

THE AQUINO GOVERNMENT'S COMMITMENT TO SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

By Florencio B. Abad

In his inaugural speech on June 30, 2010, the Philippines' new president, Benigno Aquino III, addressed the Filipino people and said, "Kayo ang boss ko (You are my boss)."

In those four words, President Aquino expressed his unqualified commitment to accountability to the Filipino people. No Filipino president has ever expressed this as directly and simply as he has.

President Aquino is a non-traditional politician who came to power in a non-traditional way. He never aspired to be president, but the death of his mother, the former president and revered democratic icon Corazon Aquino, caused the people to turn to him and say "You must continue the legacy of your mother."

Cory Aquino's death came at a time when the Filipino people were growing hopeless and cynical under a government that was mired in graft and corruption. After marching for 20 hours to bring their beloved leader to her final resting place, the people realized what a great loss Cory Aquino was, and how they had allowed the corrupt leaders at the time to squander the gains that the country had made under Cory Aquino's leadership.

It seemed as if the death of Cory Aquino gave the people the resolve not to let good government die with her. It rekindled in their hearts the fire that brought about the people power revolution of 1986, which toppled the dictator and catapulted Cory Aquino to power.

The people clearly wanted a return to clean, decent, and accountable government, and they believed that only Cory Aquino's son, Noynoy, then a senator, had the moral leadership to do it at the time.

Noynoy campaigned on a platform that resonated with the people—in Filipino, "Kung walang corrupt, walang mahirap (If there's no corruption, there's no poverty). It was the sum of a 16-point social contract with the Filipino people that he himself drew up. On May 10, he was elected to become the 15th president of the Philippines.

On his first day in office, President Noynoy Aquino gave us, his cabinet secretaries, his very first instructions—our government will stand on the pillar of good governance, we will fight corruption, and we will put a closure to the many cases of corruption that have impoverished our nation. He believed, however, that good governance would be meaningless if it does not translate to immediate, direct, and substantial benefits for the poor.

Just recently, President Aquino issued Executive Order No. 43 and here, he set forth his priority for the next five years. All programs and activities of government must be

aligned with these five priorities if they are to be funded by the Department of Budget and Management. In this executive order, one will see how important and entrenched empowerment is—the role of civil society organizations and people’s organizations—in the priority programs of the president.

The first goal is anti-corruption, transparent, accountable, and participatory governance. The second is poverty reduction and the empowerment of the poor and vulnerable. The third is rapid, equitable, and sustainable economic growth, which shall be brought about by focusing on the key drivers of employment and livelihood that are closest to the poor—agriculture, agrarian reform, fisheries, infrastructure development, and tourism. The fourth is just, inclusive, and lasting peace—which will be brought about by ending the two social conflicts that have divided the country for so long: the communist insurgency and the secessionist movement in southern Philippines. The fifth is integrity of the environment and climate change adaptation.

The cabinet has been organized around these areas—with the president heading the first cluster on anti-corruption and good governance, and the DBM as the secretariat. Any program that is not aligned with these priority programs will be scaled down or terminated whereas those in the same direction will be scaled up.

In the Department of Budget and Management, we have been trying to engage civil society organizations or CSOs. The DBM has also mandated that six of the biggest funded agencies and government corporations—including the Department of Public Works and Highways, Education, Finance, Education, and Social Works and Development—engage the CSOs throughout the entire project cycle: from budget preparation to authorization, execution, and evaluation. This is a first for the Philippine government.

We are happy to report that the engagement is proceeding well, although it requires a lot from the CSOs beyond advocacy and organizing. They have to familiarize themselves with the operations of government as well as the “esoteric” language of the budget process. These are skills that need to be learned before one can effectively participate in the process of budget preparation through project evaluation.

It helps that many of the cabinet secretaries in the Aquino administration are former social activists who had also served in past administrations, but government is not monolithic, and so the idea of social accountability resonates with government leaders in varying degrees—while some believe in it intensely, others mere pay lip service to it. It is important, therefore, that the latter be made to appreciate that the practice of social accountability is necessary for democracy and good governance to thrive.

There is, however, a bigger challenge before us—the culture of political patronage that pervades our society. It is a deeply-rooted and well-entrenched problem that cannot be solved by a president and his cabinet secretaries alone, no matter how committed they are to social reform and to social accountability. While we do have a significant constituency in the executive department, it is not enough.

We have to build constituency from those sectors that demand change; thus, it is important for us to engage the CSOs, the reform-oriented members of the business

community—because we do need to ensure a level playing field in the business environment to attract foreign investors, the church, and the media. If we are not able to do this, reforms will never be sustainable.

This is the reason for an underlying program that is not expressed in Executive Order No. 43—a program that builds and consolidates a strong and broad political constituency for reforms.

It is in this program that ANSA will be valuable to us. The cause of ANSA is in perfect sync with the cause of many leaders in our government now. It is also something that our people had always wanted to do but did not have the organization and the skill to bring about.

Exacting accountability through constructive engagement may be something new for many of our people, but the important elements needed to realize it are all there—their strong desire for change in government, their belief that change is now possible, and their hope that their participation in government will make a difference.

In our campaign sorties for then candidate Noynoy, one of the things that truly touched me was when people said they would vote for Noynoy because they wanted to reclaim people power. They wanted to experience people power again—expressed in good governance and in measures that address poverty, that protect the environment, that promote genuine and sustainable development.

The work ahead will be long and difficult. After nine years, the past administration left us with a trail of ruined institutions—political, judicial, military, technical, administrative. Rebuilding these institutions and rebuilding the trust of the people in their government will take a great deal of time. But we cannot let this opportunity pass. The significance of this administration is that it made people want to give government another chance, and made them willing to relate with it again. We, in government, are always conscious of this and we are doing every possible means to make us worthy of the people's trust and confidence.

Florencio B. Abad is the secretary of the Department of Budget and Management.