no insurmountable barrier that could stop us from becoming what we want to be. Why then are we in this sorry condition? I think it is because we have forgotten one basic thing. We Filipinos are a variegated people. We live in seven thousand islands. We profess no less than five major religions. We pray in no fewer than seven native tongues. But all of us — Muslim or Christian, Tagalog or Visayan or Ilocano or Kapampangan — all of us are Filipinos not only because we are brothers in blood — many of us are not — but because we are all brothers in tears; not because we all share the same land — many of us are landless — but because we share the same dream.

Whether we like it or not, we are one nation with one future, a future that will be as bright or as dark as we remain united or divided.

Sometimes — as at present — events obscure this truth. At other times, human selfishness tries to deny it. But the truth will not die. We are one nation with one future. Yet today that nation is sorely divided even on such seemingly uncontroversial questions like what to do with the Marcos government or how to deal with the U.S. government. Some — I am one of them — would want to change not only Marcos but the system he has implanted in our country. Others would want to change only Marcos. Others would not even want that. They would be happy with changing Imelda and Ver. And others would not even demand that, simply that Marcos give up Amendment 6 or the power to issue presidential detention actions or both.

On such a simple matter as the United States relations, some want statehood. Others want independence, and those who want independence do not all agree on what it means. Some believe in independence from every foreign government except the United States, the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). In fact, some of those who think this way seek U.S. government help to get Marcos out and put themselves in. Still others believe in independence from every foreign government which includes Russia, China, Japan besides the United States, the World Bank and the IMF. They want no U.S. intervention in our affairs not even to oust Marcos, and they want the U.S. bases out. But some who think this way, or say they do, urge that U.S. issues be submerged for the time being. Let's finish with Marcos first, they say, and then let's take on the U.S. government.

Just as we are not agreed on what changes we want, we are not agreed on how to obtain those changes. Some believe that change can only come from within the Marcos system which is why they took part in the last elections. Others are convinced that change can only come about from outside that system which is why they boycotted the elections. Some think that only violence can bring about change which is why they joined the NPA, the MNLF or other guerrilla groups. Yet others think that non-violence can bring about change, and so they have joined militant, peaceful mass actions.

In this state of disunity, change could come about, but except by a stroke of luck, it would hardly be the change that any of us want. For change to be meaningful, it is important that we agree at least on the basic issues, i.e., (1) Do we want to change just Marcos, or do we also want to change the system; (2) Do we want to free ourselves from the dominant influence of the U.S. government, or do we want to continue under its control; (3) Do we want to return to the kind of society we had before martial law, or do we want to establish a better society, more just and more human.

If we can agree on the basics of these issues, even though we may disagree on some details, then disagreements on how we can achieve these goals would not be insoluble. As long as we pursue the same basic objectives, there should be no difficulty in coordinating the activities of those who wish to pursue these objectives by different means. Let me just give you an example of what I mean.

We have today what is commonly called the parliament of the streets, and the objective of this parliament is to get rid of the Marcos government as soon as possible. But we also have political parties that are gearing for the elections in 1986 and 1987. Surely there should be no basic contradiction between these different methods. We can pursue the parliament of the streets and hopefully change the government before 1987, preferably before 1986, preferably before 1985. But if we fail, what is to prevent us from using the other methods in order to change this government. The important thing is that we agree on what we want because if we do then the dilemmas that we face today would no longer be critical.

Take for example this possibility. Suppose that Mr. Marcos for one reason or another were to quit his office tonight. Do you think the opposition would be able to put one candidate for president and one candidate for vice-president to fight against whichever candidates Mr. Marcos and the KBL would put up within the next sixty days? In 1986 if there is no agreement to these basic objectives, will the opposition be pulling up one candidate for the UNIDO, one candidate for PDP-LABAN, and one candidate for the LP, or more in the local elections as against the candidates of the KBL? And if so, what chance would the opposition have? And in 1987 if Marcos is still around to run, or even if he does not run -if he sponsors a candidate would the opposition be able to put up one candidate, or will we be putting up four or five candidates to run against Mr. Marcos?

If we can agree, however, on all of these basic issues even if we don't agree on all the details, then it would be easier to get agreement on one candidate. Why? Because if all of us are agreed on what we want, then insistence upon running can only be the result of personal ambition. And no candidate will ever tell you that he has personal ambitions. In fact, they will all say: I don't want to run, but if the people want me, I will run.

