

Headline: Speechwriters are heroes, too

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Last Sept. 23, President Duterte addressed the 75th session of the United Nations General Assembly—one of several heads of state to do so. The speeches were predictable from past pronouncements, interlaced with the usually drab motherhood statements about the importance of international cooperation, the UN system, and rising to such challenges as pandemics, poverty, human rights, climate change, terrorism, and wars.

The President's speech contained many of these motherhood statements.

It was striking that he would say, "We need to ask ourselves whether or not we have remained true and faithful to the United Nations' principles and ideals." Huh? But let's not forget that in the past, in a moment of pique, he threatened to take the Philippines out of the UN. His "abnormal" speech, normal by UN standards, must have made him the most maverick of those speakers.

It seems Mr. Duterte likes the praises he is reaping. His spokesperson Harry Roque claims that the President picked the topics that went into the speech. If so, the President is so much more cosmopolitan than he has let on over the past four years, reaching deep into the internationalism that the Philippines has shown as a charter member of the UN, mentioning its being hospitable to refugees and extending the same hospitality to the Rohingya. He also mentioned the frameworks for the peaceful settlement of disputes as well as membership in associations such as the Asean and the Non-Aligned Movement.

Mr. Duterte thus appeared much more conciliatory. He said the Philippines had had "a sustained economic growth rate of 6.4 percent between 2010 and 2019, and the Philippines was on track to becoming an upper-middle-income country by the end of 2020." Until, of course, COVID-19 struck. Well, six of those years he mentioned were P-Noy years. Did he mean to acknowledge that?

It must have taken the President much perseverance to read through the whole 22-minute prerecorded speech without any ad-lib.

He was bold in reversing his course on the West Philippine Sea, stating clearly that the 2016 Arbitral Award to the Philippines was part of international law which passing administrations could no longer abandon or deny. He stoutly defended his human rights policy and the anti-terrorism law, saying the "blood oozes" from the side of his detractors. But, surprisingly, he also appeared ready to accept UN engagement in solving the problems of human rights, provided certain principles were upheld.

As expected, the speech also drew skepticism; it was called a squid tactic to distract from local troubles. It was argued that Mr. Duterte could not instantaneously change his stripes.

But in a barren, hopeless, and changeless land, these foot-in-the-door moments are valuable. The speech tells me there is an opening for the regular bureaucracy to influence the President's mind. In this case, the Department of Foreign Affairs bureaucracy has done a splendid job of cobbling together a script, lacing it with Duterte-esque defenses of his human rights record, the anti-terrorism law, etc., and putting it under his nose. The speech is a triumph for the career bureaucracy. The DFA certainly needs to be congratulated for this coup.

This speech opens the door for the regular bureaucracy, as opposed to the Cabinet-level political appointees, to pitch in and correct the course of the nation. This should be a signal for the silent forces of reason and reform in the bureaucracy to reinforce the foot stuck in the open door. The defense and foreign affairs departments should quickly consolidate this win by organizing follow-up efforts. Instead of lurching from speech to speech, the President must now be constantly refreshed with information, insights, initiatives, and, yes, incentives for changing course.

A single flower does not a spring make. But let's squeeze this flower for all the transformative appeal it can presage.

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