

## **Traditional Politics: Is it Detrimental to Local Governments?**

*Hon. Lorenzo R. Tañada III*

Chair, Committee on Human Rights  
House of Representatives

Dear Friend, Ladies and Gentlemen... Good Morning!

At the outset, let me say that what I intend to share with you today is not a product of deep academic research but more a product of observations made by someone whose family has long been into politics but often find themselves in what we might say "opposite side of the fence." Likewise, I am a 2<sup>nd</sup> term in the House of Representatives – an institution whose image is, sad to say, strongly associated with traditional political practices.

The term "traditional politics" has acquired quite a condescending meaning. Rightly so, because people associate a lot of bad political practices to "traditional politics". To be called a "trapo" or a traditional politician can be denigrating. What are some of these trapo practices? To name a few –

***Patronage politics.*** What is this? This means prioritizing barangays not on the basis of needs but on the basis of what was delivered. Simply put, the barangays that get quick and

substantial access to the municipal budget are those headed by barangay captains who have delivered the most number of votes to a sitting mayor or councilor. Another classic example of this is depriving a particular district, headed by a councilor who continuously opposes the initiative of the mayor, the much-needed pathway by the district's school children, or even the establishment of potable water systems. Never mind if the school children have difficulty getting to school during the rainy season or that the area has perennial diarrhea problems. Let the people who voted for this recalcitrant councilor suffer so that next time, this councilor will no longer win. If we step back a bit and use this analogy to the country as a whole, Congressmen who have voted against the EVAT or have voted to impeach the President are deprived of what is due their district, no matter how poor and calamity-prone that district is.

***Untransparent Budget Processes.*** I would categorize this as part of traditional political practices. The right of people to, at the minimum, see exactly where their *ameliar* goes is a fundamental right. After all, our salaries as public officials are shouldered by taxpayers. And by this, I mean not simply putting up huge billboards and signs on projects that say "This is where the taxpayers' money go." Show them how much exactly is the total budget (IRA, *ameliar* & other local taxes) and where it was spent. At the maximum, people – non-

government organizations and people's organizations - must be allowed to participate in budget deliberations of the local sanggunians.

***Propagating the Dole-out Mentality.*** It saddens me to note that politicians are no longer regarded as the learned and the wise statesmen of the olden days. These days, people regard politicians as mainly belonging to one party – the KBL party – Kasal, Binyag, Libing. People go to you not to seek your advice on critical policy questions but because kukunin kang Ninong sa Kasal, Binyag, or their relatives died. Takbuhan din kapag nagkasakit ang tatay, lolo, mga anak, asawa. Hingian ng medalya, papremyo sa mga beauty pagents, bola at basketball uniforms. Indeed, we are regarded as DSWD, PCSO, DOH, Philippine Sports Commission, all rolled into one. Not that we do not like to help especially during times when they need us most, but let us be frank - the pay-off is a thousand fold come election time. And some of us would want them to be perpetually in need, in perpetual poverty, so that they vote not with their heads but with their mouths. Truly, a grumbling stomach easily forgets how long and hard a principled politician has stood on various issues when presented with a bag of groceries.

***Tolerating a Culture of Corruption.*** A politician might not be corrupt but as they say, "it takes a good man to do nothing for evil to triumph". The fact that corruption is staring right at our faces and we remain quiet is a sure-fire formula for corrupt officials to engage in more and daring corrupt practices.

***Abusing the term "Public Office is a Public Trust".*** Admittedly, some elected public officials take this phrase to heart but in the wrong way. They think that winning an election already is a stamp or a badge declaring that you can never go wrong...the public trusts you that's why you were elected. Of course, as many of us know, winning an election is half the battle. Continuously maintaining their trust and gaining new ones is the greater challenge.

My dear friends, ladies and gentlemen,

I know that one way or the other, we are all guilty of being trapos. I myself cannot claim to be holier and popish than the pope.

But at this critical juncture of our nation's history, patronage politics must be shunned. To the basic question that you have laid out for me to answer, "Traditional politics: Is it detrimental to Local Governments?" Can I further qualify your question to

mean, “Is it Detrimental to **Effective** Local **Governance**?” If indeed, that is your question, and you all agree to my description of what traditional politics is, then my answer is a resounding YES.

**Let us be tools of political change.** Our people have long waited for a different kind of politics. Our people have long deserved more than the traditional politics that is all we have so far given them.

The need for a new kind of politics is especially great at the local level. Local governments serve as the most proximate link to the people. For the link to be effective and true, the nature of our politics must undergo a transformation.

For politics to be transformative, certain characteristics must be evident. Among them are:

1. ***Our politics must be pro-poor & pro-social change.*** The face of our people is the face of the poor. Our bias in our goal of change must be for the poor, deprived, oppressed, exploited and marginalized.
2. ***Our politics must be educative.*** Politics has a teaching function, aiming to raise social awareness. Our people

must grow with us. We cannot keep our constituents in the dark. We must surface what is really going on and not bury it. The politics of denial is an unhealthy one. Our people must be our partners in the political process, becoming no less than our equals.

3. ***Our politics must advance the cause of fundamental freedoms and human rights.*** At the core of every discussion has to be human dignity, that infinite worth that each person making up our constituency possesses. The human rights that flow from this human dignity is not only civil and political rights, but also economic, social and cultural rights. This means not only the right to speak out and not be forcibly disappeared or extra-judicially killed, but also the right to food, health, social welfare and adequate housing, among other rights.
4. ***Our politics must be critical and creative.*** It must be a kind of politics that stops and thinks, one that ponders and does not just accept things as they are. It must constantly challenge and never tire in asking questions. It must also succeed in devising new forms of political action involving and not excluding our people in the process.

5. *Our politics must be empowering.* We must bring people together and enable them to articulate their interests and invoke their rights. We must provide open venues for them to press what is dearest to them to concerned authorities regarding social, cultural, economic, and political issues affecting them. Above all, our people must have access to the right information for them to actively and effectively participate in governance.

*In sum, our politics must be developmental.* Our people are everything. The end of all our political actions has to be for our people to realize their full potential. Anything less makes politics, and more importantly, the term “public servant” simply not worth the name.

We politicians like to think ourselves as heroes. But we should not see ourselves as being the heroes. **Our job is to let our people be the heroes in their own right.** To the extent that we have paved the way for them to shine, we have been successful indeed.

As Chair of the House Committee on Human Rights, it is an honor to address you. The House Committee on Human rights is

exerting every effort to advance a human rights legislative agenda including proposed legislation against torture and enforced disappearances as well as on the strengthening of the Commission on Human Rights. I am also actively pushing for the Freedom of Information Act. This allows ordinary citizens access to documents on matters of public concern. I truly believe that the people's right to information is a key ingredient to a genuinely functioning democracy. Without it, all claims that we live in a democratic society are, to say the least, hypocritical.

With that, I welcome questions and comments that you might have. Thank you very much and once more, MAAYONG AGA SA INYONG TANAN!