



# Reforming Philippine Language Governance

## *How Language Parity Can Revive Filipino Nationhood*

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Mikhail Roshan Tupaz

*Foreign employers have always favored Filipino employees because of our command of the English language. This is an advantage that we must continue to enjoy . . . the question of our medium of instruction must be continuously reexamined to maintain that advantage that we have established as an English-speaking people.*

*—Ferdinand Marcos Jr., July 25, 2022*

Since the brutal end of the Philippine-American War and long after Filipino independence, the English language continues to be a double-edged sword for the Philippines. On one side, it has served as an asset for global interconnectivity, economic opportunity, and mobility. On the other side, the English language has wrought unintended consequences for not only Filipino culture but also national development. Are there ways to reconcile these contradictory effects and to retain the advantages while diminishing the disadvantages? What policies would be appropriate, today and going forward, to achieve both national development and ongoing global interconnectivity? How can the Philippines preserve its rich linguistic heritage while maintaining its competitive edge in an English-speaking world? How can constitutional and legislative reforms address the systemic marginalization of native languages while also promoting national cohesion? How can language policy reform turn the Philippines' brain drain into "brain gain"?

To be sure, the relationship between Philippine national identity, economic development, and language is complex. It has been shaped by numerous historical factors, including the archipelago's preexisting ethnolinguistic diversity, English linguistic imperialism under American rule, and the socioeconomic pressures of a globalizing English-speaking world. Consequently, these factors have also led to the marginalization of native languages. Most Filipinos perceive English as a prestigious language that brings with it social mobility,

education, and economic opportunity.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, fluency in native languages, even Wikang Filipino, the national language, is seen as inadequate for economic uplift, especially among young Filipinos seeking employment abroad as stagnant wage growth hits the homeland.

Indeed, a robust Filipino language policy is crucial for fostering political stability, national cohesion, and postcolonial economic development.<sup>2</sup> To sustain these key elements of Philippine nationhood, such language policy must reflect a unifying national purpose that incorporates diverse communities into a common nation-building project while also honoring their distinct voices. If young Filipinos continue to associate English with opportunity and Filipino languages with limitation, an erosion of civic commitment to the nation will persist at a time when national unity is needed the most. Furthermore, if Philippine society continues to frame Filipino identity primarily through a Manila-centric, Tagalog-speaking lens, it risks marginalizing the diverse voices that underpin the nation's unity. Cohesion, not exclusion, will help the Philippines avoid impending economic and societal collapse.

The current Philippine economy relies on both English and skilled worker emigration to an unsustainable degree. The combination of stagnant wage growth and the lack of institutional support for Philippine languages has created conditions in which fluency in these languages proves insufficient for socioeconomic mobility and career advancement, making English a necessity that has driven educated and skilled professionals abroad.<sup>3</sup> This historical and linguistic-induced brain drain and the resultant loss of Filipino talent to foreign labor markets dooms the country's long-term prospects for economic development. Worst of all, with the decline of indigenous languages, Filipino culture and identity may disappear with it. Nearly fifty indigenous languages currently face alarming rates of decline, threatening the very existence of these communities.<sup>4</sup> Major Philippine languages are not immune to this fate. The current socioeconomic system encourages younger generations to neglect, if not abandon, their native tongues in favor of English.

Although the systemic issues behind this linguistic dilemma cannot be so easily remediated, the solution lies in the Philippine Constitution. As the supreme law of the land, the Philippine Constitution shapes the trajectory of language policy planning and serves as the blueprint for the nation's aspirations and goals. Due to the contested path to independence and inadequate language planning, the current 1987 constitution lacks clear, enforceable language protections. As a result, subsequent language legislation has been reactive, piecemeal, and vulnerable to the shifting agendas of administrations. However, with constitutional reforms to enshrine all Philippine languages as *integral to and inseparable from the national heritage*, the development and preservation of these languages will be protected despite changing governments. By honoring the diverse voices constituting the Filipino nation, these reforms reinforce the shared national project, showing that true unity emerges not from uniformity but rather from mutual acceptance and respect. To ensure the robust implementation of this constitutional reform, the current language policy mechanisms (LPMs) that enforce language policy, primarily the Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino (KWF) and the Department of Education's (DepEd) Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education Program (MTB-MLE), must be strengthened through funding, relative independence from the administration, and an

expanded mandate. By bolstering these existing institutions, native languages can continue to develop and instill in the Filipino people a pride in their mother tongues, while still maintaining the advantage of English-language education and proficiency.

