

SPEECH



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2012

## Speech

of

**His Excellency Benigno S. Aquino III**

**President of the Philippines**

**On his first year in office**

*at the PhilSports Arena, Pasig City on June 30, 2011*

Already, a year has passed. Do all of us still remember everything that we went through? Before, when storms blared on our roads, we were forced to move aside. The average Filipino's greatest dream was to get a visa so that he could work in another country. People would sleep soundly, only to wake up to flood skimming their beds, because PAGASA failed to raise a storm warning. And how many had already given up hope that justice for the 57 victims of the Maguindanao Massacre will be served?

Do you still remember those times when, upon hearing bad news, you could not even shake your head in disgust because you were certain the worse was yet to come? Before, the Filipinos were one as they sighed frustratedly: *Bea, it, this will soon come to pass*. Weren't we all surprised when the economy surged before last year's elections, only to realize that this was because the world shared our nation's anticipation of the end of the Arroyo administration, and the impending Easter redemption to our people's Calvary? Does it not feel as though it were just yesterday when you handed me the last embers of your hope, when you called on me to fight for the straight and righteous path?

I had not printed even a single poster or pamphlet when the people called on me, because as you know, I had absolutely no plans to run for the presidency. I never dreamt to engage the colossal problem Mrs. Arroyo would be leaving behind—problems that I, nonetheless fought against as a member of Congress and the Senate. I had already witnessed, through my late mother's experiences, the grave responsibilities that come with being the President, most especially if you were to inherit a system much profaned. I asked myself: Will I be able to fix all of this?

I contemplated very carefully before I responded to your call. But when a jar heavy with coins was handed to me so as to help in the campaign; when the masses, who could ill afford umbrellas that could shield them from the midday sun, crowded the streets to welcome me; when you told me that I was not alone—I could not stomach saying no. I could not say, "I am sorry, but I am a coward, and I'd rather live to a ripe old age." I said: I am with you, Filipino. Together, we

will straighten the crooked, we will weed out the corrupt, we will right what is wrong.

And we are here today, a year since we put an end to a government deaf and blind to the plight of its citizens. They gave us a house whose ceilings sagged, whose walls had chipped and cracked. The furniture had been dismantled for scrapwood, and replaced with fixings bought on credit. The worse part about it was that, I knew we would inherit even that debt, along with all the mess they left for us to clean up.

We soon discovered that the system was more extreme, more horrible than anything we could have expected. For example: from 1972 to 2000, the NFA amassed 12.9 billion pesos in debt. When Mrs. Arroyo came into power, she managed, in just a single year of her term, to raise this debt to 18 billion pesos. Let me repeat: from 12 billion, NFA debt went up to 18 billion in a year. Yet, she was far from content, when she stepped down, the NFA's debt had risen to 177 billion pesos—a thousand percent increase, evidencing the previous administration's record-breaking abilities to amass debt.

This same administration has been calling on us to recognize their so-called achievements, and has invited us to stand on their shoulders. This same administration claims that there has been no change; that the straight and righteous path will only plunge us headlong over a cliff. Will we allow ourselves to be deceived by these efforts to sow seeds of doubt so that, in our confusion, the old system will find an opportunity to wrest back its power?

I will no longer waste time hickering with them. I only wish to express my relief and overwhelming gratitude that Mrs. Arroyo herself has stated that I am her exact opposite. Finally, we have agreed on something.

If they want a response, it will come from the 21,800 families of our soldiers and police force—they who will have decent homes before the year ends.

It will come from our poor countrymen who have registered in our Conditional Cash Transfer program. Four days from now, I myself will witness the two millionth beneficiary of the CCT being signed on.

It will come from the nearly 240,000 farmers who now benefit from over 2,000 kilometers of farm-to-market roads that we constructed in just one year.

Ask them. Is the change not clear enough? Just last year, we imported tons of rice that came in frightening shiploads, needing frightening amounts of money to pay for warehouses. We only needed to import 1.3 million metric tons a year to meet our needs, but they imported two million metric tons. Now, we import nearly half of what we needed to import last year: 660,000 metric tons.

No sleight of hand was needed to increase our rice yield: We just found the most affordable and effective measures where we could allocate our irrigation budget; we promoted the use of the best seedlings available; and we encouraged upland rice farming. These are some of the reasons for the 15 percent increase in our rice production—the highest yield in the history of dry season cropping.

I hope you will excuse me, because I do not usually boast. We used to have an annual rice deficit of 1.3 million tons. In this first year alone, we will be importing 800,000 tons—to leave room for a buffer—but all we need now is some 600,000 tons. I will be all praises for Secretary Alcala if he delivers on his promise of rice self-sufficiency by 2013.

Just last year, how many of us dared to dream that the rice we cook on our stoves would have been planted, sown, and sold on Philippine soil. And we are optimistic that, as I mentioned, Secretary Proci Alcala's promise will be fulfilled: before 2013 ends, we will no longer need to import rice from other countries.

