

Happy days are here again?

Written by Administrator

Tuesday, 11 December 2018 10:52



“Roll out the barrel, we’ll have a barrel of fun

Roll out the barrel, we’ve got the blues on the run

Zing boom tarrarel, ring out a song of good cheer

Now’s the time to roll the barrel, for the gang’s all here.”

A majority of the members of the House of Representatives must have been singing that song, “Beer Barrel Polka” also known as “Roll out the Barrel,” shortly after former President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo seized the speakership in a swift coup in July.

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After the Supreme Court declared the Priority Development Assistance Fund (PDAF), also known as the pork barrel, as unconstitutional in 2014, it became difficult for congressmen to avail of pork barrel funds for pet projects in their districts and, of course, the commissions that go with them from their favored contractors.

The tribunal also nullified the laws that provided lawmakers lump-sum allocations to fund their chosen projects.

Pork barrel never really went away because in collusion with the Executive Branch, the budget preparers in Malacañang and the House committee on appropriations, administration allies in both the House of Representatives and the Senate were able to go around the SC ruling by inserting into the budget their projects before they are submitted to the House.

That's exactly what the present House leaders are trying to do under the whopping proposed national budget of P3.8 trillion for 2019.

Sen. Panfilo Lacson, who has been fighting against pork barrel and who has not availed of any pork barrel appropriations since he became senator, exposed questionable items in the proposed General Appropriations Act that he said were actually pork barrel items.

Lacson revealed that the 292 members of the House of Representatives were allotted at least P60 million worth of government projects each to be included in the national budget as "line item" appropriations.

House Majority Leader Rolando Andaya, Arroyo's former budget secretary and con-conspirator in the Speakership coup, later admitted that Arroyo had indeed directed the allotments.

Andaya defended the allotments, saying the funds were not pork barrel as these were not lump sum appropriations, which the Supreme Court had declared unconstitutional.

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A rotten pork by any other name would stink just as bad.

The fact remains that the allotments for select districts were inserted after the submission of the original budget by the Department of Budget and Management and are, therefore, illegal.

For years, the Office of the President had used pork barrel funds (previously known as Community Development Fund) as carrot and stick to make Congress follow its dictates, which made the President very powerful and tilted the balance of power towards the Executive Branch.

The lawmakers did not give a hoot because they benefited from them.

It is a clear case of conspiracy between Malacañang and Congress.

Not content with giving away P200 million annually to each senator and P70 million to each congressman, then President Benigno S. Aquino III even tapped a fund he had established without the benefit of a law passed by Congress called Disbursement Acceleration Program to ensure compliance of the members of both houses of Congress reportedly in his successful mission to impeach and convict Chief Justice Renato Corona and to pass the Reproductive Health Law.

The Supreme Court ruling also came after revelations that P10 billion in pork barrel funds went to ghost projects and non-existing NGOs, most of them formed by businesswoman Janet Lim Napoles, awakened the people to the reality that they were being deceived and robbed by the leaders they had elected into office, the same persons who were supposed to promote and protect their interests.

Napoles was convicted last week of plunder and sentenced to life imprisonment, but one of the alleged beneficiaries of the fraud, former Sen. Bong Revilla, was acquitted.

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The people got half-justice after many years of waiting and we should all be happy?

Lacson also disclosed that Arroyo's Pampanga district stood to get P2.4 billion worth of projects and P1.9 billion went to Andaya's Camarines Sur district.

It was not the first time Arroyo gave members of Congress multi-million reasons to enjoy the Christmas season.

In 2008, she released P2.6 billion in pork barrel funds for disbursement to the country's congressmen and senators two months before Christmas Day.

The amount came from the Agriculture Modernization Program of the Department of Agriculture, and was intended to build "farm-to-market" roads to boost agricultural production.

The funds were distributed to congressmen and senators to finance "farm-to-market" roads in their respective constituencies.

But because a big chunk of these funds obviously went to ghost projects or the sponsoring lawmaker in the form of commissions, the appropriations have come to be known as "farm-to-pocket" projects.

That pork barrel fund release triggered bad memories during Arroyo's term of the P728-million fertilizer scam and the P2-billion swine scam, the funds for which were released just before the 2004 presidential elections, and the P3.1-billion irrigation scam prior to the May 2007 elections.

Now, we know why the P60-million allotments for congressmen are being requested by Arroyo.

The campaign for the May 2019 elections are just a few weeks away and the pork barrel funds

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would be a good way to silence opponents of Arroyo's House leadership grab and ensure support for her and President Duterte's desire for a federal-parliamentary shift.

In an effort to distance Duterte from the pork barrel controversy, Presidential spokesman Salvador Panelo said the President wants to hear the explanation of Speaker Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo on the alleged pork barrel insertions in the proposed 2019 national budget.

But on the same breath, Panelo said Arroyo has already reached out to him and explained that the items originated from different government agencies and not from lawmakers and, therefore, not pork barrel.

With nearly the entire Congress evidently in cahoots with the Executive Branch in circumventing the 2014 Supreme Court ruling, it will now be up to the Supreme Court to plug the loopholes to their ruling to make sure the pork barrel is completely removed from the face of Philippine politics forever.

Otherwise, Arroyo and her cabals in Congress can conclude their celebration with this song:

“Happy days are here again

The skies above are clear again

So let's sing a song of cheer again

Happy days are here again.”

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