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THE FIRST YEAR:

A COMPARATIVE ASSESSMENT OF TRANSPARENCY AND
ACCOUNTABILITY INITIATIVES DURING MARCOS,
DUTERTE, AND AQUINO ADMINISTRATIONS

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As the Marcos presidency approaches its one-year mark, evaluation of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s performance in different areas will abound. This paper compares governance reform initiatives of the past two administrations in the areas of transparency and accountability with current initiatives under the first year of President Marcos Jr. A recommendation from this study is for the current administration to come up with an explicit anti-corruption agenda in order to effectively advance its goal of long-term prosperity and development.

As the anniversary of the May 2022 elections is approaching, there will be numerous assessments of President Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr.'s first year in office. The performance of the Chief Executive in a wide range of areas such as the economy, defence, public administration, health, pandemic recovery, poverty alleviation, and others will be looked into in varying degrees.

Included in these areas are the issues of transparency and accountability as they figure in the fight against corruption. The reason is two-fold: first, members of society, whether in the private or public sector, recognize the need for accountability and transparency in the Philippine government. The need to improve on these are shown by comparative indexes that provide a grim picture of how the public views corruption in Philippine society. For instance, under the Corruption Perceptions Index, the Philippines is at its lowest score, indicating high levels of corruption. The World Governance Indicators for the Philippines also paint a similar picture of the country's control over corruption and voice and accountability.

The second reason for interest in these issues is contextual. The Marcos

Jr. administration is preceded by two governments that used their transparency and anti-corruption agendas as the flagship projects of their administration. While there were vast differences in the methods that the Aquino III and Duterte administrations used to achieve transparency, they conveyed the message that the country needs a transparent and proactive government for better use of resources and better delivery of public service. Under the Benigno “Noynoy” Aquino III administration, these reforms were encapsulated by the campaign slogan “Daang Matuwid”—literally ‘straight path.’ Meanwhile, the Duterte administration, waged a “war” against drugs, corruption, and crime under the “Change Is Coming” statement. Ultimately, these sweeping anti-corruption reforms promised by Aquino III and Duterte during their respective campaigns were the key factors that eventually catapulted them to the presidency.

While there have been various reactions to the programs of the past two administrations in terms of their motivations and effectiveness, the incumbent administration's approach has been noticeably different. Many have noticed the lack of strong anti-corruption and reform statements in

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the Marcos Jr. administration especially when compared to the past two presidencies. Instead, what we see are the interesting prioritization of bills that in effect would lead to transparent and responsive public service delivery such as the E-Government and E-Governance bills. There are bills as well that attempt to create more transparent budgeting systems within the government, such as the Progressive Budgeting for Better and Modernized (PBBM) Governance Bill. Some members of the public have raised that there is a glaring need for a strong anti-corruption policy under this administration; others argue that as the government becomes more transparent, this can eventually lead to the natural decline of corrupt activities. Many also believe that there are issues that are more urgent than corruption, such as rising prices, poverty, and the lack of jobs.

While there are many voices that attempt to analyze the Marcos Jr. administration especially in the areas of transparency reforms, there is a need to have an informed discussion in this area. This paper attempts to contribute to the conversation by outlining the reforms, statements and overall direction of the incumbent President and comparing them to those of the Aquino III and Duterte administrations. An assessment of effectiveness, public response, and inclusivity of the program can then inform how the Marcos Jr. administration can move forward in the next five years.

PHILIPPINE TRANSPARENCY, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND ANTI-CORRUPTION

Corruption in the Philippines is rooted in numerous factors -- the proliferation of the political elite, historical and cultural influences, and the lack of economic incentives alongside quintessential arguments of state capability and poverty. The amalgamation of all these factors have resulted in widespread corruption of different forms: political corruption through the use and abuse of political powers for illegitimate gain (Amundsen, 2006), grand corruption scandals involving high-level positions and the mismanagement of public money (Transparency

International, n.d.), as well as petty corruption, or the everyday abuse of power by officials in their interactions with citizens (Transparency International, n.d.).

