

IN SERVICE OF LIBERTY AND PROSPERITY: THE MAKING OF A LAWYER

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I saw that in all cases the prosperity or unhappiness of nations is in direct proportion to their liberties and their problems, and, by that token, to the sacrifices or selfishness of their ancestors.¹

— José Rizal, *Noli Me Tangere*.

These are the words of none other than our national hero, spoken through the character of Crisostomo Ibarra upon his return from Europe. While his observation was dismissed in the moment, it endures as a reflection on the fate of nations: that prosperity is inseparable from liberty, and both are shaped by the sacrifices of those who came before.

This insight finds resonance in the philosophy of former Chief Justice Artemio V. Panganiban, who emphasizes the safeguarding of liberty and the nurturing of prosperity under the rule of law. To understand how these ideals operate as twin pillars of justice, it is necessary to examine their meaning and their place within the Philippine legal system.

LIBERTY AND ITS CONSTITUTIONAL GUARDIAN

Liberty is defined as the enjoyment of the same social, political, or economic rights and privileges enjoyed by others in a society free of arbitrary or unreasonable limitation or interference.²

In the Philippines, the Bill of Rights under Article III of the 1987 Constitution³ recognizes the fundamental civil, political, and socio-economic liberties of the Filipino people while simultaneously imposing restrictions against the State. At the same time, the recognition of the State's inherent powers likewise limits the exercise

¹ José Rizal, *Noli Me Tangere* (Leon Ma. Guerrero trans., Anvil Publishing, Inc., 2020).

² Merriam-Webster, Liberty, available at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/liberty> (last accessed on March 24, 2026).

³ CONST., art. III.

of these individual rights. In so doing, the Bill of Rights balances the freedoms of the people and the power of the government.

Generally, these rights may only be invoked against the State. However, due to the inclusion of most of the constitutional rights in Article 32 of the Civil Code,⁴ these rights may likewise be invoked in civil cases between private persons. The expansion of the scope of our fundamental rights is not a mere afterthought. It is a deliberate recognition of how the Filipino people deeply value our hard-fought freedoms.

Centuries of colonial rule and oppression in our own land loom like a shadow over our history, obscuring our understanding of the enjoyment of individual rights and the exercise of government powers, so much so that we were constrained to draw heavily from foreign legal models. Despite this framework, the full realization of these liberties remains a continuing challenge. For this reason, the responsibility of safeguarding these rights falls heavily upon the judiciary, which must ensure that constitutional guarantees are not reduced to mere formality.

In order to safeguard the constitutional rights of the people, especially of those who have less in life, the judiciary should exercise its constitutional mandate to review the acts of the executive and legislative branches to ensure checks and balances against any potential abuses. Thus, in cases involving individual liberties, courts have the duty to strictly scrutinize the acts of the government in favor of the people.

PROSPERITY AND THE ROLE OF THE POLITICAL BRANCHES

There is similarly a need to understand the prosperity sought to be achieved. Unlike liberty, prosperity is defined in broader terms. It refers to the condition of being successful or thriving;⁵ yet success is relative. Different persons, more so different nations, have different standards of accomplishment. What may be monumental to one may be modest to another.

⁴ Civil Code of the Philippines, art. 32.

⁵ Merriam-Webster, Prosperity, available at <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/prosperity> (last accessed on March 24, 2026).

Recent data underscores the persistence of poverty in the Philippines, with a significant portion of Filipino families identifying themselves as financially or food poor despite active participation in the labor force.⁶⁷

The promotion and development of the nation's economy is beyond the judiciary. Accordingly, the responsibility to address economic matters should lie primarily on the political branches of the government, particularly the executive and legislative. These branches are primarily composed of elected officials regarded as representatives of and for their constituents. Hence, absent any grave abuse of discretion, it is appropriate for courts to submit political questions, such as economic concerns, to the political branches of the government.

Sustainable solutions, however, require more than temporary relief. They demand policies that equip individuals with the capacity to support themselves and participate meaningfully in economic life. This includes investing in skills development, improving access to capital, and strengthening infrastructure that connects individuals to opportunities. Doing this would allow marginalized individuals to generate wealth and share in the economic well-being of the nation.

THE RULE OF LAW AS A UNIFYING FRAMEWORK

For the judiciary to safeguard our liberties and the government to nurture the nation's prosperity, there is a need for a unifying framework, one that recognizes equality, accountability, fairness, and transparency. Enter the rule of law.

The United Nations (UN) defines the rule of law as a principle of governance in which all persons, institutions and entities, public and private, including the State, are accountable to laws publicly promulgated, equally enforced and independently adjudicated, and consistent with universally recognized human rights norms. The UN further recognizes it as the foundation for economic and social progress and development and the protection of the people's basic rights.⁸

⁶ Janvic Mateo, *51% of Pinoy Families Feel Poor – SWS*, PhilStar, January 10, 2026, available at <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2026/01/10/2499899/51-percent-pinoy-families-feel-poor-sws> (last accessed on March 24, 2026).

