

OPINION & FEATURES

Last call

“THE vote is the most powerful instrument ever devised by man for breaking down injustice and destroying the terrible walls which imprison men because they are different from other men.” - Pres. Lyndon B. Johnson

WITH only a few more days to go before the deadline to register for Overseas Absentee Voting (OAV), we would like to take an active role in encouraging our *kabayans* to exercise their right to vote for the May 2010 elections in the Philippines. The OAV registration ends on August 31.

As Filipino citizens, the right to vote is not only our privilege to choose leaders wisely, it is a responsibility that requires our full participation to safeguard the freedom and democracy (or what's left of it) that we are currently enjoying.

Voter registration is the right of all eligible citizens to participate in the affairs of the government. It is one of the cornerstones of democracy, and perhaps the most fundamental form of participation by voting in free and fair elections. For Filipino citizens to exercise their democratic right to vote, there must be a comprehensive and inclusive electoral register.

This is why it is imperative for Overseas Filipinos to step up and register to be able to vote via the Overseas Absen-

EDITORIAL

tee Voting (OAV) law.

As of August 26, the Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) reported that the number of new overseas absentee registrants has reached 200,637. Existing OAV voters are at 371,304 – giving a total of 571,941 voters, 428,059 short of the one million target OAV voters set by the Secretariat.

According to Ellene Sana, executive director of the Center for Migrant Advocacy, it is the lack of information campaigns that became a major obstacle in increasing the number of registrants. Susan Ople, President of the Blas Ople Policy Center, believes that the culprit for the low turnout is a bad case of skepticism among Filipinos both in the Philippines and abroad. But she also believes that this deeply-rooted cynicism should serve as “a challenge to candidates of national positions, especially for those aspiring for the highest post in the land.”

There's still time for potential OAV registrants to drastically change the numbers. And the time to act is NOW. (AJPpress)



‘Writing on water?’

VIEWPOINT

Juan Mercado

“THERE’S a crocodile in every big river,” the Waray proverb says. And predators lurk in those brawls, whether over quadrupled Press Office phone bills to Commission on Audit reports of runaway travel costs by President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and hangers-on.

The President’s travel itch, Bukidnon Rep. Teofisto Guingona III claimed, cost taxpayers “close to P2.5 billion.” COA’s tally from 2001 to 2009 reveals this exceeded by P1.3 billion what the till held. If our copy boy’s math adds up, that could buy 13.15 million sacks of rice.

Faced with the hard data, the Palace opted for, well, candor. Deputy Executive Secretary for Administration and Finance Susana Vargas confirmed budget caps were fractured. But that includes all trips, not just local sallies, Vargas said.

Profligacy is contagious. At the Press Office, the COA stumbled upon “weak control over use of cellular phones” in 2008. That rang up a P5.53 million chit, four times the P1.27 million paid the year before.

“That was before my time,” explained Press Secretary Cerge Remonde. Compared to other agencies, the phone bill was chicken feed. “COA accepted our explanation. That’s why our budget was approved,” Remonde said.

Gripes of extravagance are valid in a country where 30 out of every 100 ill-fed kids are stunted. Pro-forma regrets do not uproot the causes

of these splurges. Or will this drill end up in the Thai proverb’s striking image of “writing on water”?

Look at the track record. “Adverse audit findings are often unresolved,” asserts the Philippine Human Development Report 2009.

PHDR analyzed audit opinions for 45 government firms between 1992 and 2007. This de-facto impunity guarantees that excesses recur with treadmill regularity

Agencies do not hold themselves accountable for performance. “Congress does not check,” PHDR observed. “One problem is the lack of any mechanism for legal or administrative sanctions against agencies [flaunting] such behavior.”

Thus, the “crosses” have a field day. And in the rampage, they castrate oversight functions that no less than the Constitution vested in the COA.

Leaf through audits of the Department of Public Works and Highways over the last 15 years. Without exception, all were “adverse,” PHDR’s matrix of audit opinion reveals.

In such a crocodile pit, the rush of congressmen to whitewash those blackballed by the World Bank for road-bidding collusion was inevitable.

Jocelyn “Joc-joc” Bolante conducted his P728-million fertilizer scam in the Department of Agriculture. Audit reports for the DA, from 2003 to 2007, were uniformly adverse.

