# Redemption from corruption

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With Easter regarded as a time for spiritual renewal and reflection, Filipinos can also use this opportunity to reflect collectively as a nation especially with the midterm elections coming up soon.

The country has been through its own agony in the garden with attacks against its moral fiber. This is no more evident than in the endemic corruption that has destroyed the core of government institutions and has pushed the country many steps behind its regional neighbors.

Government funds and revenue lost to corruption on an annual basis is huge, Benjamin Punongbayan wrote in an article on the economic effects of corruption published in November last year on the P&A Grant Thornton website.

Punongbayan, a leader in the accounting profession, estimated the amount lost to corruption in the 2024 national budget alone to be about P1.6 trillion. He based this on a Department of Justice study in 2019 stating that the amount of corruption in the Philippines at the national level was at 20 percent of the annual national budget.

“When put together, the recurring total annual amount could have been deployed in large-scale programs that have long-term and wide beneficial effects on the nation’s economic growth and development, such as in large infrastructures that provide connectivity within and among the country’s various islands (roads, railways, bridges, sea ports, airports, and similar others); rehabilitation of the education system; substantial reduction of poverty; a more expansive health-care system; and other urgently needed economic and social development programs,” he said.

## Integrity in governance

Corruption has permeated almost every corner of the bureaucracy from public works, health, immigration, customs, police, even in business, that sometimes one can’t help but wonder if there was a way to escape it.

“Clearly, widespread corruption has caused the Philippines to lose great opportunities continuously over a long period of time to become a more economically developed country. Equally sadly, the country will continue to lose such great opportunities in the foreseeable future,” Punongbayan said.

Despite the grim outlook, there’s always hope for renewal.

Like the story of resurrection, Filipinos have a chance to redeem the country’s soul and bring back integrity in governance. They have another chance on May 12 when voters elect national and local officials.

It may appear to be an uphill battle given recent developments where, on top of odious personalities seeking public office, more and more candidates have displayed offensive and misogynistic behavior making them unfit to take on leadership roles. For elections apparently are no longer a battle for the hearts and minds of voters, but a competition for the public’s short-attention span and a race toward virality on social media as a tool to get votes.

## Day of reckoning

University of the Philippines professor Jean Encinas Franco said these candidates were emboldened by former president Rodrigo Duterte who was known to make offensive and rude remarks at the expense of women and the poor. Despite that, he was elected president and, until the end of his term, still enjoyed very high approval ratings.

Franco said it will take “long-term work” to create awareness that this kind of behavior is undesirable and that there are consequences for these actions. The task, she said, rests not only on the Commission on Elections, the courts, or political parties but also on civic and nongovernmental organizations engaged in voter education.

Dishonest and crooked officials must have their day of reckoning just like how Duterte is now in detention at the International Criminal Court in The Hague, Netherlands and awaiting trial for crimes against humanity related to his deadly drug war; or his daughter, Vice President Sara Duterte, facing an impeachment trial in the Senate.

## Panacea to a broken system

Officials who have pocketed taxpayer money, some even seeking reelection, must be held accountable: for every road or bridge that collapsed because millions were funneled to pockets of corrupt officials instead of quality materials; for every peso paid for overpriced medical supplies that could have been spent on much-needed health services; for every government service that did not reach its intended recipients because the funds went to ghost beneficiaries or dummy foundations; for every schoolbuilding that was not built or textbook that was not bought because the budget was diverted to confidential funds. They must be held accountable for these acts against Filipinos.

It rests on every Filipino who wants to witness the country reach its full potential in their lifetime to use their vote as their voice against corrupt and evil ways. While elections are not the panacea to a broken system, electing leaders who have integrity, dignity, love for country, and who will serve public interest before self can be the first step in pushing the Philippines forward and redeeming it from damnation.