

By LELIANI CHAVEZ
abc-cbnNEWS.com

When asked what he could consider as President Gloria Arroyo's achievements during her term, former education secretary Butch Abad said he had one and remarked: "I'm clueless."

After much prodding, urging, and some deep thinking, he turned helplessly still shaking his head and said he filled his newly-visited office when he said: "Help me here."

Such reactions were not new among the president's critics. In an ABC-CBN.com found out. Some, after long moments of silence, would civilly narrate their version of Her Excellency's strongest points — but with disclaimers, of course. On the other hand, some would quip they'd rather focus on the loopholes, as the president has six spokespersons and secretaries who achievements flawlessly.

Nonetheless, here's what Arroyo's staunch critics consider as the closest to what can be considered as her achievements during her nine-year term:

- Infrastructure... but for tourism

Arroyo's one bright spot, our critics agreed on the evident flourishing of the tourism industry under the Arroyo administration, particularly how various infrastructure projects boosted local tourism.

One of the priorities of the Arroyo administration, according to Abad, has always been the infrastructure and economic development. "The road was still with the education department, Abad recalled that the president would constantly meet with the finance and infrastructure secretaries to discuss her projects.

"You cannot fail to notice the improvements in the tourism sector, and it is one evident bright spot," Abad said.

Political columnist and sociology professor Randy David also attests to this, as he himself saw the improvements in the road conditions during his numerous travels around the country. Arroyo dubbed this infrastructure project as the "Super Regions" and it was an integral part in her 2006 SONA.

"I think that in fairness to this government, there are visible infrastructure projects in different parts of the country that have made many important tourist sites accessible," David commented.

- Pantawid Familying Pilipino Program
- Economists and professors

Arsenio Balisacan and Benjamin Diokno, as well as Abad, mentioned, in separate meetings, the Pantawid Familying, Filipino Program (P4) as a very popular program that ended the Arroyo administration.

Diokno, however, reiterated that the program should be implemented on a national level. "Lately, it could be implemented in the national level so you don't spend a lot of money in selecting the recipients," he said.

In the success of the program, according to Abad, depends on the poverty mapping process of the local government units. He said not all local governments can clearly determine the poor in society.

Another reason why P4 can be considered as an achievement is because it is the only cabinet department of social welfare and development (DSWD), headed by Esperanza Cabral, one of the few "credible" cabinet secretaries, according to Balisacan.

Highly debatable achievements

There are also projects and issues that received mixed reactions. As an initial project, that is perceived as good and then turning sour along the way. Among these are:

- Infrastructure

Despite the numerous road arteries, airports, and ro-ro ports being constructed and improved around the country, and its obvious impact on the economic development, it turned out that a majority of these infrastructure projects were overpriced.

"There is hardly any big ticket infrastructure project that is not tainted by charges of corruption," David stressed. He explained that the government is spending more and being wasteful in adding to the country's debts.

Further, Diokno added that although the Department of Public Works and Highways has the biggest budget, the percentage of allocations still comprised two percent of the GDP. "Infrastructure spending has not increased at all," Diokno noted.

But the country "badly needs infrastructure," David stressed out. "There is no way, I think, that this country can get out of its economic crisis without out massive investments in infrastructure," he said.

- Healthcare

David also pointed out that one of the most needed is to be pointed out is the expanded coverage

of PhilHealth and the social services. Although the PhilHealth coverage is not 100 percent, he thinks it is already in the capability of the government to provide.

Despite this coverage, Lenor Briones, governance professor and convener of Social Watch, said that the government will not develop sufficient resources for such services, especially since Arroyo has the power to veto some parts of the general appropriations.

"The president vetoed some amounts that would have made a big difference in the health sector," Briones said. She pointed out that before the 2009 GAA was passed, Arroyo vetoed P100 million allocated for autoclaves, a sterilizing equipment, as well as 100 million for a mobile clinic, which was used in curbing tuberculosis, one of the leading causes of mortality in the country.

- Full automation

According to David, the automation of the upcoming 2010 national elections can be considered as an achievement if "done efficiently and professionally."

But he quickly pointed out that the Palace seemed unfazed over the dispute between Total Information Management (TIM) and the former partner, Smartmatic. The reaction from the executive office somehow, according to David, showed his lack of perseverance in pushing for automation.

"Walang sinabi ang Malacañang nang umratas ang TIM (Malacañang did not say anything when TIM backed out), but it was not the only time when they should really be worried. I don't see any persistence yet it has so much money at its disposal, both from the national and revenue from VAT," David noted.

- BPO sector

Although another obvious bright spot in the past few years was the boom in the business process outsourcing industry, Diokno argued that it should be credited to the telecom deregulation law imposed during the former President Fidel Ramos's time.

