

PCIJ Interview with Senator Antonio Trillanes IV, April 2011

Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ): Why is transparency important to you?

Sen. Antonio Trillanes (AT): Because as an anti-corruption crusader, I believe that the key here is transparency, and of course the media would play a big role in taking advantage of transparency. So that's where we would start in this anti-corruption crusader.

PCIJ: What is really important in starting this "anti-corruption crusade"?

AT: Having come from a regime that was really basically a one big crime syndicate and it pervaded across the bureaucracy, the culture of secrecy and cover-ups so we need to reverse that, and this bill would primarily address those issues. And hopefully it will result to having more transparency in the bureaucracy.

PCIJ: You came from a background of military where transparency isn't really a buzzword and you've had worked trying to put more transparency in that organization. How would this bill be received within the ranks of the military and the officers and how would it help change that culture of the military of not having that kind of transparency?

AT: I believe the AFP in general would welcome this bill because in the end it will redound to their benefit, once you get rid of the culture of corruption in the bureaucracy, then now we can be more efficient on our use of our public funds, and that will result to having more benefit for the welfare of the soldiers, better equipment, and that can help them in accomplishing their mission.

But of course, if you're talking about to the operational security, on how they would conduct their military operations, it will be part of the exceptions in the Freedom of Information bill.

PCIJ: The military are very secretive with information, how do we deal with that?

AT: We will deal with that through this. If you have seen the ongoing Senate inquiry, the AFP has been very cooperative, they've been asked for the necessary information we require, so as far as the administrative aspects of the administration, we're going to welcome that as separate from the operational aspects of the organization.

PCIJ: How important is having a Freedom of Information as a bill instead of just having the administration say that we are committed to it, we are committed to transparency? What's the difference between that and having a bill that seems black and white and seems that requires bureaucrats to divulge information?

AT: The difference is we're going to institutionalize transparency because if we were a developed country then you don't need this actually. It would follow. But we're a developing country, we're strengthening our institutions, we need laws like this to guide or at least give them some "tips" so everybody will be told alike.

PCIJ: You're very involved on the corruption hearings in the senate. You yourself are an advocate. What would this kind of bill have changed? What wouldn't have happened if we had institutionalized this kind of measure?

It could have made a big difference. Actually, if we had this bill, let's say, way back since 1986, we wouldn't even have had a GMA [former president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo] to begin with. So this would really have helped society and the media, of course, as a guard in the fight against corruption, and for accountability of government. So this really would've prevented it.

PCIJ: How does this fit in with your overall agenda as a legislator, a senator and as a crusader?

AT: If you have noticed, this is actually the first bill that I filed in this 15th congress. So this is *the* priority bill because that's how I came into this world of politics, through this anti-corruption crusade. And the very key there is transparency and access to information. So that shows to you how important this bill is for me, personally.

PCIJ: What are you going to continue to do to ensure that the FOI bill is still a priority? What will you do to ensure that you maintain the FOI bill as a priority?

Well, it's there already. I filed it so it's going to go through the normal legislative pin. And sadly, the Senate now is or will be preoccupied with some other things like the impeachment of the Ombudsman.

This bill, no matter how important this is, will have to take a backseat and we will take the cue from the President [Benigno Aquino III], if he will certify the bill also as one of his priorities. But we will also need the help of the media to pressure the president if it isn't a priority bill.

PCIJ: How do you feel about how this bill wasn't part of the priority bills of the administration even though in the last congress, then-Senator Aquino made a commitment to this bill publicly?

AT: Well as an ally of this administration, I'm giving the benefit of the doubt that [the President] has set his priorities. I'm going to give the president the leeway he needs in order to govern this country. If he feels, let's say, national security or poverty alleviation will be the priority over transparency then I'm willing to give him that.

Actually, it's not up to me to pressure the President about it. It's going to be the media. The media should be the sector that should pressure the President in taking him into account as far as prioritizing the Freedom of Information Bill. Because as you said it's one of the campaign promises, I think, and even in the last Congress he pushed this, so it's your role actually to pressure the president.

PCIJ: From your perspective, what can you say to the common people, the government rank-and-file for example, and the soldiers in the military, why is this bill important to them?

AT: We need this bill because we want to get rid of corruption. Corruption is one of the ills of this society, and it is the primary obstacle or primary reason why the enormous riches of this country are not being felt by our people. So this is the first step, this is not the ultimate solution but this is the first step. So it's going to be beneficial to everybody, not only for the soldiers but the society in general would benefit for this.

PCIJ: Given the fact that this might not be the priority of the president yet, what do you think are the main factors that could prevent the bill from being passed?

Primarily, well-entrenched interests. There are people who are benefiting from the present system that basically deprives the people to the access to information that they can continue with their wrongdoings and illegal activities. Those are the obstacles to the passage of this bill.

PCIJ: Do you factor in the possibility that media practitioners might abuse the right to access to information?

AT: Well, it's their right. As you know, the media by nature, they have to be inquisitive; they have to be persevering in getting their information so that they can build the story. So it's your job, it's the nature of the job.

When you say that the media might take advantage, the media will have to show that they're responsible enough also to be given this power and authority to access information.

I believe the penal provisions of this bill would be very important because in the bureaucracy right now, if the superior will just say that they won't release that, they won't release it. But if you have a penal provision that would punish those who would not release, they wouldn't have any choice. They would ask the superior to get that responsibility of signing the document. Denying the access to information would make them liable if you found that it is violation of the provision of this bill.

With that it will trigger a change from a culture of secrecy to a culture of transparency. It will help a lot.

PCIJ: Do you still have confidence that the Aquino administration will ratify the bill?

AT: I really don't know. The President is very sensitive to public opinion, especially media opinion, if you're going to pressure him into passing this bill then it would give us within the 15th Congress [to pass it]. Other bills right now are being pushed by the administration as a result from the pressure from the public. So you can do that also because it's in the interest of the media to have this bill passed.

PCIJ: Do you think the government and its agencies are ready for the Freedom of Information bill?

AT: Ready or not, if it is a law already then it can be switched on, so it's not a matter of really letting go of something sacred. Once this becomes a law, ready or not, it should be implemented. -
Interview conducted by Stephanie Directo, Kristal Jimena, and Essen Miguel, PCIJ, May 2011