

TO ALL MEMBERS OF THE PHILIPPINE CONGRESS

More than 7 million Filipinos overseas have, for the last 15 years, been denied their fundamental political right to vote *in absentia* in any of our political exercises.

- This denial we place squarely upon the shoulders of our national political leaders who, despite the explicit mandate of the 1987 Constitution for Congress to provide for a system of absentee voting, have since proceeded with an attitude made remarkable only by their inexcusable inaction, callous neglect or outright indifference.
- The right to vote *in absentia*, practiced by more than 40 countries, is not unique to the Philippines. But ours is a necessity made unique by the economic circumstances that compel a sizeable number of our citizenry to seek better opportunities abroad, yet remain politically marginalized, mute and powerless, even as they are hailed at every politically expedient turn as economic saviors for remitting billions of dollars a year.
- We are a citizenry no less informed of the political and economic realities obtaining in our homeland than those who remain. The realities that affect our country and our families affect us no less, demand that we neither be ignorant nor indifferent.
- We are a citizenry determined to elect only the best possible leaders and create an electorate free from the corrupting influence of guns, goons, gold and glamour. The distance that removes us physically from the political arena is the shield

we shall wield to create a compelling focus on platforms and issues.

- We are a citizenry tired of being fed the same lame excuses; excuses made even lammer by the actions that exhibit neither sincerity, nor commitment.

The fear of fraud is a fear made fraudulent by the fact that the Filipinos overseas are beyond reach by the usual corrupt campaign practices and influences. It is a fear not resolved by denying the 7 million overseas Filipinos their right to vote. It is a fear addressed only by a manifestly sincere effort to craft and pass a good law.

After five Congresses, four Presidents and 15 tedious years, some 64 absentee voting bills have been filed, some rigorously debated in Congress. Through our local representatives, we have helped craft the bills now pending before both Houses, assiduously attended countless working group meetings and legislative consultations, in country and abroad. There we extensively discussed the pros and cons of specific provisions in light of the principles and procedures in other jurisdictions viewed against our peculiar political circumstances. We have sought the advice of numerous local and international experts on how to prevent systemic fraud, in principle and in practice, through the committed involvement of the overseas Filipino communities.

Our efforts have yielded an Absentee Voting Bill that now rots on the legislative shelf simply because some legislators choose to default on their duty to study the

proposals, or make any, even as a sincere gesture towards crafting a truly good law!

- We are tired of being fed the same empty promises made even emptier by the predictability of their being broken as a matter of political habit. Every election time, politicians assure us that we will surely be able to vote. At no election since 1987 have we been able to. In August, 2001, Speaker Joe De Venecia, together with key House leaders, told a delegation of some 50 representatives of the overseas vote lobby that the House would surely pass its version before the December adjournment. Our solons promptly went their merry ways soon after the General Appropriations Act was passed. More recently, we have been assured, again, that the bill would be passed on, or before, June 6. "Don't worry; it will be passed."
- We shall not now simply watch, listen and wait much longer. We have been keenly watching, patiently listening for the last fifteen years. We shall not now allow our welfare and interests to be held perennial hostage to the parochial agenda of leaders and legislators more attuned to their political fortunes than to the future that we, even as powerless but convenient tools, help create by our labors.
- We shall now answer another promise, broken by further legislative inaction, with a promise of our own: We shall marshal all our resources in support only of the lawmakers willing to fight for us in Congress. We promise to actively boot out of office those obstructing the long overdue passage of the Absentee Voting Bill! And please do not forget that we will remember.

GIVE the 7 million Overseas Filipinos a reason to celebrate!
PASS the Absentee Voting Bill before adjournment on June 6!

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