Therefore, this policy brief proposes a two-pronged solution. First, the Philippines must enact a constitutional amendment enshrining linguistic parity and recognizing all Philippine languages as central to national identity and development. Second, the Philippines must undertake legislative reform to strengthen and protect the institutions and mandates of the KWF and the MTB-MLE through increased funding, political independence, and long-term strategic planning. What follows explores this solution in four parts. This brief will first outline the historical background of colonial language education, perception of English prestige, and Philippine language policy following the 1935 constitution. Second, it addresses the structural issues created by the Philippine Constitution and current legislation that hinder LPMs from effectively implementing their language policy mandates. Third, the policy recommendations section proposes a constitutional amendment, the revival of Senate Bill No. 2380, the rolling back of Republic Act No. 12027, and the reforming of Republic Act No. 10533. Lastly, the brief concludes with the feasibility of these policy recommendations and ultimately why this issue will determine the survival, flourishing, and unity of the Philippine nation.

## **HISTORICAL CONTEXT: COLONIAL EDUCATION AND EVOLUTION OF PHILIPPINE LANGUAGE POLICY**

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The impact of English linguistic imperialism on the Philippines reveals the interwoven nature of language and national identity. In his book *Linguistic Imperialism*, prominent linguist Robert Phillipson defines this concept as “the dominance of English . . . asserted and maintained by the establishment and continuous reconstitution of structural and cultural inequalities between English and other languages.”<sup>5</sup> Existing literature, as observed in this section, suggests that this phenomenon was pushed by the American colonial education system, which has ingrained in Philippine society a perception of English’s inherent superiority over the native languages. It was, however, not the case with Spanish.

Prior to Ferdinand Magellan’s arrival in 1521, the Philippines was split into ethnolinguistically diverse sultanates, rajahnates, and kingdoms, none of which achieved dominance over the islands. With Spanish colonization, public education in the Philippines was implemented by religious orders that focused on religious indoctrination. Meanwhile, secular higher education and universities were reserved for affluent mestizos. As a result, a mere 2–5 percent of the population achieved Spanish fluency. Nonetheless, even this limited colonial education fueled the awakening of Filipino nationalist sentiments. Filipino educational behavior during this period evolved in response to these colonial structures. Although the Spanish aimed to limit access to higher education, Filipinos sought alternative educational opportunities, such as private Latin schools, to challenge colonial intellectual dominance. Maneuvering around the Spanish-imposed system laid the foundation for nationalist movements in the late nineteenth century, as education became a primary tool for resisting colonial control and the creation of a distinct Filipino identity.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the preexisting structures of Spanish education, the Americans sought to reshape the “uncivilized” Filipino way of living in their own image, inspired by the concept of the white man’s burden and pursued through benevolent assimilation policies.<sup>7</sup> Throughout the American colonial period, English linguistic imperialism manifested in a public education system with English as the sole medium of instruction. Although disguised as an act of benevolence in contrast to the Spanish, this education system was designed to pacify Filipino resistance.<sup>8</sup> If the Americans could provide what the Spanish could not, resistance would not only be futile, but foolish. Thus, American officials used English to encourage the Filipinos to not only accept American rule but also the American way of life. This included embracing ideals such as liberal democracy, economic individualism, and Protestant moral discipline, which were portrayed as incompatible with native languages and traditions. Thus, this motivated many Filipinos to abandon their native languages.<sup>9</sup>

In 1915, American Director of Education Frank L. Crone proclaimed that he wished to “[make] the Philippines a great storehouse of Western learning and civilization, upon which the Orient may freely draw.”<sup>10</sup> Crone and his contemporaries contended that the English language carried Western values and traditions, and if the Filipinos learned it, they would also learn the American ways of life.<sup>11</sup> Ideological considerations aside, English was also practical: American teachers utilized existing US textbooks and pedagogy, English acted as a neutral language among the ethnolinguistic groups, and English was expected to become the international lingua franca.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, those proficient in English advanced to higher positions in society and government. The civil service, legislation, administration, and leadership all required English, associating the language with progressivism, democracy, and “enlightenment.” In response, Filipinos believed that they would never achieve economic and social advancement without English.<sup>13</sup> With these carefully crafted incentives, both economic and ideological, Americans persuaded many Filipinos to internalize the “superiority” of both the language and the lifestyle it represented.

