# Tall order for Torre

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It was a broadside that seemingly came out of nowhere. Reacting to the widely praised appointment of Police Gen. Nicolas Torre III as the new chief of the Philippine National Police, Sen. Jinggoy Estrada had quite a mouthful to say: Torre, he harrumphed, was “not a good choice.” This is the first time, he added, that the country will have “such an arrogant PNP chief.”

As far as the public knew, Torre had not had any altercation with Estrada before this, so what prompted the outburst? Did the senator—still entangled in 11 counts of graft charges at the Sandiganbayan over the alleged diversion of P200 million in pork barrel funds—tremble at the thought that Torre as the nation’s chief law enforcer might one day have to haul him to jail? Was this a visceral indication of fear from anyone who realized that, here at last, was a top cop who would be “arrogant” enough to ignore the bluster and power customary to the high and mighty in public office, and would simply apply the law in discharging his job?

Torre became PNP chief, after all, with a fearsome reputation preceding him—fearsome, that is, to those who have experienced his no-nonsense brand of law enforcement and leadership. There’s the now-detained televangelist Apollo Quiboloy, who, lulled by his closeness to the strongman ex-president Rodrigo Duterte, thought he could use Davao as his hometown stronghold to evade the courts for the heinous charges of human trafficking and sexual abuse of minors.

## Most dangerous mission

Quiboloy and his followers holed up in one of his sprawling properties in a two-week standoff that saw a number of violent skirmishes between the police and sect members. Vice President Sara Duterte piled in by taking up the cudgels for Quiboloy, blasting the police for their operations and demanding that the siege be called off.

The pressure was tremendous on the police force that had met failure after failure in their repeated searches of the Quiboloy compound, but their leader, Torre, was undeterred. He relentlessly smoked out his target and, in the end, Quiboloy had no recourse but to emerge from his bunker and surrender.

The same iron will was even more on display during the tinderbox minutes and hours leading to the arrest and flight of former president Duterte to The Hague in the Netherlands, to stand trial at the International Criminal Court for crimes against humanity over the drug war killings. Torre was handed the most dangerous mission of all in recent memory: Apprehend the person who, until lately, was the country’s most powerful and ruthless figure, whose blunt orders to the police led to the deaths of thousands of ordinary Filipinos and who still commanded formidable influence in government and the public.

## Moment of reckoning

Torre could have opted to be obsequious and deferential to his former boss. Instead, for once applying the principle more honored in the breach than in the observance in this republic—that no one is above the law—Torre was professional but stern, and ultimately implacable, in handing Duterte his moment of reckoning. The ultimatum: Get on the plane, or I will bodily carry you inside. Duterte was soon on the Lear jet that flew him to his prison cell in The Hague.

No wonder Torre becoming PNP chief strikes fear in the hearts of many. President Marcos appears to acknowledge as much the high hopes the public is investing in their new chief law enforcer when he gave Torre his marching orders: “Keep the ranks of our police officers clean and honorable… [and] speed up the investigation of cases against police officers who violated the law so that we can deliver justice as soon as possible.” For good measure, he challenged Torre to whip up the 230,000-strong police force into one that “acts with precision, responds with compassion, and stands as a pillar of accountability.”

## Guts of steel

It’s a tall, and long overdue, order. Torre is taking command of a police organization that suffers a severe deficit in public trust and standing, commonly seen as having become the gross parody of its motto, “to serve and protect.” He will have to summon his guts of steel to put the PNP house in order—to go after abusive cops, to crack down on crime and lawlessness, to break up well-connected syndicates no matter how high up in government their tentacles lead. To pull the PNP, finally, out of the stench and muck that continue to becloud it after having served as the foot soldiers of the Duterte administration’s murderous “war on drugs.”

But perhaps Torre might also prove to be the right person for the job. He is the first PNP chief to come from the Philippine National Police Academy and not from the elite Philippine Military Academy. Hopefully, that civilian background and training will put Torre in good stead, making him singularly sympathetic to the concerns of the civilian population he has to serve. For this country’s sake, all citizens must wish him the best.