The Philippines has generally performed poorly on transparency and anti-corruption cross-country indicators. Since 2012, the Philippines has received low scores on the Corruption Perceptions Index, a global scale used to measure perceptions of corruption in countries. While the global average remains at 45 over 100 with 100 being the least corrupt and 0 being the most corrupt, the Philippines has remained at an average of 35 over the past decade. Below is a chart depicting the score changes of the Philippines from 2012 to 2022. See Figure 1

The World Governance Indicators by the World Bank paint a similar picture. The World Governance Indicators measure the quality of governance in over 200 countries through six key dimensions: voice and accountability, political stability and absence of violence/terrorism, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law, and control of corruption. In the indicators of interest which are voice and accountability and the control of corruption, the Philippines continues to belong to lower percentile ranks, in contrast to percentile ranks taken from countries in the East Asia and the Pacific. These two indicators, among others, indicate that government accountability -- and consequently the control of corruption -- remains elusive to Philippine society even in this present day. See Figure 2

FIGURE 1 . CORRUPTION PERCEPTIONS INDEX SCORE CHANGES

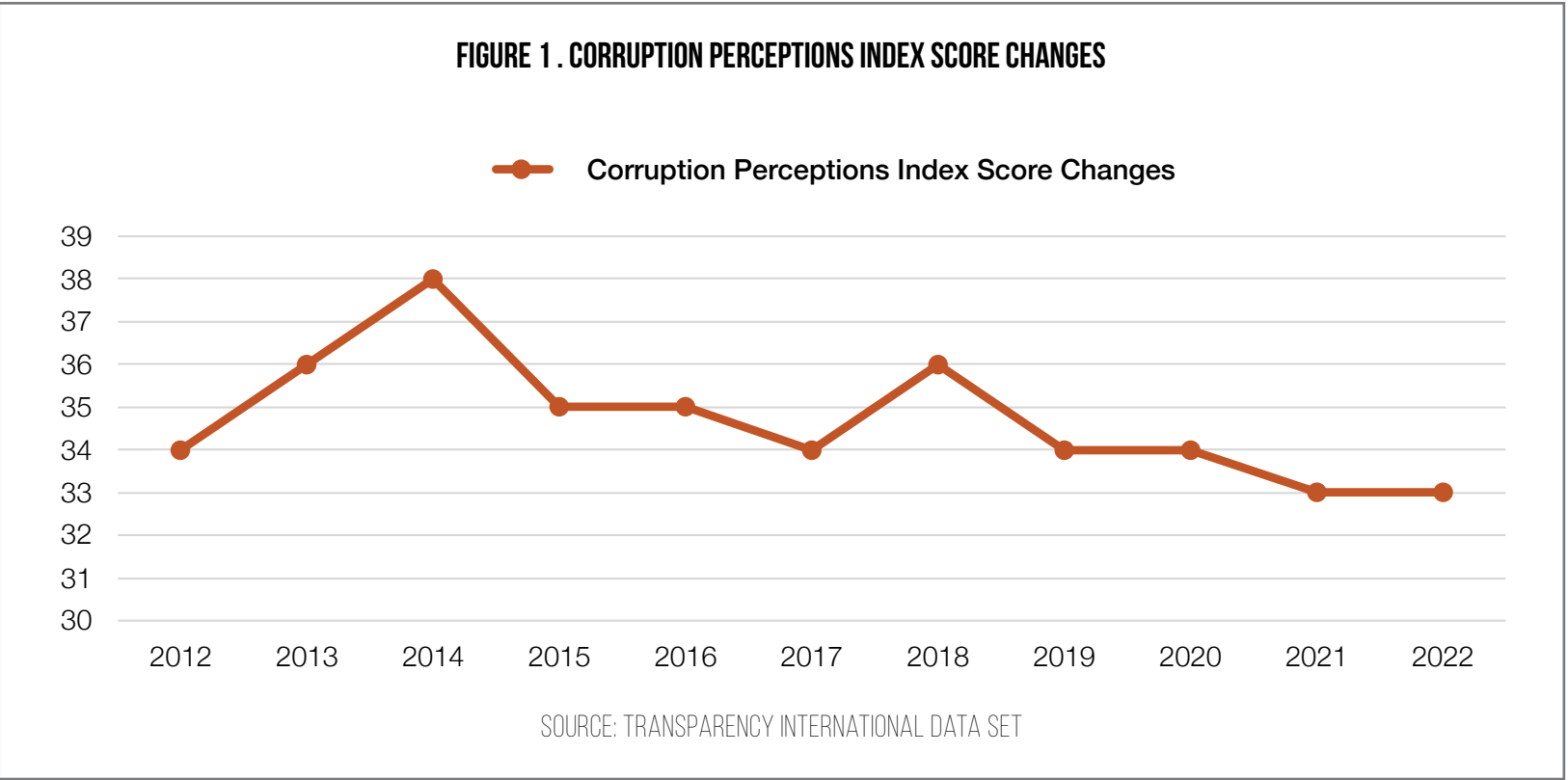
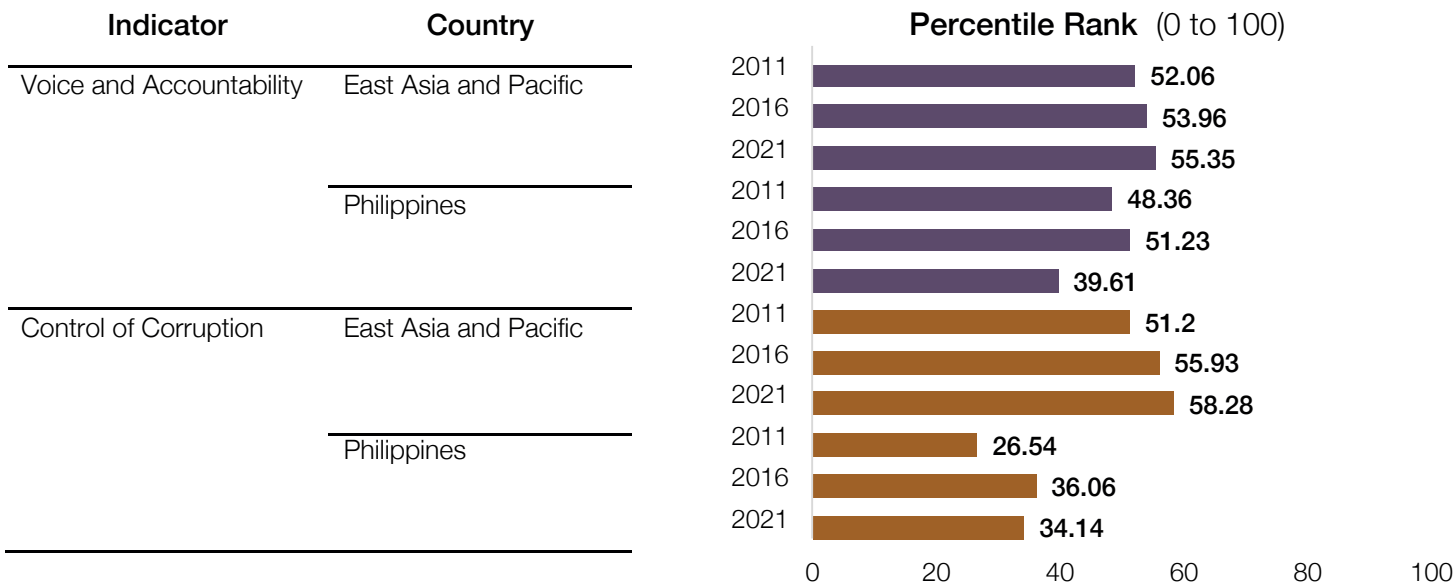


FIGURE 2 . WORLD GOVERNANCE INDICATOR



SOURCE: UNESCO, [HTTPS://WWW.UNESCO.ORG/EN/WORLD-MEDIA-TRENDS/WORLWIDE-GOVERNANCE-INDICATORS-WGI](https://www.unesco.org/en/world-media-trends/worldwide-governance-indicators-wgi)

Further, what needs to be noted in the current anti-corruption performances of Philippine government is that the trend of the downward weakening of performances as reported by third-party institutions became noticeable both in the latter part of the Aquino III's and Duterte's political timeline.

