

The Presidential Race and Accountability

In these days of searching for “good governance” and a trustworthy leadership, a principle of accountability is an absolute precondition for those aspiring to become President.

By the Policy Study, Publication and Advocacy (PSPA) Program
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The current row in the presidential race regarding preference ratings and the alleged use of public funds for election infomercials has been expected, as in past elections. Sorely missed is accountability that should be raised as an issue in the coming national election – a benchmark for choosing who among the aspirants deserves to become the next President.

The reason for making accountability (“pananagutan” in Filipino) as a major electoral agenda springs from the abuse of presidential power – or the use of authority chiefly to perpetuate power - in recent years. Presidential power has been misused to commit election fraud, as in 2004, and as the invisible hand behind big-time corruption and plunder, among other alleged cases.

Presidential authority has also shielded its user from impeachment – the only constitutional mechanism available to check the abuse of power by the chief executive. Justice has been elusive to victims and survivors of human rights violations because the iron hand of the president vests alleged military-linked perpetrators with immunity from investigation and prosecution, including the chief executive herself for possible command responsibility.

The latest example of presidential abuse is the millions of taxpayers' money spent for dinners during the president's recent trip to New York and Washington, DC. The other time such display of conspicuous consumption in this age of mass poverty happened was during the Marcos years but then the number of foreign trips of the Marcoses in 20 years of their rule is less compared to the Arroyos's 80 foreign trips in nine years. Department of Budget and Management (DBM) reports show that the presidential office had spent P2.8 billion for travel from 2001-2008 as against the total budget for eight years of P1.5 billion.

Promoted aggressively

The abuse of presidential power has been promoted aggressively with the help of political patronage, cronyism, trade-offs, transactional and extortive corruption – as alleged - involving billions of foreign-funded development projects. It has also been pursued by packing the Cabinet and other agencies, including the foreign service, with political allies and senior military officials, and by promotions, perks, and spin doctors.

The rise of the Arroyo kleptocracy has led to the further weakening of the state institutions and governance mechanisms. It has made Congress, with the exception of some House members and senators, as

a mere rubber stamp of the President thus rendering the system of checks and balances vis-à-vis the chief executive useless.

But even the monopoly of legislative power has not elevated Congress' performance from mediocrity which is aggravated by the dominant members' hardline stance against social and political reform measures such as the minimum wage, justice for Marcos torture victims, and the review of oil deregulation, automatic debt repayments, and other laws. As shown by the dominant members' shooting down of four impeachment complaints against Mrs. Arroyo and several attempts at charter change, Congress has acted not only as a rubber stamp but an instrument for the perpetuation of presidential power.

Answerable

Accountability is the means by which the President – for that matter, all other elective and appointive officials – is answerable to all acts and decisions made during his/her term. Whether with respect to the chief executive or other officials in government, accountability is summoned by laws and the code of ethics and is guaranteed by several administrative and quasi-judicial mechanisms within the executive bureaucracy, as well as independent commissions and anti-graft judicial bodies; outside these are Congress and the Supreme Court.

Accountability is exercised not only in an election when a plunderer or an incompetent is voted out – for the damage has been done before the next election takes place in six years. It thrives when machineries function to make all elective and appointive officials culpable for the wrongs they committed – or promises undone - anytime.

The Filipino people's low trust in the political leadership and government, as many opinion surveys will validate, can be attributed to the lack of an effective system of accountability – in all layers of the governance system. They cannot accept the fact of high officials being lawbreakers and enriching themselves while the services they have sworn to perform remain intangible.

Minimum expectation

In the Philippines, the minimum expectation is to put the bolts and nuts of accountability in place and working. But first in the coming presidential race, the imperative is to scrutinize the aspirants in terms of their record of transparency and accountability while in office and their capability to make the system work. Each of them should show that he/she upholds the sovereign will of the people and the supremacy of

law with a performance record of acts, legislations, or programs pursued solely for public interest and that none among his family or friends was enriched in the process.

