

A PERSPECTIVE OF NATIONAL SECURITY
(Speech before Group of 40)

JOSE T ALMONTE

1. INTRODUCTION

I understand that your Group of 40 shares two basic characteristics:

- (1) a concern for the way things are turning out in the country, and
- (2) a desire to be able to contribute to a reshaping of policy and a mobilization of action in certain still undefined directions.

Like all of you, I have been set to thinking—by the successive crises we have recently faced—on how and why we as a people and a nation have come to where we are today. And I certainly share your wish to be able to help in finding a way out of the situation we are in, to the dignity we deserve as a country of some size, achievement, and consequence.

A study commissioned to the Ateneo de Manila University, implementing a Senate Resolution on the need for a Moral Recovery Program, concluded recently that among the negative values of Filipinos are: lack of nationalism, lack of concept of the public good, and lack of the capability for self-reflection.

Last year an American writer, Mr. James Fallows, wrote an article about the Philippine situation, entitled "A Damaged Culture" in the *Atlantic Monthly*. This article provoked much discussion and self-examination among some Filipino political and intellectual elite. Is something basically wrong with us as a people? If so, wherein lies our flaw?

James Fallows diagnosed the problem as "a failure of nationalism." He said:

Nationalism can of course be divisive, when it set people of one country against another. But its absence can be even worse, if it leaves people in the grip of loyalties that are even narrower and

more fragmented. When a country with extreme geographic, tribal, and social class differences, like the Philippines, has only a weak offsetting sense of national unity, its public life does become the way of every man against every man.

. . . The tradition of political corruption and cronyism, the extremes of wealth and poverty, the tribal fragmentation, the local elite's willingness to make a separate profitable peace with colonial powers—all reflect a feeble sense of nationalism and contempt for the public good. Practically everything that is public in the Philippines seems neglected or abused.

It is a tragedy that we find it difficult to disagree with this American. It took a foreigner to diagnose our problems for us. This is a second tragedy. If we have lost the ability to define even our own problems, the resulting blow to our already bruised national ego would add a greater tragedy, for how can we begin to solve our own problems, if we no longer exercise our capability to recognize what they are?

II. THE BASIC THREAT TO NATIONAL SECURITY

The problem, in my view, is far deeper than lack of nationalism or a "damaged culture." The problem is admittedly cultural but it is much more. More precisely, the Philippine problem is a *weak moral consensus*.

The suggestion is that political, and territorial integrity are products of cultural integrity and national cohesiveness. National cohesiveness in turn is the outcome—at the socio-cultural plane—of a national consensus at a deeper, moral-spiritual plane. From this proposition, it follows that the most basic threat to national security is the lack of, or weak, moral consensus.

Economic development, according to this view, is not a precondition or determinant of national security and survival. It is, like political integrity and stability, another product of cultural integrity and national cohesiveness. In brief, economic, political, and military conditions are outward manifestations of the degree of national unity.

The futility of economic and military power when divisions and distrust rage at home is the lesson from the American defeat in the Vietnam War. The rapid modernization of the Japanese nation during the last one hundred years started with an essentially educational, cultural, and moral renewal following the Meiji Res-

toration. The Jewish Diaspora and the survival of the Jewish nation over hundreds of years and through several empires and civilizations is proof that moral-spiritual consensus is more fundamental than either political integrity or economic and military power.

These examples from history belie the other notion that culture is purely a product of material relations. From recent experience, Gorbachev's set of new policies is tantamount to an admission that one important cause of the economic plight of the Soviet Union is its entrenched bureaucratic and political culture, and not the other way around. The popular worker-based Solidarity Movement in Poland grew in spite of its Marxist politico-economic system.

It can therefore be claimed that the political and economic systems are superstructures that are built on a foundation of commonly-shared values. They are the outcome of a national consensus among a people as to *what they are* and *what they want to be*. If so, then these superstructures can never be developed and sustained beyond a certain point if that consensus is weak.

This is the Philippine problem. Herein lies the greatest threat to our security and continuing survival as a nation.

III. THE LIFE-OR-DEATH QUESTION

The Philippines — with its many ethnic groups and languages, its mix of religions, its mix of Eastern and Western cultures, its ideological armed conflicts, its political parochialisms — is a microcosm of the global village.

Like the global society, divergence of interests is a fact of life in the Philippines. Whether it will one day overwhelm its inhabitants, or whether it will be managed towards increasing convergence for the benefit of all, is a security—or life or death—question for the global society, and similarly for its microcosm, like the Filipino nation.

IV. A HISTORY OF ABORTED CONSENSUS

Our history as a nation is a history of aborted national moral consensus. It is a repeating history of opportunities found and then lost.

