

Regaining Public Trust in Democratic Institutions

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Global wave of populism

A wave of populism has engulfed the world over the past decade.

Populism may come in various forms but their disruptive effects on institutions can be generally overwhelming.

Populist leaders capitalize on anti-elite sentiments and present themselves as standing up for the people against the so-called oligarchs.

The antagonistic and divisive style of populism is often directed against liberal democracy, which is based on political pluralism.

Public support for strongman rule

Populism thrives where citizens look at strong leaders more favorably than strong institutions.

A 38-nation survey conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2017 indicates that unrestricted executive power has its substantial adherents.

In 20 countries, a quarter or more of those polled preferred an arrangement in which a strong leader can make decisions without interference from the legislature and judiciary.

In the case of the Philippines, the survey finds that half of the population was favorably inclined towards strongman rule

Weakening of democratic institutions

The ascendancy of populist strongman rule in many countries, including the Philippines, resulted in the weakening of democratic institutions.

Mass media practitioners have become timid. Civil society organizations have become less active in confronting public wrongdoings.

With the high intolerance for opposing views, the quality of political discourse dipped tremendously.

The democratic recession that populism triggered also weakened the institutional ecosystem that constrained corruption in the country.

Corruption perception on the rise

Corruption perception in the Philippines has been on the rise even before the pandemic.

The country slipped 14 spots in the 2019 global corruption perception index (CPI) released by Transparency International.

The CPI is a composite index, a combination of 13 surveys and assessments of corruption by experts and businesses, retrieved by a variety of respected institutions.

Perceptions of high levels of corruption in society tend to erode confidence in the sustainability of democracy in the country.

Corruption in pandemic times

A mega task force led by the Department of Justice was formed in October 2020 to investigate corruption in the bureaucracy.

The inter-agency body will concentrate its probe on allegations involving top government officials, more than a billion pesos worth of alleged stolen funds, and key agencies offering crucial public services, especially PhilHealth and the Department of Public Works and Highways.

The government appears to be singularly focused on investigation as its anti-corruption program.

Whole-of-government approach

The Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) of Hongkong stands out among the global best practices in fighting corruption. There are three main departments in this agency: Operations, Corruption Prevention, and Community Relations.

The corruption prevention efforts of ICAC focuses on removing the opportunities for corruption through the institution of transparent and accountable procedures, building effective leadership and supervisory controls, and improving system controls and safeguards in government.

Every agency of government has to establish effective internal control systems to prevent corruption. ICAC also publicizes anti-corruption messages through traditional and social media and promotes business ethics and youth integrity promotion.

Integrity circles

In partnership with the Civil Service Commission and the support of the United Nations Development Programme, the Transparency International-Philippines conducted a program that resulted in the production of a 2010 manual on *Organizing Integrity Circles*.

Top-level management personnel are designated to be part of the Integrity Circle Committee that reported on the work progress.

Aside from working with agency personnel, the program tapped outside organizations to constitute Integrity Circle Support Groups whose job is to help monitor, evaluate and reward the honesty and performance of the integrity circles.

Participatory monitoring

The National Movement for Free Election (NAMFREL), which originally started as an election watchdog, ventured into public health monitoring in 2004 in partnership with the Department of Health and the Coalition Against Corruption through the Medicine Monitoring Project.

In the project, 72 public hospitals and 16 regional centers across the country as well as PHP 302.51 million worth of medicines were subjected to monitoring

As a result of the project, the discrepancy in the delivery of the drugs and medicines to hospital and regional health offices was reduced significantly.

Most of the hospitals and regional health offices and procurement officers became more responsive to the role of NAMFREL volunteer-observers in the various stages of the procurement process. Bidding prices became more competitive and reflected realistic market prices.

Sustaining transparency reforms

A governance initiative that survived the transition from one administration to another is the Open Government Partnership (OGP). The OGP supplies a good platform for ushering together good governance reform advocates across the state-society divide.

The OGP provides an opportunity to bring people together to support programs rather than personalities. These programs can reinforce democratic values of participation, deliberation, tolerance, transparency and accountability.

The OGP is a global coalition of reformers within and outside of government that work together towards co-creating initiatives on access to information, civic participation, public accountability, and leveraging technology to strengthen governance

Strengthening public oversight

The public oversight agencies, especially the CSC, COA, and Office of the Ombudsman should be strengthened with enhanced financial and human resources.

The partnerships made by these agencies with civil society organizations should be continued and sustained to advance corruption prevention efforts.

This would ensure that public accountability measures are supplemented by social accountability mechanisms that keep government officials open, honest and accountable.

Passing critical legislation

There is a need to pass the bills on strengthening the Ombudsman, as well as fully implementing the National Anti-Corruption and Advocacy Plan and the country's commitment to the United Nations Convention Against Corruption.

In addition, the passage of the Whistleblowers Protection Act, Freedom of Information Act, and Budget Modernization Act are essential in enhancing transparent and accountable governance.

Reviving democratic institutions

The narrative of a strong political will would be relevant in the push for strong democratic institutions. This is not equivalent to the will of the leader but rather speaks of the general will of the democratic polity.

The role of knowledge institutions, including policy think tanks, research organizations and universities, in developing new content to educate the new generation of citizens for democracy and rules-based governance is valuable.

Media is tasked to perform the valuable job of ensuring integrity, credibility and comprehensiveness in providing mechanisms for combating disinformation.

Political parties should be strengthened as representative institutions to aggregate interests, produce evidence-based policies, and foster adherence to rules-based governance.

Support for a rules-based system is nurtured through interdependent civic and knowledge institutions.

