

IT'S TIME TO TAKE A STAND AND ACT!

For 15 years now, we have patiently urged members of Congress to finally enact a system of absentee voting. Our persistent appeals to reason include arguments so compelling it is hard to believe the legislature continues to sit on the proposed bills:

- **The right to vote is a fundamental human right that the Philippine Congress, by its inaction, has long denied 7 to 8 million overseas Filipinos.** This wholesale violation of the dignity of millions has been cited by the U.S. Department of State in its annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices and squarely contravenes the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, and the European Convention on Human Rights.
- **Article V, Section 2, of the 1987 Philippine Constitution specifically requires Congress to enact a system of absentee voting for Filipinos abroad.** It is not a particularly complicated process; some 49 countries (including neighboring Indonesia, Japan, and Thailand) have allowed overseas voting for their citizens. For members of the Philippine Congress to claim that AFTER 15 years they are still studying the issues is a monumental case of collective incompetence. The inexcusable delay should be remedied by diligent study and immediate action, not by the rehashing of old and resolved issues and dilatory quorum checks.
- **As "economic saviors" remitting at least 7 billion dollars a year (up to 14 billion dollars according to other estimates), overseas Filipinos have more than earned the right to have a say in the country's affairs.** More than 2,000 of our compatriots leave the country every single day to seek better opportunities abroad. This rampaging diaspora, which broke the levee 3 decades ago, has kept the economy afloat, not just with the 7 to 14 billion dollars in direct remittances but with the multiplier effects of hard-earned savings invested and other economic benefits of labor migration. Congress owes our 7 to 8 million "modern-day heroes" their dignity as full-fledged citizens.
- **To build political stability and elect the best possible leaders, there is a need to help create an electorate that's free from the influence of guns, goons, gold, and glamour.** The 7 to 8 million overseas Filipinos, sometimes referred to as the country's "missing middle class," are shielded from those forces by distance and relative economic independence and can help bring national focus on substantive issues.

While no legislator has expressed outright opposition to the idea of absentee voting, vigorous lobby efforts by the overseas Filipino community and our Philippine-based partners have been met with LAME excuses. The fear of fraud, for example, cannot be resolved by denying millions their right to vote. It is addressed only by a 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, consolidated versions of which have been rigorously debated in Congress. Advocates have actively helped craft the bills, assiduously attending countless working group meetings and legislative consultations within the country and abroad. We have sought the advice of numerous local and international experts on how to prevent systemic fraud. Unfortunately, our efforts have yielded an Absentee Voting Bill that now rots on the legislative shelf, simply because many legislators choose to default on their duty to study the proposals and to make informed suggestions.

Then there's the now truly appalling political habit of making empty promises. 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 definitely pass its version before the December adjournment. Our solons promptly went their merry ways right after the General Appropriations Act was passed. This year, we were assured again that the bill would be passed on or before June 6. That day came and went without passage (except for a gallant effort by the opposition in the Senate to "pass" it under controversial circumstances). Then, quite predictably, we were made to believe that passage in August was imminent ... followed by yet another "break" in early September. After Congress adjourned on September 6, we saw nothing but a string of promises made, a string of promises broken!

NOW we will not simply watch, listen, and wait! NO LONGER! We have been keenly watching, patiently listening, and wishfully waiting for 15 long years. We cannot 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, the powerless but convenient tools, help create with our blood, sweat, and tears.

NOW IT'S TIME TO TAKE A STAND AND ACT!