The 1896 Revolution was afflicted by internal dissensions between the Magdiwang and Magdalo factions. The first Philippine Republic was born in 1898, at a time when imperial ambitions of America was looming close in the horizon. Application by the new colonizer of superior military and economic power, coupled with collaborationist tendencies in some of our countrymen, resulted in aborting the republic and with it, the first chance to build a national moral consensus.

The end of the Second World War promised independence and a new beginning. In a few years, we discovered that that independence was illusory. The former colonizer forced upon a young nation, helpless and ravaged after a war, a continuing military and economic dependence. Having transplanted their own ideals of democracy, religion, and education, and having taught Filipinos their own English language, the Americans laid the strongest obstacle—a cultural obstacle—to the birth of a true Filipino nationhood.

The conditions created by the declaration of Martial Law in 1972 offered new opportunities to forge a new nationhood. Marcos had the golden opportunity to make true his 1965 promise "to make this nation great again." He used the opportunity but turned it for personal gain. The opportunity for the nation was again wasted.

God was truly kind to us for again through the February Revolution of 1986, He gave us another opportunity. After several attempted coups and with the continuing in-fighting within the government, we appear to be again frittering and losing that opportunity. It seems that behind the concern of the Group of 40 to help the nation, is a similar uneasy feeling that the nation has been losing valuable time.

V. MAIN THREATS TO NATIONAL SECURITY

1. *Disunity within the Government.*

Lack of national moral consensus is easily reflected in disunity in the government. A serious threat to national security occurs whenever government, whose primary duty is to strengthen and maintain national integrity, allows itself to become a passive reflection of disunity in the larger society. This disunity can take violent and non-violent forms.

Attempted coups reflect conflicts between certain factions in the military and the civilian government. They also reflect both politicalization and factionalism in the military. When Marcos declared Martial Law in 1972 in partnership with the military, the latter began to taste political and economic largesse built a small corps of crony military officers starting from the highest levels of command. The political hymen of the military was irreversibly broken.

However, these officers discovered during the February 1986 Revolution that they have lost effective command. Significantly, this demonstrated that Marcos was able to coopt only some officers but not the entire institution of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP).

The attempted coups after February 1986 all failed, showing that the AFP may be politicized but it remains a reliable institution for ensuring national security within a democratic order. Thus, when a faction of the military refuses to recognize a popular President, or seeks to reverse re-democratization processes begun by a popular revolution, the AFP knows that its wayward comrades are setting themselves apart from the rest of the Filipino people. The new AFP has learned that national interest should not be equated to the interest of the few but to that of the people at large.

Disunity in government can take less violent but equally dangerous forms. We have been seeing differences between the legislative and executive branches, between the upper and lower houses of Congress, between the Presidency and the Vice Presidency, between the legislative and judicial branches, between the Supreme Court and the Sandiganbayan, within the executive branches, and so forth. Media paints a sorry picture for us day after day.

An observer can get the uneasy feeling that issues and their resolution are no longer the end, but the means utilized by certain supposed public servants for pursuing their personal political purposes.

In effect they are, just like coup plotters, threats to the security of our nation.

2. Political Parochialism.

Political warlords did not disappear after the February 1986 Revolution. In an environment where the government is still under-

going the test of unity and wherein the country's political elite is still learning from a new and unfamiliar experience of running a coalition government, the combination of private armies and political parochialism is an explosive one. Any violence that may take place would be driven mainly by intense personal and tribal motives, and therefore could be more vicious and destructive than any attempted coup by a military faction driven mainly by misplaced idealism. Because military factionalism and political parochialism can feed and recruit each other, the consequences are potentially disastrous and most unfortunate for the Filipino nation.

3. *Urban Superiority Complex.*

The Filipino urban culture has been the frontline receiver of external and mainly Western cultures impinging on the nation. While it is more cosmopolitan and therefore presumably more broad in outlook, it is also the first to be co-opted by external influences. And so it happens that urban Filipinos become the unwitting carriers and proselytizers in behalf of these external influences to the rest of Filipino society.

The urban superiority complex reveals itself in the form of an assumption of superiority, or a self-appointed role of determiner and planner of the fate of the rest of the nation. For instance, development planners who are immersed in the urban milieu of Metro Manila, have thereby become unwitting contributors to disaffection or alienation from our cultural communities. Witness such development mistakes as the Chico River Dam project. Urban-rural cultural differences add to the social stresses and strains arising from economic and social inequities in our society.

The potential harm of this cultural arrogance lies in its unconscious, and hence unmanaged, effect on our value system, and its tendency to arrest the national process of arriving at a moral consensus.