And if we do agree on these basics, then does it really make much difference who is the candidate as long as we are all united and agreed on what is to be done? It may make some difference. Some candidates may be more competent than others. The mere fact that we are all agreed on these basics should not make it impossible to achieve these changes regardless of who is this candidate. And therefore if we can agree on these basics, then we should be able to achieve the first step in this long journey to a nation for our children, and that is, the step of regaining our freedom.

But to do that, as I have said, will take time. It will be difficult. Wounds have become very deep, I'm sorry to say. I arrived, as you know, about a week ago, and I have found out during this short week that between certain groups disagreements have become personal, and those are the most difficult to address. But I also wish you to know that efforts are being made, and will continue to be made, so that all these disagreements can be ironed out. We do not expect perfect unanimity, we do not expect total agreement on every detail, but we believe that we can all agree at least on these basics.

First, that we must change not only Mr. Marcos but the system he has implanted. We must return to a truly democratic government with an independent judiciary and a responsible Parliament. And more than that, we must bring government and the making of decisions closer to the people affected by those decisions. Second, I feel that there should be — and there will be — no disagreement on the need to obtain our total liberation and freedom from American control. I say this because just the other day, there was a short meeting between representatives of UNIDO and others — those who had taken part and those who had not taken part in the last elections — and on the matter of "let's start getting together, let's talk and let's see if we can get some bases of agreement," one of them said: 'Tanny, do you remember two years ago we signed a paper. Why don't we use that as the basis of the agreement?' And Tanny said: "Fine. I don't remember what was in that paper we had signed, but why don't you just send it over?" And it was sent over. And the first two paragraphs of that agreement made it very plain that every political force was committed to the proposition that the Philippines must be controlled by Filipinos and that all foreign bases must be removed from our country.

So I see no insurmountable difficulty there, and certainly I also see very little difficulty with respect to the third agreement, i.e., that we use our freedom and our independence to improve the quality of life of our people. Again we may disagree on how this is to be done but on the objectives, I think we are all agreed. I think that the second step in that long journey to attain a nation for our children is simply this: that in order to improve the quality of life of our people, what we have to do is really very simple and do the opposite of what Marcos has done for the last twelve years. I am not being facetious. I am not trying to be witty. I'm trying to state a fundamental truth.

Marcos has built his entire program on the principle of depending upon the U.S. and Japan and getting all the loans that he could. We must build our nation on the principle of depending on ourselves and getting as loans only what we need, not what we can get. Marcos has built his entire political system on gathering all power unto himself and eliminating all checks and balances. We must build our political system on respect for the sovereignty of the people, on the establishment of adequate checks and balances, and on empowering the people at the grassroots level.

Marcos has built his economic system on a policy of overspending, export-orientation, low wages, recession, unemployment, and poverty. We must build our economic system on strengthening our domestic market by increasing the productivity of our farmers and our workers and increasing their real wages because without an increase in the real wages and the real income of our workers and our farmers, it will not be possible for us to industrialize. We will continue to be dependent on foreign resources.

We must build our economy on removing disparities between urban and rural areas so that whatever social services we supply our rural areas — health, education, water, power, roads — must be of the same quality and the same standards as the social services that we supply to our cities.

And we must build our economy on using every method that we know as soon as possible to restore the buying power of our workers, at the very least and as a first step, to what was their buying power in 1972. From 1972 to the present, the real wages, the purchasing power, of our workers has dropped by no less than 45 per cent across the board — about 37 per cent for skilled workers and 48 per cent for unskilled workers. That has to be completely reversed. And our first objective must be to bring back their purchasing power at least to what it was in 1972 and then gradually increasing it.

Marcos has built his entire social system on a system of falsehood, on a system of repressing creativity, and on creating in our people a feeling of impotence and helplessness. I wonder how many of you have read Prof. Luisa Doronila's report on the textbooks that are being used in our public schools and the effects they are having on our children. When the children were asked what they preferred to be — Filipinos, Americans, Japanese, etc. — the lowest rank was gotten by those who wanted to be Filipinos. What are we doing to our children?) Our system must be the complete opposite. Our system must tell our children the truth. Our system must seek as much as it can to unleash their creativity.

I described to you when I began what I thought was the vision of most Filipinos of a nation for our children, and I know that for many of you, it may sound ideal. Yet reality is often much more beautiful than anything that we can conceive of. If we can but release the creative energy of our people, then we will have a nation full of hope and full of joy, full of life and full of love — a nation that may not be a nation for our children but which will be a nation of our children.

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