From this history, two sociolinguistic consequences emerged that continue to obstruct language policy reform efforts. First, the internalization of the belief that the English language represented liberation, and progress erased the violence of colonization, which and, in turn, instilled in the Filipinos a sense of indebtedness to the United States, and, consequently, to the English language. This process has created a “problem of consciousness,” whereby Filipinos have come to idealize the American occupation and normalize English dominance, weakening the political will to invest in native language development.<sup>14</sup> Second, the English language became an indicator of an educated, privileged class and served as a gatekeeper to education, governance, and labor markets.<sup>15</sup> This signifying and gatekeeping has entrenched inequality in access to opportunities, making native language use insufficient and English use necessary.

The influence of these sociolinguistic consequences can be seen in the first two constitutions of the Philippines. The 1935 constitution did not explicitly establish an indigenous national language, only mandating the search for one. Furthermore, the effectiveness of early language policy was hindered by favorable perceptions of English and by interethnic

and intra-elite rivalries, reflecting the difficulties of imposing one indigenous language over a diverse archipelago. Establishing the Philippines as an American commonwealth, the 1935 constitution was drafted to act as a guiding hand for effective governance and eventual self-rule. Given that English had been used for over three decades, the governing authorities adopted English as the official language, alongside Spanish.<sup>16</sup>

Nonetheless, the 1935 constitution included a push for the search for a national language: “The National Assembly shall take steps toward the development and adoption of a common national language based on one of the existing native languages.”<sup>17</sup> With this mandate, President Manuel L. Quezon established the KWF’s predecessor, the Institute of National Language (INL), in 1936. Composed of commissioners from major ethnolinguistic groups, the INL was tasked with selecting the language that was most developed in structure and literature as well as widely accepted and used by most Filipinos.<sup>18</sup> In 1937, the INL recommended Tagalog as the national language, which was swiftly implemented through Executive Order No. 134. Crucially, however, even though Tagalog was recommended, the prestige of English as the language of education can still be observed in the wording of the executive order:

Be it further resolved . . . the adoption of Tagalog as the basis of the national language . . . shall not be understood as in any way affecting the requirement that the instruction in the public schools shall be primarily conducted in the English language.<sup>19</sup>

This wording explicitly illustrates the deep association between education and the English language, a stark sociolinguistic consequence of the American occupation. This association between English and educational outcomes continues to hinder language policy efforts, particularly for the use of indigenous languages in education, which continues today with the debate over the MTB-MLE.

A confounding factor for the ineffectiveness of the 1935 constitution was that ethnolinguistic groups opposed the establishment of Tagalog as the national language, especially the more populous Visayans. Although interethnic conflict was certainly a factor in their opposition, so, too, was English linguistic imperialism. Scholars point out that the debate over Tagalog’s status “reflects intra-elite rivalry and internecine battles over resource allocations that happened to be parceled out by region.”<sup>20</sup> In this alongside other language debates, anti-Tagalog opposition allied—and continue to ally themselves—with the pro-English lobby, especially the elite. The alliance guaranteed the viability of English as a link within the elite class that cut across regional groups.<sup>21</sup> Because English was an indicator and gatekeeper of prestige and wealth, much of the opposition to Tagalog was an effort by many non-Tagalog ethnic group elites to preserve the dominance of the English language and their sociopolitical power. They resisted submission to a native language that they did not identify with and did not preserve their prestige. Thus, the complex interaction between the prestige of English, the imposition of Tagalog, and the ethnolinguistic diversity of the Philippines created conditions that hindered a clear and actionable language policy.

