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Transparency Int'l tells Noy: Create body to jail thieves

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MANILA, Philippines — The incoming administration should create an independent commission to go after “those who robbed and stole from the country,” the cofounder of Transparency International said yesterday.

Speaking before members of the Makati Business Club (MBC) and the European Chamber of Commerce of the Philippines, Michael Hershman said the administration of President-elect Benigno Aquino III should live up to its promise to stamp out corruption by relentlessly going after thieves in the government.

“Go after those who robbed and stole from this country. They must be held accountable, and this time, it has to be done for real. They must go to jail if found guilty of corruption and their assets must be seized and returned to the public treasury,” said Hershman, who is also the president and chief executive of the Fairfax Group.

Recover the money

“Go back 10 or 15 years and look at the breakdown of systems and controls. Try to recover the money that has been stolen from the country. But don’t do it unless you have a judicial system that can penalize those who broke the law,” he said.

The Philippines is ranked 139th out of 180 countries on Transparency International’s corruption perception index, 28 places behind Indonesia and the lowest of the major Southeast Asian nations.

Concerns about endemic corruption and weak institutions have seen foreign investment in the Philippines lag behind those of its neighbors.

But Aquino should not expend too much of his own energy to go after those who have stolen and continue to steal from the country, Hershman said.

Instead, an independent commission should be formed to handle such cases with "no fear or favor," he said.

Full disclosure

Hershman also said there should be greater transparency among government officials, starting with the members of the incoming Cabinet.

He said the new officials should disclose their assets at the onset.

"Integrity pacts" should likewise be required in all government procurements and deals "to prevent middlemen from passing money to government employees," he said.

Hershman said there should be transparency in the private sector as well.

"Companies that don't do the right thing should be subjected to peer pressure and public scrutiny. In biddings and other undertakings, exclude companies that don't follow the proper processes. This way, we can level the playing field," he said.

Toolkit for business deals

In an interview with the Inquirer, MBC executive director Alberto Lim said local businesses had initiated a move to "clean our own ranks" by developing a toolkit that would serve as guideline for all business dealings.

"We want to have clear rules, a code of conduct that will guide people on how they act and companies on how they operate," Lim said.

He said the government also had to do its part by ensuring transparency in bidding processes "to encourage businesses to invest, especially on public infrastructure."

"Businesses are still reluctant to invest because the rules are not clear or sometimes favor a certain group of people. We want this to change," Lim said.

No instant changes

Ramon del Rosario, who served as finance secretary under President Fidel

Ramos, said people should not expect instant and dramatic changes once Aquino is sworn into office on June 30.

"The prosecution of erring officials will be a significant breakthrough, but this will not be enough," Del Rosario said.

"This is not a fight only against public sector corruption but also a commitment to clean our own ranks. Thus, we can't count on the Aquino administration to take on the fight alone. We must do our part," he said.

Aquino's clean image and the trust Filipinos have in his family's name were factors in his big win in the May 10 presidential election.

His nearest rival was Joseph Estrada, who was forced from the presidency in 2001 over corruption charges. He was convicted of plunder in 2007 but was quickly pardoned by his successor, outgoing President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.

Said Hershman: "I don't understand how someone could be convicted of a crime here, pledged not to run for office, and wind up as the No. 2 candidate for the presidency. I don't understand that philosophy. You can't let that happen."

Ms Arroyo herself is dogged by allegations of corruption, electoral fraud and rights abuses, which she denies.

Aquino, who ran on a campaign of anticorruption and transparency, has promised to investigate the Arroyo administration. ***With reports from Reuters and Inquirer Research***