

Keynote Address

Keeping the Faith

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Binabati ko po ang pinagpipitagang mga opisyal, guro at alumni ng College of Public Administration ng Unibersidad ng Pilipinas sa napakahalagang okasyon na ito—ang inyong ika-45 anibersaryo. (Greetings to esteemed officials, faculty members and alumni of the College of Public Administration, University of the Philippines on a significant occasion—your 45th anniversary.)

Nais ko pong magpasalamat sa inyong lahat, sa pangunguna ni Dean Jose N. Endrigo, sa mainit ninyong pagtanggap sa aba ninyong lingkod. (I wish to thank you all, through Dean Jose N. Endrigo, for your warm welcome to your humble servant.)

Dati-rati, movie actor lamang; ngayon, nakukumbida na ng University of the Philippines (UP) at lalung-lalo na, sa College of Public Administration (CPA). What could be more prestigious than this gathering of the nation's intellectual aristocracy? (I was only a movie actor then; now I also get invited to the University of the Philippines, especially the College of Public Administration.)

In fact, I approach this audience with a certain degree of anxiety, much like a student on the day of his oral comprehensive, or like my good friend, Senator Orly Mercado, on the way to defending his doctoral dissertation before the faculty of the best university in the world—the University of the Philippines.

Sana po, sa araw at sa okasyong ito, maintindihan ninyo ang Ingles ni Erap. (I sincerely hope that on this occasion, you will be able to understand the English of Erap.)

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Hindi po ito Ingles ng nanggaling sa Harvard, o sa Ann Arbor, o sa Oxford. Ito po ay Ingles ng ordinaryong Pilipino na ang pinakamalaking hinayang sa buhay ay ang hindi nakapag-aral sa University of the Philippines. (My English has not originated from Harvard, or Ann Arbor, or Oxford. This is the English spoken by the ordinary Filipino whose greatest disappointment in life is not to have been able to study at the University of the Philippines.)

So what does this college drop-out say before the intellectual aristocracy of the land? An aristocracy with a “k,” or in current *lingua franca*, “may karapatan,” (one who has the right) because it is earned through diligence and hard work, not through inheritance nor influence.

If I were to ask speechwriters to craft a highly literate piece, you would say, “narinig na namin iyan kay Chancellor Raul de Guzman.” (We have heard the same thing from Chancellor Raul de Guzman.)

If I expound on the difference between “pole-vaulting” and “relay race,” using technical economic jargon, you would be asking among yourselves, “sino kayang taga-U.P. School of Economics and sumulat nito.—si Ben Diokno o si Noel de Dios?” (Who from UP School of Economics wrote the piece—Ben Diokno or Noel de Dios?)

So I chose to put my simple thoughts on paper, and bare to you the essential Erap, his vision of a political order where economic transformation is always, *always*, achieved with social equity.

Like most of you, I hold sacred our democratic system. *Sabihin man ng iba na mabagal ang mga proseso ng demokrasya, na hindi ito angkop sa mabilis na pagbabago ng ekonomiya at ng siyensiya, ito pa rin ang sistemang angkop sa Pilipino.* (While others may say that the process of democracy is slow, and that this is not appropriate for the fast-paced change in the economy and sciences, I believe it is still the system appropriate for the Filipino.)

Nagkamali na tayong minsan; huwag na tayong magkamaling muli. (We already committed a mistake once; let us not repeat it again.)

We thought that authoritarianism could make more meaningful change in our lives, specially on our economy, and we submitted to the theory of one man’s indispensability, only to regret it.

Now the same theory is being foisted upon us again, by PIRMA and cabinet “*sip-sips*” (lapping dogs). To them I say: “*Tigilan na ninyo iyan. Hindi ganyan ka-igsi ang ala-ala ng Pilipino.*” (Stop it! The memory of the Filipino is not that short.)

Yet we cannot close our eyes to the daily paradox that rules the lives of our poor, whether rural or urban. Or even the middle-class, who toil from day to day, yet find that even in their years of retirement, things do not seem to be enough.

The answer, I suppose, is in our misunderstanding and mishandling of democracy. Collectively, we have defined democracy as elections, no matter how farcical; as legislative debate, no matter how empty; as position and title, no matter how undeserved.

We love the "forms" of democracy, the institutions of power and authority: but forget the "substance" of democracy—the substance that is **equality before the law**, borne out of genuine respect for and adherence to the sacred principle of the **rule of law**. The substance that is **equal opportunity**. The substance that is **equal access** to basic services under a democratic order founded on the principle of the greatest good for the greatest number.

As a people, we cry to the highest heavens when we feel our rights, and that of our family, are violated. But we shrug our shoulders when big and powerful men get away with graft and corruption. We do not feel that our rights are violated, even if graft steals from the community's resources—resources best put into basic services.