Because of the Second World War and the hardships of postwar reconstruction, the language issue was not a priority until the 1973 constitution under President Ferdinand Marcos. The 1973 constitution mandated a new search for a national language called “Filipino,” which would not be based on Tagalog, but on all Philippine languages and dialects “without precluding the assimilation of words from foreign languages.”<sup>22</sup> This search, however, was linguistic fiction—a search for such a language was futile since it did not exist. Rather, the constitutional convention sought to pacify the non-Tagalog and pro-English lobbies with a language policy for an invented language. Still, the new national language, “Filipino,” ended up being a mere copy of the Tagalog language. Eventually, a bilingual education policy (BEP), with both English and Filipino, was officially put into effect in 1974. Under the BEP, English would be the medium of instruction for science and mathematics, while Filipino would be used for all other courses. This policy was a compromise to the demands of nationalism and internationalism. Filipino kept Filipinos grounded in their identity, while English ensured global competitiveness.<sup>23</sup> However, even in this compromise, the complex conflicts from the 1935 constitution were still present. The BEP represented a political compromise between rival elites: Tagalog-speaking elites, fluent in English, who advocated for Pilipino, and the non-Tagalog elites, also fluent in English, who worried that prioritizing Pilipino would disadvantage them.<sup>24</sup> This compromise held in the new 1986 constitutional convention under President Corazon Aquino. Although there was general acknowledgement of Filipino having become a national lingua franca, a strong English-language lobby was still present during the convention, securing the use of English in government and education in the 1987 constitution.<sup>25</sup> The effects of this constitution on current language policy are discussed in the following section.

From this history, we observe that Philippine language policy has been shaped by three main factors: (1) English linguistic imperialism, (2) the push to proliferate Tagalog, and (3) ethno-linguistic diversity and non-Tagalog opposition. The American colonial period ingrained in Filipinos the perceived prestige of English, maintaining the language’s preferred status in language policy and education. Although there were movements to proliferate the use of Tagalog, other language groups opposed it due to concerns over loss of prestige and lack of identification. Given these intractable issues, the premise of a monolingual, monoethnic nation-state is incompatible with the Philippine context. For this reason, the Philippines must pursue a diverse, multilingual idea of nationhood, where all ethnolinguistic groups are given a major stake in the nation’s future and destiny. Such a vision will not undermine national unity in the Philippines, but rather root it in a shared, yet diverse, commitment to our Republic’s founding principles, enabling difference to flourish as part of a stronger, more cohesive Filipino nation.

## ISSUES WITH CURRENT LANGUAGE POLICY

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The legacies of English linguistic imperialism, the imposition of Tagalog, and ethnolinguistic inequality are still present in the 1987 constitution, which enshrined Filipino as the national language but failed to define its scope or articulate protections for the country’s other

indigenous languages. While the Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino (KWF) was created to oversee language development, its lack of fiscal and political independence has limited its capacity. More recently, the implementation of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) represented a landmark effort to decentralize language use in education. Without robust legal safeguards, however, this policy has proven vulnerable to political shifts and elite resistance, leading to the recent rollback of its mandatory status in 2024. These historical legacies continue to manifest in today's legal and institutional landscape.

The 1987 constitution represents a marked improvement in language protections compared to the previous 1935 and 1973 constitutions. The document proclaims Filipino as the national language and expresses an enthusiastic push to “initiate and sustain the use of Filipino as a medium of official communication and as language of instruction in the educational system.”<sup>26</sup> Further, this constitution is more ambivalent toward English use, stating, “the official languages of the Philippines are Filipino and, until otherwise provided by law, English.”<sup>27</sup> Whereas Filipino is implied to be the nation's official language in perpetuity, the phrasing “until otherwise provided by law” suggests a temporality to the official status of English. Yet, the Constitution's weak wording is insufficient for the independent and appropriate funding of the implementation of language policy through institutions such as the KWF. Furthermore, it does not enshrine major Philippine languages as national languages, weakening the MTB-MLE. This section delineates not only the initial strengths of the 1987 constitution, which provide for the establishment of the KWF and the MTB-MLE, but also the unintended weaknesses that undermine their effectiveness and long-term entrenchment in the national education system.

First, the constitution mandates the establishment of a national language commission that shall “undertake, coordinate, and promote researches for the development, propagation, and preservation of Filipino and other languages.”<sup>28</sup> Building on the legacy of the Institute of National Language (INL) created under the 1935 constitution, this constitutional mandate became the basis for the Republic Act No. 7104 (RA 7104), which established the KWF in 1991. RA 7104 explicitly invokes the constitution in Section 2:

Pursuant to the mandate of the Constitution, it is hereby declared to be a policy of the Government to ensure and promote the evolution, development and further enrichment of Filipino as the national language of the Philippines, on the basis of existing Philippine and other languages. To this end, the Government shall take the necessary steps to carry out the said policy.<sup>29</sup>

Crucially, however, the constitution does not specify the structure, institutional independence of, or budgetary allocation for the KWF. As a result, RA 7104 does not guarantee the institutional or fiscal independence of the KWF from political or partisan influence. RA 7104 grants the president the power to appoint and reappoint at most once the chairman and commissioners, whose terms are staggered. The chairman is the only position that has a term longer than a presidential administration, seven years. Meanwhile, half of the commissioners serve for



five years, and the other half serve three years, well below a president's six-year term.<sup>30</sup> These staggered terms substantially reduce the institutional independence of the KWF, allowing any president and political party in power to appoint and reappoint its chairman and commissioners. Thus, an administration that heavily favors English can swiftly appoint and reappoint commissioners who support their agenda instead of promoting and preserving Philippine language use.

