

Headline: An afternoon with P-Noy

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It was concern for the environment that brought His Serene Highness Albert II, Prince of Monaco, to the country earlier in the week. He was due to leave for El Nido, Palawan, the day after the luncheon in Malacañang hosted by P-Noy on Thursday, and from there would visit Tubbataha Reefs Natural Park, about five hours away by boat. Part of his itinerary, it's said, is to shoot a documentary on climate change, with the Philippines a focus because of our vulnerability to the environmental impacts of this weather phenomenon.

But also part of his visit, said the prince in his response to P-Noy's remarks, was to highlight the "need to protect" the reefs, given their status as a Unesco World Heritage Site. Home and "incubator" to the majority of fish and sea life in our part of the world, as well as a nesting site for birds and marine turtles, Tubbataha is certainly a most valuable—and vulnerable—resource that deserves to be protected from the incursions of illegal fishers and exploiters.

The Philippines, noted the prince, the son of the late Hollywood star Grace Kelly and the late Prince Rainier of Monaco, suffers from "the dramatic effects of climate change," one of which is the searing heat we are experiencing this season, as well as El Niño, which is causing devastating drought that has resulted in depleted harvests and stunted crops.

That is a reality that the Philippine government needs no encouragement to address. Despite accusations of negligence, if not indifference, to the impact of El Niño on farming communities, especially given the deadly dispersal of farmers rallying in Kidapawan City, the President stressed that the national government has long been aware of the impending impact of El Niño and preparing to mitigate the worst of its effects.

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Indeed, it took but a single question about the Kidapawan dispersal for P-Noy to convene an impromptu tête-à-tête with a group of media women after the departure of Prince Albert and his party and of most guests to the state function.

He had charts and graphs aplenty to show that the government, through Pagasa and the Department of Agriculture, had been aware since last year of the impact of El Niño and the nature of the phenomenon. Agencies and local governments had taken steps to address the impending crisis, he said, and stressed that indeed we had already passed "the worst" phase of this climate phenomenon.

Since P-Noy had asked that matters taken up that afternoon be kept confidential, we can only speak in generalities here. But a major impression left by our two-hour exchange is the sheer range of concerns that any president has to confront each day in office. P-Noy displayed a clear and remarkable grasp of the issues he faces, from the personal to national politics to foreign affairs. One thing I think I can share with readers is that the President is well prepared for the day he has to leave Malacañang, saying that in fact he has already begun to pack his things, and that the Aquino family home on Times Street in Quezon City is undergoing renovation for his move there.

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Someone asked me on social media if the afternoon was not tinged with sadness.

To be honest, I think we were too caught up in so many topics of interest (how often does a media group have the chance to sit down for an extensive period of time with the President?) to even take the emotional temperature of the moment.

The only time I recall P-Noy showing a bit of sentiment was when he was asked about the photos displayed behind his desk, including that of his father Ninoy in his famous pose on the cover of Asiaweek taken during his plane ride back to Manila in 1983, and a montage of his mother Cory and the Blessed Mother. With these images behind him, he seemed to say, How could he ever forget not just his personal duties but also the family legacy?

But beyond this moment, P-Noy appeared upbeat, and when we began apologizing for taking up so much of his time, he smiled and said he welcomed this break from routine. "Otherwise I would have been obliged to face the thick pile of documents waiting for me," he said.

He even complained goodnaturedly about his current schedule that called for him to look after affairs of the state in the morning and then "go out helping in the campaign for the rest of the day."

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Perhaps in the near future P-Noy will have time and opportunity to look back on his six years as president and ponder the matter of "legacy." But now, even as he has barely a month left of his term and should be in the process of wrapping up, he still faces a most contentious campaign and nagging concerns about the continuity of policies and programs hard-won from a bruising battle against corruption and decades of economic stagnation.

Indeed, it seems ironic that the Philippines—and by extension P-Noy himself—enjoys better press and more convivial company from foreign media, ratings institutions and leaders around the world. To listen to leaders of the opposition, the country is on the verge of collapse and on the threshold of destruction. The only common program, from what I glean from the media and press releases, that all candidates will pursue seems to be the "4Ps," otherwise known as the conditional cash transfer program. But this only after the most obvious beneficial effects have made themselves felt, and judging from the positive feedback of the beneficiaries.

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But even the "4Ps" program is vulnerable to corruption and exploitation by the most cynical of political players. Protecting it from politics and patronage should be counted as one of the P-Noy administration's major legacies.