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A visit in gratitude for support

PETITE she may be, but Philippines President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo is looked up to for getting her priorities in perspective. She has introduced laws and policies in a move to bring back the glory days of the 60's when under her father's stewardship the Philippines was the region's economic powerhouse. She shares her vision with Ashraf Abdullah and Tony Emmanuel who are in Manila. Picture by C.H. Loh.

Q: You are making your first state visit to Malaysia after being appointed President. How would you describe the relationship between Malaysia and the Philippines after the Estrada administration?

A: Well, I think it is much, much better than the previous administration. I certainly appreciate the support by Prime Minister (Datuk Seri Dr) Mahathir (Mohamad) and his Government in our efforts for a lasting peace in Mindanao. And that is the reason why I chose Malaysia for my first State visit and also my first visit abroad. It is precisely to dramatise the gratitude of our people for the great support that Malaysia has been giving us.

Q: When you are in Kuala Lumpur, will you be looking for specific areas of co-operation? I think you are looking at possible co-operation in tourism, health and education...

A: Not really. That's what the bureaucrats want. But tourism, yes. We are looking at an agreement between our Ministries of Tourism for a twinning arrangement. This means that if there are visitors to Malaysia, packages will be arranged to encourage them to visit the Philippines and vice-versa. That is something very specific. Other areas include the revival of the BIMP-EAGA (Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines-East Asian Growth Area).

I hope we will also be able to begin talking about something concrete with regards to Petronas and the Philippines Oil Corporation for a gas pipeline between the two economies.

Q: When you talk about a gas pipeline between the two economies, that will naturally relate to the southern region of Mindanao...

A: Not necessarily, because Malaysia is looking at the downstream activities of our gas industry which are located in Luzon. But one of the ideas is to ask them to make the pipeline to go through Mindanao so some of the linkages can be in Mindanao.

Q: While on Mindanao... I am sure you are delighted with the progress of the peace talks (between Moro National Liberation Front and Moro Islamic Liberation Front). What are your hopes for the future of Mindanao when you go down to Kuala Lumpur and witness the signing of the peace pact?

A: First of all, I don't know whether I will be signing an agreement or even witness the signing of one. That is not the main purpose of going there. My main purpose is to go there and thank the Prime Minister of Malaysia and the officials for what they are doing to help us in the south. Whether or not there will be an agreement to sign, is a different question. The peace talks are not part of my visit. It so happens that the talks are going on at the time of my visit.

What I hope for is for peace and development in the Philippines and I would like development to take place in the conflict areas even before any peace agreement needs to be signed. If they do sign an agreement, it's well and good. But even if they do not sign anything, there is already suspension of military operations. It is really time to get on with

developments in these areas. And I want MILF to see developments in those areas and be a part of these developments. That's what I want.

I thank the Government and the people in the high offices in Malaysia because they have helped facilitate the MILF to see the sincerity of the (Philippines) Government in these efforts.

Q: The MNLF and the MILF have reached a unity pact. Do you think this will in some way help to curb the problems caused by Abu Sayyaf?

A: Not necessarily because the Abu Sayyaf is neither MNLF nor MILF. It is a terrorist group. It is not a secessionist group like the MNLF used to be. The MILF is still officially so.

Q: In looking back, your father is reputed to be responsible for bringing the Philippines' economy to be the No 1 in the region. He is also known to be the people's common man. You also seem to be moving towards that direction because you are very much into economics. The public now seems to perceive it to be "like father, like daughter"...

A: (smiles) It is so!

Q: What are your objectives? It is known that you are just serving the remaining term of the previous administration, but you are very determined to push through many policies and Bills...

A: 16 Bills and when I was in Congress, it was 55.

Q: You seem to be juggling with many issues like economics, poverty eradication and looking at some of the laws that you proposed and were passed, sexual harassment laws. What is your main priority?

A: Well, the main priority is to fight poverty. I spent my 30-page State of the Nation Address (Sona) on discussing the main priorities. Fighting poverty will come in four components. The first is to promote opportunities for a free enterprise in the new economy. We want to push to greater heights the information and communications technology as well as tourism. Tourism is very important to us.

We also want to learn from Malaysia's experience in ICT... Cyberjaya. The second component is to modernise agriculture because most of the poor people live in the countryside.

The fourth component is to introduce a social bias in our development plans. That's why the development of Mindanao is very important. Five of the poorest provinces are in Mindanao, and that happens to be the conflict areas. The fourth component also encompasses the need to improve the moral standards in the Government and the society. We are quite focused on these specific targets.

Q: When we talk about tourism, at present there are only nine flights from Kuala Lumpur to Manila and most of them are code-shared. Are we looking at the possibility of increasing the number of flights?

A: That's one of the things that we can explore because we are pursuing a liberalised air policy. While in Malaysia, we will take up the issue of reviving the EAGA. The flights we are thinking of are those from Kuala Lumpur to Davao. That are the kinds of flights that we want to push for.

Q: You were talking about the four components for development. Do you have a target date to achieve this?