Moreover, the funding of the KWF flows at the discretion of the sitting administration. As RA 7104 stipulates, "The amount [of funding] necessary to carry out the provisions of this Act shall be included in the General Appropriations Act."<sup>31</sup> Accordingly, this means that the KWF's annual operating budget is determined through the regular budget process, where it must submit proposals to the Department of Budget and Management (DBM). The president then either includes or excludes it in the national budget proposal to Congress. Finally, Congress has the final approval of appropriations. Therefore, the KWF cannot carry out its provisions and mandate consistently due to its lack of fiscal autonomy and its reliance on the priorities of the sitting president and the dominant political party.

In 2010, a bill proposed by Senator Edgardo J. Angara, Senate Bill No. 2380 (SB 2380), aimed to directly address these two systemic issues. SB 2380 proposed (1) seven-year terms for all commissioners, provided that the first appointees have staggered terms of five and three years, (2) the removal of the power of reappointment by the president, (3) establishing a revolving fund from income generated by the commission, and (4) the creation of a comprehensive performance monitoring system, requiring annual reports to Congress and the president, including funding utilization and measurable impact.<sup>32</sup> Yet, despite this bill addressing many of the issues of the KWF, it did not progress beyond the committee stage and was not enacted into law, illustrating the lack of political will in reforming language policy. While the establishment of the KWF was a symbolic victory for Philippine language promotion and preservation, its effectiveness in carrying out its mandate has been impeded due to the vagueness of the constitution and RA 7104's delegation of key powers—appointments and funding—to the discretion of the executive and legislative branches. As a result, the KWF possesses neither institutional nor fiscal independence, remaining structurally vulnerable to the very forces it was designed to counter.

Second, the 1987 constitution explicitly grants regional languages auxiliary official status, which is significant for a more inclusive language policy. It states, "The regional languages are the auxiliary official languages in the regions and shall serve as auxiliary media of instruction therein."<sup>33</sup> It was under this constitutional directive of using the regional languages as auxiliary media of instruction that Republic Act No. 10533 (RA 10533) was passed in 2012, which established the MTB-MLE framework. As RA 10533 stipulates:

Basic education shall be delivered in languages understood by the learners as the language plays a strategic role in shaping the formative years of learners. For kindergarten and the first three (3) years of elementary education, instruction, teaching materials and



assessment shall be in the regional or native language of the learners. The Department of Education (DepED) shall formulate a mother language transition program from Grade 4 to Grade 6 so that Filipino and English shall be gradually introduced as languages of instruction until such time when these two (2) languages can become the primary languages of instruction at the secondary level.<sup>34</sup>

The MTB-MLE framework is significant because of its support from linguistic theory and clear benefits based on empirical research. According to numerous studies, the benefits of the MTB-MLE framework for children's learning include: (1) better expression of ideas and understanding of lessons, (2) empowered pupils with the self-confidence and increased active participation, (3) better lesson retention, and (4) promotes a friendly and healthy learning environment.<sup>35</sup> Most crucially, studies show that mastery of a student's mother tongue *enhances* the acquisition of additional languages, *including* English.<sup>36</sup> This directly challenges the misconception that mother tongue instruction delays English proficiency, when in fact, it strengthens the very foundation needed to learn it effectively.

Despite these benefits, logistical implementation challenges, ideological pushback, and, ultimately, the weak wording of the constitution, led to the discontinuation of the mandatory status of the MTB-MLE framework through a recent bill, Republic Act No. 12027 (RA 12027), enacted in October 2024. Implementation challenges included (1) multilingual environments in which students in one classroom spoke different mother tongues, (2) difficulties in translating lesson content in local languages, (3) inadequate instructional materials in the mother tongue, and (4) the top-down imposition of mandatory compliance to the DepEd's orders.<sup>37</sup> Aside from these, an ultimate tipping point was Filipino students' significantly low scores in the 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), with the Philippines ranking seventy-seventh out of eighty-one countries, well below the global averages in mathematics, reading, and science. The report notes that only 16 percent of learners attained at least Level 2 proficiency in mathematics, compared to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) average of 69 percent.<sup>38</sup> Citing this statistic to support overturning the MTB-MLE framework, proponents pinned the blame on its enforcement as negatively impacting the Philippine education system.

