

ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE AND UNIVERSITY GOVERNANCE¹

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The UP Charter is once again on the legislative agenda. One proposal, drafted by the UP Wide Democratization Movement II, is entitled “Act Orienting the University of the Philippines as a Democratic University of the People”. Among others, the bill proposes to do away with the Board of Regents and replace it with democratically elected representatives of four sectors at various levels: the faculty, students, non-academic staff, and alumni. While the academic bodies — the University Council and the proposed University Senate — will continue to consist solely of the faculty, the university will be run by the democratically elected multi-sectoral University System Assembly.

Two things disturb me about the proposal. The first is that the bill does away with the University’s accountability to a larger public. As the highest governing body, for example, the University System Assembly can vote itself any benefit without regard for the impact on the financial source of that benefit—the tax-paying public. The rationale behind the public composition of the Board of Regents is precisely to make the University answerable to the public. If there is disenchantment with the make-up of the Board, the appropriate solution is to change its composition rather than do away with the accountability factor altogether.

Second, while the proposal recognizes that academic bodies should consist of the faculty, the bill would nevertheless submit these

bodies to higher decision makers dominated by students and non-academic constituents of the university. Yet ironically, the bill asserts the primacy of the University's function as a learning institution.

My purpose this morning is not to discuss the details of this proposal (we can do that in the open forum) but to juxtapose the philosophy that underpins it with others I have seen in the university. The proposed charter bill sees the university as essentially and primarily a polity rather than an academic community. As a polity, UP becomes a humongous barangay where students, administrative staff and alumni have equal say as the faculty. The very purpose of the university, to learn, create and spread knowledge, takes a back seat to the everyday needs of any polity: employment, staff benefits, and so on. Given a choice about where to spend our resources, the polity would impose demands different from the priorities of an institution of higher learning.

Few as they are, the proponents of this bill represent one end of the governance spectrum that I do not think we should take lightly because of the appeal not so much to the desirability of democracy but to democracy's humanitarian sense. Let me cite an example. Early on in Quezon Hall I had to deal with the case of a faculty member who was not given tenure because she had failed to meet the publication requirement. To comply with this requirement, she submitted to a local journal the paper turned in by her master's student that semester as a requirement of her course, with herself initially as lead author. The workers' union to which the faculty member belonged asked to meet with me to discuss the case; on her behalf spoke the head of the union, who works at the printery.

Try as I did to explain why the publication did not pass the tenure standard, the union appealed simply to my sense of humanity. In a polity the argument will be scholarship vs. humanitarianism, and if submitted to majority rule, scholarship will always lose out.

If the overzealous democrat stands at one end of the governance pole, the opposite in a university is not the tyrant but the bureaucrat masquerading as a faculty administrator. Like the