A: Of course we have set a target of 10 years to win the battle against poverty. But what we want to do within these three years of my administration is to contribute towards winning the battle in 10 years.

For instance, to promote agricultural modernisation, I specified that we must spend 18 billion pesos for irrigation and we must allocate six billion pesos within the next three years. That will translate into 500,000 beneficiaries. We must aim for a million new jobs in the agriculture sector within the next three years. And all the expenditures I mentioned earlier are geared towards contributing to this.

For the urban poor, we want 400,000 poor families to acquire the power

to purchase the land that they are occupying. This is the principle of empowerment. About 300,000 houses will be built for the working class within the next three years. I also want the price of medicines to go down by half of what they were when I delivered my Sona. They are already going down now. I have given very specific target because I want to be focused.

To make our people to continue with their competitiveness in ICT, we have to improve the mathematics, science and English components of our basic education. To make education accessible, we will have to have schools in every village by 2004. That means we must have schools in the 4,500 villages which do not have schools.

We have 45,000 villages, and only 10 per cent of them do not have schools. We have to also improve the textbook to student and teacher to student ratio. Our aim is to have one textbook a student in the basic years of schooling.

Q: Corruption led to the downfall of President Estrada. How are you fighting graft?

A: First of all there must be leadership by example. So when there was a rumour by a frustrated would-be franchise holder that my husband took bribes to persuade me to reconsider my decision to veto the (telecommunications) franchise, I asked the Ombudsman to investigate him.

All the Cabinet members will have to submit to me their programmes on how to fight graft in their respective departments. I want to make the bureau of Customs and bureau of Internal Revenue the showcases in the fight against graft. We have also started electronic procurement because this saves billions for a government and minimises corruption in the procurement system.

Q: What we have learnt from that is the disadvantages of texting (short messaging system through handphones which was used to spread corruption allegations against her husband), I presume...

A: (laughter) I suppose that is part of freedom of speech in the 21st century... That's really true... I hope people will be more responsible in the use of texting... (you know) we are the number one texter in the world...

Q: Looking back, your father (former President Macapagal), President Sukarno and Tunku Abdul Rahman had forged a very close alliance for the MaPhilIndo initiative and now you are moving towards Asean integration - the catalyst being BIMP-EAGA. When you look at Asean integration, how do you see Philippines contributing towards the Hanoi Plan of Action?

A: We have different levels of Asean integration, ie, the EAGA and the original Asean, the CLMV (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam) new members, we have the Asean+3 (dialogue partners with China, South Korea and Japan). In this perspective, the Philippines' role is stronger in a smaller grouping like the EAGA initiative and probably in the Asean+3.

Q: The Hanoi Plan of Action has the objective of Asean integration, but we see hiccups in bilateral relations among member countries, for example Thailand and Myanmar. Do you think this will affect Asean integration?

A: Well, if you remember, it took the EEC very long to integrate so I don't think we should put too much emphasis on integration over a short a period of time. That's why my focus is on EAGA rather than integration of the whole Asean.

Q: And, what is the Philippines' stand in Asean's non-intervention policy?

A: Our stand (I would say) is subtle engagement. We talk bilaterally as brothers. We cannot use embargoes. I believe the Asean way is... like brothers.

Q: (So) you agree with the Asean Troika which is already in the system... but nobody knows whether it will work.

A: For us, the most important thing in our country right now is how to fight our poverty and how we can contribute towards democracy. And as I said the way to do it (solve problems) is not to impose embargoes.

Q: Much is talked about the relationship between (Presidents) Macapagal and Sukarno and now the daughters are Presidents in the own right. (Sukarno's) daughter Megawati is coming to see you (a more senior President). Will you give her some advice?

A: (laughter) Senior only by a few months. I don't think I will give her (Megawati) unsolicited advice. I don't think my father's relationship with Sukarno was patronising in nature. They were really very very close to each other. I hope our relationship can be similar to the relationship our fathers had. During my father's time, it was of mutual benefit to the two countries. I hope we can also achieve that mutual relationship.

Q: On the BIMP-EAGA, there has been much Overseas Development Aid towards the development to various sectors of Mindanao, i.e. the General Santos port and airport projects, the National irrigation project. Now you are going to Kuala Lumpur to revive EAGA, but domestic security problems in the south may seem to hamper your efforts for that initiative...

A: The on-going war is really in Basilan. What that means is that (at the moment) we cannot do much on Basilan which boasts of a population of about 200,000... compared to the millions of people in Mindanao. It is not hampering development in Cagayan de Oro, General Santos, Davao. In fact, we hope that my visit will push forward development in poorer conflict areas like Lanao del Sor, Tawi Tawi, Jolo, Sultan Kudarat and Cotabato province.

Q: Your comments on Malaysia-Philippines security agreement, especially in the southern region.

A: We do have agreements already in place now. Rather than have something common every six months, I am really looking forward to something more regular. When Defence Minister (Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak) was here, he suggested border patrols and also that Malaysia was looking at six sea lanes for the movement of vessels. It's a very good idea and if we can formalise that idea into an agreement on both sides, we (the Philippines) will welcome that.

