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Fighting corruption in a federal system

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A MULTI-layer government structure will require a more sophisticated and streamlined anti-corruption strategy. In fact, instituting a coherent and robust anti-corruption mechanism in the new federal constitution is integral to the success of the federal system itself.

The bodies tasked to write a draft federal charter should bear in mind that if the current way of fighting graft and corruption is carried over to the federal set-up, then the socio-political ills we all want to eliminate can even multiply exponentially.

It is worthy to note that a significant percentage of complaints filed with the Office of the Ombudsman are against local officials. Moreover, the Philippines currently ranks 101st in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index for 2016.

Pertinently, for many years now, Singapore has consistently been perceived as the least corrupt country in Southeast Asia – thus, making its anti-corruption framework the most logical benchmark for the Philippines to follow.

I am citing two studies here to highlight vital lessons from Singapore's experience in defeating corruption which can be integrated in the new federal constitution. The first one is in Corruption in Asia: Pervasiveness and Arbitrariness, particularly the finding that maintaining only one independent anti-corruption agency has proven to be very effective in curbing corruption in the public sector.

In Singapore, the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau is the only state office mandated to investigate corruption in government. This agency prides itself on the unimpeachable integrity of its personnel. However, the most critical quality of this institution is its insulation from politics. Its one and only mission is "To Combat Corruption through Swift and Sure, Firm but Fair Action."

The nearest equivalent entity for the Philippines is the Office of the Ombudsman. The 1987 Constitution describes this institution as "protectors of the people." It is a constitutional office endowed with substantial investigatory and prosecutorial powers to basically enforce the constitutional tenet: "Public officers and employees must, at all times, be accountable to the people, serve them with utmost responsibility, integrity, loyalty, and efficiency; act with patriotism and justice, and lead modest lives."

Notably however, all presidents elected since 1992 have created their own anti-corruption office. Therefore, instead of just having one agency to tackle this problem, we have multiple agencies. And many anti-corruption experts believe this is precisely the reason the Philippines has failed in the battle against this heinous problem.

As we have seen many times in the past, the "turf war" syndrome has afflicted the various anti-corruption offices. And if not engaged in the blame game, officials of these agencies rarely coordinate with each other. Moreover, spreading funds across different agencies performing the same mandate diminishes the effectiveness of all to produce the desired outcome.

The second one is in Combating Corruption in the Asia-Pacific Countries: What Do We Know and What Needs to be Done? where one of the conclusions provide that "political will" is the most important prerequisite for an anti-corruption mechanism to be successful.

Meaning, if government leaders are dead serious in defeating graft and corruption, they must allocate the required resources to support the anti-corruption strategy. As the adage goes, put your money where your mouth is. Otherwise, the anti-corruption aspiration is just a typical Pinoy politician's election promise.

Moreover, "political will" equates to the impartial enforcement of anti-corruption legislation. In our context, this would ultimately mean that no one in the

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