

Gopac hits parliamentary immunity

Details Category: [Top News](#) Published on Monday, 04 February 2013 21:16
Written by Recto Mercene | Reporter



AN international meeting held in Manila has acknowledged that parliamentary immunity helps embolden some lawmakers to engage in corrupt practices. Still, it held that the rest of the legislators who are presumably honest can help eradicate graft in governments.

“Legislators cannot remain idle, in recognition that we must be part of the solution, even while there are those among parliamentarians who have been party to corruption,” said a statement from the recently concluded three-day conference organized by the Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption (Gopac).

But, according to John G. Williams, Gopac founder and CEO, parliamentary inviolability “undermines the rule of law. No one, not even parliamentarians, should be above the law.”

While a parliament can criticize and demand accountability from the government, Williams said, it is helpless against lawmakers who invoke parliamentary immunity when faced with allegations of wrongdoing.

Parliamentary inviolability, according to him, came into being during the French Revolution when the reigning king could order anyone who criticized him to be guillotined.

Members of Parliament, to counter the king’s overzealous desire to arrest those who oppose him, declare themselves beyond the reach of the king and his men, giving rise to parliamentary immunity.

Williams said that Gopac, which he founded in 2005 in Ottawa, Canada, “is the beacon that shines the light of accountability on parliamentarians who want to use their office for personal unjustifiable gain.”

He added that the world would be a better place when all who hold public office know that they are answerable directly to the people who put their trust in them.

The incoming Gopac chairman, Sen. Edgardo Angara, said political-campaign contributions are a source of corruption among public officials.

He added that contributors would demand payment when the politicians they helped elect assume office, “thereby holding us hostage to vested interests, compromising our efforts at good policy-making and structural reforms.”

Huguette Labelle, chairman of Transparency International, pressed for passage of the Freedom of Information (FOI) Act, which she said would empower the people to prevent corruption.

Labelle added that this act should apply to political-campaign contributions where access to information would reveal the source and the amount contributed by individuals. She said that a strong independent electoral commission or its equivalent should be able to audit and make the information public.

According to Labelle, “access to information is not a gift to the people. The information belongs to the people, as a human right.”

She called on all countries to not only guarantee the right to information but also compel states “the duty of putting effective systems in place to give effect to this right and to encourage public debate.”

“Now, of course, some countries were beyond just disclosure to putting caps so that there’s no one individual, company...that has so much power over individuals because when you put a lot of money into somebody’s back and you want them to be elected, of course, you have expectations that they will listen to you after,” Labelle said.

“Corruption is a monster. It must be an epidemic as well. When you have a monster, a plague, an epidemic, you don’t wait until tomorrow to act, you act now,” she added.

Labelle said that corruption causes violence, civil war, illicit trade and social destabilization.

She said in Canberra, Australia, pressure from civil society forced the passage of a law that obliges the state government to publish information all the time.

Brazil, Labelle added, also passed a law, where every department of the government by 12 midnight every day, has to publish everything it had disbursed, to whom, how much and for what purpose.

The Philippine Congress is said to be struggling to pass the FOI bill into law.

San Juan City (Metro Manila) Rep. Joseph Victor Ejercito said that certifying the bill as urgent may be the only option left for President Aquino to have the measure passed before Congress adjourns next week.

He added that the President should give the FOI bill the same importance as the reproductive-health bill, which the Senate and the House passed after Mr. Aquino certified it as urgent.

“The FOI bill aims to promote transparency, accountability and good governance, which are the President’s core advocacies,” Ejercito noted. It is “not just a means of empowering people but also a means of preventing corruption.”

The international conference that ended on Saturday was attended by 12 members of parliament, including 581 Gopac members from 67 countries.

In Photo: Sen. Edgardo Angara answers questions from Department of Justice Chief State Counsel Ricardo Paras III and Foreign Undersecretary Jesus Yabes during the hearing of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations of which he is vice chairman, on the extradition treaties of the Philippines and Spain, India and the United Kingdom. Angara is also the newly installed chairman of the Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption (Gopac), which just concluded its fifth international conference in Manila. In a post-conference statement, Gopac acknowledged that parliamentary immunity has often emboldened the very lawmakers who are charged with passing and safeguarding laws to break the same. (Roy Domingo)

