



Issue Analysis No. 02
Series of 2012

Nowhere to Go: Will Aquino's Anti-Corruption Reform Work?

President Benigno S. Aquino III's much-vaunted anti-corruption program barely scratches the surface of the problem and gives no hint on how he will grapple with its systemic roots. Failing to address or worse abetting the fundamental roots that sustain corruption makes his administration's anti-corruption drive superficial if not a complete sham.

By the Policy Study, Publication, and Advocacy (PSPA)
Center for People Empowerment in Governance (CenPEG)
March 12, 2012

President Benigno S. Aquino III's much-vaunted anti-corruption program barely scratches the surface of the problem and gives no hint on how he will grapple with its systemic roots. Failing to address or worse abetting the fundamental roots that sustain corruption makes his administration's anti-corruption drive superficial if not a complete sham.

After keeping the public waiting for 21 months of his 6-year presidency, Aquino III finally unveiled last January his "Good Governance and Anti-Corruption" (GACC) plan for 2012-2016 spearheaded no less by himself in a Cabinet cluster. On February 21 this year, the president announced the presence in the country of an American professor, Robert Klitgaard, who will act as his anti-corruption consultant. Klitgaard is claimed to be the world's "leading expert on corruption." On March 1, the Senate, sitting as a court, suspended until March 12 the impeachment trial of Supreme Court Chief Justice Renato C. Corona. Aquino III has openly backed the impeachment of Corona on charges of constitutional violation and betrayal of public trust saying that the chief magistrate's conviction is crucial to his administration's campaign against corruption.

Couched in "transparency, accountability, and citizen engagement" terms, Aquino III's GACC plan integrates digitalized and publicly-accessible government databases particularly on budget, procurement, and projects. This scheme makes budget disclosure mandatory to all agencies and local government units (LGUs). The GACC

plan also calls for engaging NGOs or "civil society organizations" (CSOs) in a social audit while community organizations will be tapped for "local poverty reduction plans."

The GACC translates into action Aquino III's campaign slogan in the 2010 elections, "Kung walang corrupt, walang mahirap". Curbing corruption will reduce poverty – this is his "core strategy for changing the status quo." Expounding, the "new status quo" that Aquino III refers to is a government that delivers "roads and bridges," where those who toil are "rewarded justly," and the judiciary upholds the rule of law.

The GACC blueprints action plans beginning this year till 2016 which covers the remaining period of the Aquino III presidency. It is vague, however, on what tangible results the plan will yield or what measurable indicators there will be to assess whether corruption per se has been reduced particularly in the huge government bureaucracy in four years indicating, as a result, a corresponding improvement in the lives of Filipinos.

More to the point, the GACC is schematically treated as a strategic reform by itself promising to address corruption and, thus, make poverty a thing of the past. Nothing is clear, however, what reforms are being done in other fronts to address decisively the overarching problems of social inequities, economic and political marginalization of many Filipinos, unemployment, and other long-enduring maladies. The way GACC is touted as

the president's centerpiece program, the solution to the country's institutional and centuries-old problems is simplistically reduced into anti-corruption = anti-poverty formula that would make a political economist, sociologist, social scientist, and activist turn their heads in disbelief.

Outside the anti-corruption drive Aquino III's economic paradigm, land reform, foreign loans, anti-insurgency, peace process, and other programs lead to the same short-term roadmaps pursued by Gloria M. Arroyo and other past regimes with dismal results. Fact is, as sounded out by the president's economic administrators – and echoed by the foreign business community – the clear intention of Aquino III's anti-corruption program is to attract foreign investments and this is no less different from his predecessor's priorities.

Yet Aquino III has not stopped his own family from blocking the implementation of the Supreme Court ruling on the land distribution of Hacienda Luisita to its tenants and farm workers thus making the land a possible subject of a deal in the ongoing impeachment of the SC chief justice. Contrary to government claims, unemployment has increased with stable jobs unavailable for Filipinos forcing more of them to work abroad. None takes the president seriously when he says “the masses are his boss” but turns a blind eye to the demolition of urban poor communities and oil price hikes that bleed both drivers and consumers dry no end.

Klitgaard, Aquino III's anti-corruption consultant, tries to offer a different perspective on corruption. He rehashes what many Filipinos have long held: corruption is systemic, breeds on political culture, and is politically entrenched. The key, he agrees, “is to focus on systems and not individuals.” Fine words but the man who hired him as consultant is doing exactly opposite the American scholar's advice: Aquino III wields political patronage the way his predecessors did by allocating pork barrel funds as a trade-off in maintaining an alliance of convenience in Congress. He renders the GACC's “accountability” track hypocritical by not pursuing the prosecution of Arroyo for alleged corruption cases, plunder, and human rights violations as relentlessly as the impeachment of Corona. Absent these initiatives, the impeachment of Corona

appears to confirm what is widely believed as a mere changing of the guard at the highest judiciary – replacing Corona with his own appointee.

Klitgaard's solution, like Aquino III's, however is like a one-size-fits-all policy where anti-corruption reforms are expected to lead to “a turning point in a country's development.” While he concurs that corruption leads to a monopoly of power Klitgaard's solution falls short on how to deconstruct the institutional roots of corruption such as political patronage and the system of political dynasties that perpetuate the culture of corruption. Neither does it prescribe a transformative solution to the country's economic disparities where wealth is concentrated in a few families – encouraged no less by a corrupt bureaucracy – while the vast majority wallows in poverty. Well, Klitgaard offers a caveat for Aquino III: The political leadership must be challenged but don't commit “political suicide.”

Incredibly, Klitgaard also asks the whole NGO community with all its diverse colors and persuasions to abandon any critical stance with this credo: “From critic to partner.” Akin to the “public-private partnership” catchphrase, cause-oriented groups will be expunged of their progressive advocacies and social struggle against the status quo in favor of collaborating with bourgeois reformism that essentially preserves it. The disempowering of the social movement will have the effect of making the impunity of corruption more unshakable.

Aquino III need not hire foreign experts or use models for an effective strategy against corruption. Too many agencies have been formed, laws enacted, and billions of pesos spent to combat corruption with no concrete results, worse, with some of these bodies not exactly the epitome of credibility. Yet again, the neo-liberal lens of transparency and accountability frontlines the administration's anti-corruption policy primarily as a means of attracting foreign investment and multilateral credit institutions' financial loans that, in the end, exacerbate social inequities and mass poverty.

Instead of prettifying the presidency with empty slogans and expending all its attention on the Corona impeachment, the Aquino administration may be better off

using the rest of its term by doing some constructive measures. Some of these include the passage of the Freedom of Information bill minus its major restrictions or conditions, strengthening of the whistleblower's act and the witness protection program, and supporting anti-dynasty bills. The president should let go of the Hacienda Luisita and make economic planning inclusive by heeding calls for a mining moratorium, scrapping the oil deregulation law, revoking the anti-poor VAT law, and other proposals. These may be short-term but they constitute the first step toward removing impediments to basic social, economic, and political reform.

Now, is the president ready to walk the talk?

For reference:

Bobby M. Tuazon
Director for Policy Studies
Center for People Empowerment in Governance (CenPEG)
Main office: 3F CSWCD Bldg., Magsaysay Avenue
University of the Philippines, Diliman, Quezon City
Tel. No. +9299526; TelFax No. +3554022
Email: info@cenpeg.org, cenpeg.info@gmail.com
www.cenpeg.org, www.eu-cenpeg.com