Why are transparency and accountability in government important? The principle of transparency is hinged on open decisions, policies, and processes that are readily available for participation and scrutiny by members of the public (ICMA.org, n.d.). Accountability, on the other hand, is the ability of the government to answer in terms of its actions and decisions (Cunningham & Harris, 2001). Both accountability and

transparency are necessary components of good governance as the efficient dispensation of public goods and the management of public resources happen when accountability and transparency are practiced thoroughly. Conversely, inadequate accountability and transparency within government lead to corruption, as corrupt practices are most evident in the misappropriation of public resources that are hidden from the public (Mayai, 2015). An effective anti-corruption policy would therefore espouse the means for people to visibly see government processes and decisions and allow for questions to be raised to key decision makers. Simply put, to curtail the misuse of government resources, the first step would be to engender and sustain good governance by enshrining transparency and accountability in

government processes. While transparency and accountability are cross-cutting issues that range from answerability and openness to circumstances where there is misconduct or incompetence, the discussion of these concepts in this paper will center on the need for these concepts in the context of corruption.

THE MARCOS ASSUMPTION OF THE PRESIDENCY

The Marcos Jr. administration, in contrast to many doomsday prophecies by many progressive groups, has been deemed stable compared to volatile prior administration. These predictions did not originate from nowhere—the elections of 2022 proved to be deeply polarizing due to the significant usage of social media in the production, transmission, and reception of election-related information (Arugay & Baquisal, 2022). Through the usage of social media, disinformation related to historical inaccuracies and nostalgia for a strongman type of leadership became a central component which ultimately undermined other candidates in the race and fuelled the Marcos Jr. campaign forward. Many believed that under the Marcos Jr. administration, democracy would further be weakened, undermining all efforts towards transparency and accountability built upon by past administrations.

However, upon the assumption of the presidency, it was clear that strong public support provided some form of steady momentum to the administration. For instance, there is a certain amount of political stability that can be perceived as the administration tried to create an equidistant relationship with China, where transparency towards loan agreements and bidders for developments were raised in the past administration (CNN Philippines, 2019). Marcos Jr. himself further reiterated an independent yet flexible foreign policy in his dealings with China (Banlaoi, 2023), a country known for an explicit rejection of transparency in their agreements involving official finance agreements (Cormier, 2022).

While rising prices of commodities and basic goods compromised public trust and competence in the early months of the presidency, there also seems to be some form of bureaucratic order that is established on the other hand. A sense of continuity is seen under the presidency, such as the desire for infrastructure investments evidenced by the Public-Private Partnership (PPP) Act that has been filed under both the House of Representatives as well as the Senate under the 19th Congress under House Bill No. 6527 and Senate Bill Nos. 765, 1022, 1251, 1344, 1613, and 1974. This agenda was widely known as one of the flagship projects of the Duterte administration under the “Build, Build, Build” Program, and is also now continued also under the Marcos administration under the “Build Better, More” initiative. The PPP Act is a testament to the desire of the Marcos administration to focus on the private sector and to allow for strategic investments to proliferate across the country.

Many of the legislative reforms raised in both houses strongly allude to transparency and accountability as by-products of these reforms, such as inclusion of the E-Governance Act or and Budget Modernization bills into the Legislative Executive Development Advisory Council (LEDAC). The goal of efforts such as the digitization and cash-based budgeting reforms through the aforementioned bills are to streamline government services and to allow for more accountability within agencies.

However, the Marcos Jr. presidency is not without its own share of controversy especially in the sphere of transparency. For now, it would suffice to say that issues on the ease of doing business, costs of energy and legislative guarantees are foremost concerns that must be tackled in order to bring foreign business into the country (CNN Philippines Staff, 2023). As some commentators have pointed out, an anti-corruption agenda is necessary in any administration when courting private investors and partners to invest within the country (Atienza, 2022). Watchdogs like G-Watch also ventilated concerns about serious rollbacks on governance reforms under the Duterte administration, particularly in the areas of transparency and anti-corruption, and that if the Marcos Jr. administration wants to woo foreign investors and private partners, his government must work harder toward reforms.

