



Center for People Empowerment in Governance

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5th State of the Presidency
Center for People Empowerment in Governance (CenPEG)
July 20, 2013

The P-Noy Presidency after Three Years: Mass Yearnings, Missed Opportunities

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In the three years of the P-Noy administration, the president continued to enjoy favorable performance and trust ratings by a significant majority of the people (an average of about 68 percent) but this political capital has not been effectively translated into inclusive reforms and changes for the benefit of the majority, particularly those for poor and low-income families. Thus, its few successes in terms of progressive legislation and policies have been overshadowed by many missed opportunities for inclusive growth and development. In the remaining final three years of the P-Noy administration, the task of building inclusive and participatory institution-building becomes more daunting as public officials will be distracted once again by the preparations for the 2016 presidential elections and the looming reality of a lame-duck president.

Assessing the Presidency and its administration: How to assess the performance of an administration in a reputedly democratizing political system and committed to a "*daang matuwid*" path of development?

Our proposed assessment framework: In a modern political democracy, public authorities must be held accountable for their actions through their elected representatives and the actions of politically active civil society groups. Moreover, the democratic system of governance must show concrete improvements in the human quality of life for its citizens within a reasonable period (Miranda, Rivera, Ronas, Holmes 2011).

This framework necessarily includes current formulations about the need to make our governance system more "politically and economically inclusive". Inclusiveness means that there are institutions that allow and facilitate the participation of the people, directly or indirectly, in making important policies, and accessing and sharing in the benefits of economic resources and growth. Its opposite is a system where policy-making and economic benefits are monopolized or dominated by the few in society.

The Philippine Presidency as an agent of change: Institutional and Social Challenges. Under our presidential system of government, the presidency wields enormous powers which can be used to facilitate change and progressive reforms. But it can also be used to frustrate, sidetrack, or dampen progressive initiatives for change especially those coming from the marginalized sectors and their representatives.

Institutionally, the biggest challenge facing the presidency is how to initiate, implement and sustain a progressive agenda (the "*daang matuwid*") in the absence of a strong party and the weak linkages with progressive civil society and peoples' organizations. Historically, Philippine presidents, including P-Noy, have tried to address this institutional infirmity vis-à-vis the House and the Senate by using the pork barrel system (PDAF in its current incarnation) to forge working coalitions in support of the administration's legislative agenda. But by its very nature, this system lends itself to opportunistic, short-term negotiations and alignments with the legislative body driven not by commitments to a strategic set of reform legislation but by the narrow and immediate concerns of individual legislators particularly in the lower House. Not surprisingly, P-Noy and the overwhelming number of legislators have shown no support for current moves by progressive legislators to do away with the PDAF. One can imagine what



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productive alternative uses can be done for the minimum of at least P15 billion (not including the various congressional insertions) allocated yearly for the individual pork privileges of senators and congresspersons.

Socially, the biggest constraint to any long-term reform agenda is the continuing dominance of our electoral system by powerful oligarchic, dynastic families who have the power and resources to negotiate from a position of strength vis-à-vis even a reformist presidency. This allows them to maximize the resources and perks they can get from the presidency while basically protecting their own narrow interests in their constituencies.

In the last 2013 senatorial and local elections, political families continued to dominate in 75 out of 79 provinces (or 95 percent). Many studies have already documented the correlation between electoral dominance by political families and lower indicators of socio-economic outcomes. A long history of oligarchic power by a few families abetted by dense and pervasive patronage linkages between national and local elites and the overall weakness of state enforcement and accountability mechanisms have perpetrated this exclusionary practice.

In terms of building a stronger political party that could serve as the anchor of strategic reform planning and decision-making by the president and its administration, the 2013 elections proved to be another missed opportunity. Instead of putting together candidates committed to a coherent party platform and agenda of reforms, President Aquino simply repeated the old practice of relying on winnable candidates from various pseudo-parties in pursuit of their own agenda with no regard for a binding common platform.

Because of the deeply entrenched system of power and privileges enjoyed overwhelmingly by dynastic political clans, nothing short of a systematic frontal challenge against them will effectively address the problem. Term limits have miserably failed to contain their reproduction as unaccountable elites. Piece-meal electoral reforms including the disastrous experiences with automated elections have failed to make any dent against the system (some political families lose elections only to be replaced by new clans). Moreover, the latest Supreme Court decision on the requirements for participation in the Party List system has further opened up new opportunities for controlling the PL system by established elites and organizations.

I suggest that starting with the 2016 elections, a new and truly broad alliance of progressive parties and organizations come together to put up a common slate of candidates or support common candidates in various provinces and LGUs to challenge these established political clans. While there are many issues that continue to divide the progressive groups, they can unite on a minimum set of agenda and harness their forces together and present to the people a viable alternative to the *trapos* (traditional politicians). While not ignoring the necessity of immediate electoral reforms such as amending the Party List Law to make it a vehicle for the truly marginalized sectors, it is time to mount a credible parliamentary challenge from below.

Let me end with the administration's centerpiece political program on the battle against corruption, popularized by its campaign slogans of "*kung walang corrupt, walang mahirap*," and the "*matuwid na daan*" commitment. The latest public opinion surveys by the 2013 Global Corruption Barometer of Transparency International show that in the Philippines, 38 percent of the people think that corruption has decreased in the past two years compared with 31 percent who think that it has stayed the same, and 32 percent that it has increased. However, the people continue to view corruption as a very serious problem at 4.4 (range of 1 to 5 with "5" as very serious).



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In a normally functioning democratic political system, the problem of corruption is addressed by the horizontal (elections), vertical (inter-agency system of checks and balances), and social (civil society interventions) accountability mechanisms in place. But in a system such as ours where horizontal and vertical accountability mechanisms are weak or captured by powerful vested interests, there is a need to strengthen institutions designed to specifically target corruption and facilitate the intervention by politically active civil society watchdogs, peoples' organizations, and the mass media. It is in this light that the non-passage of the Freedom of Information Act (FoI) should be seen as another missed opportunity, a lack of resolve by the P-Noy administration in effectively addressing the problem. President Aquino's failure to declare the FoI as a priority administration bill in effect doomed its passage unlike with the successful cases of the Sin tax and the Reproductive Health Act which were fully supported and endorsed by the presidency.

Time is running out on the P-Noy administration. Unless it is able to effectively address its own institutional infirmities and social disabilities, the P-Noy administration will end up as another exercise in missed grand opportunities amidst much initial promise and yearnings for a better life by Filipinos. ##

