

# Rizal's challenge to the youth

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Rizal's Challenge to the Youth JOSE Rizal's famous message for the youth is that the youth is fair hope of the nation. What he exactly said was the youth was "bella esperanza de la Patria mia" or "fair hope of my fatherland" (Rizal's Poems, Centennial Edition, Manila: Jose Rizal National Centennial Commission, 1962, p. 15). He did not say that the youth was the country's sole hope. That he said so is misquoting him. Fair hope is very different from being the only hope. This message was in his poem *A la Juventud Filipina* (To the Filipino Youth), which won the first prize in a literary contest sponsored in 1879 by the Artistic-Literary Lyceum of Manila, a society composed of the leading writers and artists in Manila. He was given a feather-shaped silver pen and a diploma during the awarding ceremonies held on November 29, 1879. Only 18 years old, he bested both the indios (native Filipinos) and mestizos (Filipinos with mixed races) who joined in this contest. Some people misunderstand Rizal because they have not read the 25-volume *Escritos de Jose Rizal* (Writings of Jose Rizal), which contains nearly all of his writings and philosophical thoughts. He will be misquoted once he is interpreted through one poem only. Critics should first read him thoroughly before attacking him. They claim that Rizal was wrong because the youth cannot be the nation's hope, for they are still dependent on their parents, do not have a voice in national affairs, and are still struggling with their lessons in schools. He was totally wrong, they add, because the young are delinquent, addicted to illegal drugs, join violent and criminal gangs, suffer from unwanted pregnancies and abortion, or give in to smoking, drinking, gambling, and other vices. For them, the faults of some young people frame the general picture of today's youth. When Rizal wrote *A la Juventud Filipina*, it was

already the 314th of the 333-year Spanish colonization of the Philippines (1565-1898) — already the decadent era of Spain's imperial glory. Under Spain, Filipinos did not have freedom and security for their lives and properties. They were forced to submit themselves and the fruits of their labor to the flag of Spain, the colonial government, and the Roman Catholic Church. Those who fought for their rights could be stripped of their belongings, arrested, tortured, exiled, or executed. The government taxed them heavily, and the friars taxed them more. They were also obliged to render labor without pay in building roads, highways, bridges, government buildings, church edifices, galleons, and other public works. Rizal saw the miseries of his people. He himself suffered cruelty one night when a Spanish lieutenant attacked him because he failed to give him the mandatory salute. Rizal did not see him because it was very dark. Despite the wound that he got, he was still imprisoned. Only 17, he appealed to the governor general, but the highest Spanish official in the land only brushed him aside (The Rizal-Blumentritt Correspondence, Centennial Edition, Manila: Jose Rizal National Centennial Commission, 1961, Part 1, p. 62). Rizal wanted an end to the oppression of his people. He would like to get the help of senior Filipino citizens but could not do so because most of them were subservient to the government and the church. He saw that they would rather spend lavishly on fiestas that afterward impoverished them, and cast their fortunes into Masses and religious items like rosaries, scapulars, and statues (Miscellaneous Writings of Dr. Jose Rizal, National Heroes Commission Edition, Manila: National Heroes Commission, 1964, pp. 92-106). Seeing that the elder generations of his time were hopeless against tyranny and were

submissive to the colonizers, Rizal turned to his fellow youth. *A la Juventud Filipina* was for the youth of his time. It asked them to excel in the arts, sciences, and professions because it was they, not the elders, who would one day right the wrongs, free the country from Spanish colonization, build a new and independent Filipino nation, and mold a better future (Rizal's Correspondence with Fellow Reformist, Centennial Edition, Manila: National Heroes Commission, 1963, p. 187; *El Filibusterismo*, offset printing of the first edition published in Ghent, Belgium, in 1891, Centennial Edition, Manila: Comision Nacional del Centenario de Jose Rizal, 1961, pp. 44-49). During those times, the youth meant people in high school, college, and those in the early years of their professions—or those from 13 to 30 years old (Rizal's Correspondence with Fellow Reformists, p. 474). Thus, when Rizal talked of the youth, he meant those born from 1860 and above. In 1890, Rizal was 29 and he still considered himself a youth. It is still the same today. People who are 13 to 30 years old are the ones considered the youth. Since the message was for them, Rizal and his contemporaries tried all they could to fulfill it. Rizal was 25 when he published the *Noli Me Tangere*, a novel that asked for extreme repairs of and cures for the cancerous colonial society of his countrymen. He was 29 when he published *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas*, an old book about the last moments of our ancient nationality and could therefore give Filipinos a chance to know the shadow of the civilization of our ancestors. And he was 30 when he published *El Filibusterismo*, his second novel that urged the Filipinos to face a tragic revolution to finally end their sufferings. Andres Bonifacio was 28 when he founded the Katipunan. Emilio Jacinto was only 20 when made the Katipunan secretary-general and one of

