

# State of the SONA: Policy-focused, coherent, disciplined, resolute, presidential

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BY YEN MAKABENTA ON JULY 26, 2018 OPINION ON PAGE ONE

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### ***First word***

STRANGE things happened during the run-up to the third State of the Nation Address (SONA) of President Rodrigo Duterte on Monday, July 24.

First, Speaker Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo happened. As if struck thunderbolt from heaven, Speaker Pantaleon Alvarez was unceremoniously ousted from office, which is fourth in the line of succession to the presidency. Alvarez could only perform his last act as Speaker: turning off the sound system on his successor, in a vain attempt to invalidate her election.

Second, the President threatened to walk out of the event because of the speakership row. He relented when GMA agreed to allow Alvarez to still preside as House Speaker during the SONA.

Third, the House of Representatives ran out of time to ratify the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL), which had earlier passed muster in the bicameral conference committee. As a result, Duterte could not sign the measure into law before the president's address. TV director Joyce Bernal lost what she had planned as her masterstroke: recording for posterity the signing of the Bangsamoro law.

Fourth and the biggest surprise of the day was the address itself, which featured a different Duterte, serious, focused, polite, respectful, bereft entirely of adlibs and profanities. He read non-stop his prepared address, which only lasted 48 minutes, the shortest SONA in his three-year presidency.

### **Manila Times TV panel**

That afternoon, I sat on a Manila Times TV panel that previewed, viewed, analyzed and rated the third SONA of President Duterte. With me on the panel were: the president of the Chamber of Commerce of the Philippine Islands Jose Luis Yulo Jr., former University of the East law dean and Social Security System Chairman Amado Valdez, Manila Times president Dante Francis Ang 2nd, and Times publisher-editor Nerilyn Tenorio.

During the preview we speculated whether Arroyo's election as Speaker would relegate the SONA to second billing in the media coverage. Tenorio wondered about the headlining problem this would give the Times front-page editor.

But the way things turned out, there was no choice to make between the Arroyo accession and the SONA. The address was indubitably the story of the day. Its message rang loud and clear.

The panel was one in pronouncing the SONA as not only surprising, but strong, effective and admirable. DU30 was never better.

### **Major vs minor speeches**

For my part, I observed that it was in my view the best speech of the Duterte presidency, more substantive and consequential than his inaugural address and his ceremonial hosting of the Asean summits.

I see the matter this way. Presidential speaking engagements are not all alike. Addresses are either major or minor — major when the president is called upon to deliver a policy address or address an important issue; minor when the occasion is mainly ceremonial and light in its demands on the president.

The SONA is plainly a major address, the most important address of the president every year. It is, says William Safire in his Political Dictionary, preferentially called a message because it is primarily a message to Congress. Inaugural speeches are formally called addresses.

The SONA is delivered before a joint session of Congress, a full assembly of the top officials of all branches of the government, representatives of the diplomatic corps, and selected guests of the president and his family. The address is broadcast live to the nation with running commentary. And the Filipino public, when they like their president, eagerly make time to watch it, and the post-mortem evaluations.

Both the SONA (state of the nation) and the SOTU (state of the union) are lengthy statements of legislative intent. They are a method by which a president takes the initiative in shaping a legislative program for his administration.

### **Rising to the challenge**

In his third SONA. President Duterte rose to the majesty of the occasion, and the challenge of converting it into a leap forward for his presidency.

Gen. George Patton has fine advice on the art of facing challenges: “Accept the challenges so that you may feel the exhilaration of victory.”

Duterte accepted the challenge of adjusting his rhetorical style to the demands of his third SONA. Among these adjustments were: adhering closely to a written text of the address, focusing like a laser on his policy agenda and major legislative proposals, worrying more about substance than style; ignoring critics and opponents who annoy him, totally avoiding his proclivity to adlib and wander away from his message; and above all omitting cuss words and profanities, and looking serious and presidential throughout the address.

Mr. Valdez said Duterte was able to refute accusations of human rights violations by saying that while the critics’ concern was human rights, his was “human lives.”

CCPI President Jose Luis Yulo Jr. said the President “acted presidential” and noted that there were no inappropriate words in his speech. His statements, moreover, had no inconsistencies and went straight to the point. “I think it’s one of the best speeches so far,” he said.

“Tomorrow’s headline should really focus on the content of the SONA; then on the side we could have the Alvarez-Arroyo tiff which should just be a sidebar,” our publisher-editor said.

### **Written text an advantage**

If, as I predict, the third SONA turns out to be a success for the President and the government, it will be due in no small part to the fact that it was a written address, and the President stayed close to his text.

Richard Dowis, the author of the book, *The Lost Art of the Great Speech* (American Management Association, New York, 2000), devotes a chapter to the subject of “whether speeches should be written” and to “a defense of written speeches.” He wrote:

“A well-written speech is a disciplined speech. It doesn’t ramble. It gets to the point. It fits the time allotted. It contains no superfluous detail, but it doesn’t leave out anything important.

“The kind of thinking you have to do when you write is more than just letting the subject turn over and over in your mind. Writing forces you to think in specifics. Writing is the application of discipline to creativity.”

Dowis has a lot to say about the process of writing a speech, the role of research, brainstorming, the preparation process, the usefulness of a thesis statement underlying the speech.

Some Filipino politicians believe naively that they are more impressive to audiences when they just speak spontaneously and do not read from a text. It would look like they are God's gift to public speaking.

This kind of spontaneity is a comedian's art. Sometimes they look good even when they fumble.

The art of a statesman and leader is something else entirely, because they speak for the record...or will be recorded.

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