

Pork Barrel Scam: A Tipping Point for an Awakened Citizenry

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Public trust in government dived to its lowest as a result of the P10-bn pork barrel scam. It will not be restored – not in this generation.

For one, it will take long before the charges against the alleged operator of the criminal syndicate and accomplices/beneficiaries such as lawmakers, heads of agencies, and bogus NGOs are finally decided with convictions meted out to those found guilty. For another, the present scam involving the plunder of pork barrel and other special funds supposedly earmarked for poverty alleviation and other projects is just the tip of the iceberg that could unearth other similar syndicates. With the first set of plunder charges having been filed before her office, Ombudsman Conchita Carpio-Morales has the daunting task of marshalling the much-politicized agency to support the investigation, weather political pressures, and prevent the cases from being dragged into a pro-administration agenda for the 2016 presidential election. Impartiality demands that the Ombudsman along with the justice department should also look into allegations of involvement by Aquino administration officials and allies.

People dramatized their outrage over this latest case of plunder of taxpayers' money through spontaneous and organized rallies and other nationwide protest actions since August. There was sheer disbelief and shock that while people from all walks of life were being displaced by disasters like floods a scam headlined a few people awash with stolen money living in shameless profligacy while hobnobbing with high public officials in plush hotels.

In many respects, this latest case of corruption is unprecedented given the involvement of the high and mighty in Congress and the longevity of this alleged criminal operation – albeit reportedly known to many legislators – that dates back to 2004 until it was exposed by a



whistleblower this year. It brings to mind how in the past 50 years modern-day corruption using power, authority, and secrecy looted the national treasury, foreign grants, investments, development projects, and other sources often leading to witnesses and whistleblowers being silenced. Corruption – among other alleged heinous crimes – led to the ouster of Ferdinand E. Marcos (1986) and Joseph E. Estrada (2001); likewise it almost led to the removal of Gloria M. Arroyo during her term. Yet, for all the evidences and testimonies of plunder and other cases involving other officials, politicians, and generals most perpetrators remained untouched while convictions gave way to political compromise or “reconciliation.” Corruption, indeed, thrives on opportunism.

Corruption weakens the state. Pork barrel, sugar-coated by the title “Priority Development Assistance Fund,” is just one among many sources of corruption. Still, it alone made Congress a rubber-stamp of Malacanang under a system of political patronage disabling its constitutional mandate as check and balance on the chief executive and made it less conducive for a viable political party system. The executive department, of course, has its own pork barrel amounting to several-fold more than that of Congress: Being lump sum

and discretionary, the funds have never been subjected to real auditing.

Corruption and the patronage politics it engenders is at the core of dysfunctional institutions ranging from agencies that are tasked to deliver public goods and services to the criminal justice system. One of the reasons why corruption is unbridled is the absence of an effective rule of law and justice system particularly when powers that be are involved. Aggravating all these is a much-hyped but toothless system of transparency and accountability and a freedom of information act which many legislators loath of enacting. All these breed a culture of impunity that allows the commission not only of more graft and corrupt practices but also other crimes including human rights violations that involve the state's powerful security forces against defenseless activists and other people.

Public trust, however, is built not only by credibility or integrity but also by government's competence and responsiveness in measuring up to the nation's social and economic expectations. Claims of economic growth will not cover up government's failure to address the endemic poverty and the ever-widening income disparity that underscores the concentration of wealth in a few families including political dynasties. It also magnifies government's pro-elite, exclusionary economic policy. When more people lose jobs and families are consigned to a life of hopelessness, public trust in government suffers.

In the first place, the justice department's probe of the P10-bn pork barrel was prompted only by an expose of the whistleblower and media reports which thereafter unleashed the public outrage. More investigations and media stories also revealed the failure – if not complicity by some officials – of the oversight functions of the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) and other departments that were dragged into the mess as well as, more importantly, the Commission on Audit (COA).

It is a misperception to even think that the Aquino administration is devoid of any accountability with respect to the pork barrel scam. The reason is not only due to its reactive position on the case and the possible culpability of some administration officials as well as Aquino's allies in Congress. The bigger reason is that the president himself since 2010 has officially prioritized and signed the automatic inclusion of PDAF as well as his own pork barrel funds in the national budget – aware that huge chunks of this taxpayers' money end up in the politicians' and criminal syndicates' pockets.

To sum up, the pork barrel scam evinces the following: First, it is the result of a sinister deal long practiced by past and present governments particularly between the president and leaders of Congress to steal taxpayers' money for personal aggrandizement in the guise of PDAF and other budget items, in short, legitimized plunder; second, an atrocious belief that the way to run a government is to ensure a quid pro quo partnership between Congress and the chief executive through patronage politics with pork barrel as one of the devices, i.e., a fellowship of crooks; third, big-time corruption undermines the system of transparency and accountability and is abetted by a weak oversight function at all levels of government; fourth, the scam shows the whole government machinery as one big business and a source of profits by traditional politicians and the political elite; and, fifth, the case underlines once more the institutional weaknesses of government encouraged no less by the present administration's failure to adopt wide-ranging institutional reforms way beyond mere sloganeering.

A congruence of situations spells major challenges facing the administration today making it more uncertain whether it has the capability to govern competently. Poverty and unemployment is rising, despite claims of GDP growth – it remains a potential trigger for social unrest. New armed conflicts are emerging in the South, the peace process with the MILF is long delayed, while that with the leftist guerillas has been stalled and their armed struggle has intensified. Aquino is continuing a strong and onerous pro-U.S. policy allowing the country, through a bases access accord, as a new war front against China in the midst of territorial tensions. Aside from a renewed anti-bases movement, this development is fomenting new challenges on the accord's constitutionality that can even be a potential material for impeachment.

The whole nation is now witness to the declining levels of a weak state that clearly spell out a total government failure. It all began 41 years ago with the declaration of martial law followed by the failure of succeeding regimes to lift the people from economic stagnation that is bringing the country to the bottom pit of human development among poor countries of the world. And one of the identifying marks of this regime failure is corruption and plunder involving mostly the political elite. The public trust rating in government as an institution is at its lowest and the state is at its terminal stage. It is time to move forward.

The public outrage generated by this latest case of plunder can be a potential tipping point – a defining

moment toward a political transformation. Between now and the 2016 election is an opportunity for mass politicization toward empowering the people with alternative governance. Meantime, there can be more vigilant citizens' watch on both the executive, Congress, Ombudsman, and other agencies and a final push for a real Freedom of Information Act that will also cover security and foreign policy transparency. Vigilance backed by political actions is empowering.

Public trust is not just about government. It is about people trusting themselves to collectively devise the best government model they deserve. Now is the best time to begin the process.

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