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People's Initiative vs Pork Barrel and the Imperative of State Reform

Sweeping reform is possible the moment people begin to struggle against personality-oriented leadership, myths, and illusions. It can be done when people begin to act as a collective power.

By the Policy Study, Publication, and Advocacy
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Former Chief Justice Reynato Puno's proposed "citizens' initiative" sends a clear message that the people should not expect anything noble or act of courage from the Congress and executive department to abolish the whole pork barrel system. Sustained and well-coordinated, the six-million signatures representing 10% of the country's total registered voters as people's initiative can be gathered favorable to exercising the people's constitutional right in initiating a major policy reform without Congress. Many agree with Puno that both the President and Congress – now linked together in the destabilizing P10-mn PDAF scam, presidential pork barrels, and the theft of the Malampaya energy fund – will not abolish pork barrel in whatever sneaky form and, hence, only the people as the sovereign power and as the source of all constitutional authority must prevail.

When all else fails - the state's key governing institutions refuse to heed public clamor for reform – the constitution supports people's initiative as the penultimate resort for affirmative action. In contemporary times, people's initiative as a political right has established a rich legacy of mass struggles – from the street parliament, to extra-constitutional and civil disobedience movements – as in the epochal civilian uprisings that ousted the brutal Marcos dictatorship in 1986 and the morally-bankrupt Estrada regime in 2001, as well as in resign movements backed by impeachment initiatives against the illegitimate Arroyo presidency.

Aside from these, other people's initiatives took the similar paths of mass mobilizations resulting, for instance, in the removal of the U.S. military bases in 1991 after the Senate succumbed to public pressure to reject the proposed

bases renewal treaty that was backed by Corazon C. Aquino; as well as in stopping destructive dam projects, illegal logging, mining development aggression, and the graft-ridden Bataan nuclear-powered plant. The backdrop to these contemporary struggles – in basic issues articulated, in the forms the unprecedented mass protests took, and in the comprehensiveness of reform – dates back to the nationalist ferment of the 1960s and the First Quarter Storm of the 1970s with millions-strong protests calling for the radical restructuring of society to end exploitation and oppression by the ruling dynasties and the founding of a new state free from foreign subjugation.

Failure of reform

The proposed people's initiative against pork barrel dramatizes the failure of reform under a state that for all intents and purposes is in its terminal stage. There is a failed state when major scams and corruption cases involving high officials and politicians are brought to the fore not by the much-touted World Bank-constructed "system of transparency and accountability" but by whistleblowers. There is a failed state when major functions of government – from budget to programs, services, elections, human rights, media protection – need to be monitored by citizens' watchdogs and investigative journalists precisely because the state's numerous anti-graft, auditing, oversight bodies, and criminal justice system do not function. There is a failed state when public money is devoured by parasites under a culture of impunity – encouraged no less by the incumbent president – that promotes a conspiracy of corruption between the executive and legislature and covers up criminal syndicates. A failed state it is when it is unable to translate claimed GDP growths into food and jobs to the

vast majority of the people. In short, rehashed WB formulas blindly followed by the government - then and now -- have all failed to uplift the lives of the poor and simply made the few wealthy families richer and more entrenched.

While systemic corruption clearly underscores a failure of governance it also aggravates the state's inability to address widening income disparities (e.g., today the net assets of the 40 richest Filipinos correspond to the total income of 60 million Filipinos), in ensuring economic stability, human security measured in terms of all-sided development, public services, human rights and rule of law, among others. On these indices, the state under the Aquino regime fails. Whether one agrees with its indicators, the U.S. Fund for Peace's 2013 "Failed States Index" (FSI) ranks the Philippines No. 59 as a "failed state" out of 178 countries. Lumped with the Philippines are Somalia, Iraq, Ethiopia, Rwanda, and Colombia. Among Asian countries, the Philippines - now considered "in danger" - is outranked by Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam, and Malaysia. Topping the "green" or most stable states is Finland. Early this year, Transparency International also noted no significant improvement in the Philippines' corruption performance index. Wasn't this the same prognosis decades ago from Marcos to the present government?

Clan interests dominate the state

As seen in Aquino's refusal to abolish the pork barrel - one of the major sources of corruption - such reports show that reform whether political or socio-economic is not only a zero possibility but the present state itself is intrinsically anti-reform. This is explained largely by an elite-driven government and a political system dominated by political clans - the same elements linked to numerous plunder cases - whose narrow interests are interlocked with those of the economic elite. Clan interests dominate the state and its key instrumentalities; no doubt, the state primarily serves their interests. Thus the clan- or elite-dominated state can never be a machinery for genuine reform - nor will it allow "inclusive" governance and growth - since doing so would harm its interests.