⁷ Department of Finance, *Recto on All-Time High 52.4M Filipinos in the Labor Force*, August 6, 2025, available at <https://www.dof.gov.ph/recto-on-all-time-high-52-4m-filipinos-in-the-labor-force-as-of-june-2025-not-just-more-jobs-but-quality-jobs-are-on-the-rise/> (last accessed on March 24, 2026).

⁸ United Nations, *What is the Rule of Law*, available at <https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/what-is-the-rule-of-law/> (last accessed on March 24, 2026).

In the Philippine setting, this framework finds its foothold in the 1987 Constitution, which not only guarantees fundamental rights but also emphasizes the distribution and separation of powers among the branches of the government. Grounded on the Constitution, substantive and procedural laws enacted by Congress, jurisprudence decided by the Supreme Court, and regulations issued by the Executive Department altogether compose the Philippine legal system. Through this framework, liberty and prosperity are transformed from abstract ideals into enforceable realities. The rule of law ensures that the protection of rights is not left to discretion, and that the pursuit of economic development is guided by standards that prevent arbitrariness and abuse. In this sense, it serves not merely as a legal doctrine, but as the *sine qua non* of realizing liberty and prosperity.

However, it is one thing to articulate a sound legal framework, and quite another to realize it in practice. At present, the Philippines continues to face challenges such as unequal access to justice, delays in the resolution of cases, varying levels of public awareness of legal rights, and tensions between state power and individual rights. These gaps underscore a crucial point: that the safeguarding of liberty and the nurturing of prosperity remain ongoing endeavors. In this light, the responsibility does not rest solely on institutions, but also on law students, lawyers, and citizens who engage with the law.

FORMING STEWARDS OF LIBERTY AND PROSPERITY

To promote the philosophy of safeguarding liberty and nurturing prosperity, I must first cultivate a rule of law mindset grounded in the truth rather than by desired outcomes. To be truth-oriented is to allow the facts and the law to determine conclusions, even when the result may challenge my preconceived notions. This requires intellectual discipline and integrity, especially in a time when legal issues are often viewed through an arbitrary lens.

This mindset demands sensitivity to both civil liberties and economic realities. The former ensures vigilance against the erosion of fundamental rights, particularly for the marginalized, while the latter recognizes that the law directly shapes people's capacity to earn, to build, and to live with dignity. In studying case law, I should be able to determine the individual rights involved and the effect that the law as interpreted therein could have on similar lived experiences. In balancing these considerations, I may begin to appreciate that liberty and prosperity are not

competing ends, but complementary goals sustained through the faithful application of the rule of law.

Yet, the cultivation of a rule of law mindset should not remain confined to thought alone. It must find expression in concrete acts that bring the law closer to the people. As a law student, I can use my education as a tool for service by helping bridge the gap between legal principles and public understanding.

Currently, I am an active member of the Center for Legal Aid Work (CLAW) in the University of San Carlos where I had the opportunity to organize a lecture on *Katarungang Pambarangay* Laws for the *Lupon Tagapamayapa*. I initially feared low turnout and limited engagement, but I was proven wrong.

On the day of the lecture, the *Lupon Tagapamayapa* was complete in attendance. Even the *Punong Barangay*, some of the councilors, and representatives from the barangay's Violence Against Women Desk were present. The participants were actively engaged. They completed assessment forms, reviewed our materials, and participated in discussions with genuine interest. The open forum, in particular, revealed questions rooted in real experiences on the ground. After the lecture, the participants repeatedly expressed their gratitude. The *Punong Barangay* even told us that she was looking forward to similar programs for her other constituents in the future.

Through this experience, I realized that while our laws exist for the people, these laws often fail to reach the very people who need them. While ignorance of the law excuses no one, a vast majority of the public is unaware of our laws through no fault of their own. It is true that the publication of laws is tantamount to public knowledge, but publication does not guarantee an understanding of the law. That is where students such as myself can step in.

Under Rule 138-A, law schools must implement a Clinical Legal Education Program, which allows qualified law student practitioners (LSPs), under supervision, to engage in limited legal practice, including public legal orientation.⁹ Although students who have not yet completed their first year of law school cannot conduct these orientations, they may still render their time and talent by volunteering in extracurricular programs where they may assist in organizing such public legal orientation activities.

⁹ A.M. No. 19-03-24-SC, *Re: Revised Rule 138-A (Clinical Legal Education Program)* (2023).

Another manner by which I can develop this rule of law mindset is by maximizing my externship with the Office of the Executive Judge of the MTCC and RTC of Cebu City, specifically the Regional Trial Court Branch 3. There I can observe the processes before the court from the appearance of lawyers and their clients in the courtroom to the resolution of cases. Being a certified Level 2 LSP, I am also authorized to assist in the preparation of case digests, legal research regarding the most recent jurisprudence, and drafting of court orders under the guidance of a supervising lawyer. This way, I am able to gain a better understanding of how individual rights are invoked by parties to a case; how the courts ensure the observance of due process; how facts as proven by evidence are appreciated by the court; and ultimately how the laws are applied in resolving disputes before the court.