Moreover, ideologies surrounding the superiority of English-medium instruction and its utility for socioeconomic advancement also motivated the rollback of the MTB-MLE framework. This is exemplified by President Marcos Jr.'s earlier statement: "[T]he question of our medium of instruction must be continuously reexamined to maintain that advantage that we have established as an English-speaking people." Finally, the constitution's weak wording with regard to the role that regional languages play in education has made it effortless for the administration to advocate for the MTB-MLE framework to be optional. The keyword is referring to regional languages as "auxiliary," which implies "non-essential" or "secondary." Thus, it allows for their use in the classroom, but it does not require them. Using this interpretation, then, it is easy for a given administration to not only remove its mandatory status, but even discontinue the MTB-MLE framework, in order to mandate the bilingual education system of Filipino and English.

Although the repeal of the MTB-MLE mandate was framed as a necessary response to declining test scores and logistical constraints, this reversal misidentifies the root issue. The perceived failure of the MTB-MLE mandate does not stem from its pedagogical foundations, which are well supported by linguistic research. Rather, it stems from weak institutional design, insufficient constitutional protection, and chronic underfunding. Numerous studies have shown that mother tongue instruction enhances comprehension, confidence, and long-term academic performance.<sup>39</sup> However, in the Philippine context, the program was undermined by a lack of teaching materials, inconsistent teacher training, and inadequate language mapping. Rather than discard this framework altogether, it will be more constructive to strengthen the institutional and constitutional foundations that would allow the MTB-MLE framework to thrive. Effective multilingual education may be daunting, but it is not impossible. Multilingual education in the Philippines requires political will, sustained investment, and systemic reform.

In short, the weak wording of the 1987 constitution regarding language policy has led to the vulnerability of the current LPMs to political administrations' shifting priorities. First, the short-term reappointments of its commissioners and the reliance of its budget to annual congressional appropriation weakens the effectiveness of the KWF in implementing its mandate to promote and preserve Philippine languages. Second, the inefficient implementation of the MTB-MLE mandate due to logistical implementation challenges, ideological pushback from English-medium education proponents, and the weak stance of the constitution regarding regional languages have led to the program's discontinuation through RA 12027. Therefore, in order to address these issues, this brief advocates the amendment of the Constitution, the reintroduction of SB 2380, the rollback RA 12027, and an increase funding for the MTB-MLE.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

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Given the historical and legal issues presented above, and in order to pursue a strategy of national revival, both cultural and economic, the Philippines must pursue a two-pronged strategy: (1) amend the 1987 constitution enshrining language parity and (2) strengthen both the KWF and the MTB-MLE through new legislation. These recommendations seek to bolster the foundations of Philippine language policy as implemented by the Philippine constitution and its language policy mechanisms, the KWF and the MTB-MLE.

### CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT TO ENSHRINE LANGUAGE PARITY

The bolded and underlined wording in the Constitutional Amendment section indicates new material added to the current 1987 constitution.<sup>40</sup>

#### A. Proposed Amendment to Article XIV, Section 6:

1. The national language of the Philippines is Filipino. As it evolves, it shall be further developed and enriched on the basis of existing Philippine and other languages.

2. The co-national languages of the Philippines are all major Philippine languages spoken by more than one million Filipinos, including, but not limited to, Cebuano, Ilocano, Hiligaynon, Bicolano, Waray, Kapampangan, Maguindanao, Pangasinan, Tausug, Maranao, and Tagalog.<sup>41</sup> These languages shall be recognized by this Constitution as integral to and inseparable from the national Filipino heritage in perpetuity.
3. Subject to provisions of law and as the Congress may deem appropriate, the Government shall take steps to initiate and sustain the use of Filipino and the co-national languages of the Philippines as media of official communication and as languages of instruction in the educational system.
4. Other indigenous Philippine languages not classified as co-national shall also be recognized as integral to and inseparable from the national heritage in perpetuity and shall be developed, propagated, and preserved accordingly. Congress may, when deemed appropriate, provide by law for the inclusion of additional Philippine languages as co-national languages.