Could it be that positive Filipino virtues are being lost faster by urban Filipinos compared with their rural and ethnic brothers? Therefore, could it be that our seeming inability to define our problems is the inability solely of the urban Filipino to truly see himself?

4. *Economic Subversion.*

Economic subversion—such as smuggling, tax evasion, dollar salting, mismanagement of government funds, and illegal harvest

of natural resources from the public domain—weakens the economic health of the nation, weakens the financial health of the government, erodes confidence in our economic system, and ultimately undermines the economic order. Actions of economic subversives worsen inequities, fuel insurgency, and make pursuit of social justice a more expensive proposition for the government.

From studies by various experts, economic subversion is conservatively estimated to result in annual loss of at least 46 Billion pesos or about one-half of government revenues. On top of annual losses, the nation is still suffering from the effects of losses from the past kleptocracy. As of February 1986 the cumulative loss is estimated, again conservatively, at about 250 Billion pesos or three times annual revenues of the government.

Economic crimes stem from a failure to recognize and act according to the common good. Especially for a poor and indebted country such as ours, economic crimes committed pose subtle but real and serious threats to our security and stability.

Those who participate in in-fighting within the government, political parochialism, urban cultural superiority, and economic subversion are usually those in positions of political and economic power. Honest self-reflection on their part can reveal how much they themselves may be part of the problem. Their gravity is comparable to more easily-perceived threats to our national security such as the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF), the Communist Party of the Philippines-New People's Army-National Democratic Front (CPP-NPA-NDF), "ultra-rightist" forces, and certain foreign interests.

5. *Mindanao Secession Movements.*

The MNLF has been strengthening its political and military positions—preparing for either negotiations or more armed confrontation with the government. The MNLF is waiting for any national political crisis or weakness that would provide it with opportunities to advance its secessionist objectives, or any political mistake in Manila which would be a justification for seeking further foreign support.

The danger from the MNLF is not much from the MNLF itself, but from the means for manipulation that it offers to foreign powers for pursuing its interests against national unity while purportedly assisting our Muslim brothers. As a separatist movement,

the MNLF faces great odds. Few Third World states, no matter how sympathetic to the MNLF, lack their own separatist groups—and fewer of them can afford to play the double game of encouraging separatism abroad while suppressing it at home. In fact, the MNLF has again failed to convince members of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) to give it full recognition as a member.

Philippine sovereignty over its recognized territories is a political reality, overwhelmingly recognized as such both within and outside the country. The MNLF threat, itself another political reality, can be defused by true regional autonomy or, as some are proposing, federalization of the Philippine Republic. Because the MNLF threat, like the Cordillera problem, has geographic dimensions, the federalization formula can be so designed as to allow local political and ethnic differences to coexist within a larger and broader moral consensus, strengthen the territorial integrity of the nation, and contribute towards lasting peace and prosperity every Filipino is yearning for.

6. *The CPP-NPA Threat.*

The outward strength of the CPP can be gauged from its membership and its economic and military capabilities. It has a membership estimated at 30,000 and its New People's Army has a force of between 23,500 regular or full-time guerrillas. The CPP-NPA has a presence in 65 of our 74 provinces, exerts influence in thirteen percent of our country's 42,000 barangays, and has functioning taxation and political structures in another seven percent. The NDF has a foreign network with linkages to left-wing parties abroad, through which it was able to raise US \$15 million in 1987.

Judging from their capability to mount tactical offensives, the CPP-NPA seems strongest in the Cagayan Valley, Central Luzon, the Ilocos, Western Mindanao and Sulu, and the Bicol Region in that order. Its hold over Davao City and eastern Mindanao had dramatically decreased as a result of media efforts and the government's counter-mobilization of the local people.

The basic source of strength of the CPP-NPA is precisely the existence of oppressive social and economic structures in Philippine society that developed as a result of a weak national moral consensus. We have not agreed how and where our society should be moving towards. As a people, we have not come to terms with one another.

Another source of strength of the CPP-NPA is the ideological tenacity and fanatic dedication of its leadership. Being based on leadership and not on any underlying values of the Filipino people, this source of strength is also its basic source of weakness.

The overwhelming defeat of CPP-NPA-supported candidates during the last elections is a reminder that the majority of the Filipino people do not incline towards Marxist beliefs. These beliefs go against the grain of urban and rural Filipino cultures characterized by aversion to violence and confrontation, religious or devotional nature, and predisposition to free enterprise.

