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VIEWPOINT

Viewpoint : Beyond parking tickets

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A recent New York Times report on illegal parking tickets may jog memories for those who squirmed when Ferdinand Marcos and Joseph Estrada landed on Transparency International's list of the world's Top 10 most corrupt leaders.

"Diplomats from countries that rank high on Transparency International corruption index pile up huge numbers of unpaid (parking) tickets," the Times reported in its op-ed page last Aug 13. But "diplomats from countries that rank low on the index barely get any."

On Transparency International's 2004 list, Marcos' \$5 billion to \$10 billion trailed the topnotcher, Indonesia's Suharto. Wedged into slot No. 9 was Estrada, with \$78 million to \$80 million. He lagged behind Nicaragua's Arnoldo Aleman who had \$100 million.

Diplomatic immunity enables many to shred tickets, David Brooks wrote. Yet, "not a single parking violation by a Swedish diplomat was recorded" over a five-year period. "Nor were there any by diplomats from Denmark, Japan, Israel, Norway or Canada."

In contrast, Kuwait picked up an average of 246 parking violations. "Diplomats from Egypt, Chad, Sudan, Mozambique, Pakistan, Ethiopia, Syria committed huge numbers of violations."

"Don't you know me?" a congressman from north Cebu once snarled at the traffic officer he slapped for flagging his car. Violence was his chosen form of immunity from a traffic ticket. His district is now snarled in Girl Scout funds ending in personal accounts, ghost foundations to Joc-Joc fertilizers.

Some jeepney drivers outdo ambassadors. The security cop for Cebu City Mayor Tomas Osmeña's wife owned a jeepney whose driver racked up 350 traffic violations. Did his job vest de-facto immunity? The mayor fired him.

Most traffic fatalities here are children between 1 and 4 years old, the Asian Development Bank reported in its study of Asean road safety. "Some aspects of Filipino culture . often go against strict law implementation, self-discipline and courtesy. These cultural factors infect many agencies and the behavior of drivers and pedestrians."

But run a red light in the Subic Bay Freeport Zone and cops will pull you over pronto. Nuts who careen through Metro Manila, Iloilo City, Cagayan de Oro City, etc., turn law-abiding inside Subic.

Cultural norms swirl below parking tickets. Citing "The Culture of Nations" study by Raymond Fisman and Edward Miguel, the Times writer adds: "If you're Swedish and you have a chance to pull up in front of a fire hydrant, you still don't.. You're Swedish. That's who you are."

Ordinances here penalize peeing in public. Would a London bobby "unload" in public? "I saw a Lapu-Lapu city cop pee against a post in uniformed glory," I groused to a brilliant forester from India. "We have them back home," he said.

An Ateneo Human Rights Center survey of 128 law enforcers focused on those linked to murder and homicide. Trying a military office or public official is an uphill battle, the survey found.

"Delays of investigation and prosecution are directly proportional to the rank the accused holds. Victims or witnesses are often reluctant to volunteer information. The cause is interlocking fear of reprisal, financial fixing, distrust of the judicial system." Some fret that such investigations fizzle out.

"Most respondents agreed there's basis for the fear of reprisal. The theory of our legal system is equal justice for all. That is as far as it goes," Fr. Joaquin Bernas, SJ, noted. "The powerful can always seek shelter in impunity."

Look at how Transparency International's local alumni fare. Monday's rites recalling former senator Benigno Aquino's assassination show the masterminds benefited from the "culture of impunity." See that too in today's extra-judicial killings.

The core of our values is the right to God-given life. "All lives are mine," says the Book of Ezekiel. Life is not for Maj. Gen. Jovito Palparan and soldiers to take, on orders of the state, activists insist. Neither is it for insurgents to snuff out lives for "failure to pay 'revolutionary tax' or 'blood-debts against the people,'" as Catholic bishops warn. The mayors of Davao and Cebu encourage vigilante murders to "ensure peace and order" by watering down the Fifth Commandment into a suggestion.

In his book "The Central Liberal Truth," former foreign aid worker Lawrence Harrison argues that culture shapes behavior and differences mostly explain why some develop faster than others. Some cultures check graft; others turn a blind eye to it. Fatalism is encouraged by some and individualism by others.

Ireland, China and Latin America show cultural transformations can't be imposed. Such transformation is led by people who accept responsibility for their own culture's problems -- and selectively reinterpret their own traditions to trigger modernization.

Sustained investments in education, especially in improving female literacy, usually precede transformations. (Thailand spends six times per pupil than we do for our students.) Chile was highly literate in the 19th century.

By 1905, 9 out of 10 Japanese children were in school -- and went on to graduate. In contrast, 33 out of every 100 who enrolled here in Grade 1 at the turn of the century dropped out before reaching Grade 6. And 2006 ADB indicators show this worrying trough has deepened even further.

"These investments (in education) laid the groundwork for takeoffs that were decades away," Harrison writes. Indeed, complex cultural change is measured in centuries, not in short election cycles.

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