B. Proposed Amendment to Article XIV, Section 7:

1. For purposes of communication and instruction, the official languages of the Philippines are Filipino, the co-national languages, and, until otherwise provided by law, English. These languages shall serve as co-equal media of instruction, communication, and governance throughout the regions of the Philippines.

C. Proposed Amendment to Article XIV, Section 8:

1. This Constitution shall be promulgated in Filipino, the co-national languages, and English and shall be translated into other indigenous Philippine languages, Arabic, and Spanish.

D. Proposed Amendment to Article XIV, Section 9:

1. Congress shall establish a national language commission composed of representatives of various regions and disciplines which shall undertake, coordinate, and promote research for the development, propagation, and preservation of Filipino, the co-national languages, and other indigenous Philippine languages.
2. The Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino shall serve as the national language commission. To ensure the continuity of Philippine languages as integral to and inseparable from the national heritage, its fiscal and political independence shall be guaranteed by this Constitution and safeguarded from interference by party politics.

## STRENGTHEN THE KWF AND THE MTB-MLE

### A. Revive Senate Bill No. 2380<sup>42</sup>

1. Through its revival, the institutional and fiscal independence of the Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino (KWF) shall be strengthened through the following provisions:
  - a) Longer Commissioner Term Limits
    - (1) All commissioners, including the Chairperson of the KWF, shall serve a non-renewable term of seven (7) years.
    - (2) For the first rollout of implementation, the terms shall be staggered: one-third of commissioners serve for three (3) years, another third for five (5) years, and the rest for seven (7) years, to ensure continuity and rotation.
  - b) Revoking the Power of Reappointment
    - (1) The President shall be prohibited from reappointing any KWF commissioner, including the Chairperson, after the expiration of their term.
  - c) Creation of a Revolving Fund
    - (1) A revolving fund shall be created from income generated by the KWF from its programs to support its mandate, in addition to its current funding in accordance with the General Appropriations Act.
    - (2) This fund shall be used exclusively to support the KWF's operations and projects, thereby strengthening financial autonomy and reducing dependence on annual government appropriations.
  - d) Performance Monitoring and Transparency
    - (1) The KWF shall be required to submit an annual performance report to the Office of the President and to Congress.

### B. This report must detail the utilization of funds, implementation of programs, and measurable outcomes, ensuring accountability and efficient public service.

### C. Rollback Republic Act No. 12027 & Reform Republic Act No. 10533

1. Through rolling back RA 12027, the MTB-MLE shall be restored to its mandatory status, providing for its implementation throughout the nation.
2. By reforming RA 10533 with the following provisions, the implementation of the MTB-MLE shall be strengthened:<sup>43</sup>
  - a) Establishing a Dedicated MTB-MLE Fund
    - (1) To ensure adequate funding for its implementation, the MTB-MLE's fund shall be sourced from:
      - A fixed annual allocation equivalent to 5% of the national education budget from the General Appropriations Act;

- International development aid designated for indigenous education and cultural preservation (e.g. UNESCO, UNICEF).
- b) Guaranteeing Instructor Support through Training, Skill Evaluation, and Incentives
    - (1) Mandatory pre-service and continuous in-service training on MTB-MLE pedagogy, instruction, and sociolinguistic awareness for all teachers;<sup>44</sup>
    - (2) A nationwide language profiling program for public school teachers to determine mother tongue proficiency, followed by reassignment or targeted training as needed;
    - (3) Provision of language acquisition and co-teaching support for educators teaching outside their native language region;
    - (4) Incentives for MTB-MLE teachers, such as salary adjustments, hazard pay, promotion opportunities, or service awards for teaching in underserved or highly diverse linguistic communities.
  - c) Limiting Top-Down Implementation and Empowering Local Communities<sup>45</sup>
    - (1) To ensure community relevance, limit top-down implementation, and empower local community voices:
      - (a) Regional MTB-MLE Implementation Councils (RMICs) shall be established in each region, composed of educators, linguists, local officials, cultural workers, and representatives from indigenous communities. RMICs shall be tasked with:
        - (i) Conducting language mapping and community consultation;
        - (ii) Recommending orthographies and instructional materials;
        - (iii) Overseeing training and program evaluation;
        - (iv) Ensuring a community-based model of implementation, where parents, elders, and cultural institutions collaborate in the design and delivery of MTB-MLE content in their respective regions.
      - (b) Legislative provision that at least one-third of MTB-MLE content be RMIC-approved, validated by DepEd and KWF, in alignment with national curriculum standards.