Think about it: Because of the conscientious spending of the people's coffers, and by mending the leakages in our system, we have saved up enough money this year to fund projects that go above and beyond those already programmed in our General Appropriations Act. Despite not raising taxes, an additional 12 billion pesos have been programmed to finance our various needs: from the Pantawid Pasada for drivers of public utility vehicles who are often the first to feel the rising fuel prices, to the salaries of 10,000 nurses sent to serve in our poor provinces; from modern ships that can patrol our shores, to other such programs and projects that will benefit the majority of our people.

Imagine what would have happened had we continued to allow the plunder of our country's coffers. Perhaps, then, our drivers would have no choice but to walk. Perhaps the sick in far-flung areas would be left to chew leaves to ease their aches. And perhaps, then, our Navy might not even be capable of frightening the fish in the seas they patrol.

Housing, rice, security, wages, roads, gas subsidies, lifebuoys for our countrymen drowning in poverty: These are the reforms we now seek. We need not have unearthed Yamashita's treasure to accomplish all of this; we merely pursued the corrupt in government, rectified government spending, and straightened the long-crooked system.

Just look at what they did to the Philippine National Construction Corporation: In spite of an inability to submit decent remittances, its officials still had the gall to give themselves bonuses. It took a five-page memo to detail the corruption that our new PNCC officials have uncovered and fixed: from creating unnecessary positions paid half a million in salary every month; to subscribing to cell phone plans unnecessary to their duties; from materials sold at a loss to fatten their own pockets, to fictitious fixed allowances amounting to at least a hundred thousand

pesos every month—all of these we stopped. As a result, we have lowered their former monthly expense of P22 million to just P11 million.

Again, take for example the wickedness we have discovered in the PCSO. They found money to go over their budget for commercials airing the face of this or that politician on television, but can not find the money to pay for the three billion pesos they owe our government hospitals. Because these debts have not been paid—*because of corruption*—the very hospitals funded by the government refuse to accept guarantees from their fellow government agencies. Would this not make your blood rise to your nape? Uncovering deliberate mismanagement and corruption, instead of joining its fray: This is the change we have been proclaiming.

I know that many of us are in a hurry to sow the fruits of the reforms we have just planted. I cannot blame our countrymen who have gone through a decade of ceaseless corruption and unscrupulousness, that they no longer believe that it is possible to have a government that chooses to tread the straight and righteous path. There are those who are slow to realize that we need to work together and face challenges together to achieve everything that we aspire for.

I understand where they are coming from. I, too, dream that all of us will wake up one day and find that we have been granted the solutions to all our problems overnight. But I also know that you are aware that, in the long run, a hastened, mediocre solution will be useless and pointless. We need to carefully establish our reforms, we need the guarantee that our programs are effective and will continue to be so, and we need long-term solutions that will ensure that we will no longer pass on problems to the coming generations.

Is it not that simple? We know how much we suffered in the past, and we know what we want for our future. Don't we now wholeheartedly strive to bridge the gap between what we hope for and what we can achieve, and has not the nation risen up in the struggle to realize our collective dreams? Is it not so that now, whichever side of an argument we may be, we are driven by compassion for our country? Now, our slightest actions are open to scrutiny.

Isn't it that, these days, whichever side of an argument we may be, we are still bound by concern for our country? Sometimes, I wonder: If I am asked to comment on an issue but I think it prudent to keep my mouth shut, I am criticized. But then, when I express my opinions, I am labeled as a nosy busybody. What do they expect me to do? Cut my body in half and hover around like the *manananggal*?

I have told you before: If we end corruption, we end poverty. Good governance redounds to palpable benefits for the people, especially for the less fortunate: Every medicine tablet our government funds for the poor, every inch of road,

every opportunity to acquire a decent job—all of these were borne from integrity and a government that responds to and cooperates with its people.

Our destination is clear and we will reach it: The services that are meant to benefit you, now benefit you, instead of some politician who fancies himself king, but in reality is nothing more than stale, sparse bread.

We have come so far in just one year. Just imagine the breadth of our success in the five years to come. The Filipino people and the entire world stand witness: We are reaping the rewards of our journey on the straight and righteous path. Why turn back now?

The corrupt are still hard at work to break the faith of the very people who called on me and have brought about our triumph in the past election. We expected this, and I am confident the Filipino people are still behind me in our collective fight against those who have wronged us. I have said this before: You are my strength—strength that is the wellspring of the successes we reap today, and the imminent and continuous realization of our hopes.

This will never change. You are still my Boss.

We have done fairly well this first year, but in the coming years, I expect all members of government, with the help of the citizenry, to work together even more and hasten the realization of the change for which we aspire.

Good afternoon to you all. Thank you very much.