The heart of the matter in the refusal to abolish the pork is that this measure will significantly reduce politicians' power and access to public resources - contrary to their agenda of using public office as a business enterprise and as a means of perpetuating dynasties. Allowing the subjects of elite rule - slaves in the old days - to challenge the power of the tyrants over public money is an incendiary that could

open the floodgates of more reform, such as abolishing political dynasties or a fair electoral competition. In the first place, Aquino III is of the same mold as the powerful political clans feasting on people's money. His is of the belief that governance is run by patronage politics, pork barrel, trade-offs, perks, and all - "you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours." His government is not much different from the past; it is one whole bureaucracy ruled by political dynasties that promotes patronage politics and allows unbridled syndicated theft of the people's money.

In resisting public demands for real reforms all that past and current regimes could offer are bite-size measures motivated primarily to defuse outrage and project the image of "responsiveness" - "the people are my boss." Thus, they offer band-aid solutions such as conditional cash transfer funds for poverty alleviation in lieu of lasting genuine rural and land reform; overseas work in lieu of jobs-creating basic industries and manufacturing at home; crumbs of benefits in lieu of minimum wage increases; and demolitions in lieu of real socialized housing programs for the poor. The elite-dominated state has consistently refused to implement the constitutional ban on political dynasties. More evident in the state's anti-reform ideology is the use of its reactionary coercive machineries - armed forces, police, paramilitary, and death squads - to demonize and silence those advocating for social change. This culture of impunity remains strong until today. This should stop.

Prospects of genuine reform

Yet, there are brighter prospects of mobilizing and harnessing various forms of people's initiatives and struggles for genuine reform. The mass politicization triggered by the nationalist ferment of the 1960s continues to express and articulate the communal or collective desire for democratization, against authoritarian rule, cronyism, and elitist politics and, on a broader scale, for economic equality and people's effective representation in governance. Various creative forms of struggle have succeeded in removing oppressive regimes a number of times - hijacked also a number of times most despicably by opportunistic elite factions - to electoral exercises, legislative engagements, citizens' watching, community organizing, to - on the part of the radical Left and Bangsamoro people - revolution.

Significantly, more and more people including those from the middle-income sectors, are beginning to realize the futility and bankruptcy of bourgeois reform (tokenism) and

are disillusioned by the myth of “clean politics” (e.g., of the Aquinos) as they are increasingly enraged by traditional politics. The burger chain-inspired “daang matuwid” (clean governance) has today become a butt of ridicule. Talks about the loss of public trust in government in its entire spectrum are fertile ground for the convergence of genuine reforms on the state. While before the targets of public outrage were despots and individual plunderers today more and more unorganized masses are talking about sweeping institutional reform.

But how to go about this remains a question.

Qualitative change in people's political awareness

Such qualitative changes in social and political consciousness are key toward strategizing upon where people's struggles should go. There is, for instance, a need to distil, sharpen, systematize, visualize, and popularize key political advocacies, linking a specific issue (e.g., pork barrel and corruption) to the core issues of elite rule and bureaucrat capitalism. Social media is fine but it can never be a substitute to the more effective direct mass engagements, discussions, and street protests. The media, on the other hand, should not only expose anomalies but should be critical observers and active change multipliers as well.

People's initiatives such as petition signing should be a means of public discussion and should result in the broadening of mass and organized mobilizations. Such vibrant and dynamic mass politics can give birth to more mass leaders, organizers, advocates, and trimedia message articulators. Although the spontaneity of mass protests will

continue and increase as popular demands are unheeded and, hence, the momentum of reform will intensify such mass energy should be able to evolve into a broad coalition of reform voices to give teeth and leadership to any political program while respecting the independent initiatives of coalition forces. Spontaneity has the potential of broadening the spectrum of forces advocating democratic reform; organizing and leading a critical mass will move it forward.

Alternative governance

The current political discourse provides the platform for raising anew the issue of alternative people's governance – and how such vision can be enhanced by building and sustaining people empowerment. On this point the various – not necessarily competing – political perspectives that gravitate around the anti-pork barrel rallies as well as forums on reform should find congruence. Vigilance should be maintained in not allowing the advocacy for genuine reform be distorted or misguided by opportunism and by those compromising with the powers that be. Sweeping reform is possible the moment people begin to struggle against personality-oriented leadership, myths, and illusions. It can be done when people begin to act as a collective power.

Lessons have to be learned from previous people's struggles particularly in the two Edsa uprisings. Only a struggle on the side of the people can be just and won. Change can only be effected by the people – no one else will. The time to stop the insanity of this kind of government system, inherently despicable with its insatiable greed for power and hypocrisy is NOW.

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