

International People's Tribunal to try Philippines President Aquino and Obama for Crimes against the Filipino People

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An international tribunal will try cases of human rights violations perpetrated by Philippines President Ninoy Aquino, as well as United States (US) President Barack Obama, in Washington D.C. next July.

The International People's Tribunal, initiated by non-government organizations, human rights groups and solidarity groups in the Philippines and the United States, was launched today in Quezon City, Philippines. It is being seen as part of efforts by the international community to make the Philippine and US governments accountable for the various abuses and "anti-people" policies inflicted on the Filipino people.

"Beneath the liberal-democratic facade of the Aquino regime, brutal repression of people's civil and political rights abound, with hundreds of cases of extra-judicial killings and forced disappearances and massive displacement of families (happening today)," said Cristina Palabay, secretary-general of Karapatan which is among the complainants in the IPT.

IPT will also try the many violations of economic, political and cultural rights of the Filipino people, including the congressional and presidential pork barrel scandals, the many onerous deals entered into by the Philippine government, including Public-Private Partnerships, the massive demolition and displacement of urban poor settlers, among others.

The tribunal will also probe into the role of the increasing US political, economic and military intervention in the Philippines that is at the root of the intensifying poverty and repression in the country.



IADL's Jeannie Mirer (on screen) speaks during the public launch of IPT.
KR Guda

Moral suasion

During the public launch at the University of the Philippines in Quezon City, Reverend Canon Barry Naylor, who is chairperson of the International Coalition for Human Rights in the Philippines and one of the IPT's convenors, spoke via Skype.

Naylor said that although the IPT is judicially non-binding, it is nevertheless significant and symbolic, and aims at helping shape global public opinion regarding the systematic abuses committed on Filipinos by the US and Philippine governments.

“People’s tribunals have had success in directing international attention to grave abuses of human rights in various countries including the Philippines during the Marcos and Arroyo regimes. The IPT draws inspiration and builds on the momentum of previous peoples’ tribunals to advance human rights and hold governments to account,” said Naylor.

Its initiators said IPT draws inspiration and builds on the gains of previous people’s tribunals, including the 1980 first session of the Permanent People’s Tribunal on the Philippines in Antwerp, Belgium, which tried the Marcos dictatorship; and the 2007 second session of the PPT on the Philippines in The Hague, The Netherlands, which tried President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo and US Pres. George W. Bush.

Aside from Naylor, co-convenor Jeannie Mirer (US), president of the International Association of Democratic Lawyers (IADL), also joined the public launch via Skype.

Mirer also said that although an IPT verdict is not legally binding, similar people’s tribunals had tremendous impact in shedding light to state abuses and other atrocities in specific contexts. She cited the Russell Tribunal, initiated by Nobel Prize-winner Bertrand Russell as well as French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, investigated the US atrocities during the Vietnam War in 1966 and 1967.

“Its findings and reasoning were accepted in the court of public opinion,” she said, adding that the tribunal had a tremendous effect on the consciousness of the people regarding the Vietnam War.



Human rights lawyer Edre Olalia: Credibility will be ensured. KR Guda

Credible process

Azadeh Shahshahani (US), president of the National Lawyers’ Guild (NLG) and a juror in the IPT, said that the judges and jurors, as well as the prosecutors, are distinguished lawyers and experts in their the field of human rights coming from different countries.

“We are obviously coming to this situation with an impartial standpoint. We are looking forward to hearing what the evidence is as presented to us by the victims and the experts. Based on that, and based on our own experience in dealing with international human rights law, we can consult with our colleagues and reach a verdict,” Shahshahani said.

American lawyer Vanessa Lucas, also from NLG, said that the verdict and the evidences presented in the tribunal will be presented to international bodies such as the United Nations as well as the concerned US government agencies.

Filipino human rights lawyer Edre Olalia of the National Union of People’s Lawyers, who will

serve as one of IPT's clerks of court, said that although the verdict to be reached during the tribunal in Washington DC in July will be non-binding, legal procedures to ensure impartiality shall be followed.

For instance, Olalia said the Philippine and US governments shall be given summons for both to be given opportunity to defend their case before the tribunal.

"As clerks of court, we will enjoin the jurors and prosecutors to follow the judicious, impartial, fair and credible legal processes," Olalia said, adding that every party involved in the tribunal will have their own roles and no one person will perform more than one role.

Prosecutors, which, according to the initiators will possibly be led by former US Attorney General Ramsey Clark, will have to present credible evidence and testimonies that will convincingly prove the allegations.

"If these standards are achieved, the tribunal will definitely be credible whatever the verdict may be," Olalia added.

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