

NATIONAL LANGUAGE AND UNITY¹

President Ferdinand E. Marcos

I am personally grateful that the socio-linguistic scholars of Asia concerned with national language development are gathered here for the second time in two years. Your first meeting in Manila in 1972, soon after the Philippines elected to go on a new path of development, has added a new dimension to the enlarging spectrum of regional co-operation in Asia. Today, you begin your second conference which will build on the success of the first. It is therefore a real pleasure for me to welcome you - I refer of course to the delegates from the other Asian countries - to our country. May I say that we are in a position to profit much from the exchange of national experiences and information on this crucial subject.

The national language question is inseparable from the larger question of nation-building in all its ramifications. Today, no matter what we call the process, nation-building is the overriding concern of every developing country in Asia. For instinctively as well as empirically; we know that a strong national unity and binding cohesion is the key to all achievements in all fields.

That is the reason why some of our countries are resolutely restructuring our respective societies. This objective, as I perceive it, is to break up the concentrations of power, to create a much broader base of popular participation in government and in development.

We therefore aim to re-establish democracy on broader, stronger and more enduring foundations. In our country one of the main instruments that is being utilized for this social re-organisation is agrarian

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reform together with the re-activation of our ancient barangay system, or social political participation of the people at grassroots level.

We know that similar efforts are taking place in our neighbouring countries. Thus, in Malaysia, a multi-racial country, the government concentrates on social restructuring through correcting the racial imbalances as a pre-condition to national unity and stability. This is also a major thrust of policies in Indonesia and Thailand. There is now more or less universal recognition of the fact that you cannot build lasting national unity on a foundation of rank inequality, where the accident of birth of race foreordains a man's place in society. The first task of nation-building therefore is to attack the problem of chronic instability at its roots, to recast the feudalistic framework of society and effect a real transfer of power from the few to the many. Only then we can enlarge, widen and permanently strengthen the foundations of our national cohesion and solidarity. Only then we can forestall the ever-present dangers of social disintegration and even civil war. Only then can we be sure of passing on to posterity the accumulated gains of our respective national development efforts.

It is in that context that we are compelled to recognize the possibility of a cultural feudalism which segregates the masses from participation in government and in development because of a language barrier between the elite and the people. Nations of course cope with this problem according to their differing backgrounds. In Indonesia, where the Dutch language remained a possession of a very tiny minority, they had the advantage of being presented, during their Revolution, with a clear-cut situation: Dutch had long ceased to have a major importance as a world language and Malay had been used in the coastal areas of the entire Malay archipelago, including the Philippines, for centuries. It was for them a relatively simple matter adopting Malay as the basis of their national language, known today as Bahasa Indonesia. The Malaysians and the Singaporeans also were in possession of this language, but their situation was much more ambiguous; they inherited, not a moribund international language, but a world language - English - which was fast gaining ascendancy across national and ideological barriers as the most useful lingua franca of all mankind.

But if the Malaysia dilemma was painful, the Philippine language dilemma was even more so. So the Philippines under the tutelage of the United States got its education almost entirely in the English language. Moreover, the divide-and-rule strategies of the colonizers since Legaspi took Manila in 1571 had made it impossible for one of the major native languages to gain nationwide acceptance as the national language.

It must be said in fairness that Tagalog became the natural language of the Philippine Revolution of 1896 and to a lesser degree, of the first Philippine Republic in 1898. President Emilio Aguinaldo wrote his memoirs entirely in Tagalog. The seminal documents of the Revolution were written in Tagalog. This gave the basis for Dean C. Worcester, one of the American colonial administrators who also prided himself in being an ethnologist, to brand the Revolution and the first Philippine Republic as a "Tagalog military oligarchy". The wide and universal support enjoyed by the Revolution in the non-Tagalog areas of course belied this accusation and revealed the divisive nature of the colonial policies.

The imposition of English as the universal medium of instruction in the Philippine educational system, and as the language of government, commerce, sciences and the arts, curtailed the development of a national language. The Philippine Constitution of 1935 committed the nation in favour of a national language based on one of the native languages. This basis, of course, had to be Tagalog - the language of the primate city. Unfortunately, the absolute reign of the purists and the orthodox priests of this language further curtailed the development and acceptability of the national language. The new Constitution re-asserts the country's commitment to the adoption of a national language, but on the basis of a much more liberalized, more flexible and probably more representative language. There is no question that the framers of the Constitution do not envisage the complete discarding of all the gains already realized in developing a national language. We must build on our successes but must be fully instructed by our failures.

The Philippines, under the New Society, is re-affirming more strongly than before our commitment to national unity through a national language. It is my desire that the national language now known as Pilipino, but which will develop further to become Filipino, should now be firmly incorporated in all the college entrance examinations and in all the civil service examinations, as well as in the management development courses of the Development Academy of the Philippines. It is also my desire that the important documents of the State, from now on, should be published in two languages - both English and Pilipino. And it is also my desire to see Pilipino rapidly established as a medium of instruction together with English in appropriate courses in our higher institutions of learning. I direct the Department of Education and the Institute of National Language to take strong and immediate measures to implement these policies.

I spoke earlier of the possibility in our respective countries of a cultural feudalism which bifurcates a nation between a foreign language

- speaking elite and the masses of the people speaking their own native languages. Just as we are determined to recast the feudal structure of our society through agrarian reform and through labour reform, we are committed to the eradication of feudalism in culture. Our decision to broaden and strengthen the foundation of our national unity raises its implication for reforms in the field of language. The future Philippines should be one where the government and the people can communicate in a single medium easily mastered by the masses of the people, a language most identified with the struggles of the nation for independence and dignity, a language that will serve, like the flag itself, as a binding force for permanent national cohesion and solidarity at all levels of society.

There is no implication here that we are ready to renounce our possession of English as a world language. For Filipinos in the indefinite future, English will serve as the key to the storehouse of the world's knowledge, and in an age of knowledge explosion, it will be folly to renounce our comparative advantage in our possession of the English language. But this must always be seen in proper perspective. When we speak of holding on to English, we mean this will be cultivated and strengthened as our valued means of access to modern knowledge and information in all cultures. But this certainly does not imply that the farmer in the field and the fisherman in the sea have to devote a major portion of their lives learning to speak and write in a foreign language, when they can assimilate knowledge much more easily in the language they know best. Neither will this mean that a minority of highly educated, affluent and influential persons will continue to monopolize the channels of communication through their endowment of a foreign language, while denying the masses of the people access to the decision-making process.

The dilemmas I have stated are the same one as that, to a lesser or greater degree, face many of the developing countries in our region. Every nation will have to meet these dilemmas in its own way. But it certainly is useful to learn from our own neighbouring countries how they are coping with these problems in the context of their own nation-building objectives and aspirations. We in the Philippines can contribute from our own experience, but we are in a much better position to learn from our neighbouring countries. This gathering of scholars, experienced specialists involved with sensitive policies of national language development from all over Asia, can do much to illuminate the problem areas and derive conclusions and recommendations that can guide policy-makers in the region. May I repeat what I have said earlier: your conference opens up a new and necessary dimension to Asian regional

co-operation in the cultural and social fields, no less important than co-operation in the economic field.

Your theme is concerned with the standardisation of language but the larger principle behind it is the attainment of national unity for human development. I endorse the cause that has brought you here together. I welcome you warmly once again to our country and hope that you will find your visit not only productive but also pleasant. I wish your conference the utmost success.

