

Speech by the President of the Republic of the Philippines Benigno S. Aquino III

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On March 21, 1887, a novel entitled “Noli Me Tangere” or in English, “Touch Me Not,” was published here in Berlin. It was written by a then-27-year old Filipino doctor, artist, and visionary named Jose Rizal. Dr. Rizal spent two years in Germany. Short on funds, he rationed his biscuits for meals; to stave off loneliness, he wrote poems about the flowers of Heidelberg, translated Schiller’s William Tell into his native Tagalog, and drew ideas from Berlin’s libraries. Along with his fellow Filipinos, he engaged in discourse with the intellectuals of Europe, applying the ideas of the Enlightenment to his own context back home, and pursued discussions about their shared values and their aspirations for humanity. –

Noli Me Tangere was Dr. Rizal’s first novel. It offered a candid look at the ills of Filipino society under colonial rule. It shed light on the abuses of the colonizers, and on our people’s collective longing for freedom and dignity. Scholars consider it the first articulation of a Filipino national consciousness. The novel eventually earned the ire of the authorities. After some time in exile, Dr. Rizal would be arrested and martyred by firing squad on the 30th of December, 1896.

Dr. Rizal’s ideas, works, and, ultimately, his death, sparked a revolution for Philippine independence. Since then, the world has recognized Rizal’s greatness; in fact, my second official function during this European trip was to lay a wreath at a monument for Dr. Jose Rizal built by the Spanish government in Madrid. Today, more than 127 years after the Noli Me Tangere emerged from a Berlin press, I stand before you as President of the first democratic and constitutional republic in Asia, one in which every generation has been challenged by Rizal’s words, “There can be no tyrants where there are no slaves.” In our generation, we have rearticulated this challenge in a battle cry that resonated in our last Presidential elections wherein we said, “Where there is no corruption, there is no poverty.”

From the beginning of my term, we have stayed true to our promise. We have brought the moral imperatives of justice, transparency, and accountability back into the equation of governance. We have plugged bureaucratic leakages and strengthened public institutions. A good example of our reform efforts is our overhaul of the Philippine budgeting process. Our administration has adopted what we call the zero-based budgeting, which involves reviewing all government projects, axing the ones that provided little to no benefit to our countrymen, while keeping and even strengthening the ones that had great positive effect.

We pursued all those who committed wrongdoing, regardless of their wealth or influence. When evidence of plunder and electoral sabotage were found against my predecessor in the Presidency, corresponding charges were filed, and now, she is under hospital arrest, waiting to face due process of our court systems. When it was proven that the sitting Chief Justice of our Supreme Court failed to declare 98 percent of his assets in his Statement of Assets and Liabilities, as our Constitution requires him to do, like-minded reformists in Congress

removed him from office, by following constitutionally-ordained proceedings. These instances, among others, sent a clear message: The rule of law applies to all.

We cannot stress enough the importance of adhering to the rule of law. A nation's law, after all, encapsulates that nation's set of values and aspirations. This same idea applies to international law, which reflects the collective values and aspirations of humanity, and is meant to guarantee that relationships are established and dictated not through might, but through a commonality in values, and a recognition that we are all inhabitants of one world.

We are all aware that tensions in the South China Sea have created uncertainty in our region. This uncertainty poses threats to the rule of law. My country stands firmly in the belief that the only sustainable, peaceful, and dignified resolution to any debate lies not in belligerence, deception, displays of military might, or surreptitious actions meant to shape the situation in the waters, but in reasonably laying out our arguments before an impartial arbiter. As descendants of the seafaring Austronesian peoples, Filipinos have, for millennia, viewed the South China Sea as a region vital to the livelihood, security, and cultural identity of those who live around it. It is thus an imperative for us to oppose by every peaceful, legal, and diplomatic means possible, any attempt by any country to claim these waters solely as their own.

To this end, we are taking two tracks: first, we continue to promote the formulation of a binding code of conduct for the South China Sea; and second, we are pursuing arbitration to clarify the maritime entitlements for all countries concerned; this a mechanism embedded in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. We continue to invite other claimant countries to join us, so that together we may expand the avenues to arrive at a peaceful resolution to this long-standing dispute.

Ladies and gentlemen, if it is true that international law embodies our consensus as co-inhabitants in a single, global community, then it stands to reason that violating it means flouting not just a single nation, but the entire community of nations. Conversely, observing international law strengthens a dynamic harmony among nations, which then could be harnessed to uplift the lives of all. I believe that the heads of government whom I have had the honor of meeting on this particular trip have reaffirmed these ideas as they manifested their support for the peaceful resolution of disputes in the South China Sea.

The maintenance of stability creates an environment conducive to unhampered and inclusive growth. Today, my country is on the cusp of an era of even greater potential for progress. By 2015, or next year, the Philippines will be hitting a demographic sweet spot, which means that majority of our population will be of working age. Studies show that countries who hit this sweet spot grow by an average of 7.3 percent over the ten years that immediately follow.

This is why we continue investing heavily in areas that will increase opportunities for all our countrymen. Our administration's commitment to transparency and accountability has allowed us to unlock resources, which we have spent on improving the lives of our people. Perhaps the most prominent example of this is our Conditional Cash Transfer program, the recipients of which we increased from less than 800,000 households in 2010 to more than four million this year. The idea is simple: As long as their children are sent to school and vaccinated, and as long as pregnant mothers get regular health check-ups, then they will

receive a regular cash grant from the government. The program ticks all the boxes. It gives those in the margins additional resources to get by, it ensures that they remain healthy, and it allows their children to receive a more complete education. In fact, this year, we have further expanded this program to include households with children aged 15 to 18. This decision came about because of a study conducted by the Philippine Institute for Development Studies, which revealed that high school graduates make about 40 percent more than those who only get to finish elementary years.

