

## **IN DEFENSE OF OUR DEMOCRACY**

**By Amb. Albert del Rosario**



**At the Bishops–Businessmen’s Conference a few weeks ago, the possibilities of a declaration of emergency rule or an imposition of martial law were among the topics discussed.**

**Last week, our nation found itself deeply mourning the immeasurable loss of our beloved former President Cory Aquino who was responsible, not only for ousting a dictator, but also for restoring our democratic institutions.**

**As we quietly paid tribute to our one and only charismatic leader at La Salle Greenhills, I was overwhelmingly reminded that each of us has a responsibility in making his/her contribution towards defending our democracy.**

**Having served as the Philippine envoy to the United States from 2001-2006, I decided that I, too, should contemplate on how I could make my own contribution under the present conditions. This humble contribution, intended to guard our democracy, has been fully earned by the Filipino people under the leadership of President Cory Aquino.**

**In that regard, I am prepared to sadly confirm that our incumbent national leadership would indeed be capable of placing our democracy at great risk in pursuit of their survival.**

**Our people, I believe, are fully entitled to know this with certainty if we expect to advance the concept of a proactive citizenship and to encourage vigilance at all times in protection of our democratic freedom.**

**The facts as related would also serve to provide a momentary view of that quaggy place to public officials who may in the future be asked to advance a Palace agenda which is contrary to the national interest.**

**It was in 2005 during the “Hello Garci” controversy that the then Speaker of the House came to Washington DC. In this visit, he indicated that the Palace had empowered him to ask if we could defend for them the lifting of the writ of habeas corpus. Taken aback, I could only ask why, to which he responded that it was to be used against certain members of the political opposition. ( In case the privilege of the writ is suspended, a person can be arrested and detained without charges).**

**As I contemplated the circumstance, the question was repeated. In essence, I replied that what our people needed was good governance and not a weakening of our democracy. Given that we were the first republic in Asia, the scheme, I added, could inevitably result in our becoming a failed state. With apologies, I expressed as succinctly as I could that the plan was not defensible, and we could not defend it.**

**Late that evening, I dutifully reported what had transpired to the Secretary of Foreign Affairs, Alberto G. Romulo, who looked favorably on our having taken a clear and firm position.**

**Several days after he had returned to Manila, I received a call from the Speaker who mentioned that he was contacting me from the Palace to advise that there had been a change of plan and that the proposal to suspend the writ of habeas corpus was no longer an option. It was obvious to us that, while the specific proposal came under consideration, there were officials in our government who strongly opposed it.**

**Some weeks later, the Speaker called me once more from the Palace. He wanted to know if I could source a safe phone. My response was that there is probably no such thing in Washington DC.**

**He then proceeded to ask if we could defend the declaration of emergency rule. To my reactive query on why we were intending to do this, he answered that the government was preparing to take a forceful stand against the intransigent media. I replied, without hesitation, that such a position against the fourth estate would bring upon us the condemnation of the international community. That, I said, is also indefensible, and we could not defend it.**

**The Philippine press began to subsequently publish articles on hypothetical situations fostered by the Palace regarding threats to national security while at the same time providing emergency rule as a constitutional means to address the threats. With this apparent propaganda, we knew with near certainty that emergency rule would be declared.**

**The US State Department was also alerted by the press releases. When asked by them what we thought, I shared my opinion that there was an increasing probability of emergency rule being declared; that it was not good for the Filipinos and for the country; and that we should strategize on how the plan could be averted.**

**A review of the weeks prior to and during the declaration of emergency rule will show that the US Government had sent a procession of several government officials to Manila, including Ambassador John Negroponte, who was then Director of National Intelligence. The American visitors were to ostensibly share their views with our government about the lack of wisdom of such a declaration.**

**Emergency rule was nevertheless declared by the Palace on February 2006.**

**Since we could not justify what was unjustifiable, the Embassy limited itself to reporting factual occurrences in Manila, while expressing**

**hope that the declaration would be lifted at the earliest possible time. This, I thought, was the best course of action to at least preserve our reputation for credible representation in the US.**

**On the sixth day after emergency rule was declared, Assistant Secretary Chris Hill – the US official then tasked to negotiate with North Korea in ending its nuclear program and now the new US Ambassador to Iraq - visited the Palace. By the ninth day, emergency rule was lifted. END**