Bonifacio's right-hand men. Emilio Aguinaldo was 27 when he became a revolutionary general and 28 when he was elected the country's first president in 1897. He was 29 when he declared Philippine independence from Spanish rule on June 12, 1898. He was also 29 when he became the president of the Philippine Republic (1899-1901) on January 23, 1899. He was almost 30 when he began defending that independence and that infant republic against the Americans during the Filipino-American War (1899-1903). Rizal was in his early twenties when he gave his countrymen the sense of nationhood and independence. Bonifacio was in his twenties too when he envisioned a revolution. Aguinaldo was also in his twenties when he led the establishment of the Philippine Republic. Because of the youthful Rizal, Bonifacio, and Aguinaldo, the Filipino people were able to acquire their independence, republic, national flag, and national anthem—their nationhood. Bonifacio's fellow Katipuneros were also at the peak of their youth when they launched the bloody uprising against Spain in August 1896. They and the other Filipinos who fought during the Filipino-American War were young and dedicated as well. Mamerto Natividad and Flaviano Yengko were the youngest Filipino generals to perish on the battlefields while fighting the Spaniards, dying at 26 and 22, respectively. Gregorio Del Pilar was 22 years old when an American bullet struck him on the face. He was the youngest Filipino general to die during the Filipino-American War. Many of the Malolos Congress delegates were Rizal's high school and college peers. They were the country's most important lawyers, physicians, pharmacists, engineers, businessmen, writers, educators, and military officers. They were the ones who drafted in 1898-99 the Philippine Political Constitution or the Malolos

Constitution, which created the Philippine Republic, mapped the Philippine territory, defined Filipino citizenship, provided civil rights for Filipinos, and established a government that would be elected and run by the Filipino people themselves. By writing this fundamental law of the land, they established the sovereign Filipino nation, which was the supreme goal of the Philippine Revolution. The youth of Rizal's time was the first generation of patriotic and idealistic Filipino youth. They were the pioneer young generation that offered their talents, strength, and lives for the motherland. They would have been thoroughly triumphant in winning the goal of building a free nation had not the Americans arrived in the Philippines in May 1898 and launched a bloody war against them in February 1899. The U. S. government sent 126, 468 soldiers and spent US\$300 million to murder more than 20, 000 Filipino soldiers and more than 200, 000 Filipino civilians (House Documents, 57th [U. S.] Congress, Vol. IV, p. 291). They destroyed homes, schools, churches, villages, and towns; stole jewelry and other precious items; annihilated water buffaloes and livestock to serve as their meat; and blasted roads, bridges, highways, cable lines, and railroad lines. The month-old Philippine Republic was totally defenseless against the United States, which was 122 years old already as a republic. Besides, the Filipinos had exhausted most of their arms and ammunition against Spain. The youth of Rizal's time tried but failed to fulfill his message for them because the Americans won the Filipino-American War and ruled the country until 1946. However, the noblest fruits of their efforts — the national flag and the national anthem — are still well and alive today, consecrated and honored by the people and recognized by law. On June 12, 1898, the flag was waved and

the anthem was played officially for the first time to mark the birth of the Filipino nation. Today, the flag is still unfurled and the anthem is still sung, which only proves that they are the genuine living legacies of the Philippine Revolution. Rizal's call on the youth to become the fair hope of the motherland is still applicable today. Millions of today's young people in all nations have the ability to build better generations and better civilizations.

