

'My term ends in 2010'



GMA: No extension, martial law

By PAOLO ROMERO

President Arroyo came out swinging yesterday at her critics in her last State of the Nation Address (SONA), defending her style of governance and vowing to continue to "fight" for the welfare of ordinary Filipinos and the economy up to the last day of her term in June 2010.

"At the end of this speech I shall step down from this stage, but not from the presidency. My term does not end until next year. Until then, I will fight for the ordinary Filipino. The nation comes first. There is much to do as head of state - to the very last day," Mrs. Arroyo said.

Wearing a magenta terno and sporting a hairstyle similar to what she had when she

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President Arroyo gestures during her State of the Nation Address at the House of Representatives yesterday. Insets show Senate President Juan Ponce Enrile and Speaker Prospero Nograles. Enrile adjourned the joint session immediately after the SONA, ending speculation about the event being used by congressmen to convene a constituent assembly. WALLY PEREZ

My Term

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was sworn into office in 2001, Mrs. Arroyo started her SONA with a prayer for the cancer-stricken former President Corason Aquino, whom she later referred to as her "spiritual father."

She said under her administration, the economy grew stronger despite the global recession while the country's democracy remained protected despite several destabilization attempts accompanied by allegations of massive corruption and efforts to amend the Constitution to purportedly prolong her stay in office. The International Monetary Fund and the World Bank expect the economy to contract this year.

She said she never declared martial law and never expressed a desire to extend her term.

"A year is a long time. *Patalay ang panunahunan sa linalawng na three E's ng ekonomiya*, environment at edukasyon. (We will continue to invest in the three E's of economy, environment and education). There are many perils that we must still guard against," she said.

"Some say that after this SONA, it will be all politics. Sorry, but there's more work." She thanked Filipinos for allowing her to serve as President.

She asked political candidates in the coming elections "to talk more about how they will build up the nation rather than tear down their opponents."

"Our candidates must understand the complexities of our government and what it takes to move the country forward. Give the electorate real choices and not just sweet talk," Mrs. Arroyo said.

"Meanwhile, I will keep a steady hand on the tiller, keeping the ship of state away from the shallows some prefer, and steering it straight on the course I set in 2001," she said.

While not naming names, the President delivered heavy punches to some of her strongest critics, who were apparently former President Joseph Estrada, Pangasinan Rep. Jose de Venecia Jr., Sen. Mar Roxas, and critical business groups.

"I never expressed the desire to extend myself beyond my term. Many of those who accuse me of it tried to cling like nails to their posts," Mrs. Arroyo said.

"I am accused of misgovernance. Many of those who accuse me of it left me the problem of their misgovernance to solve. And we did it," she said.

She said she was "falsely accused, without proof, of using my office for personal profit. Many of those who accuse me of it have lifestyles and spending habits that make them walking proofs of that crime."

"We can read their frustrations. They had the chance to serve this good country and they blew it by serving themselves," she said.

"Those who live in glass houses should cast no stones. Those who should be in jail should not threaten it, especially if they have been there," she said, apparently referring to Estrada's detention and conviction for plunder. Mrs. Arroyo pardoned Estrada shortly after his conviction by the Sandiganbayan in October 2007.

Apparently referring to her erstwhile ally De Venecia, she said the "noisiest critics of constitutional reform tirelessly and shamelessly attempted Cha-cha (Charter change) when they thought they could take advantage of a shift in the form of government."

"Now that they feel they cannot benefit from it, they oppose it," the President said. She, however, remained silent on her latest position on moves in the House of Representatives to amend the Constitution.

She said "as the seeds of fundamental political reform are planted, let us address the highest exercise of democracy, voting."

She also hit Roxas, who has presidential ambitions, for using the Cheaper Medicine Law issue to lambast her. She said she exercised her powers under the law to increase the number of medicine whose prices are to be reduced.

Just do it

"To those who want to be President, this advice: If you really want something done, just do it. Do it hard. Do it well. Don't pussyfoot. Don't pander. And don't say bad words in public," she said, apparently referring to Roxas' swear words during an anti-Charter change rally in Makati City in December.

Mrs. Arroyo said being the President in the last eight years was not easy and was full of risks, but countered it by working "24/7 and being ready for any contingency, any crisis, any where, anytime."

"There isn't a day I do not work at my job or a waking moment when I do not think through a work-related problem," she said.

"Even my critics cannot begrudge the long hours I put in. Our people deserve a government that works just as hard as they do," she pointed out.

"Everything right can be undone by even a single wrong. Every step forward must be taken in the teeth of political

pressure and economic constraints that could push you two steps back if you flinch and falter," she said.

"I have not flinched, I have not faltered. *Hindi ako sumasira sa humor* (I don't run away from challenges)," she said.

Mrs. Arroyo said she has never done any of the things that "have scared my worst critics so much." "They are frightened by their own shadows," she said.

She justified her frequent foreign trips, which critics have lambasted as a profligate misuse of public funds.

She also defended her strong moves to quell various destabilization and coup attempts since 2001, saying she was able to resolve the crises "with the ordinary powers of my office."

"My critics call it dictatorship. I call it determination. We know it as strong government," the President said.

"But I never declared martial law, though they are running scared as if I did. In truth, what they are really afraid of is their weakness in the face of this self-imagined threat," she pointed out.

"I say to them: do not tell us what we all know, that democracy can be threatened. Tell us what you will do when it is attacked. I know what to do," she said.

As she has shown in the past, she said, she will continue to firmly defend democracy and "try to sustain it by wise

politics of economic progress, so that a democracy means not just an empty liberty but a full life for all."

Unprecedented growth

Mrs. Arroyo pointed out that in 2008 up to the first quarter of 2009, the Philippines stood among only a few economies in Asia-Pacific that did not shrink.

"Compare this to 2001, when some

of my current critics were driven out of power. Asia was surging but our country was on the brink of bankruptcy," she said. "The state of our nation is a strong economy. Good news for our people, bad news for our critics."

"I did not become President to be popular. To work, to lead, to protect and preserve our country, our people, that is why I became President. When my father left the presidency,

we were second to Japan. I want our Republic to be ready for the first world in 20 years," she said.

Since 2001, the economy posted uninterrupted growth for 33 quarters; more than doubled its size from \$76 billion to \$186 billion, she said. The average Gross Domestic Product growth from 2001 to the first quarter of 2009 is the highest in 43 years.