We no longer challenge the "*palakasan*" system, and accept the same as a way of life. The rule of law has been subverted by the very people we elected to uphold the same.

This perennial evil of corruption which we keep decrying but meekly accept as a way of life, "steals" from the national budget 20 percent per annum, by your own studies' reckoning in the College of Public Administration fifteen years ago. Even now, no less than the Budget Secretary of this administration, admits to that figure up to 30 percent; and even more.

It is high time we reverse this feeling of helplessness, this attitude of apathy.

When I was mayor of San Juan, I jailed a relative a few weeks after I assumed office, for disturbing the peace. As Chairman of the PACC, I jailed a compadre and confidante for involvement in syndicated crime. I charged a general in court for the same, but the courts set him free.

I intend to forcefully implement the rule of law, no matter who gets hurt, until adherence to it becomes once more the rule, rather than the exception. From 30 June 1998 and onwards, let no one test my resolve.

Mere resignation from office will not suffice. For crooks and grafters, con artists and forty percenters, there will be no slap in the wrist—they will be clamped in jail. And we will continue to do this, until respect for the rule of law becomes once again enshrined in the national character.

As a developing nation, we have a multitude of public needs from countryside infrastructure to mass transport systems, from quality education to basic preventive health care. Yet we are unable to address these as we continue to look for creative solutions, from more taxes to bond floats; forgetting that right under our noses, corruption bleeds us of 50 billion pesos a year, almost a trillion in one presidential term of office.

But we need creative solutions borne out of common sense, and here I ask the College of Public Administration, to help us: in simplifying the systems by which the public transacts with its government; in making government cost-efficient yet service effective.

These systemic changes are needed, for leadership cannot forever play cops and robbers. The simpler the rules, the lesser the opportunities for graft. The more cost-efficient our systems, the more effective our services will be.

The economy, as we know, is the single greatest factor in giving substance to democracy. Until every family has equal access to economic opportunity, to jobs and gainful livelihood; until Filipino children are trained well and educated properly; their health requirements amply cared for; and the dream of owning a home is an affordable reality, there is little substance to our democracy.

Thus I do constantly harp on growth with equity. This is not to say that we intend to turn back the clock and reverse correct economic policies.

In this regard, I invite you to look at contemporary economic history—at Britain's example, from which country our President recently came.

Back in the sixties, Britain's government went into socialist economic policies which were temporarily welcomed by the population, but later, these policies eroded British competitiveness in industry and caused an economic slump.

The mistake was corrected by the Tory governments of Thatcher and later John Major, and they succeeded in nursing the economy back to global strength.

However, as Britain enters the 21st century, there has been a widespread clamor for more social reform under the same free market economy, thus the resurgence of the New Labor Party under the leadership of Prime Minister Tony Blair.

The Philippines, likewise, must not go back to the days of protectionism or government intervention in business, but we have to deepen government's commitment towards improving the quality of life of our poor, suffering masses, who have yet to see the much-touted economic growth affect their daily lives in a meaningful way.

And we will do this the Filipino way—accepting realities of the global market place, but not surrendering our national interest blindly to the altar of globalism.

We will provide safety nets, not as an after-thought by textbook economists, but because our people are our first priority.

The people's interest, the national interest, takes primacy above everything else.

This is what mature democracies all over the world, from England to France, the United States and Canada, Germany and Japan, have through the years, successfully nurtured.

We will not dismantle the forms of democracy. We will make—we must make—democracy work, in substance more than form.

For that is what good public administration is all about.

Whether it is managing a municipality like San Juan, where twenty years back, with your advice, I computerized our revenue system, institutionalized barangay health care, resettled squatters into a model resettlement area and provided basic services to all.

Or whether it is running an awesome bureaucracy spread over 7,100 islands, the principles of good public administration are the same.

Honesty.

Accountability.

Simple functional systems.

Simple rules and regulations implemented uniformly, and communicated to the people properly.

Heeding the wise counsel of the learned and the experienced.

And listening, likewise, and always, to the simple wisdom of the common folk; reaching out to them; making them feel they belong.

Above all, a sincere commitment to upgrade the lives of the majority, by a government that protects; a government that defends; a government that cares.

Knowing the real problems of real people, making government implement real solutions, rather than empty talk.

My friends, you whose wise counsel I have always sought, and will continue to seek, I am proud to say all these years, from mayor to senator to vice-president, I have always kept the people's faith. I have not betrayed the public trust.

And the public has kept me going with their popular support. Joseph Estrada hopes to repay the people, our people, through genuine public service; not by bowing to fleeting populist pressures, but by using popular acceptance to support what is right, to instill national discipline, and inspire collective greatness.

Maraming salamat po. (Thank you.)