

Without commenting on who is charging what about whom in the AFP right now, it is not difficult to see how *pabaon* (send-off money) scandals can so easily happen. Blue Ribbon Committee hearings and politicians talk incessantly about slush funds - and they seem to feature in every high level case of alleged corruption: But as yet, we don't seem to link the ubiquitous slush funds with the ubiquitous and hugely discretionary contingency and special purpose funds (and dare we say it again, the PDAF/Pork Barrel Allocations) which are written into national budgets and approved by legislative committees year after year.

To stop taxpayers paying for Californian condominiums and first-class shopping sprees around the world in the future, we must get rid of all those discretionary lines under which 'slush money' may be hidden and paid. Simply put, it is not fair to rely on the Commission on Audit to spot anomalies after the event and after the money has been spent – it is for those in charge of putting the budget together and those whose legislative duty it is to examine and approve to identify and strike out the dark areas of the budget where money can be quietly put and then seemingly whisked away.

Of course, all governments and departments face contingencies and there should always be money allocated to the likes of the Calamity Fund – but it seems far too often there are no proper rules or controls enforced over their use. Essentially, the more rigorous and transparent the budget and the more detail that goes into explaining and accounting for each individual line, the better we will all be.

In a related issue, while in Davao last week and following our useful transparency and accountability roundtable that featured Maguindanao Governor Esmel “Toto” Mangudadatu, some people alleged that in many towns and cities of Mindanao, local government budgetary savings last year were so great that anything between PhP 20,000 – 50,000 (USD 454-1,136) were given out to all local government employees. This was over and above the obligatory 13th month payment and is very common practice according to people who were discussing it after the roundtable. Incidentally, none of the towns mentioned were in Maguindanao.

It may not be corrupt, but it immediately begs the questions – why were the savings not invested in projects to benefit the local community as a whole, rather than simply given out to government employees (it is taxpayers’ money after all); and just how effective and accurate does that mean budgetary planning is? Perhaps this is a regular thing that happens each year –if so, what does that tell us all? What do the AFP and other government departments do with any savings they have left over each year? Again, this is where we can end up having very serious misuse of public money. If some people are too focused on ensuring end of year savings and thinking about how best to ‘dispose’ of them, it means they are not focused on the job at hand - which is delivering the agreed services to the people.

We will be looking into this in the coming weeks. In the meantime, if you have any comments, thoughts or information you wish to tell us in confidence about this alleged ‘savings’ practise at either the national or local level, do please let us know. ☐

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