

OPINION & FEATURES

Bashing the Philippines?



Photo courtesy of Philstar.com

The Commission on Human Rights has come out in support of the latest US State Department report on the state of human rights in the Philippines. Among other things, the report notes that corruption and the slow pace of the administration of justice have set back the promotion of human rights in the country.

The statement was issued as pro-administration congressmen accused Washington of systematically bashing the Philippines amid calls for the abrogation of the Visiting Forces Agreement due to the controversy over custody of convicted rapist US Marine Lance Cpl. Daniel Smith. The congressmen said the World Bank report on bid-rigging in WB-funded projects was also part of Philippines-bashing by the United States.

The World Bank announced the debarment of seven contractors in connection with the bid rigging before the controversy over Smith erupted. And the State Department country report on human rights

is an annual thing.

Instead of attributing sinister motives to foreign reports and administrative sanctions, lawmakers should work to improve the promotion of human rights. Congress should help professionalize the military and police so cops and soldiers will stop resorting to extrajudicial shortcuts in keeping the peace and protecting the nation from threats. Congress can also give more resources and teeth to the Commission on Human Rights so it can carry out its mandate better.

The collapse of the Marcos dictatorship in 1986 did not lead to an end in human rights violations. Just 11 months after democracy was restored, farmers holding a protest march in Mendiola, leaving 13 dead. Since 1986, hundreds of militant activists, legal professionals and journalists have been killed nationwide, with government forces as key suspects in many of the cases. The number of unexplained killings and disappearances dropped dramatically in the past two years, but arbitrary arrests and detention remain common, as the CHR itself has confirmed.

The US country report did not say anything about human rights in the Philippines that most Filipinos don't already know. When the international community takes note of a problem in the Philippines, the proper response is to see it as a challenge to deal better with the problem. (*Philstar.com*)

GUEST EDITORIAL

Self-serving legislation

THERE has been so much hue-and-cry over the initiative of Congress to legislate a proposed Right of Reply Bill (RORB). I would not add to the noise except to share my own take on the burning issue that has galvanized the otherwise fractious Philippine media. Our exulted elders and veterans in the professional media, in fact, have spoken passionately against this proposed bill. They echoed the call for Congress to kill this bill for being a very unconstitutional piece of legislation to say the least.

While we in media are frothing on the mouth over RORB, I am sorry to say but there is already a law passed by the previous Congress that mandates media to provide such right to reply with equal space in newspapers and airtime in broadcast. This is required under Section 10 of RA 9006 or the law that lifted the media ban on political advertisements.

Section 10 of RA 9006 already gave that right to reply to candidates, including those running for Congress, to rebut charges aired against them and have it published or aired with the same prominence, time and space in media. Legislators behind this law went further taking advantage of the widespread support by media to the lifting of the political ad ban by adding a "rider" that was completely not related to this purpose.

This is Section 14 of RA 9006 which repealed Section 67 of the Omnibus Election Code. And why did Congress repeal this particular provision

COMMONSENSE

Marichu A. Villanueva

of the Omnibus Election Code? Because this old provision of the law requires incumbent elective officials who run for other positions to resign from their

elective posts.

This is the reason why we have the specter of having to bear with the likes of actor-turned politician Senator Lito Lapid. Barely-qualified to be Senator, Lapid decided to go back to being a local executive. He boldly took his chance to run in the mayoral race in the city of Makati against incumbent Mayor Jejomar Binay in the last May 2007 elections. Even if he terribly lost to Binay, Lapid reclaimed his seat at the Senate because he was allowed by that "rider" in RA 9006 to serve his remaining three years of his six-year term as a Senator.

While giving this guarantee of not losing the elective posts of incumbents running as candidates for another office, the same privilege is not given to Cabinet members and other officials holding appointive posts in government who want to run for public office. These appointive officials are deemed automatically resigned from office once they file their certificates of candidacies.