Of course, we are matching these efforts with significant improvements in our system of education. Since entering office, we have addressed the 2010 backlog we inherited in classrooms, which amounted to 66,800 units, and we have done the same with the backlogs in textbooks and school seats. We have likewise passed a law updating our basic education cycle to be at par with global standards.

To equip our people with the skills to take advantage of the opportunities that arise, we have empowered agencies such as the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority, which spearheads the skills-training and livelihood initiatives of government. For example, TESDA's Training for Work Scholarship Program alone has benefited 632,105 graduates as of June 2014. A recent study shows that 68.5 percent of the Program's 2012 graduates found employment within six months. The rest, meanwhile, are being assisted by the agency in their search for employment.

Protecting the interests of the people, of course, also involves securing them in times of disaster. We are determined to confront the new normal of climate change with foresight. Our country is hit by an average of 20 storms a year, which is why, from the beginning of our administration, we have upgraded our technological capacities to allow us to better prepare for incoming storms. We have installed several Doppler radars in strategic areas around the archipelago, enabling us to better estimate rainfall amounts; we have used LiDAR technology to map the topography of our river systems; and as part of a project named NOAH, we have put up a website through which anyone with an internet connection can access real-time weather information. With the technological wherewithal we now have, we are able to better position personnel, rescue equipment, and relief goods in the event of natural disaster, and of course, to move populations to safer areas.

However, one of the hardest lessons my administration has learned is there are times when no amount of preparation is enough. In November of last year, 44 out of 81 of our provinces were ravaged by Typhoon Haiyan, which, according to some, was the strongest storm to ever make landfall in recorded history. Indeed, it was a storm on a scale that we had never seen before. It swept away many of the goods we had prepositioned, much of the necessary equipment for relief operations, and even some of our first responders, among them our Secretaries of Defense and of the Interior and Local Government, who flew into areas in the typhoon's path the day before it made landfall were put in danger.

I am thankful for the solidarity of the international community, who helped us get back on the road to recovery sooner rather than later. Germany was one of those that extended significant aid to my people. In the wake of the typhoon, we received a significant amount in aid and assistance from the German public. It was, I am told, the highest recorded amount of

donations given by German citizens to a foreign country. In fact, we also have to thank the German government. Truly, Filipinos will never forget your kindness and compassion.

The task at hand for us now is clear: We must not allow ourselves to be mired in a vicious cycle of destruction and mere reconstruction. We have to build back, and we have to build back better. This means constructing more resilient infrastructure and communities in more strategic areas, so that we can minimize the impact of future disasters. Moving forward, we are likewise seeking to foster more vibrant and more inclusive economies in the area. We are also taking long-term measures to address climate change: As early as now, we are taking steps to embark on a low emission development strategy. I am certain that everyone here recognizes the challenge of utilizing such technologies. After all, Europe, and in particular, Germany, is one of the leaders in renewable energy, and you know how costly and complex such a strategy is. This is why, today, I am also hopeful that we can find partners in this particular sector who can find methods to pursue energy production that is clean, efficient, and affordable.

Addressing our people's vulnerabilities, investing in their strengths, and reforming the way our government works, are vital cornerstones of our development strategy. This strategy is working, and the world has taken notice. In 2013, the Philippine economy grew by 7.2 percent, making us one of the best performing economies in Asia. Average GDP growth from 2010 to 2013 stands at 6.3 percent; a significant increase from the 4.3 percent recorded from 2006 to 2009. Furthermore, since my administration took office, we have received 20 positive credit rating actions from agencies around the world, the most significant of which were granted last year, when Moody's, Standard & Poor's, and Fitch unanimously declared us investment grade. This took place when global economy was in turmoil, and the credibility of the ratings agencies was being questioned. Even if they took a very conservative approach to evaluating risk, they still deemed upgraded us.

There is no doubt in my mind that our two countries are more than capable of mutually beneficial engagement. Germany is our biggest trade partner in Europe, and German investments are well represented in many major sectors. I am certain many Filipinos, and perhaps many Germans as well, are expecting even greater things from a strengthened partnership, as we build new platforms to deepen our economic and people-to-people ties. These include the so-called Triple Win Project we signed last year, which facilitates the entry of Filipino nurses into Germany. We also have the Social Security Agreement we concluded this morning.

We have gone a long way in the past few decades. In 1986, my mother, Corazon C. Aquino was catapulted to the Presidency through the bloodless EDSA People Power Revolution. Just three years after that, she visited Germany in July of 1989; a few months later, the Berlin Wall fell. It was a time when our two countries, both having suffered through dictatorships, could recognize and celebrate the values that we share: freedom, democracy, and the rule of law.

Just one generation removed from my mother's visit, the Philippine resurgence is now in full swing. The empowerment of the people in 1986, most profoundly manifested then in our newfound freedoms, now finds new meaning in the economic empowerment being engendered in our society. We have recovered from the scourge of the dictatorship and from

periods of self-serving leadership, and have fostered a positive shift in the national psyche. Optimism among the Filipino people and the international community is very high, opportunities are expanding, and our government continues to move towards progress with the interest of the Filipino people as its north star.

I am extremely confident that, if we continue nurturing our shared values and deepening our engagement, we can look back generations from now and see this meeting in Berlin as yet another turning point: the moment when the world ignited new dynamic synergies, to bring about mutual success and prosperity that is felt by more and more citizens of a world where, indeed, no one will be left behind.

Thank you and good afternoon.