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P-Noy can still save FOI bill, lawmakers say

By Jess Diaz (The Philippine Star) | Updated February 3, 2013 - 12:00am



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MANILA, Philippines - Certifying the Freedom of Information bill as urgent may be the only option left for President Aquino to have the measure passed before Congress adjourns next week, lawmakers supporting the proposed law said yesterday.

San Juan Rep. Joseph Victor Ejercito said the President should give the proposed FOI law the same importance as the reproductive health bill, which the Senate and the House passed after Aquino certified it as urgent.

"The FOI bill aims to promote transparency, accountability and good governance, which are the President's core advocacies," he said.

However, Ejercito pointed out that even with a presidential certification, consideration of the measure could still be stalled if the House fails to muster a quorum and the minority bloc continues to derail debates.

Last week and this week, members of the minority prevented the House from going into floor debates on the bill by questioning the quorum.

At one time, Davao del Sur Rep. Marc Douglas Cagas threatened to raise the quorum question because he did not want a law dismembering his district read and sent to the archives.

Authors have so far succeeded only in delivering their sponsorship speeches.



Rep. Sherwin Tugna of the party-list group Citizens' Battle Against Corruption urged all Filipinos supporting the FOI bill to plead with the President to certify it and to appeal to their representatives to attend the last three days of session of Congress next week.

"This we have to do if we want the bill to pass before the 15th Congress adjourns next weekend," he said.

"We need to double our efforts in pushing for this important piece of legislation. Not only do we need to contact and compel members of the House to attend the remaining sessions days, let us also channel a certain portion of our efforts in convincing the President to certify it as urgent as well," he said.

"The FOI is not just a step towards daang matuwid. It is a big leap. The FOI bill would open up the government to public scrutiny and would expose anomalous deals and contracts. It would hold public officials accountable and usher in a new era of good governance where transparency and accountability reign supreme," he added.

Quezon Rep. Erin Tañada, one of the authors of the proposed FOI law, has indicated that the President might be open to certifying the measure as urgent.

In a television interview, Tañada said Aquino is monitoring deliberations on the measure in the House of Representatives.

"He is watching how the process will go. If we can get the bill to a second-reading vote, I think he will act appropriately," he said. He said a presidential certification would definitely expedite the approval of the measure.

"Even if we have only four session days to go until next week before we adjourn for the elections in May, we can still do it because we have more sessions in June when we reconvene," he added. The Senate has already passed its version of the FOI bill.

Congress will go on a long four-month recess for the election campaign next weekend, reconvene on June 3 before adjourning again four days later until the new set of members elected on May 13 convene on July 22 as the 16th Congress.

'Most effective modality'

Even Justice Secretary Leila de Lima is pushing for the swift passage of the measure, which she called, "the most effective modality to prevent corruption."

In a speech before delegates to the 5th Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption (Gopac) conference in Pasay City last Friday, De Lima also stressed the need for the President to certify the measure as urgent to ensure its passage before Congress' election break.

In batting for the pending measure, De Lima stressed that "a well-informed citizenry could and would meaningfully participate in the governance of a country."

She said greater public access to government records as well as greater accountability for public officials are "anticipated fruits of political maturity."

"But it is noted that certain conditions have to be engendered in order for the right to information to be meaningfully practiced," she said.

Meanwhile, former Manila congressman Benny Abante Jr. said that without an effective FOI law, billions of taxpayers' money would be lost to corruption annually.

Abante cited statistics from international watchdog Transparency International that showed an estimated 20 percent of the national budget getting lost to corruption due to lack of transparency in government. – **With Edu Punay, Sandy Araneta**

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If the palace has the will

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For those rushing the bill

For those rushing the bill for approval, they may try to re read the proposed measure thoroughly. From what I have recently learned, the bill has been watered down, albeit surreptitiously, effectively crippling any real attempt for transparency. Those pushing for its passing may just be leading everybody into a trap - a political double cross. The rant may be to approve and advertise the ruse as an "act of government transparency" before any serious re-reading is attempted but once it is approved in its present form and content, any real attempt to secure government files will be thwarted with "discretions" and "deems" and "prior approvals" as well as "executive privileges" with no real and physical definition of "rooms" or "confines" or "executive sessions". Maybe, the better wisdom is just to let it languish in the present Congress and let the succeeding Congress conduct a more thorough review.
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This is not a priority bill

The real problem is not lack of transparency or access to information. It is the highly opinionated culture and the politicians propensity to engage in useless probes for pure publicity stunt instead of crafting bills that help the economy, business or industrial sectors, environment, etc.

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