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For Freedom and Social Justice – Social democratic political platforms
and practical politics since the middle of the 19th century***
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Reflections on the realities and potentials for political change in the Philippines

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Thank you for inviting me to the launch of this fascinating photo exhibit which offers a compressed but comprehensive but comprehensive history of the German Social Democratic Party. No Filipino citizen who is activity engaged in the affairs of our country can avoid using the text and photos from this exhibit as lenses through which to view Philippine realities.

For the last 63 years since regaining its independence, the Philippines has been beset by enormous political problems that remain unresolved up to this time. We can almost say without exaggeration that politics has been our biggest failure as a nation. The Filipino people's efforts to find enduring answers to persistent questions have led to experimentations with various systems of government and various modes of removing governments. Yet the questions have remained: How do we make our elections honest and fair? How can we make our people vote for the competent and qualified rather than for the merely popular? How do we stop corruption in government? How do we make politics and government work for us so that, instead of being a burden, they become the Filipino nation's tool for long-term survival and growth?

If there were easy answers to these questions, I suppose we would not find ourselves in the kind of political black hole into which we seem to have fallen since 35 years ago, starting with Martial Law. Allow me to offer some reflections that may allow us to formulate the answers we seek.

While most of our political institutions are modern in form and in concept because of their American origin, the underlying system around which our political life revolves is very different. The operative political system in our present society is a product of the highly unequal distribution of wealth, power, and privilege that still characterizes our society. Ours is a political system that relies for its survival on the patronage networks built on the poverty, ignorance, and the powerlessness of the vast majority of our people. Here there are no real policy and ideological differences that set apart politicians in government from politicians in the opposition. What they represent are not long-term visitors but narrow vested interests.

But while most of our politicians are stuck in the obsolete practices of "trapo" politics, there are a few who recognize that this brand of politics is no longer viable, no longer relevant to the requirements of a rapidly modernizing society. These few "modern" politicians find themselves in a paradoxical situation. They know that the political system must change, but they also know they cannot effect change from outside. They must try to secure a foothold within the old system, to be ready to play its games before they can aspire to change it from within. Many do end up being swallowed by the system they sought to change.

There are bright spots on the horizon, however. The world around us is changing, and our people are changing in ways we have not previously imagined. These changes are exerting a tremendous pressure in favor of something new. The fact that Gloria Macapagal Arroyo has become one of the most popular political figures in the nation's history shows that the game of the traditional politicians might be coming to an end. Why? I believe that our people are not only growing in number, they are also becoming more sophisticated and are acquiring new values as a result of global travel, overseas employment and satellite communications. Despite their poverty, more and more Filipinos are getting the benefit of higher education, thanks to the new money coming from overseas employment.

These developments are not congenial to the survival of traditional politics. In fact, in the short term, they feed recurrent political crises. More and more of our people recognize the imperatives of change even as their leaders are trying desperately to prolong the life of the old system. In their impatience for change, many feel compelled to resort to extraordinary measures to overthrow government, only to discover that change is more than merely replacing leaders. They are also realizing that for change to endure, it must be embodied by ordinary people in their everyday lives. In short, we must at one point deal with the value system that is deeply rooted in the everyday life of the average Filipino.

Although we are not always conscious of it – patronage, for example is very much ingrained in our daily habits. We find ourselves almost instinctively searching for a patron whenever we find ourselves in need of service, or of a public good, or when we have to fight for our rights, or to defend ourselves against those who oppress us. Part of the reason for this is that we do not trust the legal system or the bureaucracy to be fair. And so, almost by impulse, we reach out to a patron even when we don't really need one. Even the educated among us, who should know better, still think in terms of their social entitlements, privileges and duties that are appropriate only to a stratified society. We don't like being inconvenienced or ignored or taken for granted. We take offense when we are made to wait. In short, our personal orientations are elitist even when we raise the banner of democracy in political practice.

Until we learn to open our eyes to this enemy within us, we will continue to think that all it takes to effect structural change is to get rid of the existing government and to replace the present leaders with people we know and trust. Personal integrity and trustworthiness are no doubt important. To have public officials who personify such traits often works wonders in the short term, but it is not enough. The history of German politics shows that authentic reformist leaders create new systems, new ways of acting and doing that can be shown to be superior in the sense of achieving collective goals, as well as rewarding those who abide by them. The old systems that are discarded are made difficult and unrewarding, and dealt with resolutely until the new structure of expectations is stabilized in society.

The interesting thing about institutional reform is that, in general, we know what we want, but it takes a while before we can fully understand why things are not working as they should. For example, we know that for elections to function as they are intended, we must make sure, first of all, that those put in charge of them at all levels possess the highest credibility and the right qualifications. They must be people who can conduct elections in a professional, honest, and non-partisan way. Our constitution puts the power and responsibility for choosing the members of the Commission on Elections in the hands of the President, with the concurrence of the Commission on Appointments, a congressional body. There is nothing wrong with this in itself. The problem arises when the appointing power, the President, chooses people on the basis of considerations other than qualification. Congress, through the Commission on Appointments, should be able to check the arbitrary exercise of this power. The question is: Is there a real opposition party to do the checking?

