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Let's rise for rice

By TONYO CRUZ

RICE has become very expensive in the past years, but especially now under President Duterte.

The government has tried to deflect the issue by launching a campaign against waste of rice. It is as if there's a national trend where we willingly throw away precious rice, order beyond what we could consume, or have the means to buy lots of rice only to throw them most of them away.

Enter Bantay Bigas, which tries to pierce through the fake news of tarrification and importation preached by the government as the solutions to high rice prices and low rice supply.

Cathy Estavillo says "rice tarrification is not the solution for the rice crisis happening now in the country. In fact, flooding of imported rice in the local market will lead to our farmers' bankruptcy and displacement from their lands. It will put our farmers at a disadvantage, especially that the government has minimal support for our rice farmers and the entry of the imported rice may coincide with the harvest season."

Bantay Bigas also denounces as fake and artificial the National Food Authority's claims that there's a rice shortage, and that it is nothing more than a concocted justification for the recent increases in rice prices and for importing 250,000 metric tons of rice.

Rice prices are rising because of a combination of factors beyond the control of farmers and consumers, and yet well within the powers of government to rein in but won't.

One reason is that the government is mind-conditioning us about the removal from the market of the P27 NFA rice and the switch to P38 Department of Agriculture commercial rice.

This two-step combo is consistent not with making sure the poorest Filipinos, including minimum wage earners and even farmers, get access to the national staple. It is arguably more consistent with rice hoarding, price and supply manipulation, importation and tarrification.

Lowering the price of rice nationwide should be fairly easy, if only the government cracks down on big landlords, the inutile NFA, illegal rice importers, and rice smugglers.

The first step: Instead of pampering the big landlords, big rice traders, and big rice importers, the government should increase local palay procurement and buy from farmers at better prices. This solves many problems for farmers and removes business opportunities from those who fleece consumers with expensive rice prices.

The second step: Government should abolish the rice syndicate starting with rice traders who cheat farmers, hoard rice and fix rice prices, and their partners who smuggle rice. At the same time, revamp the NFA and the DA to make them work for both the farmer and the consumer.

The third step: Government should provide appropriate support services

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and subsidies to local rice farmers, instead of pampering the big landlords who manage rural economies solely for their own, selfish benefit.

The fourth step: Government should stop promoting the massive land use and crop conversion that limit the areas devoted to rice farming and consequently rice production. Liberalizing agriculture since GATT and WTO has not brought us the promised lower food prices and adequate food supply. It has only enriched a few, and made the country insecure in terms of food.

The fifth step: Genuine agrarian reform and development of the rice industry. Farmers should be freed from archaic feudal bondage through land reform. There's no more excuse for it in 2018. It would enable them to freely work with entrepreneurs, scientists, academics, and other professionals in developing the rice industry towards national food security, lower prices, higher yield, and so on.

These are mostly proposals from the National Federation of Peasant Women and the Peasant Movement of the Philippines, the country's biggest peasant organizations, backed by pro-farmer and pro-consumer experts and advocates in Bantay Bigas. Every Filipino consumer should endorse these sensible steps.

Up to the early 1970s, the Philippines was among the world's top rice producers and the nation enjoyed adequate rice supply and low rice prices. But starting with Marcos and continuing with the post-Marcos regimes, governments have systematically neglecting farmers and consumers in favor of Big Landlords, land use converters, crop switchers, rice traders and smugglers along the line of neoliberal economics.

They coalesced to commodify and commercialize the national staple, saying the wave of the future means abandoning rice farming, switching to cash crops for export, and depending on cheaper imported rice and other food imports. That's the package of neoliberalism's bitter prescriptions and false promises for you and me.

The current situation under neoliberalism: extra white rice at P30 per serving at fastfood restaurants, upwards of P50 per kilo in palengkes and supermarkets, and at the same time massive poverty among farmers in the provinces. Who profits from this state of affairs, and who would score a windfall under tarrification and rice importation? Definitely not the farmers and consumers.

Amid all these, the government and apologists for neoliberalism blame the farmer for being supposedly lazy and the consumer for being allegedly wasteful. Nice try.

"Itaas ang presyo ng palay, ibaba ang presyo ng bigas" are demands that don't make sense to both the academic philistines and the leaders of a feudal Philippine economy. But for farmers and consumers, they are demands that make perfect sense and compel the nation to alter the absurd realities in agriculture since the time of Marcos to the present Marcosian pretender.