- 1. NOW we ask ALL our families in the Philippines to show sympathy to our just cause: ACTIVELY SUPPORT politicians who push for immediate passage, and BLACKLIST AND BOOT OUT OF OFFICE those who directly or passively oppose absentee voting!** We will provide a complete list of our political allies, as well as those who are blocking passage, and marshal all our resources to either ELECT THEM or KICK THEM OUT of office! For the most recalcitrant politicians, we will not wait until the next elections: We will partner with our allies in the mainstream Philippine media and use the tools of modern communications, including the Internet, to EXPOSE them for their anti-migrant politics!
- 2. NOW we appeal to members of the international community--including human rights organizations, aid agencies, foreign governments, and transnational businesses with conscience--to exert all their moral, political, and economic sway in our fight for a basic human right: PLEASE JOIN US IN URGING the Manila administration to finally demonstrate the political will to enfranchise overseas Filipinos!** We are now launching a letter-writing campaign to expose the immoral political apartheid that has kept 7 to 8 million overseas Filipinos voiceless.
- 3. NOW we ask ALL overseas Filipinos and foreign nationals to make a hard but powerful choice to show solidarity in our now epic struggle for political inclusion: IF BY THE END OF OCTOBER THE ABSENTEE VOTING BILL IS STILL ROTTING ON THE CONGRESSIONAL SHELF, LET US SUSPEND UNNECESSARY VISITS to the Philippines UNTIL absentee voting becomes law!** As much as we like to be home, we will dramatize the gravity of Congress's colossal failure by staying away from a country whose government has continued to treat 7 to 8 million of its citizens as political outcasts.
- 4. NOW we call upon ALL overseas Filipinos who value their right of suffrage to use our ultimate economic leverage to bring the absentee voting issue to the fore: USE OUR REMITTANCE AS A WEAPON to urge Congress to get its act together!**
 - This is NOT a call to completely stop sending funds to our families back home. We cannot punish our families for the failure of politicians. It is a campaign to encourage overseas Filipinos to REMIT FUNDS OUTSIDE THE RADAR SCREEN of government until the administration realizes that we mean business. Currently, around 70 percent of all remittances go through banks, which are monitored and taxed by the government. Our contribution to the country's foreign exchange reserves has been enormous. To prevent the government from laying its claim to our hard-earned dollars, we encourage ALL overseas Filipinos to send funds through non-bank channels, preferably through colleagues, friends, family, or private agencies. For gifts, we encourage ALL overseas Filipinos to send *balikbayan* boxes instead of cash.
 - If our families have money deposited in banks in the Philippines, we encourage them to utilize those funds, as we make deposits in our banks abroad for their use AFTER passage. It is a temporary arrangement that will send a clear message to an administration that has so far paid lip service to our fight for political empowerment.
 - **IF BY THE END OF OCTOBER THE ABSENTEE VOTING BILL IS STILL LANGUISHING IN THE LEGISLATURE, WE WILL DESIGNATE A SPECIFIC PERIOD AT WHICH TIME WE WILL COMPLETELY REFRAIN FROM REMITTING FUNDS. WE ASK ALL OVERSEAS FILIPINOS TO BE PREPARED FOR THIS EVENTUALITY!**

JUSTICE DELAYED IS JUSTICE DENIED!

IT'S TIME WE MAKE MEMBERS OF CONGRESS DO THEIR SWORN DUTY TO ALLOW THE 7 TO 8 MILLION OVERSEAS FILIPINOS TO EXERCISE THEIR INALIENABLE RIGHT TO VOTE!

LET US ALL TAKE A STAND! LET US ALL ACT TO PASS THE ABSENTEE VOTING BILL BY END OF OCTOBER!

Endorsed by:

- EMPOWER: The Global Coalition for the Political Empowerment of Overseas Filipinos
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- PPU Forum
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- O. Bakker-Mananquil, Charter Founder, OFWNet Foundation, Inc.
- Benedict Perez, Managing Director - SG Cowen Securities Corporation
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- Philnews.com Alliance
- Kapampangans4AV/Dual
- Friends of Overseas Filipinos, Inc. - Manila, Singapore, The Netherlands
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- Regidor Ybanez - eLagda Al-Khobar
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- Bert P. Barriga, Jr. - eLagda Riyadh, ICOFVR-KSA
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- Rodolfo Yap - Alpha Phi Omega International (Riyadh Alumni Association), eLagda-Riyadh, and ICOFVR-KSA
- Carolien van Ham, Development Aid Worker – The Netherlands

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The Platform of Filipino Migrant Organisations in Europe Council represents an alliance of 75 organizations, including:

- CFMW International - Amsterdam, The Netherlands
- KASAPI-Hellas – Greece
- Samahan ng mga Filipino sa Belgium
- Radyo Pinoy – Denmark
- Bayanihan Center for Filipino Migrants – Denmark
- Danish Filipino Association – Denmark
- Damayan – Denmark
- CFMW-Italya – Italy
- Filipino Christian Bayanihan in Italy – Italy
- Pinagsamasamang Lakas ng mga Pilipino Sa Italya (PILAPIL) – Italy
- Filipino Women's Council – Italy
- Malayan Theater Group – Italy
- Philippine Women's Forum of Germany – Germany
- Munting Nayon – Greece
- Alliance of Ilocano Organisations in Athens – Greece
- United Visayas Mindanao – Greece
- Seafarers Club Athens – Greece
- Couples for Christ – Greece
- Christ the King – Greece
- Kasapi Youth – Greece
- Federation of Filipino Organisations in the Nederland (FFON)
- Alab, Bayanihan - The Netherlands
- CFMW International – Amsterdam
- Damayang Filipino sa Nederland
- Dutch Pilipino Association - The Netherlands
- Kababayan - The Netherlands
- Kapatiran - The Netherlands
- Kapitbahayan - The Netherlands
- PSAP - The Netherlands
- Silangan - The Netherlands
- Kapisanan ng mga Filipino sa Groningen - The Netherlands
- Babaylan (Women) – Europe
- Working Group of Women Religious against Trafficking in Women - The Netherlands

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