Q: Sabah has a very serious illegal immigrant problems; will we see it during your term in office to set up consular office there?

A: I am not against the idea. We will see if Congress provides a budget for the idea.

Q: On information technology, what are your favourite websites?

A: I have so much to do. If ever I surf the Net it is to do research on something that I am doing. Even reading, at present I have a book called Mystery of Capital on my table on how to address poverty problems. Most of the books I read are related to my work. My reading now is not for pleasure; that's how serious I am about my plans.

Q: (And) 24 hours is not enough...?

A: You know I have so much to do and I do have to sleep seven hours a day. Previously I read Alfred McCoy, a book about two graduating classes of the Philippines military academy and there was Glenda Gloria's Under The Crescent: Mindanao about the rebellion in the south (Mindanao).

Q: And your secret of looking good and your approach towards healthy living?

A: There's three hours of exercise a week. Then, there is the driving range (usually after work). And on some Sundays, catching a movie at the local cinema.

Q: At the cinema? Why can't you have them shown in your palace?

A: It's too much trouble. It's easier to decide over lunch which movie to catch and give several hours advance notice for PSG (presidential

security guards) to "case the joint" and then go to the movie. The last time I had a private viewing was when I watched my son's movie. It's inconvenient because you have to bring over the equipment and my house is not equipped. At the movies, we can have popcorn... it's really much easier. Most recent movies I watched were Along Came the Spider and my favourite was Lara Croft's Tomb Raider.

Q: On your other favourite pastime, golf... what's your best achievement?

A: My longest drive was about 200 yards... when I was V-P.

Q: And what's your handicap?

A: 36... that's the handicap for beginners... ladies.

Q: You talked about reviving EAGA. Care to elaborate?

A: It would not be during the one-on-one (with Dr Mahathir). It would be during the bilateral talks. Like for the flights to Davao. Investments in palm oil, we are planning to cultivate oil palm on 160,000 hectares and the president of the Philippines Palm Oil Association would also be coming along to attract investors. Then there are also opportunities for your national oil and gas, Petronas, in pipeline.

Q: You seem to be taking a hands-on approach in everything that you have laid out...

A: Not all... only in my favourite sector which is agriculture. I hardly interfere in finance as my Secretary of Finance is well-versed with what he is doing. The other sectors, I have the supervisors whom I have appointed.

Q: While we are on the subject of finance, you have taken a very strong stand and echoed Dr Mahathir's warning about currency speculators...

A: He is my model of a leader. We will continue our efforts to curb such activities (speculation). Fundamentals show that the value of the peso against the dollar is undervalued. It should be about 50 pesos against the US dollar, and we believe we can achieve it soon. On imposing tightening control like foreign exchange controls practised in Malaysia, we have inventory of policies. I shouldn't be talking about it. We are determined to tackle currency speculation.

Q: After 1997, why this attack on the Philippines?

A: Not correct to say that it is just the Philippines. But my concern is the Philippines.

Q: Prime Minister Dr Mahathir has suggested Asean countries use own currencies for trade in the region. Do you think this should be pursued?

A: Yes, that is a good idea. It lessens the demand for the US dollar.

Q: Will that be discussed?

A: It's not on the agenda. My main purpose for the visit is to thank (Prime Minister) Dr Mahathir for the assistance in the peace process and discuss how we can work towards reviving EAGA. And, if the topic of currency crops up, of course we can discuss that too.

Q: There has been much media reports about the rich Chinese being targets of kidnapping gangs.

A: I formed a National Anti-Crime Commission, represented by officials from the Justice Department and the Bureau of Investigations, police and armed forces. I organised this commission after consulting the Chinese community. Three private sector representatives are from the private sector, and of the three, two are from the Chinese community.

Q: After what happened on Thursday night (latest Abu Sayyaf attack), do you believe the military can achieve its objectives in putting an end to the threat posed by the criminals?

A: They are terrorists. What happened was near the Abu Sayyaf lair. It was a diversionary tactic. And those killed ... well, these are realities of war. You have casualties on both sides but I am determined to go ahead

and will not be intimidated.

Q: Can you tell us something on Philippines international relations and its foreign policy under your stewardship?

A: The United States, China and Japan are important components. The inter relationship will continue to play an important role when we address these countries. Looking at the reality... for the US, we continue to enhance relations. They are the dominant economic and military powerhouse. With the US, we have a common history and system of democracy. With Japan, we will continue to focus on enhancing political and economic ties. Japan is our biggest source of ODA and also one of our major investors and trading partner. There is also much positive relations with China and we need to foster closer friendship.

Rather than focus on irritants, we should look towards friendship. The other focus is Asean. More and more of our foreign and trade policies are being made from the Asean context. The Asean Regional Forum is good and important. What is also important is the role of Islamic countries, like Malaysia. Another reality is Philippines overseas foreign workers, which is essential to our economy. And our foreign policy also takes this into consideration. Tourism is important aspect of foreign policy.

Q: Your priority for the Philippines is economic development. Do you believe this can be achieved in a short term (your term of office)?

A: I am confident it can be achieved...

(END)