

# EXECUTIVE POLICY BRIEF

## NATIONAL IDENTITY AS AN IMPERATIVE TO BUILDING THE NATIONAL COMMUNITY\*

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*The National Defense College of the Philippines (NDCP) is the government's key educational institution for training and research on defense and security.*

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### ***A Nation Strongly Built, A Nation Secure***

A nation strongly built is a nation secure. To be strong it must have unity. And to have unity it must have, among others, a national identity. Hence, the quest for national identity is an imperative to building a strong national community.

A group or community distinguishes itself or is distinguished by its difference from others because the persons making that particular group or community share things in common. Their shared commonality may well be history or experience, language, culture, tradition, ethnic composition, or religion. Whatever it may be, their shared commonality is what gives form and substance to their identifiable uniqueness as a nation – in a word, their national identity.

### ***Challenges in Forging a Filipino National Identity***

It appears we Filipinos have yet to have an identity. We do not seem to possess the kind of national pride and confidence that others have. Perhaps the explanation lies in the negative effect caused by conditions and realities that have yet to be recognized and made over.

**First.** Lack of unity. There are the long-festering local communist rebellion and Muslim separatist movement. Regional autonomy is insistently demanded and federalism could well be the feature of what is intended as a parliamentary form of government. Note also the country's demographic condition. There are 37 major ethnic groups and hundreds of sub-groups. That by itself means diversity, but it could

also imply divisiveness of the population inasmuch as some dominant groups oppose adoption of a common national language or even agitate for independence.

**Second.** Lack of unifying symbols. One such symbol is a common language. We need to have one which we can speak and write, and by which we can connect "our inner selves to the realities of community life." Another symbol worth considering is a native national name. "Philippines" or "Filipinas" should be replaced for it symbolizes nothing but the country's colonial experience and it can hardly help in the making of our identity. Just about the only meaningful symbol is the flag. But even so, it has not escaped criticism from some quarters which claim it is not reflective enough of all the major contributors to our country's historic struggle for freedom.

**Third.** The archipelagic nature of the country. The Philippines is geographically broken up into as many as 7,100 islands. But no matter, the handicap of fragmentation is no longer that difficult to overcome, what with the great advances in the fields of information, transportation and communication. But do you think that being separated from one another by the sea is really a hard and incontrovertible fact? Is that not merely a perception? For it can also be argued that the sea does not separate them but, rather, it does unite them.

**Fourth.** Colonial policies. Filipinos, it is said, were made to live for more than three centuries in the convent and half a century in Hollywood. How was this possible? Western ideals and virtues were instilled even as Filipino shortcomings and inferiority were rubbed in. Filipinos were made to ignore their pre-colonial accomplishments in the various aspects of culture, arts and

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sciences. They were told of their backwardness” so that they would accept the latter’s superiority. The end result of all this colonial tutelage and indoctrination is a Filipino people who have turned out to be the “most occidental of the orientals and the most oriental of the occidentals.”

**A common national language is imperative if our country is to be strengthened of its solidarity and distinctness.**

The effects of the policy of divide and rule have been so profound and lasting. One such effect is the non-integration of the Muslim segment of the population into the mainstream of Philippine body politic and its strong desire to separate from the Republic. A corollary policy was the cooptation of a number of Filipinos into the colonial government service.

As a matter of practical necessity Spanish colonial authorities enlisted the services of native chieftains and lesser leaders in the conduct of local government affairs. As a consequence those minions of the colonizer acquired such degree of power, wealth and education that they eventually became the *ilustrados* and/or *principales* – the socio-economic elite or upper class. Those coopted would serve well the objectives of imperialism. In return, the elites were greatly benefited by their cooptation.

Politically, the electoral system had the effect of ensuring the elite’s virtual monopoly of the political leadership of the country. Moreover, their monopoly would open the door of opportunity for the creation of their political dynasties. Now most of the country’s wealth are in their hands. Data obtained some years ago which could not have changed materially by the lapse of so brief a time show these revealing figures:

1. The top 5.5% of all landowning families owns 44% of all the cultivable lands;
2. 15% of the richest families accounts for 52.5% of all the national income; and,
3. Only 60 to 100 political clans control all the elective positions at the national level.

