

Let the Fullness of History be Told

Leonor Magtolis Briones

Secretary, Department of Education

(Remarks at the Bantayog ng mga Bayani Annual Honoring of Martyrs and Heroes in the People's Resistance to Dictatorship, 30 November 2016)

Today we honor the life, struggle and achievements of nineteen Filipinos who took the path of movement and resistance against Martial Law: Marciano Anastacio Jr., Eduardo Aquino, Fortunato Camus, Benjamin Cervantes, Hernando Cortez, Edgardo Dojillo, Manuel Dorotan, Lourdes Estella-Simbulan, Ricardo Filio, Margarita Gomez, Leticia Jimenez-Magsanoc, Joel Cecilio Jose, Julio Xavier Labayen, Romulo Peralta, Jovito Salonga, Jose Tangente, Simplicio Villados, Danilo Vizmanos and Antonio Zumel.

They were students, union leaders, peasant organizers, journalists, military officer, artist, politician, priest. They were fathers, mother, brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, friends. Nine of them died under violent circumstances, two of which came after Martial Law.

Today's honoring of heroes and martyrs of the resistance of Martial Law, here at Bantayog ng mga Bayani, takes on a unique significance. It happens at the same time that actions are mounted to protest the burial of the very leader of Martial Law at the Libingan ng mga Bayani, that our honorees have vigorously resisted, some to their very death.

I am sure my remarks today are of interest, not for my person but because I lead the Department that oversees the country's basic education. What

are my thoughts, as Secretary of Education, on how our teachers and young students should view these confusing and contentious events?

One reference to this matter attributed to me was in a story by Rappler titled “New textbooks to include SC ruling on Marcos burial – DepEd”. The quotes were:

“The Supreme Court [decision] is about burying him at the Libingan, and the decision of DepEd is a review of accounts of textbooks, so they do not contradict each other”.

“It’s not like the book will tell you he’s a hero, or he’s not a hero. What we’re trying to develop is critical thinking. The student, the learner, decides for himself. Let’s give them facts, the positive things vis-à-vis the human rights [issues], so that the child, the learner, can make a judgement for himself or herself”.

Looking back, I realize that the quotes, especially in the absence of continuity with other statements, may be interpreted as taking a “value neutral” approach to the teaching of the Martial Law period.

It is far from it.

Within the quote itself is the important value of critical thinking, of being able to distill facts, reasons, and conclusions, that we are trying to develop among our students. And this value of critical thinking cannot happen in isolation. It must be learned along with other key values – a strong sense of history, an appreciation of culture, arts and literature, the respect and grounding on human rights, and the combination of nationalism and global citizenship.

I am committed to bringing these values to the policies and approaches in basic education, to the extent that I can. Last November 3 and 4, DepEd along with CHED and TESDA convened the Education Summit, where I presented my vision and agenda on basic education for the medium term. This vision and agenda can be summed up into four major deliverables: quality, accessible, relevant and liberating basic education for all.

In discussing the fourth aspect, that of delivering a liberating basic education, I emphasized that even as we catch up with technology, we cannot leave behind our history, we cannot leave behind our culture, we cannot leave behind our aspirations as a people. The soft side of education has to be there, even as we go into the hard aspects.

I made reference to the essay “Why Literature” by Nobel Laureate for literature Mario Vargas Llosa, who was recently in the country. I quote him again today. He says:

“There is still another reason to grant literature an important place in the life of nations. Without it, the critical mind, which is the real engine of historical change and the best protector of liberty, would suffer an irreparable loss. This is because all good literature is radical, and poses radical questions about the world in which we live. In all great literary texts, often without their authors’ intending it, a seditious inclination is present.”

This is exactly what we want to achieve in education: critical thinking and critical minds.

I also stressed that we all look to human rights as really the framework of all that we are doing. Education has a very strong moral and ethical

foundation. Ethics and morals of course involve human rights, and these we commit to and recognize.

And so when I said that we need to include the decision of the Supreme Court on the Marcos burial in our textbooks, it is by no means an agreement with, or endorsement of the decision. We need to be able to present it to our learners as a historical fact, mindful that we need to equip them with the values to critically comprehend the things embodied in it, and outside of it.

In the majority decision penned by Justice Peralta, the Supreme Court held, among others, that an AFP regulation governed the determination of who are entitled and disqualified to be interred at the Libingan ng mga Bayani. Under this regulation, the Court opined that Mr. Marcos had the eligibility and none of the stated disqualifications for the interment. The Court said that this does not confer upon Mr. Marcos the status of a “hero”. Further, keeping with such limited regulation does not amount to a violation of the Constitution, domestic laws, or international human rights laws.

However, bear in mind that for the 58-page decision, there are as well a 94-page dissent by Justice Leonen, a 72-page dissent by Chief Justice Sereno, an 11-page dissent by Justice Carpio, and a 59-page dissent by Justice Caguioa joined by Justice Jardeleza.

Justice Leonen, for example, closed his dissent with the single sentence, and I quote, “Ferdinand E. Marcos is not a hero”. In support of this conclusion, he related various literature on the acts of torture, summary executions, arbitrary detentions, and other atrocities committed during the time of Martial Law. He also provided excerpts of direct testimony before the Supreme Court of living victims of torture and sexual molestation or rape under detention during the Marcos regime: of Etta Rosales and her

sister Cristina, of Hilda Narciso and many others. The relevance of the conclusion is in his different finding of the applicable laws that govern interment at the Libingan ng mga Bayani.

The accounts of the lives of today's honorees and those before them add to historical written record of what transpired during the Martial Law years. And the search for those who should be recognized in this sacred setting of Bantayog continues.

During the Senate hearing on the education budget, I underscored that Bantayog ng mga Bayani is for all those who suffered and died defending democracy during the dark days of Martial Law. Many of them from Visayas and Mindanao need to be recognized. For example, Silliman University was the first university to be closed and the last to be reopened during those terrible days. More research needs to be done about heroes from these regions who remain unrecognized and unidentified – from Cebu, Leyte, Samar, Mindanao and many other places.

I urge Bantayog to continue the search. Bantayog ng mga Bayani is for all who defend democracy and freedom.

Let the fullness of history be told.

Good afternoon to all, and felicitations to the family and friends of today's honorees.