



2014: Time to change, to account before 2016

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Political storms, scams, and disasters of all types will leave an indelible mark on 2013. The past year also proved to be a reawakening of sorts for many Filipinos; an organized and spontaneous call for institutional reform reached a crescendo. Similarly, a high sense of solidarity unfolded as people from all walks of life reached out to provide immediate succor to millions of families in the Visayas whose lives were ruined by a devastating earthquake and a catastrophic super typhoon.

The stream of events has a continuity and dynamics. Every year, a plethora of new issues and events unravels in a country that is constantly wracked by political instability and economic uncertainty. But given the weak state and the contradictions that undergird the society – a widening social divide, elite-dominated politics, the lack of progressive response to calls for change, to cite a few – such phenomena remain largely unsolved, their implications becoming more complex year after year. Some people look at 2014 as the year of rebuilding. But it may as well be the year of accountability, a push for institutional reform which in fact is long overdue.

Unleashed by public outrage on ruling political dynasties, pork barrel scams, and faulty automated election the demonstration of people power across the country last year was carried notches higher with calls for accountability, prosecution, and even removal from office of the perpetrators in the cases of scams and plunder. Louder voices clamored for an end to clan politics, the system of political patronage and pork corruption, for free access to public information, the exercise of sovereign power through people's initiatives as well as court cases. The apparatuses of elite political power – from the presidency, to Congress, and even the judiciary – came under challenge to adopt institutional changes and put an end to the politics of greed. There was no illusion, however, that the exhortations of

reform in governance will produce results: That, for instance, investigations and prosecution of perpetrators of plunder and other high crimes will lead to state institutions performing their mandated role and act as catalysts of change so that the system of corruption, patronage politics, and abuse of power are gone forever. Indeed, it is illusory to expect that change will come from those who greatly benefit from the present system of unbridled patronage and greed.

At least this year, more and more citizens groups and alternative political forces will be watching closely the Commission on Audit, Ombudsman, Sandiganbayan (anti-graft court), the justice department, as well as the Supreme Court (SC) to see how the wheels of justice move in the light of the new legal cases and probes that were begun last year. Both the president and Congress – now under the shadow of public suspicion – will be doubly monitored with respect to reforms expected to be done in the wake of the pork scams and other issues.

But a wall of resistance is now up in Congress with many legislators – now on the warpath against the Supreme Court – refusing to budge on the public clamor to abolish pork barrel altogether using “realignment” and “power of the purse” to retain it. In fact, public patience has grown past the limits given the mounting cases that remain unsolved and the agonizingly slow process of justice in the Ampatuan massacre (2009), the series of media killings (since the 1980s), continuing rights violations, plunder and corruption charges against former President Arroyo, the prosecution of legislators allegedly involved in the multi-billion Napoles pork scams, and so on.

The technological disaster that was the May 2013 automated elections which saw a repeat of the 2010 counting errors and technical glitches in the foreign-owned precinct count optical scan (PCOS) machines was simply ignored for

political expediency. Except for complaints and protests that were quickly dismissed by the Comelec and the elected lawmakers including the president for “insufficient proof,” all that remain is the continued secrecy on the PCOS source codes and the voluminous studies by Filipino IT and security system experts who insist to this day that what may appear as frequent machine errors and glitches are actually disturbing systematic programming and security concerns that make the election process incredible. It is this same defective and expensive voting system which the poll body, headed by a former Aquino and Ampatuan election lawyer, continues to promote for the crucial presidential race in 2016.

One strategic issue that will continue to haunt the Aquino administration this year until its term ends in June 2016 is the economy. Power rate hikes and increases in basic commodities remain major public concerns even as more and more Filipinos see no hope in bailing themselves out of poverty and joblessness. Despite claims of GDP growth, poverty incidence has increased under Aquino III and so are income inequality (highest in Southeast Asia) and unemployment. When Arroyo ended her term in 2010, the number of Filipinos leaving the country in search of work abroad was 4,000. In three years, the figure has gone up to 6,000 showing a worsening condition of lack of jobs, low salaries, and employment instabilities. Unemployment is expected to rise this year in the wake of catastrophic calamities and a population increase at 100 million.

Billions more of pesos are pumped into government's conditional cash transfer (CCT) program this year. After nearly 6 years, however, the dole-out program has not made any dent on poverty reduction. Indeed analysts at the National Economic Development Authority (NEDA) reveal that the immediate objectives of CCT such as access to primary education and health services by the poorest families cannot be met without radical improvements in these sectors. The CCT is maintained as a centerpiece to conjure the image of a pro-poor president in the absence of high-impact structural reforms such as genuine land distribution and job-generating industries which all past administrations have refused to adopt.

The failure of meaningful economic reforms combined with the failure to institute drastic institutional changes in making the presidential office, Congress, constitutional bodies, and judiciary more responsive to popular demands will make the Aquino regime no different from its predecessors. In fact the myths that were built three years

ago to market Aquino III as the president with a difference have crumbled: With 2 ½ more years to go, his regime is being kept afloat by more empty rhetoric and more baseless claims of growth.

Last year's upsurge of collective protests presents opportunities for pushing ahead with meaningful institutional reforms this year. In the first place, the broad, cross-sectoral mass actions rallied around calls not only for accountability over the looting of billions of taxpayers' money but also for transforming governing and legislative institutions into real instruments of public service. Emerging was a progressive streak of various political forces and citizens coalitions advocating the end of political dynasties by legal, extra-legal, or electoral means in order to replace the traditional clans and crooks of Congress and local governments with real representatives of the people.

Dramatizing the qualitative change in the quest for reform is the growing assertion that social change is not only a matter of replacing “leaders” but of reconstructing the institutional centers of power – from the presidency to Congress and local administrations – by removing the myriad of systems that have long dominated the country's political life including the pork barrel, patronage, and the autocratic clan politics. The politics of change has become a platform for making change possible outside the elite-dominated power structures where only token or band-aid solutions are allowed. The cumulative, organized, and spontaneous experiences of the people in ousting two presidents – including almost a third one – are a rich arsenal for making social transformation possible.

Even just for this year, the time calls for real change of heart and action – not just in words and slogans – to build from the ruins of devastation caused not necessarily by super typhoons but by elite patronage politics and politics of dependency that marginalize many Filipinos and put the Philippines farther behind its Asian neighbors and the world.

As the P361bn post-Yolanda recovery plan is launched with more billions from international aid donors, the Filipino people deserve more than continued dole-outs and servile programs vulnerable to yet another cycle of corruption by the powers that be.

The challenge for this year is to link the vigilant watch and accountability in governance with consolidating the gains achieved last year and years previous to that. More

than this is to ensure a total paradigm shift from elite-dominated to transparent, inclusive, and accountable governance. In short, truly democratic governance where the people are seen not simply as recipients and victims but as an empowered citizenry informed of their rights and active participants of programs and projects affecting their future and well-being.

The demonstration of people power has opened a wide platform for a critical discourse as well as awareness- and capacity-building on people-centered strategic programs for alternative political systems, “new politics,” and development paradigms in place of the elite-class dominated structures now being blamed for the social inequities.

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