David also sees the BPO success as "dependent on improvement in telecommunications." Further, Abad thinks too that the BPO industry should not be credited to Arroyo but to the inherent characteristics of Filipinos. Briones simply

quipped: "The economy grew in spite of her."

- OFW remittances

All of the critics agreed that behind the increase in remittances from overseas workers of the worsening unemployment in the country.

"You shouldn't be proud of it," Diokno stressed. "Deduction on remittances is a sign of weakness because you cannot generate your own industry."

Balisacan noted that Arroyo is lucky because there is a constant influx of remittances but it was not worth bragging about. "You shouldn't be proud that your citizens are leaving the country and developing other country's economies. She should develop the manufacturing industry — employment in that sector is long-term."

Likewise, Abad considers the BPO growth as a fruit of the flourishing of global economies. Both David and Abad pointed out that the overseas employment has a negative cause socially, as children endure living under the guidance of relatives as their parents are working overseas. "The BPO has really paid attention to the effect of sending mothers and fathers to different countries," Abad noted.

She could have...

Critics will be critics. If there are hits, there are definitely misses. And Arroyo's critics would be quick to add she could have done better during her term:

- **Appoint the right people**

In early 2000, there were many appointments and dismissals narrated. Under Arroyo, leadership made the problem as she allegedly placed people in the office not based on the capacity to do the job, but on "political exchange" for "baldy favors."

"Public service is badly damaged. Bureaucracy was favored. Many positions should be filled by people who know how to play the game," Balisacan said ruefully.

Appointments crippled the unions, according to David. "People who absolutely don't have any knowledge of the departments and agencies in which they are assigned are just randomly appointed to these positions as political rewards."

David further explained: "You cannot do anything by way of enforcing government

programs in a consistent and competent way unless you have good people."

Abad simply commented that the President "was never serious about putting the proper people in the office."

"Leadership defines the credibility of the organization or the department," Balisacan said, adding his own definition of a proficient department or organization would work, he added.

- **Create sustainable employment**

The employment issue has been the constant favorite of our critics, saying that despite Arroyo's SONA promises, local employment has remained stagnant as numbers were misleading.

Diokno pointed out discrepancies in the numbers and the actual numbers in the ground. He explained that there is an increase in the number of self-employed Filipinos and these are mostly those who left their jobs and decided to put up their own small businesses.

"The increase in self-employment means there is not an increase in poor quality jobs," Balisacan said. "It is hiring but not on employment that will broadly define where the country is going," he said.

"The jobs she created are not sustainable. Like the cleaning districts, they (government) employ them for one month and they get another batch," Briones said. "It is similar to what is quoted from another critic quoting "jobless growth and narrow shallow employment" and pointed out that infrastructure should be used to create jobs, economies and generate jobs, especially for people in the countryside.

"You cannot rely entirely on call centers as the source of labor, you have to develop your real economy. You have to provide opportunities for people in the countryside. Not any job can be a call center agent but people have to plant, people have to produce food, people have to process food," David commented.

"This administration is making the symptoms but not the disease."

- **Develop the education sector**

Having been an education secretary during the early days of the Arroyo administration, Abad said that since then, the key sectors such as education and health were never given enough attention.

"She says that in words but... are we investing (in schools)? Have we worked out the policies so that the schools become the engines to bring money into a competitive knowledge-based society?" Abad noted.

Abad, however, added that money was never an issue, it was money on where the money was being spent. He recommended giving parents a form of livelihood in collaboration with the schools, as well as incentives on where the money all barangays and provide appropriate teacher training.

"The education system is the key driver in bringing the Philippines forward. Even if the window is closing, we still have an edge in these areas," he said without optimism.

David agreed on the attention it deserves.

If there is one sector the critics considered as the most overlooked in Arroyo's nine-year term, it would be agriculture, it was the agricultural sector.

Unfortunately, Balisacan said the agriculture sector has been highly politicized during Arroyo's term. "The president was off to a good start when he momentarily held the post of agriculture undersecretary."

"There is no good momentum in the Department of Agriculture and many programs have questionable impact," Balisacan added.

According to Briones, the Arroyo administration has thoroughly destroyed the institutions, particularly the agriculture sector and this has had a lingering impact on the country's economy as those lives depend on the fields.

"In this government, I don't see the place of agriculture modernization as a key driver of food security, infrastructure development and jobs," Abad said.

Balisacan shared that the government should have allocated enough funds to agriculture, for instance, of the hybrid rice technology. According to Balisacan, the hybrid rice released different reasons as the rice were not appropriately planted in some parts of the country.

Further, Diokno added that instead of paying P70 billion to support rice production, the government should have used the amount to modernize agriculture.

"We should have used modernization in agriculture to jumpstart food production and fisheries development. The impact can be very immediate in agriculture," Abad said.