ANTI-CORRUPTION EFFORTS: MARCOS JR. AND HIS PREDECESSORS

This segment discusses major governance reform initiatives in the areas of accountability and transparency of the current Marcos Jr. administration and the past two administrations on the first year of their terms. The discussion uses comparative reports and relevant literature from academic sources, articles from news sources and the Official Gazette, Executive Orders, as well as government priorities through development plans of the three administrations.



THE BENIGNO AQUINO III ADMINISTRATION

Benigno Aquino III, or “PNoy,” won in the 2010 national elections based on a strong anti-corruption campaign. Other factors were allegations of corruption and malversation of funds that hounded the Arroyo administration before him. Former President Gloria Arroyo herself was entangled in several corruption allegations, such as the rigging of the 2004 national elections, more commonly known as the “Hello Garci” scandal, the NBN-ZTE scam, the Fertilizer Fund Scam, and the alleged misuse of the Philippine Charity Sweepstakes Office’s intelligence funds. Aquino III began his term with the government mired in heightened political instability, corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, and weakness of the rule of law (Philippine Development Plan 2011-2016, Chapter 7). This current state of governance became the object of focus in Aquino’s reform agenda throughout his administration.

During his campaign, Aquino III sought to make the problems of endemic corruption front and center and vowed to instill a culture of accountability within the government (Saccomanno & Bower, 2011). His campaign slogan of “kung walang kurap, walang mahirap” (if there’s no corruption, there’s no poverty) encapsulated the fight against debilitating corrupt practices that affected cash flows meant for efficient and comprehensive service delivery in the country. Under the banner of transparency, accountability, and participatory governance, PNoy executed initiatives that 1) held corrupt officials to account, 2) changed opaque administrative systems into more transparent ones, and 3) involved more of civil society within governance processes (Holmes, 2012). One of the earliest notable actions under his administration was his commitment to the Open Government Partnership (OGP), a multilateral initiative that led to national government agencies’ publishing of reports, budget disbursements, notices and results of bids, accomplishment reports, and more (Villanueva, 2018). This initiative was led by the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) just three months after

Aquino III assumed the presidency, and by 2011, 90 percent of local government units (LGUs) were compliant with the said policy (Holmes, 2012).

Another reform initiative in 2011 was the approval of Good Governance and Anti-Corruption Plan 2012-2016, which further strengthened the DILG’s partnership with local civil society organizations (CSOs). These included a feedback mechanism on the performance of their respective Local Government Units (LGUs) through the internet (ADB 2013). Further transparency initiatives were carried on across the years of PNoy’s term, such as the Seal of Good Housekeeping launched in 2010 and later changed into the Seal of Good Local Governance in 2014.

Some of the results in these reforms paid off quickly: transparency initiatives caused the Philippines’ rank in the World Economic Forum Global Competitiveness Report (World Bank, 2011) to climb 10 places, signifying lower risk to international creditors and a more attractive country for investors overall. The Aquino III administration sought to create a stable and transparent environment to gain more interest from foreign investors.

Despite the success of these initiatives, some of PNoy’s promises of transparent and accountable governance in his first year proved to be controversial. They were seen as a way to prosecute members of the former administration, but not corrupt officials as a whole. Executive Order No. 1 creating the Philippine Truth Commission in 2010 sought to create a fact-finding commission that would investigate corruption and controversial cases within the Arroyo administration. However, in July of the year after, the Commission was found unconstitutional and was nullified by the Supreme Court (Calonzo, 2011). As a result, the PNoy administration was accused of ‘selective retribution’ by some opposing sides. Others claim that while assessments of the administration were generally positive, there were numerous missed opportunities to implement key legislation -- the Freedom

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of Information Bill, among others -- that would have enabled greater transparency (Baylon, 2018).

One key similarity of the Aquino and Marcos Jr. administrations is their focus on the bolstering of ICT. Some of the most notable actions of the Aquino administration include improved systems such as cashless and paperless transactions of the Philippine Electronic Procurement System or PhilGEPS, consequently reducing spaces for abuse and corruption (Villanueva, 2018). The heightened use of this portal further increased government savings by Php29.93 million in 2010 to Php65.17 million in 2014 (Baylon, 2018). In the same way, the National Government Portal that was launched in 2010 made available a wide range of government data such as government pronouncements, statements, and reports previously inaccessible to the public.