The challenge to the aspirants really is to understand, imbibe, and practice the culture of accountability. An elective position, especially the president, is the highest form of public service: The power is entrusted to him/her by the sovereign people only to perform service, and nothing else. This means being one with and for the people: Actions and decisions articulate and are responsive to the rights and collective interests of the people. He should take at heart the provisions of the Constitution and the code of ethics: To uphold and protect the national interest at all times, and to serve with the highest ethics and integrity anytime. The presidency embodies the highest sense of patriotism and an oath to serving only the people. The aspirant must be change-

oriented, in all its ramifications. Have we forgotten that self-sacrifice, nationalism, and integrity are the highest virtues that make a true political leader?

The President is accountable to the people – not to the office of the president, not to financial backers or allies.

All these may sound a tall order suggesting even that none of the current aspirants may be equal to the task. But in these days of searching for “good governance” and a trustworthy leadership, a principle of accountability is an absolute precondition for those aspiring to become President. Absent this, the coming election, assuming it will push through, will end up with a new face that is answerable to no one. It's like having another Arroyo regime without Gloria.

The presidential aspirants

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The number of aspirants for the Philippines' 11th President is about 17. The list includes Vice-President Noli de Castro; former President Joseph E. Estrada; seven senators, led by former Senate President Manuel Villar, Jr. and Senators Mar Roxas III, Francis “Chiz” Escudero”, Loren Legarda, Jambly Madrigal, Richard Gordon, Noynoy Aquino; Makati Mayor Jejomar Binay; three religious leaders, namely, Bro. Eddie Villanueva of JIL, Bro. Mike Velarde, El Shaddai, and Fr. “Among” Ed Panlilio, governor of Pampanga. The flock also includes lesser known figures, including Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro and MMDA chairman Bayani Fernando.

Roxas announced Sept. 1 his withdrawal from the race in favor of Noynoy Aquino.

The race will likely narrow down by November to about three, Villar (dubbed by Forbes-Asia as the ninth wealthiest Filipino), Estrada, and Aquino, or even five if De Castro and Escudero are included. De Castro, who postures as an independent, has been invited by Malacanang to make himself available for the presidency under Kampi and Lakas-CMD. But he knows that being anointed by the incumbent president, Mrs. Gloria M. Arroyo, is a “kiss of death.” There are talks that with the incumbent administration devoid of any winnable candidate –especially if De Castro will not bite Arroyo's offer – Malacanang may just enter into a “negotiated election” with any of the top contenders.

Eventually, the rest of the aspirants will be chosen for the No. 2 spot in a coalition of political parties, money, and machinery. Who has sole possession of these resources will be nominated for the presidency en route to Malacanang. Reminiscent of past presidential contests, the coming weeks and months will see a series of turncoats or political butterflies gravitating toward who they believe will win and guarantee their own victory in the local polls. Traditional politics in the Philippines remains unchanged since the 1900s.

The May 2010 election, expected to be the most acrimonious ever, has given rise to “reform” candidates as a result of popular frustrations over the current political system and by the need to bring new albeit moderate faces in an election dominated by traditional politicians (trapos). But Among Ed, earlier groomed as the “reform” bet, is giving way to Noynoy Aquino while another, Isabela Gov. Grace Padaca, may just end up in a senatorial slate.

Supreme Court Chief Justice Reynato Puno, who has brought judicial activism to the high court, had earlier been pushed to take a shot at the presidency as the alternative “moral force.” Having denied any political plans, however, Puno's burden is to make sure the SC will play a balancing act in a possible scenario of failure of elections in which case a holdover President will be needed to avert a constitutional crisis. But then Puno is set to retire in May 2010.

Four other names from the Party-list system will likely run for the Senate: Satur Ocampo and Teddy Casino, both of Bayan Muna; Liza Maza, Gabriela Women's Party; and Riza Hontiveros-Baraquel, Akbayan. *CenPEG 2009*

For reference:

Bobby Tuazon

Director, Policy Study, Publication, and Advocacy (PSPA) Program

Center for People Empowerment in Governance (CenPEG)

<http://www.cenpeg.org>

Tel/Fax + (63-2) 929-9526; Mobile Phone 0929-8007965

For your comments/suggestions please send your email to issueanalysis2009@cenpeg.org, cenpeg.info@gmail.com