The outcome of colonial policies was to make the Filipino elites the rich and the mighty, the dominant and ruling class, while the large majority, the masses, are the poor and dominated class. This is how the structure of Philippine society came to be what it is today.

## **The Trident Approach to Building a National Identity**

How does this state or condition of Philippine society bear on the quest for national identity? The answer is well put in Pablo S Trillana III’s “Foreword” to Building the National Community: Problems and Prospects and other Historical Essays written by Oscar L Evangelista. Trillana tells what Evangelista thinks of that state or condition. Which is that:

*“after all our struggles to become a nation, the true spirit of nationhood continues to elude us. Our perception of “nation” remains divided. There is the “nation” of the elite and the “nation” of the masses. We have yet to reconcile these two perceptions into a single, national aspiration. This is, so to speak, the canker in the rose.”*

The nation envisioned by the elite and the nation the masses aspire for no doubt reflect the fundamental class interest of the one and of the other. Reconciling them, therefore, could prove to be extremely difficult, considering that they are diametrically opposed to each other. But it is not impossible, though it entails political will and long, determined and unwavering effort.

That effort could proceed through an overlapping and mutually reinforcing trident approach.

### **1. Study of the Past.**

Filipinos need to know and internalize their past. The past is actually a record of experiences. We should learn lessons from it so that we can better understand and cope with present-day problems, issues and events. Knowing the past, too, is knowing, among others, what our ancestors did accomplish so remarkably.

An example are the rice terraces in the mountain provinces of Northern Luzon built thousands of years ago. They are an engineering feat, designed by nameless architects with only their native and practical talent and keen aesthetic sense to go by. They can compare and contrast with the pyramids of Egypt, the Great Walls of China, the Ziggurat of Mesopotamia (now southern Iraq), etc. But while countless human lives had to be sacrificed to build those monumental structures, the rice terraces on the contrary needed no such destruction to human lives. They were built in the true *bayanihan* or *balikatan* spirit by a people who knew how to

work together so that they could overcome the problem of survival under an inhospitable, niggardly physical environment.

In citing the rice terraces as a standing proof of the relatively high degree of civilization the ancient Filipinos had attained by then, we should be aroused with a feeling of greatness, pride and confidence in our people's ability to make remarkable accomplishments; a feeling that bonds us together, at least psychologically because it is one which we all share in common. This is the feeling that generates the form and substance of our national identity.

## 2. Use of the National Language.

With the existence in Philippine society of so many major and minor ethnic groups having tongues of their own, language is dividing more than unifying us. As such, a common national language is imperative if our country is to be strengthened of its solidarity and distinctness.

In the Philippines, the adoption and use of a national language has been quite a contentious issue, since the onset of the Commonwealth in the mid-1930's. Attempts to resolve the problem nearly always resulted in emotional discussions, consultations, debates, etc. In fact, in the Constitutional Conventions that drafted respectively the 1935, 1972, and 1987 Philippine Constitutions, the issue evoked so much passion on the part of the delegates that more often than not meetings called to hammer it out easily turned into acrimonious argumentations and confusion.

Ultimately, however, the oppositors came to terms through gradual modification of pertinent provisions of the three fundamental laws of the land and, eventually by Constitutional mandate, Filipino has been adopted as the national language. It should be used, among other purposes, to unify the Filipinos and bring about their identity. But regional reticence lingers and has yet to fully atrophy its ugly head. Hopefully its full adoption by the entire country would materialize as time marches on and as the Filipinos from north to south, from east to west, take it upon themselves to speaking and writing in Filipino.

## 3. Enhancement of Nationalism.

The eminent Filipino historian Teodoro A. Agoncillo quotes a definition of nationalism: "devotion to or advocacy of national unity and independence." Then he asserts that it is the

"most important prerequisite to the formation of national consciousness, indeed the sine qua non to the development of national identities." It thus serves to bind individuals or groups to "common values, attitudes, purposes, and ways of action."

In the Philippines, nationalism has become a movement (connected and long-continued series of acts) to "define and advance the national interest." Its aim is "the fullest realization by ethnic Filipinos of the political and economic independence, as well as the discovery and assertion of their national and Asian identity in a competitive world." Curiously enough, it emerged both as a product of and a reaction to Western imperialism.