Election lawyer Romulo Makalintal deplored such "discriminatory" provisions of this law passed by Congress and I completely agree with him. While our lawmakers publicly declare their commitment to level the playing field during elections, they, however, make sure to tilt it in their favor.

We must concede that Congress has the inherent rights and powers to enact or repeal laws. The lat-

est furor over the RORB highlights the fact that our Congress have come up with certain laws that were clearly self-serving.

Makalintal reminded me that RA 9006 was signed into law by President Arroyo on Feb. 12, 2001. The Congress at that time was headed by then Senate president Aquilino "Nene" Pimentel Jr. Now as Senate minority leader, Pimentel is one of the principal authors of this controversial Right of Reply Bill.

Speaker Prospero Nograles, to his credit, invited to a dialogue yesterday top media executives and heads of various Philippine press organizations to hear out their sentiments on the controversial legislation now pending approval at the House of Representatives. The free-wheeling dialogue was held not in Congress, but in neutral grounds at the Melo's Restaurant in Quezon City.

At the outset, Nograles expressed surprise over the vehement objections by the Philippine media against Senate Bill 2150. Nograles told us during the dialogue that Pimentel impressed upon him that his pet bill was "unanimously" approved last year, with a 21-to-0 vote of Senators.

When he checked with their official record, SB 2150 was transmitted to the House on July 28, 2008 and placed on the order of the House business in August of the same year. Following parliamentary procedures, Nograles explained, they in the House would have to consider SB 2150 in the normal course of their legislative agenda since it is not a priority bill. Thus, SB 2150 has been languishing at the House until Pimentel called him up asking the House to act on it, Nograles confessed.

Out of inter-chamber parliamentary courtesies, the Speaker turned over Senate's RORB to the House Committee on Information, chaired by Manila Rep.

Bievenido Abante. After one public hearing, Abante admitted, he submitted a Committee Report endorsing for approval the RORB House counterpart bill authored at the House by Bacolod Rep. Monico Puentevella.

"So I'm a little bit puzzled when this was unanimously passed at the Senate but there was no squeak from the media until it reached the House when we tried to put it at the floor," Nograles pointed out. But for Nograles it was more of a wonder for them why some Senators who originally voted for it now claim they have withdrawn their signatures and support of this measure.

Nograles, who is the president of the ruling Lakas-Christian Muslim Democrats (CMD), brought with him key leaders of Congress and partymates. He was joined by Abante, deputy speaker; Cebu Rep. Raul del Mar, House majority leader Iloilo Rep. Arthur Defensor; deputy House majority leader Cavite Rep. Crispin Remulla; Quezon City Rep. Matias Defensor, House committee chairman on justice; former newspaper publisher Makati Rep. Teodoro "Teddyboy" Locsin; House committee chairman on suffrage and electoral reforms; Palawan Rep. Baham Mitra; and Camarines Sur Rep. Luis Villafuerte, president of the pro-administration Kabalikat ng Malayang Pilipino (Kampi). Bayan Muna Party-List Rep. Satur Ocampo, who himself is a former newsmen, and Puentevella came in late.

Fortunately at the end of the two-hour dialogue, it was worthy to mention that both Nograles and Villafuerte obviously were in consensus with the media practitioners on the need for the House to take a second look at this bill and truly reflects the stand of media vis-à-vis this Right of Reply Bill which should not be passed in whatever form of legislation. (*Philstar.com*)

I want to be a...

SOME time back, the Department of Education wanted to add a 7th grade but backed off after strong opposition from parents. The pressure to add more years to basic education



PINOY KASI
Michael Tan

continues though, coming out of recognition that the number of schooling years in the Philippines is too short at 10 years (six years elementary and four years secondary), compared to 12 years in most countries.

Now comes the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) proposing to extend college to five years for courses like nursing. That proposal has again met with strong opposition from parents.

My position is that we need more years at the secondary level, which could be divided, as it is in several East Asian countries, into three years of junior high

school and three years of senior high school. Some local Chinese schools were using this system years ago, giving their graduates a competitive advantage when they got to college.

