# Wider probe for systemic rot | Inquirer Opinion

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Lost amid the bedlam opening of the Senate Blue Ribbon probe into anomalous flood-control projects—when certain senators took crucial time away from actually ferreting out the truth with their performative antics and sanctimonious handwashing—was an important development in the issue of the hour: President Marcos has agreed to form an independent commission to look into the public-works irregularities.

This is an important concession, and one that the public and various quarters have rightfully demanded if only to ensure that any investigation would be fair, thorough, and impartial. Short of that, and any touted probe would be seen as compromised and a distraction from any real drive for accountability.

Mr. Marcos said his office is already drafting the executive order that will create the independent commission. Its members, he added, should be “forensic investigators… lawyers, justices, prosecutors, who will look at the evidence… and make the recommendation to either the [Department of Justice] or the [Office of the] Ombudsman, depending on who is found to be liable for some of these nefarious activities.”

Forming this commission forthwith should be Mr. Marcos’ most urgent to-do for now, because as the ongoing Congress hearings underscore, the public is hard-pressed to buy the pearl-clutching shock expressed by lawmakers at the billions lost to corrupt public works over the years.

## Newfound zeal

Nor are they buying the newfound zeal these lawmakers are now demonstrating as they go after complicit private contractors and bureaucrats in the Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH), when it’s common knowledge that most politicians are not only right in bed with them, but are in fact at the apex of the system.

According to Mr. Marcos, the independent commission’s investigation will cover infrastructure anomalies in the past three years of his administration. That is not enough by any standard. After all, the cozy ties that contractors, DPWH middlemen, and local political overlords have forged between themselves to jointly profit from public funds certainly did not start only in 2022, at the start of the Marcos presidency.

That much was made clear by the revealing exchange at the Senate hearing on Monday, when Sen. Bato dela Rosa asked contractor Sarah Discaya when their construction firms first started bagging contracts from the government, which, by her own admission in a TV interview, would catapult her family to great wealth.

## Ballooning budget

Discaya said it was 2016 onwards. Dela Rosa asked her to repeat her answer. It was the same: 2016—the start of the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte. Dela Rosa, a staunch Duterte ally, immediately clammed up, perhaps ruing in his mind how his grandstanding attempt only ended up possibly implicating his former boss and his subordinates.

Records show that the budget for flood-control projects steadily grew during the Duterte years—from P64 billion in 2016, to P80 billion in 2017, P141 billion in 2018, a slight dip to P133 billion in 2019, P90 billion in COVID-era 2020 when funding was scarce, then inching back up to P101 billion in 2021, and finally P128 billion in 2022.

Did that ballooning budget manifest itself in fewer floods, better flood-control infrastructure, and overall less damage to life and property among hapless citizens? The opposite, in fact, was what happened, as Sen. Panfilo Lacson pointed out: “The rise of floodwaters in our country is directly proportional to the increase in the annual budget for the national government’s flood management program.”

## Heinous levels

Perhaps the biggest flood-control allocation for one district also happened under the Duterte administration. In the last three years of the former president’s term, the family stronghold of Davao City—represented in Congress by his son, Paolo Duterte—received P51 billion solely for purported flood control programs. Not only was the amount staggering, but the yearly allocations were way more than what was originally proposed in the national budget. For 2020, for instance, the city requested P4.7 billion for flood control; the approved General Appropriations Act, however, jacked up that amount to P13.7 billion.

Thievery built on such profligacy has only grown to heinous levels. Between 2023 and 2025, corruption in flood control projects has drained the economy of P42.3 billion to P118.4 billion, according to the Department of Finance. Without such irregularities, the country’s economic growth might have reached 6 percent, while the losses could have otherwise generated 95,000 to 266,000 jobs over the same period, it said.

The rot is systemic, stubborn, deep-rooted. And if the independent commission Mr. Marcos is forming will only take a magnifying glass and scalpel to the past three years, then what it would see would only be a blip, and not the sprawling hydra-headed beast of venality and plunder that has long plagued the country’s public infrastructure and led to the unending misery of millions of Filipinos year in and year out.