This takes on a similar form under the Marcos Jr. administration through the introduction of the E-Governance Bill. The goal of House Bill No. 7327 is to “provide secure, responsive, and transparent online citizen-centered services” that will harness “the potential of open data for promoting economic growth” (House Bill No. 7327, Part 1, Sec. 2). This bill has also been included in the list of priority bills under the Legislative Executive Development Advisory Council and part of the key priorities that Marcos Jr. himself has outlined in his first State of the Nation Address (SONA). Here we see the links between transparency initiatives, open data and its links towards economic growth.

Many of the similarities of the Aquino III administration and the Marcos Jr. administration lie in their shared agenda of creating a viable business environment for foreign investors and the private sector during their first year. The difference however lies in the methods by which this environment is created and the barriers to a robust business setting. Under the Aquino administration, the problems stem from opaque systems where corrupt practices like bribery ran rampant. Therefore, the solution to this would be to create honest and open systems through good governance practices. On the other



hand, Marcos Jr. has cited that investor concerns involve institutional complexities such as red tape and the lack of efficiency, which is why e-governance has been designated as a legislative priority.

THE RODRIGO DUTERTE ADMINISTRATION

The widely known Rodrigo Duterte campaign and subsequent administration was founded on a strong rhetoric of eliminating drug use, corruption, and criminality. While the administration preceding his held one of the highest opinion poll ratings among post-Marcos presidents (Thompson, 2016), many members of the public were disillusioned by the lack of trickle-down effects such as inclusive economic growth and tangible gains in human well-being and development (Baylon, 2018). As a result, the rhetoric that Duterte championed that encapsulated sweeping changes in both government and society won the fatigued public over.

Though the first year of Duterte was marred with issues over his controversial views and remarks, his significant foreign policy shift towards China and most notably the extrajudicial killing of drug addicts that he has openly endorsed, his first year was marked with landmark anti-corruption policy that addressed accountability and transparency especially within the executive branch. One of the first Executive Orders that Duterte signed just days before his first State of the Nation address was on operationalizing Freedom of Information, an initiative that has been stuck in the legislature since the 1987 Constitution (Asia Society, n.d.). While this executive order covered only the executive branch (Executive Order No. 2, sec. 2), local governments and other government agencies were also encouraged to observe this initiative as well.

Another landmark transparency initiative came through the form of Executive Order No. 6, which established the Citizens' Complaint

Hotline, or more commonly known as 8888. The order that was signed on October 14, 2016 provided the public with a feedback mechanism for poor government public service delivery or corrupt practices done by government officials. The hotline also allowed direct access to the executive by placing the contact centre under the Office of the Cabinet Secretary, who then coordinates with the concerned agency on how to solve grievances aired on the hotline. The hotline was well-received by the public, with the center receiving more than 1,000 calls per day in 2017 (Torres, 2017).

One of the biggest campaign promises that Duterte critics and supporters alike closely monitored was Duterte's statements on clearing the government of corruption in just six months. Because of Duterte's strong political rhetoric, many hoped that the impossible task of purging the government of its corrupt elements would be possible under the Duterte administration. In March 2017, Duterte announced the firing of 92 government employees under agencies like the Bureau of Customs (BuCor), Bureau of Internal Revenue (BIR), Land Transportation Franchising and Regulation Board (LTFRB), Energy Regulatory Commission (ERC), and the Land Transportation Office (LTO) among others for graft-related offenses, as well as other key officials like Ismael Sueno, the Secretary of the Department of the Interior and Local Government (Rappler.com, 2017). However, there were accusations that this zero-tolerance policy for corrupt officials was not consistent, as Duterte had chosen to keep other officials involved in mismanagement and corruption allegations.

