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The people have spoken: End institutionalized plunder now!

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It is the height of irony that pork barrel – an institutionalized plunder of people's money until the Marcos years – was restored under Corazon C. Aquino in the guise of “countrywide development fund” (CDF), then renamed as “priority development assistance fund” (PDAF) under Joseph E. Estrada, and now will be retained in another form by Benigno S. Aquino III – son of Mrs. Aquino – to defuse public disgust. Even more enraged by the latest trickery, Filipino taxpayers young and old will push through the 1-million march-rally at Rizal Park, Manila on August 26 in yet another broad albeit spontaneous mass mobilization against this lunacy.

It is public knowledge that pork barrel is one among many sources of corruption that have enriched not only many members of Congress but also the presidential office where pork barrel which in 2011 reportedly amounted to a lump sum, non-audited P68bn; likewise, in the LGUs. This institutionalized or legitimized plunder used to be cornered by traditional politicians (trapos), line bureaucrats under the executive department, and private contractors through kickbacks and other commissions from development projects. But greed indeed has a way of innovating and covertly and rapaciously “spreading its sunshine” so that today's beneficiaries include criminal syndicates and bogus NGOs claimed to be protected by officialdom. Incidentally, nothing is new about this subterfuge given that even state technocrats along with crony capitalists – active or retired – since President Corazon Aquino formed their own GONGOS (government or quasi-government NGOs) and used their influence in order to usurp official development assistance funneled by foreign donors to legitimate non-government organizations (NGOs).

Since Marcos, the practice of pork barrel allocations in the national budget has been rationalized by the need for Malacanang to secure the cooperation of legislators especially for their pet bills. Even if true, this act legitimizes

the plunder of people's money on the pretext of supporting soft and hard projects supposedly for the legislators' constituents. The fact remains, however, is that pork barrel promotes party turncoatism, concentrates power in the president, and renders inutile the constitutionally-enshrined check and balance mechanism that is supposed to be provided by Congress under the so-called system of separation of powers. Moreover, the vastly enhanced powers of the presidency also allow the executive to use arbitrarily the huge revenues generated from agencies such as Pagcor, the PCSO, and special projects such as Malampaya. The truth remains, likewise, that this patronage politics is for the mutual benefit of the president and Congress: Legislators get what they want and the presidential office is shielded from legislative scrutiny with regard to how its bigger pork allocations are spent.

Chief executives, particularly Gloria M. Arroyo, use pork allocations for Congress adroitly to whip members of Congress into line to protect the president. Arroyo succeeded in using pork barrel and other perks to thwart five impeachment complaints against her since 2005 over alleged electoral fraud and other constitutional violations. Its disbursement was consistently denied to critical and progressive legislators who initiated the impeachments.

Pork barrel, seen from all angles, is definitely plunder – a heinous crime. While it steals taxpayers' money and aggravates poor social services it fattens the pockets of corrupt political clans and other beneficiaries. In defending pork barrel, President Aquino III expresses pity over depriving legislators of development funds out of their concern for their constituents. The question really is, since when have these traditional politicians expressed any public concern? Decades and billions of pork barrel allocations – and now conditional cash transfers – have not freed the people from poverty while mansions were built from the stolen money. What tangible signs of progress is he

talking about in the midst of potholes, cracks and other hazards along highways and roads not to mention dilapidated schoolhouses and collapsed bridges that were supposed to be funded by pork barrel? What about ghost projects?

Aquino III is wrong if he believes he can dupe the people in saying he will abolish PDAF but actually aims to retain it by another ruse. In his plan, the congressional pork barrel will be retained in the guise of project requests by lawmakers to be budgeted under line agencies and disbursed by the same agencies. The end-users of this new scheme – which may involve bigger money – are those same legislators and fellow accomplices out to misuse these funds. It will further strengthen the president's power of the purse in making more and more members of Congress beholden to the chief executive through such “project requests.” Aquino III's sleight of hand is his response to the public clamor for abolition and hides continued pork barrel allocations under so-called line projects. In the end, this trickery promotes culture of impunity in another form.

But at stake in the scheme being forged with leaders of Congress belonging to Aquino III's coalition is the 2016 presidential election. In previous elections, incumbent administrations used pork barrel – along with other government resources – to ensure the victory of their candidates. Thus it is materially crucial for Aquino III to retain the congressional pork barrel now undergoing a facelift to make the ruling coalition in Congress and LGUs intact as they gear up for the next election.

Abolition should involve not only the congressional pork barrel which some senators are now forced to support but also Malacanang's pork barrels which are bigger than Congress's yearly P27bn PDAF. Masquerading as discretionary funds, social fund, intelligence and calamity budgets, travel, and other suspicious-sounding allocations, the presidential pork barrels have been abused and misused and never been subjected to strict auditing.

As an alternative, the pork barrels of Malacanang and Congress should go to state universities and colleges

(SUCs), health, socialized housing, and other social services whose yearly subsidies have been cut a thousand times since Marcos in favor of defense and foreign debt servicing. Part of these funds can also be used to augment the IRA of the poorest LGUs subject to transparent and stringent auditing mechanisms. In the short term, a consultative council of citizens' watchdogs, people's organizations and civil society groups – similar to the legislative and executive development advisory council (LEDAC) – should be formed at the national level to participate in the planning, allocation, and auditing of the national budget. Similar consultative or advisory councils should be set up at the local level. The Aquino III administration should be challenged to institute new laws that will enshrine the practice of “participatory people's budgeting” at all LGUs. This proposal is warranted not only by the constitutionally-enshrined principle on people empowerment and governance participation – a dead provision since 1987 – but also because of the sheer failure of the state's much-touted system of transparency and accountability to monitor and address government wrongdoings.

Meantime, should there be a public clamor for independent probe of the misuse of all public funds including PDAF and presidential special funds the appropriate body should have the power to investigate and recommend the prosecution of corrupt officials and private accomplices. There should be a full disclosure of such public investigation. This again is necessary because of the sloppy performance if not utter failure of state's anti-graft agencies in discharging their mandated responsibilities against graft and corruption for almost 30 years.

The long frozen Freedom of Information (FOI) bill deserves to be passed now. As the first line of citizens' watch on governance, the likes of the alleged P10bn pork barrel scam would have been unearthed earlier – and there would have been no need for whistleblowers – had there been full transparency of public transactions and government policy deliberations under a FOI. For this matter, the president and Congress will be all the more accountable if FOI does not see the light of day in the 16th Congress.

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