So, the problem goes back to a very basic question in politics, namely, are the collective interests of society represented and articulated adequately by a majority party and minority parties? On the surface, it would seem that we have such parties in our midst, but in reality what we have are ad hoc coalitions of interest groups and political clans rather than modern stable political parties with clear long-term visions and programs of government. In mature political systems, politicians do not change party affiliations the way we do here in the Philippines. Nor do they cross party lines as often as our politicians do here. The survival of real parties depends on their ability to enforce party discipline.

If political parties are so important to the aggregation of interests in society, the question we must then ask is why we have not been able to develop such stable parties in the Philippines. The answer perhaps lies in the fact that politics in our country has not been fully differentiated from the interests of the ruling families. Although this is no longer as visible at the national level, where mass media popularity or celebrity status is challenging the supremacy of the old political clans, at the local level, it is still the traditional political families that call the shots. At this level, political parties without financial resources of their own easily become the tools of the political dynasties.

The absence of a strong Opposition lies at the core of many other important unresolved issues in our time – the corruption in the judiciary, in the armed forces, in the executive agencies; the ineffectiveness of the impeachment process as a check on presidential powers, etc. to begin to understand this situation is to comprehend the whole social system of dependence and patronage that characterizes our society today. Despite the spread of capitalist relations, Philippine society remains a feudalistic order, marked by sharp concentrations of wealth, power and privilege at the top, and insecurity, poverty, powerlessness and dependence at the base. It is almost impossible to enforce democracy under these circumstances. Political scientists say that in order to induce change, you have to split the top as a minimum condition.

I like to think we are slowly beginning to see this – that is, the bifurcation of the Filipino elite into those who want to professionalize governance and shield government institutions from capture by vested interests, on the one hand, and those who wish to continue treating the government as a tool of personal accumulation and political patronage, on the other. I call the first “modernists,” and the second “traditionalists.” Right now, the “traditionalists” dominate nearly the entire terrain of Philippine politics. The “modernists” occupy very small niches in this system. Politically weak, they also tend to be partial to civil society initiatives outside the electoral system. Their impatience, successes, and disappointments are registered in the annals of the middle-class people power protests of 1986 and 2001, as well as in the many aborted coups of the recent past.

Interestingly, more and more modernists are taking a good look at the electoral terrain. We saw this in Pampanga in the 2007 provincial elections, where a motley group of concerned professionals and businessmen put up a Catholic priest for the governorship in order to challenge the supremacy of two traditional politicians who are both pillars of the Arroyo regime. Without the party or slate of his own, the priest, Eddie Panlilio, managed to squeak through with a very slim majority. It took a miracle to win, but not even a miracle could adequately arm him for governance. Among Ed is the highest official of the province but he does not have a single mayor or councilor or barangay captain on his side. Governance in Pampanga as a result is deadlocked. The trapos are doing everything to unseat or neutralize him, while he refuses to deal with them. But neither is he keen to build or consolidate his own political base according to the norms of party-based politics. Here you have an individual with strong reformist intentions who, by a fluke, became a public official – even before a constituency for reform has been organized and consolidated.

The point I am trying to convey here is this: we may know what good governance means and where it lies, but getting there is not as clear to us. It will become clear only when we begin to understand where we are, how we got here, and why we always seem to be running in place.

Our country is tragically saddled with a system that is increasingly useless and ridiculously out of line with the modern world, and yet we seem so powerless to get rid of it. We grumble, we give up, until finally we leave. Those of us who opt to stay and, beyond merely criticizing, prefer to do something to change the way things are have no choice but to spread the gospel of change, organize, and expand our ranks. This is what politics is about, this is where it begins.

Once in a while, a society accidentally taps into a core of meanings in the culture that leads to the activation of possibilities previously barred or inhibited. And so a woman, riding on a surge of Mama Mary devotees, became president of our country in 1986. A Catholic priest, held aloft by the charisma and grace of a Church of the poor, became governor of Pampanga in 2007. The powerful figure of a mythical hero called Panday, who serves on the side of the oppressed, nearly made the movie idol Fernando Poe Jr. the president of the country in 2004. There is a rich vein of untapped meanings in every culture that can be placed at the service of meaningful social change. To know, this is to understand how the improbable Barack Obama energized American politics.

But we need to go beyond individuals and fleeting social movements to actualize the promise of enduring change. We need to formulate relevant political programs for our times, but most importantly, we need to establish strong political parties to serve as vessels of freedom and social justice. This is a long and arduous struggle, and success is not guaranteed, nor is it accomplished overnight. But we have no choice but to preserve. This to me is the powerful lesson of this exhibit. Thank You.