Some of the similarities between Marcos Jr. and his predecessor in terms of governance reforms lie beyond the first year. For instance, both administrations intended to enact a cash-based budgeting system, which "funds only the programs and projects that can be implemented and completed within the fiscal year and provides for a fixed implementation and payment period that must be strictly

observed" (Department of Budget and Management, n.d.). The result of this reform would ultimately ensure that resources are used wisely, preventing wastage and corruption, and improving public services as a whole. While Duterte was able to create an executive order pushing for cash-based budgeting, it has yet to be institutionalized. There is a need to create a Republic Act for this lest another president revoke the Executive Order.

Under Marcos Jr., the Budget Modernization Bill has taken on a new name: the Progressive Budgeting for Better and Modernized (PBBM) Governance Bill. Currently the bill is pending with the Committee on Appropriations under House Bill Nos. 19, 418, 6384, 4260, 4650, 5266, 5809, and is also pending with the Committee on Finance under Senate Bill No. 1020. This is also one of the key priorities that the Department of Budget and Management is looking to push early on in Marcos Jr.'s term.

To sum up, all three administrations converge on a host of issues with regard to transparency in government systems such as the introduction of budget reform programs. While the motivations for these varied, a goal of these budget reforms was to ensure transparency (Baylon, 2018; Department of Budget and Management, n.d.) and to prevent resource wastage and corruption. Another similarity was the usage of ICT as a means to create a more responsive government. Currently, the Marcos Jr. administration announced its intention to continue the Duterte's digital transformation program with the intent of improving quality of life and business environment in the Philippines (Giray, 2022). While there is no explicit mention of anti-corruption, per se, this is a promising component of the current administration's initiatives toward making the government more accountable for its actions.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that unlike the two administrations before it, the Marcos Jr. administration is focused on re-opening the economy, re-establishing trust among international institutions and agencies, and achieving digitalization to boost bureaucratic efficiency. This is a clear contrast to the reforms spearheaded by the past two administrations that focused on curbing corruption that has plagued Philippine society. One probable reason is the difference in issues that the administrations have been met with: while the Duterte and Aquino III administrations were met with failing trust in institutions, the Marcos Jr. administration's main challenge is to recover from the pandemic and build a strong and resilient post-pandemic economy.

Another reason is the approach to corruption: while the past two administrations directly used corruption to solidify their first year in office and showcase the integrity of their core pronouncements, the Marcos Jr. presidency is opting to create ideal political, economic, legislative and social environments that will mitigate and curb corruption activities and opportunities.

All three administrations used ICT in their governance initiatives. This is consistent with trends in recent years across governments and the rising importance of the internet as an avenue for government openness and responsiveness. The institutionalization of ICT in government processes creates a culture of transparency and anti-corruption. Another would be major budget reform initiatives that have and are continually being brought up for discussion amidst pending legislative bills. All three administrations aimed to reform budget systems for numerous reasons, among them being the need to improve accountability in the fiscal sector by improving existing processes.

Currently, the most prominent initiatives towards transparency and accountability under the Marcos Jr. administration lie in its legislative priorities. However, with two months before the anniversary of his inauguration, there are still many opportunities for a more solid anti-corruption agenda to be introduced as a priority. While it might not be seen as a problem in the face of more urgent issues such as the rising costs of basic goods, the lack of focus on this longstanding issue can cause more difficulties in the future. It can even be a barrier to achieving the administration's long-term development goals.

Anti-corruption can be a by-product of comprehensive governance reforms that aim to tackle inefficiency, complexity, and opacity in the bureaucracy. If governance reforms that aim to heighten transparency and accountability in government are prioritized, these can become effective tools to fight corruption.

As the Marcos Jr. moves closer to its first-year anniversary, it must build back better from the opportune lessons offered by the experiences of the past two administrations. These can range from rising prices and a failing healthcare system to longstanding issues such as the clamour for efficient and honest governance and the restoration of trust in public institutions. The Marcos Jr. administration is only on its first year; the rest of its potential lies ahead. Critics are always skeptical of changes and what personal benefits would redound to the proponents. So, while attaining the budget reform objectives is within reach, the real challenge may be convincing people about the administration's genuineness of purpose.

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⁴ Page 7: philstar.com/business/technology/2019/02/14/1889716/5g-iot-and-ict-key-innovations-boost-philippines-digital-transformation-2019



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