Another advantage of this system is that the senior high school system can be oriented, as it is in Taiwan, toward giving students certain vocational skills, simple book-keeping for example, so that even if they don't go on to college, they can be gainfully employed. They would be much better qualified than many of the college-educated sales clerks we see today in the Philippines, who need a calculator even for simple addition, and then run into problems just keying in the figures.

Parents worry about more expenses with added years in high school, but they should be looking at the potential returns later on, i.e., a graduate of a six-year high school would be able to find a better-paying job here or overseas than our barely literate four-year high school graduates. They would also be in a better position to be self-supporting if they want to go on to college.

The CHED proposal to add years

to college is meant to make up for the weaknesses of our high school education. But even if there is an upgrading the tertiary system, its benefits would be only for a small percentage of the population. I seem to recall that only about 24 percent of our youth are able to enter college, and this drops further down with each year of college because the family can't keep up with the expenses.

Gap year

I am going to do another take on this issue of adding years to the educational system. Remember how, as kids, we would be asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" With our current educational system, we are not just asking young people about their aspirations but making them decide about lifelong careers. This happens as early as the start of their senior year in high school, when they are 15 or 16 and have to take entrance exams for the better schools and have to indicate which degree program they want.

In contrast, most other countries' high school graduates are at least 18 years old, and many would have had some work experience, taking up part-time jobs.

I have a niece in Canada who graduated from high school last year, at age 18, and has taken and passed several college entrance exams. But rather than starting with college right away, she has taken off for what is called a "gap year," working at different jobs and doing internships related to her diverse interests, before she finally decides on what college degree to take.

A century ago, people were adults at 14 or 15, with some even starting families since marriage was allowed as early as the age of 12. For much of the world's population, these very young adults often chose to follow their parents' occupation, learning by apprenticeship.

Today, the world is much more complicated and while it is still possible to use apprenticeship to become an "albularyo" [healer], or a weaver, or even some of the more modern trades like car repair, most other careers are dependent on formal training in school. Yet so many of our young people will make their career decisions almost haphazardly, based on idealized concepts of what a profession might be, courtesy of movies and television shows.

When I first began to teach an-

thropology, I had students who wanted to specialize in archaeology because they were captivated by the "Indiana Jones" movie. More recent anthropology majors can barely remember Indiana Jones, but now talk about becoming forensic anthropologists because of the American television show "CSI" (Crime Scene Investigations) and a local version, "SOCO" (Scene of the Crime Operatives).

Last month, I was interviewing applicants for a medical school, and some of them, when asked about who their role models were for physicians, mentioned characters from TV shows based on doctors in hospitals.

Informed choice

I am not faulting these students for having TV or movie role models. The problem is that movies and TV programs are meant to be entertainment. Even educational channels like National Geographic and Discovery are notorious for their glamorized portrayals of science and scientists. They are not about to feature molecular biologists, physicists, or your favorite family doctor, where the work can be as heroic as that of crocodile catchers but just wouldn't be appealing on television.

Besides TV and movies, our

young have to depend pretty much on the family. Many will follow in the footsteps of a parent, grandparent, an uncle or aunt. Others will follow the orders of their parents—"Son, I think you'll make a good surgeon"—and that's that.

Fortunately, the first two years of college are mostly general education courses, so it is possible for students to shift courses. But this shifting will not always be easy and could mean an additional year or two in college. Imagine that happening if we move into a five-year college program, which could mean some students staying on up to seven or eight years because of course shifting.

Since we are still stuck with a system where 15- and 16-year-old students are being asked to decide about what they will do the rest of their life, we should try to make the career choices more informed. Our parents and high school teachers need to be better equipped to offer career counseling. Mass media needs to present more options, without the hype. Government and the private sector could pitch in with a clearer program for human resources and job generation, instead of pushing flavors of the month like nursing. (*Inquirer.net*)

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Main Office:
1150 Wilshire Boulevard
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