These experiences allow me to see that the rule of law is not merely studied, but lived—both in the quiet discipline of legal reasoning and in the active service of bringing the law closer to the people. Yet, they also serve as a reminder that these efforts, while meaningful, are only a beginning. The role of a law student, though significant, is ultimately preparatory. The true test lies beyond the classroom and community programs, in the practice of law itself, where decisions bear real consequences on people’s rights and livelihoods. It is there that the philosophy of safeguarding liberty and nurturing prosperity must be fully embodied.

THE LAWYER I ASPIRE TO BE: IN SERVICE OF THE PEOPLE

As I look toward my future legal career, I am guided by the philosophy articulated by former Chief Justice Artemio V. Panganiban that those who have been given the privilege of education and opportunity bear a corresponding responsibility to serve others, especially the poor and the underprivileged, by safeguarding liberty, conquering poverty, and sharing prosperity.¹⁰ This responsibility is not measured solely in material terms, but in the willingness to share one’s time, talent, and resources in the service of justice. In this light, the practice of law is not merely a profession, but a vocation that demands competence, integrity, and a steadfast commitment to truth. It calls for lawyers who are not only skilled and knowledgeable, but also morally upright and socially conscious, individuals who

¹⁰ Artemio V. Panganiban, *Safeguard Liberty, Conquer Poverty, Share Prosperity*, February 23, 2014, available at <https://cjpanganiban.com/2014/02/23/safeguard-liberty-conquer-poverty-share-prosperity/> (last accessed on March 24, 2026).

recognize that liberty and prosperity must go hand in hand, and that one is rendered meaningless without the other.

As I envision the lawyer I aspire to become, I see one who stands first and foremost as a guardian of liberty. I hope to be a lawyer who does not shy away from difficult cases, especially where the rights of the marginalized are at stake. Upholding due process, even for those who are misunderstood or unpopular, is not merely a professional obligation. It is a commitment to the principle that justice must remain available to all. I recognize that power, when left unchecked, can encroach upon the freedoms it is meant to protect. Thus, I must be prepared to question, to challenge, and when necessary, to stand firmly against actions that undermine fundamental rights. In doing so, I do not simply represent clients; I take part in preserving the very freedoms that define a just society.

Rather than measuring success by the size of one's clients or transactions, I intend to build a practice centered on those who are often left unheard—indigent individuals, women, and children who face barriers in accessing justice. For many of them, the law can feel distant, complex, and even intimidating. I aim to become a lawyer who makes the law more accessible, one who listens with patience and explains with clarity, so that clients may fully understand their rights and the remedies available to them. In serving those with limited means, I acknowledge that for many, legal representation is not a luxury, but a lifeline. Through this, I hope to contribute to a form of prosperity that is not defined solely by economic gain, but by the ability of individuals to live with dignity, security, and a sense of agency over their own lives. In this way, nurturing prosperity becomes inseparable from empowering those who have the least in life.

I also see my future role as extending beyond the confines of legal practice into meaningful service within the community. I intend to continue the work I have begun as a student, bringing the law closer to the people through education, outreach, and engagement. Whether through legal aid initiatives, public orientation programs, or *pro bono* work, I want to remain actively involved in efforts that bridge the gap between legal principles and everyday realities. I believe that the law should not only be invoked in times of conflict, but also understood as a tool for prevention, empowerment, and social stability. By sharing my time and skills, I can help ensure that the law is not reserved for those who can afford it, but becomes a resource that all members of society can rely upon.

Above all, I envision a practice that is grounded in integrity. I understand that the trust placed in lawyers is not easily earned and can be quickly lost. For this reason, I must remain committed to honesty, competence, and accountability in all aspects of my work. There will inevitably be moments when convenience, pressure, or personal interest may tempt compromise; but it is precisely in these moments that adherence to principle becomes most important. I want to be the kind of lawyer who upholds truth even when it is difficult, and who approaches each case with a sense of responsibility not only to the client, but to the legal system as a whole. In doing so, I contribute to maintaining the credibility and strength of the rule of law.

Ultimately, the path I have chosen is one that demands more than knowledge of the law. It calls for a sustained commitment to serve, to endure, and to give more of myself in ways that may not always be easy or rewarded in tangible ways. As José Rizal reminds us, the future of our nation lies in the hands of those willing to devote themselves to it. For me, this means embracing the sacrifices that come with the legal profession: the long hours of study, the discipline required to seek truth over comfort, and the courage to stand firm in defense of those who cannot stand on their own. It means choosing a path that may not always be the most lucrative, but one that is purposeful and grounded in service. In making these choices, I accept that safeguarding liberty and nurturing prosperity are not abstract ideals, but responsibilities that must be carried out through deliberate and sometimes difficult decisions. Through these sacrifices, I hope to contribute, even in a modest way, to a legal system that not only protects rights, but also uplifts lives—one where the law truly serves the people for whom it exists.