So were Department of Agrarian Reform audits for the same period. Not a single audit for the Bureau of Internal Revenue got the good housekeeping seal of “Unqualified.”

When agencies get away with debauchery year after year, people die. Our health facilities, for example, are fund-starved. Eleven mothers die every day from pregnancy-related causes. These deaths are preventable.

In the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, we vowed to slash maternal death rates from 162 (compare that to 62 for Malaysians) down to 55 out of every 100,000 births. Because of buwayas we won’t achieve this goal by 2015.

“COA’s findings are not used intensively during budget preparations. Congress pays scant attention to whether ‘deliverables’ from previous year(s) have been implemented or not,” PHDR notes.

In the House of Representatives, members bicker over “parochial concerns” (read: pork barrel). Some are visible as Priority Development Assistance Fund, but the loot is in “one-liners.” These are secreted within the budgets of the DPHW and the Department of Transport and Communications.

PDAF allocations bolted from P2.3 billion in 1990 to P11.4 billion in 2007. Senators got P200 million slabs, congressmen P130 million. Each.

That’s the “petty cash.” In the 2009 National Expenditure Program, “one-liners that amount

to P100 million or more, (total) P224.4 billion.” This is 16 percent of the whole national budget. “It is crucial to find out which of these ‘one-liners’ are actually backed up by plans and programs or which simply serve as discretionary funds,” PHDR adds.

The Palace dips into savings and such items and calls it “realignment.” Palace spokesman Gary Olivar peddles this as “budget flex.”

The Palace won’t talk on this “croc pit.” The opposition hasn’t had the grit to find out. And many prefer to slurp at the trough. Here is where a constitutional body like the COA could do more of performance auditing. But it prefers the less-taxing compliance auditing.

When probable fraud is found, the COA trots to the Ombudsman for action. Today’s ombudsman is the First Gentleman’s schoolmate. Under Merceditas Gutierrez, convictions by the Office of the Ombudsman dwindled. “This is an institution that has a poor record of disposition of cases and convictions,” PHDR observes.

Today, we have a “croc pit.” But that need not be our children’s inheritance. Reform will come, not from “messiahs on whiter chargers,” but from ordinary citizens who speak up and honest men in constitutional bodies, like the COA or the Commission on Elections, insisting on integrity.

Indeed, “the deepest human defeat is the difference between what one was capable of becoming and what in fact one has become.” (*Inquirer.net*)

Boto Mo, I-Patrol Mo, Ako ang Simula ng Pagbabago!

“THERE are fixed bounds to every human thing. When the branches of a tree grow very large and weighty, they fall off from the trunk. The sharpest sword will not pierce when it cannot reach. And there is a certain distance from the seat of government, where an attempt to rule will either produce tyranny and helpless subjection, or provoke resistance and effect a separation.” John Witherspoon, 1776.

John Witherspoon wrote the words above, and delivered his stirring speech, *The Dominion of Providence Over the Passions of Men*. He spoke eloquently of how he sees a corrupt and unethical government being disconnected from its people.

He spoke of corruption, greed, partisanship, and how each party was avengeful of the other. The more the parties competed against each other, the more ambivalent the people became towards them.

From Scotland, he came to America and became Princeton University’s president. From among his students at Princeton emerged 37 judges (three of whom made it to the US Supreme Court), 10 Cabinet officers; 12 members of the Continental Congress, 28 US senators, and 49 United States congressmen.

According to Wikipedia and *The Patriot’s Handbook* written by George Grant, Aaron Burr, a student, became vice-president and James Madison became president. His influences on them



RHIZOMES
Prosy Abarquez Delacruz, J.D.

and many others paved the way for the three branches of government in America during the 18th century, a form of checks and balances.

Fast forward to the 21st century in the Philippines – the headlines on newspapers are mostly about greed, corruption, partisanship and about how each party take snipes at one another. They mirror the issues of America before the Declaration of Independence in 1776.

It is as if the Philippines is still colonized, except that the colonizers have been replaced by few incumbent government officials who exercise control over the citizens and who breed a culture for corruption and greed. The more these few government officials exercise their dominion and control over the people, the more the citizens disengage themselves through resistance or apathy.

