

'Corruption under GMA the worst since Marcos'

A coalition of lawyers, big business groups, Ateneo professors, and two social arms of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) yesterday slammed corruption in the Arroyo administration, saying it is the worst the country has ever seen since the time of former President Ferdinand Marcos.

The Ateneo School of Government professors, the Makati Business Club (MBC), and the Integrated Bar of the Philippines (IBP) made the denouncement on government corruption.

"Corruption is the gravest threat to Philippine democracy and society today,"

By MICHAEL PUNONGBAYAN

they said in a statement.

Other groups that joined them in criticizing corruption in the administration are Barug Pilipino, Bishops-Businessmen's Conference for Human Development, Caucus of Development NGO Networks, CBCP's Sangguniang Laiko ng Pilipinas and its National Secretariat for Social Action, Justice and Peace, Management Association of the Philippines, the National Citizens' Movement for Free Elections, and Transparency and Accountability Network that all belong to the Coalition Against Corruption (CAC) as their umbrella organization.

In the Millennium Challenge Corp.'s recently released Philippine scorecard for fiscal year 2009, the groups said the country failed to meet the performance standard in the control of corruption category, with its percentile ranking falling to 47 percent from 57 percent this year.

In the 2008 Corruption Perceptions Index released by the Transparency International in September, the Philippines placed in the bottom quarter of 180 countries as it tied for 141st place with Cameroon, Iran, and Yemen.

"The country's poor performance in these corruption ratings is not surprising given the litany of scandals that have hounded the current administration since 2001," the groups said referring to the IMPSA kickbacks, the Armed Forces of the Philippines comptroller hidden wealth case, the Jose Pidal scandal, the Commission on Elections-MegaPacific computerization deal, the fertilizer scam, the North and South Rail projects, the cheating in the 2004 presidential elections, the distribution of cash gifts in Malacañang, the NBN-ZTE bribery scandal, and the Philippine National Police "euro generals" controversy.

"No one has been held accountable. We have not witnessed corruption of this magnitude since the years of the Marcos dictatorship," members of the organizations said.

Contrary to President Arroyo's pronouncement, she has allegedly failed to show intention to use "the considerable powers and resources at her disposal to get to the root of all these scandals, and has in fact allowed the misuse of her power of executive privilege to hinder investigations into acts of official corruption."

"The unchecked rise of corruption is seriously hampering efforts to reduce poverty in the country and affecting our economic competitiveness," CAC said.

"But most alarming is the moral impact of this virulent cancer on our citizenry, especially the youth. Not only is it fostering a sense of cynicism and desperation, the greater tragedy is that it may be engendering the adoption of the corrupt's disoriented moral compass among our people," the group added.

CAC member organizations also referred to Jarro Archbishop Angel Lagdameo question: "But who will pick up the broken, shattered pieces of our country, hurting from poverty and corruption, to make it whole again?"

CAC members said: "We Filipinos are our own liberators."

"Despite the dire situation we are in, we believe that we are not powerless to defend the integrity of our institutions and values. We urge all Filipinos to join us in challenging our political leaders," the groups said proposing a number of reforms to be pursued.

They said citizens' participation in local development planning and budget reviews should be implemented as they urged public officials to recognize their constituents' right to participate in governance.

Citizens should know how public funds are being used in their barangay, city, and province, they added.

"Strengthen the civil service. We need civil servants who will build quality and integrity systems in government agencies, and spearhead the campaign against corruption from within the bureaucracy," they said.

CAC said "the corrupt, and not the whistle blowers should be punished considering that except for General Carlos Garcia, no one has been held accountable for their misdeeds."

"We strongly urge the Ombudsman to act on pending high-profile corruption cases, to increase the office's pool of competent field investigators, and most importantly, to uphold her mandate to serve as protector of the people and not of the powerful," the groups said.

"Let us end the culture of dishonesty and impunity in our country, especially in government, and take the war against corruption to the forefront of the national agenda."