Note that until 1892, nationalism was essentially a peaceful movement. But in that year, the masses led by Andres Bonifacio founded the Katipunan. Militant with separatist aims, it initiated an armed struggle that culminated in the 1896 Philippine Revolution. Independence was declared and the Philippine Republic was inaugurated. However, after the Philippine-American War in 1907, American colonial rule may be said to have been firmly established. Nationalism now shifted from armed to parliamentary struggle as the Filipinos were allowed greater participation in the conduct of colonial government affairs with the inauguration of the Philippine Assembly.

Parliamentary struggle led to an independence law which was enacted with a ten-year transition period. To provide for the transition, a Commonwealth government was established. But midway towards the end of the transition Japan invaded the Philippines. By this time nationalism had come into its own. This is why war or no war the Filipinos did not want to compromise. Finally on 4 July 1946, Filipinos recovered their independence.

With Philippine independence, nationalism may have reached its defining moment. But since then it has seemingly lost much of its ardor, a spent force, too weak and desultory to attain fully its primary aim. This despite the fact that the Constitution declares as a State policy the inculcation of patriotism and nationalism in the youths in recognition of their vital role in nation building. It also directs the State to "give priority to education, science and technology, arts, culture, and sports to foster patriotism and nationalism. . . ."

***Education has a two-fold purpose: as a means for developing the person of the individual Filipino and as a tool for building the national community.***

### ***Enhancing Nationalism through Education***

Something has to be done, therefore, to enhance and make nationalism more useful in further advancing the national interest, unifying the Filipino people and redirecting the overall effort to building the nation.

To enhance nationalism and, for that matter, widen and intensify the use of the national language and facilitate the study of the Philippines' past, education is necessary. This should be quite evident, considering that education as we all know is imparting knowledge to people for the purpose of making them useful in the society of which they are members.

To some scholars, Filipino education should envision the "production of literate, self-reliant, and responsible citizens, proud of their Filipino-ness and determined to build a prosperous nation." Viewed in this light education has a two-fold purpose: as a means for developing the person of the individual Filipino and as a tool for building the national community.

To materialize the latter purpose the Philippine education system has to be so modified of its content as to feature sequenced curricular offerings and instruction on the Philippines' past. This should be done in the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels of the educational process. The idea is to infuse that kind of knowledge into the awareness of the Filipino learner, starting from his childhood or formative years to his adulthood or matured years. This is to acquaint him with and make him learn by heart the efforts and accomplishments of our ancestors, thus arousing his pride in them. It is also meant to infuse into his conscious self a sense of belonging to the Filipino people and to the motherland.

At the same time the educational system should devise more serious and determined ways and means of developing Filipino as the national language of the Philippines, in compliance with Sections 6 and 7 of Article XIV of the Constitution. Towards this end the system should likewise incorporate in its curricular offering in the three levels adequate and progressive courses of instruction on Filipino. This is with the end in view of developing the Filipino student into being highly proficient in speaking and writing in his own national language. Also, the use of Filipino as language of instruction should be encouraged. By Filipino, we mean Filipino as correctly spoken and written; it may include such foreign words and phrases as are widely used, like those used in science and technology.

After the educational system shall have revised its curriculum, put in place the progressive courses of instruction on the national language and Philippine history, it is not inconceivable that in ten to fifteen years the education effort will yield the desired results. All those who shall have gone through the revised curriculum will not only greatly benefit in terms of personal development. They shall be the force multiplier in widening and intensifying the use of Filipino. They shall be the animating element of Filipino nationalism, giving it the zeal and sustenance in the attainment of national goals and ideals. They shall be the instrument in instilling national pride and confidence of the Filipino people. They shall create the aura of distinctness to ensure the successful quest for Filipino national identity, an imperative to building the national community.

Which is what all of us Filipinos have to strive for: a nation strongly built, a nation secure.



#### ***About the Executive Policy Brief***

*The Executive Policy Brief is intended to provide strategic assessment on specific current issues on national security. It aims to contribute to strategic thinking in the defense community as well as provide alternative policy inputs.*

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