While partisans sparred with each other – from the halls of Congress to the Malacañang Palace – Filipinos have catalyzed several movements for change.

People Power I, in 1986, removed an oppressive dictator and elected the first woman president who dismantled the dictatorship institutions, released the political prisoners and rebuilt a democracy.

People Power II, in 2001, removed a blatantly corrupt president who was found guilty of committing plunder while in office.

The grip of dynasties is being dismantled, slowly at the local levels by courageous governors and mayors. They are deviating from the traditional governance, delivering, instead, accountable and transparent public service. These reforms are now emerging in Isabela, Pampanga and Batangas.

How? A vote from the energized electorate changes local governance. The local treasury has revenues allotted for infrastructure projects, schools, and cemented roads, even Phil Health for residents. Quality of life is slightly better for folks in these provinces, as the public treasury is solely dedicated for public use, as it should be.

I believe that corruption can die naturally, when local and national governance are changed for the better.

Come to Bohol and experience a seamless coming together of citizens, determined to care for their forests, their rivers, and showcase the best of their province to eco-tourists.

They have cemented roads, clean surroundings, zero crime rate, and a high sense of pride for what they have achieved since 1997. Public transport drivers speak highly of their local officials for what they have done: man-made forests to save the rivers, conservation of natural wonders like Chocolate Hills and road-building. Soon, a new airport will accommodate daily seven flights from Manila to Bohol and vice versa.

Wear a Bohol t-shirt in Manila or Los Angeles, and it will elicit a spirited conversation with a Boholano who is proud of the serenity, simplicity and

good governance of his or her province.

More provinces are on their way, like Nueva Ecija, Naga City, Isabela, Ifugao, Pampanga and Camarines Sur, to name a few, are experiencing qualitative changes with their local government being headed by a governor or mayor who are intent on delivering first class public service to the citizens they serve.

As local citizens become responsible and more engaged, they elect governors and mayors who put the business of the people ahead of their self-interests, and allow reforms to happen. They are not perfect, but they are starting to put the people’s interests first, ahead of their self-interests, and they have more miles to reach as yet.

Since the inception in Feb. 2009 of Kaya Natin, a Movement for Good Governance and Ethical Leadership, Ilocos Norte, Laguna, La Union, Bulacan, Rizal, Zambales, and Davao have joined, 12 localities thus far, in making a pledge towards good governance and ethical leadership.

The youth has initiatives as well. *Boto Mo, I-Patrol Mo, Ako ang Simula ng Pagbabago*. Students are registering as voters and are making public contracts in their campuses and universities. Their footprints are on banners, promising to monitor their ballots when cast. All are pledging to be accountable for their entire campus. They recognize that the future of their country is in their hands, and when they are involved, engaged, and participative, social change begins. *Ako ang Simula*

ng Pagbabago (Change starts with me) is their top of mind.

When John Witherspoon signed the Declaration of Independence, he signed up for democratic change in America during the 18th century. Today, in the 21st century, we can sign up as overseas voters and ensure that we vote for folks who stand for good governance and ethical leadership. Our votes will become mightier than bullets in initiating reforms. *Boto Mo, I-Patrol Mo, Ako ang Simula ng Pagbabago!*

Like the 80 million Filipinos, with 10 million of them scattered around the globe, there is no greater joy for me than to see the Philippines at the helm of good governance, ruled by ethical leaders who put the country’s interests first and alleviate poverty for 40% of the country’s population.

Just as Gawad Kalinga has now paved a way for us to stamp out poverty and to bring back dignity in every Filipino home, the best is yet to come for our nation. If each Filipino citizen will choose to vote wisely and participate in the movement for good governance, ethical leadership and social entrepreneurship, we can prosper here and now! It starts with our active participation in registering for our right to vote.

As Senator Ted Kennedy once said, “Hope never dies, the dream lives on.” ■

(Nota Bene: My husband and I took our oath as dual citizens on June 28, 2009. We also registered to vote for the May 2010 Philippine presidential and national elections.)

The views expressed by our Op-Ed contributors are solely their own and do not necessarily reflect the predilection of the editorial board and staff of Asian Journal.



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