The Future is Bright for the Filipino Youth

A variation of this piece was presented in the Kabataan Party-list Aklan Provincial Chapter Assembly held in the Kalibo Poblacion Brgy. Hall last May 26, 2012. It has always been said the youth is the hope of the nation. It has been repeated again and again since Jose Rizal first said it a century back that the adage has become a seemingly worn out claim, a cliché. In order to retrieve it as a truth claim, in order to make it effective again, in order to make it the powerful assertion that it used to be, we must add a condition to the statement that the youth is the hope of the nation. The truth is the youth cannot become the hope of the nation if it does not act collectively — side by side with the masses of workers, peasants, urban poor, indigenous peoples, and other marginalized sectors — to change an oppressive and exploitative social order. The continued domination of US imperialism, domestic feudalism, and bureaucratic capitalism has led to the deterioration of the national situation. The youth can never become the hope of the nation if it continues to be shackled by these three basic problems which have as its direct symptoms the lack of access to education and social services, joblessness, hunger, and poverty. The Filipino youth and people suffer more than ever under the Noynoy Aquino regime. It's now two years after Noynoy assumed power. The

Coronavela saga is about to end. But the youth are still out of school and out of work. Millions have no food on the table and are mired in poverty. After using anti-corruption rhetoric and empty promises of change to win big in the 2010 elections, the Aquino regime proved to be no different from previous regimes by pursuing the same programs that only worsened the chronic crisis plaguing the nation. There can be no bright future for the Filipino youth unless it fights to transform an unjust society dominated by despotic feudal hacienderos, big compradors, corrupt bureaucrats, and their foreign masters. US Imperial Domination Imperialism is the monopoly stage of capitalism. From free competition, financial and industrial capital has become concentrated in the hands of a few big monopolists of advanced capitalist countries like the US, Germany, France, Britain, and Japan. Imperialist powers seek colonies and semicolonies — like the Philippines — in order to facilitate the quick expansion of their burgeoning economies and gain enormous superprofits. Their drive to divide and re-divide the world among themselves has led to war and much suffering. Under the Aquino regime's "matuwid na daan" our country continues to suffer from subservience to foreign powers — mainly US imperialism — politically, economically, and culturally even after the granting of nominal independence after the Second World War. This situation of domination is sustained by unequal treaties and unjust economic edicts that keep our country a source of cheap labor and natural resources for foreign powers as well as a dumping ground for surplus capital and commodities manufactured abroad. Our ability to borrow from foreign financial institutions like the US-controlled International Monetary Fund-World Bank is tied to unfair economic



provisions that further open our economy to foreign control and keep our country more dependent on more foreign loans. Budget for the social services like education — especially the State Universities and Colleges — and health is reallocated for foreign debt servicing and superficial doleout programs like the Conditional Cash Transfers that does not weed out the roots of massive poverty. But the most glaring manifestation of foreign domination in the country is the escalating buildup of US military presence in the guise of aiding us against Chinese aggression. Through the Visiting Forces Agreement and the Balikatan Exercises, US troops freely enter the country. US military advisers train and directly command Filipino troops while US smartbombs and aerial drones are directly used in counterinsurgency operations against the Communist Party of the Philippines-led revolutionary movement in the country. Backward and Foreign-Dominated The Philippine social formation has been kept backward, agrarian, and lacking basic industries in order to keep it dependent on US surplus capital, goods, and loans as well as to keep it a steady a source of cheap labor and natural resources. The persistence of feudalism or the land monopoly by the landed elite stands out as the most pervasive problem of the backward and foreign-oriented social condition. The continuing saga of the peasants and farmworkers of Hacienda Luisita — the sugar estate of President Noynoy Aquino's family — is one of the most blatant symbols of the continued domination of feudal rule in the country. While various regimes have implemented their own agrarian reform programs, 7 of 10 peasants still do not own their land. Land remains concentrated in the hands of a wealthy few who continue to enrich themselves at the expense of the