Impatience, and perhaps the realization that they may never win in the war over the Filipinos' hearts and minds, may be the reason for factionalism within the highest leadership of the CPP-NPA: between a recent "urban insurrectionist" faction in the CPP-NPA leadership, and a faction believing in a rural-based "people's war." The "urban insurrectionist" faction is responsible for terrorism and sabotage of public facilities like bridges, power transmission lines, and communication stations. The creation of Sparrow units which undertake assassinations and liquidations is also due to this faction. Such tactics serve to alienate, rather than win over, the people to their side. A new source of weakness of this movement can thus be seen in the power struggles and personality clashes within the highest levels of CPP-NPA leadership. The CPP-NPA doctrine of "centralized leadership, decentralized operations" has exposed weakness in the leadership as shown in occurrence of some local corruption in handling of funds, and a degree of factionalism/warlordism.

Two factors external to the underground movement have further undermined its rationale. First, the overthrow of Marcos removed one rallying point utilized by the CPP-NPA. The snap election and revolution of February 1986 demonstrated for the Filipinos their own capacity for initiating political change through democratic and peaceful means. Second, domestic reforms now taking place in the People's Republic of China and in the Soviet Union towards greater democracy and freer markets, are shaking the rigor and persuasiveness from the fundamental ideological assumptions of the movement.

The initiative and the resources are definitely in the hands of the government. As it now stands, the CPP-NPA will win only by default on the part of the government.

Today the Presidency can once again become a rallying force for all Filipinos in ending exploitation, not through class struggle and warfare, but through the forging of new modalities of solidarity and cooperation between labor and capital, between employers and employees, and between the rich and the poor. Once again, our leadership has another opportunity to design a compelling national vision that could resolve inequities and divisions in our society.

7. *"Ultra-Rightist" Forces.*

This grouping is a strange assortment of rebels. Some rebels profess loyalty to the deposed Marcos. Although Marcos loyalists continue to receive substantial amounts of financial support from Marcos and some cronies, they represent a fading political force as, unavoidably, time and distance work to consign their rallying point and symbol to the dustbin of Philippine history.

Other so-called "ultra-rightist" rebels are dissident factions of the Reform-the-Armed-Forces Movement or RAM. For them the "ultra-rightist" tag seems inadequate. This group represents what could be nascent Nasserite tendencies in the officer corps, which can become significant only if the situation deteriorates and if some of its key leaders allow themselves to be utilized by traditional politicians possibly in alliance with external forces.

8. *External Threats.*

External threats, no matter how severe, are easier to solve once greater national unity and cohesiveness are achieved. Internal strength is more fundamental to national security than military defense agreements with external powers. However, any connection with divisive domestic cultural factors can make an external threat important. There are two factors that must be noted.

First, Saudi Arabia which controls about two-thirds of our foreign source of petroleum is in a position to exert pressure vis-a-vis the Mindanao secessionist movement.

Second, the United States which controls about two thirds of our trade and foreign investments is in a position to exert pressure via the weakness of our people for everything American. The Thomasites brought to our shores the mixed blessings of the American brand of democratic institutions and the English language. They also planted a cultural time bomb that explodes every time a Filipino decides to buy an American commodity, adopt an American idea,

and apply for American citizenship. The American military facilities at Clark and Subic, rather than protecting us from this cultural threat, are lacking cultural selectivity on our part—one of the continuing sources of the same.

VI. CONCLUSION

The moral consensus among a people is what makes them a nation. It is the soul of nationhood, of selfhood among the world of nations. Anything which deprives our people of opportunities to forge this moral consensus is a threat to our security as a people, and as a struggling nation. Anything which furthers the shaping of this moral consensus, whether a peaceful moral revolution or a violent one, would ultimately be of service to the Filipino people. In the ultimate analysis, a nation is not threatened by a revolution—it is threatened by extinction if it can no longer make one.

If a national moral consensus is a desirable thing, what should be done and who should do it? What steps should the Group of 40 consider?

The trap that we usually fall into is to make the seemingly natural assumption that the elite should define the problem and initiate its solution. This would be the precise formula for failure, as it will likely lead to a consensus among the elite and an imposition by them of this consensus over the rest of society. By definition, the outcome would be a false consensus. The national unity would not be authentic.

What may be done is to propose and initiate a nationwide political process of consensus-building. We must refuse the habit and temptation of controlling the process beyond its initiation. Those in power must participate in equal terms with their less fortunate Filipino brothers, so that the latter can have greater power control over their fates, not only in the cultural but also in the economics and control over political spheres.

All Filipinos must learn how to listen. In short, they must learn the difficult trait of humility. They must learn the most difficult trait of managing their selfishness for the sake of the common good.

To be convinced that this difficult task must be done, we can either proceed from "head knowledge": from a pragmatic realization that common survival demands redesigning for a more organic Fi-

lipino society; or, we can proceed from "heart knowledge": from the faith that we—after everything else is said and done—are all brothers under the same Father above.