poor majority. "Industrial" progress is limited to business process outsourcing call centers, environmentally-destructive mining and plunder of our natural resources, and the repackaging and reassembly of goods that are mainly manufactured abroad in export processing zones. The wages of ordinary workers are meanwhile kept low, with a P272/day minimum wage here in the island of Panay, and cannot suffice for the basic needs of an ordinary family of 4 pegged at over P900 a day. Most workers are also contractuels and lack benefits. Youth unemployment has soared up. According to the latest SWS survey, 54% of the labor force that are aged 18-24 while 49% of those aged 24-35 are jobless. Because of the deregulated economy, the people continues to be at the mercy of international oil monopolies which leads to weekly oil price hikes and soaring cost of basic goods. Education and health services are expensive commodities that are out of reach to the masses. State universities and colleges and public schools are deprived of sufficient budget leading to massive shortages and forcing admins to resort to commercialization schemes. Under the Education Act of 1982 that continues to hold sway even today, private schools are given free rein to hike fees annually with tuition rates soaring from P257 per unit in 2001 to P501 per unit in 2011. Despite the reality that only 1 for every 10 Grade 1 Elementary students make it to graduate College because of high fees, the Aquino government is still pushing for the addition of two more years to the basic education curriculum under the K+12 program. This does not consider the massive shortages in the public elementary and high schools. According to DepEd, there are shortages of 50, 921 classrooms, 74, 178 in teachers, 123, 196 toilets, 62. 4 million in textbooks and 1. 3 million

chairs. This education "reform" is, of course, premised on creating more semi-skilled laborers for the disposal of multinational companies. It directly serves the Aquino regime's continued allegiance to a labor export policy.

Executive Committee of the Ruling Classes Instead of confronting these problems head on, the Aquino government resorts to hiding massive poverty by doctoring official statistics in the form of lowering the poverty threshold from at least US\$2 (P83) to P46. The unemployment situation is meanwhile reduced by excluding those who are of working age but are not looking for jobs anymore from the labor force. The 7% government unemployment rate is thus very far from the 34% unemployment rate pegged by the latest SWS survey. When Asian Development Bank officials met in the country's capital for its 45th annual meeting, the Aquino government — following the footsteps of Imelda during the Marcos dictatorship — made "a little fixing up" by erecting a makeshift wall along the main roads of Metro Manila. This brings us to the obvious conclusion that government has never been a service at all. This is symptomatic of bureaucrat capitalism or the use of government as a business enterprise by these very same landlords and big businessmen who benefit from the country's foreign-dominated and underdeveloped condition. The shenanigans that led to the recent impeachment and conviction Supreme Court Justice Renato Corona is in fact the "standard operating procedure" his fellow corrupt bureaucrat in the judiciary, legislature, and the executive. All these serve to reaffirm how "the executive of the modern State is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie." Our public servants are in government to serve not the people but their own selfish interests. The armed forces,

meanwhile, are mobilized for the primary purpose of militarily suppressing people's movements that oppose such a social order. A long series of human rights violations from extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, militarization of rural communities, massacres, forcible evacuations, etc., continue to intensify under the Aquino regime's counterinsurgency plan Oplan Bayanihan. The Future is Bright The country is undergoing great transformations and the youth is at the forefront of the movement for social change. In the past year, the Kabataan Party-list and the whole Filipino youth movement was at the forefront in exposing the rotten ruling system and its representative and number one defender, the Noynoy Aquino regime. In particular, the youth and student movement was at the spearhead of the broad movement against the low budget for State Universities and Colleges. But more needs to be done. There is an urgent need to further strengthen and expand the growing mass movement for social change. The youth must take on a greater role in pushing for the implementation of a program of genuine agrarian reform and nationalist industrialization. We must stand against foreign domination and abrogate all unequal treaties and unfair economic agreements. We must push for the cancellation of all foreign debt and prioritize the social services like education and health in the budget. Military officials responsible for the killings and disappearances of activists and journalists and corrupt bureaucrats must be put to justice. Amidst false accusations of apathy, passivity, and indifference, the Filipino youth has proven that it can stand up for social change. Idealistic, energetic, and open to new ideas, it has proven to be a powerful force for change. Our history is replete with instances that we can look into for inspiration. It was only when

the Filipinos united under the banner of the Katipunan that we were able to kick out the Spanish colonizers. Twenty years of organizing and mobilizing by the people's movement against the Marcos dictatorship culminated in the 1986 EDSA Uprising. Twice, our peaceful gatherings in the streets were able to depose abusive presidents from power. Conscious of the people's demands and the nation's real problems, many of the country's best sons and daughters are forgoing their personal, family, and class interests to unite with the workers and peasant majority in the struggle against the bankrupt social order. History teaches us that it is only the collective action, solid organization, mass mobilization of the Filipino masses that can truly transform oppressive and exploitative social structures and create history. Only this way can we ensure a bright future for the Filipino youth.