By implementing this two-pronged approach, constitutional amendments and institutional reform through legislation, the Philippines will have a more comprehensive and *national* language policy that ensures the continuity, dignity, and uplifting of Philippine language and culture. This recommendation is ultimately an investment in language as a tool of national revitalization and economic development, which will help build a Philippines that anyone can thrive in, no matter what their native language may be.

## ADDRESSING POTENTIAL CHALLENGES AND METRICS FOR SUCCESS

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Such a comprehensive approach to language policy reformation necessarily gives rise to challenges. It is crucial to examine (1) the strategy for the constitutional amendment and legislation; (2) its political feasibility, by addressing pro-English resistance and elite, bureaucratic, and regional dynamics; (3) the road map of implementation; and (4) the metrics for success.

### CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT AND LEGISLATION STRATEGY

First, out of the three modes of constitutional amendment in the Philippines—Constituent Assembly, Constitutional Convention, and People’s Initiative—the most viable mode would be through a Constituent Assembly, which entails Congress proposing an amendment by a vote of three-fourths of its members, both the House of Representatives and the Senate. This does not require presidential approval and would then be ratified by the people via plebiscite. This mode would allow for (1) this amendment to be directly presented to the various political parties and modified to allow compromise; (2) a rapid vote and swift implementation; and (3) the lowest financial burden, since there would be no need to call a constitutional convention. Meanwhile, the proposed legislation in this brief would be presented to Congress as regular bills. Although the proposed constitutional amendment to enshrine language parity represents a transformative long-term vision for Philippine nationhood, its passage in the near future remains unlikely, given political constraints. However, critical first steps are well within reach. The passage of SB 2380, the rollback of RA 12027, and targeted reforms to RA 10533 are not only feasible but also urgently necessary to restore and strengthen the MTB-MLE system and institutional independence of the Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino.

### ADDRESSING PRO-ENGLISH RESISTANCE AND ELITE, BUREAUCRATIC, AND REGIONAL DYNAMICS

Second, the largest hurdle to overcome would be minimizing pro-English resistance. To be sure, in a globalizing and digitizing world, President Marcos Jr.’s concerns are not unfounded; the necessity of English fluency is undeniable. Therefore, this proposal must crucially be promoted as (1) a *patriotic* and *unifying* policy that promotes Philippine culture and nationhood, (2) a *pro-education* and *pro-English fluency* initiative, and (3) a *national revitalization* strategy. First, by promoting this as a patriotic policy that will uplift, revalorize, and preserve the legacy of Philippine culture and language, the opposition will appear less as a defense of modernity and more as a dismissal of national identity and historical justice. Crucially, proponents must emphasize that linguistic parity *does not* fragment the nation but instead fully incorporates all Filipinos into the already existing national project. This project has been formed by shared experiences of colonization by, resistance against, and triumph over empires. Philippine nation-building has always involved the whole archipelago, even if only some languages and cultures have historically been honored and recognized. Linguistic parity brings into view the peoples and languages who have always borne the burdens of Philippine history yet have not been provided the opportunity to recount their experiences.

Next, promoting this as a pro-education and pro-English fluency policy will further soften resistance. As discussed previously, linguistic and pedagogical research strongly support the premise that students' mastery of their mother tongues reinforces the successful acquisition of other languages, *including* English and Filipino. Accordingly, proponents must emphasize to the pro-English factions that supporting language parity is what will improve Filipinos' English language acquisition. Furthermore, the educational benefits of the MTB-MLE must be highlighted, especially successful cases in which children feel more empowered, confident, and equipped to learn in the classroom. These critical points must be central to congressional advocacy and public communication strategies. Additionally, the policy must highlight that both Filipino and English will continue to serve their constitutional roles as national and official languages, and both will remain vital tools of unity and global engagement. The inclusion of co-national languages does not replace these roles but rather strengthens the linguistic foundation upon which true national integration and multilingual excellence can flourish.

Beyond legislative hurdles and public opinion, any reform of this magnitude must also anticipate resistance from entrenched elites, bureaucratic inertia, and the dynamics of regional ethnolinguistic politics. Elite actors and political dynasties may perceive language parity as destabilizing to the status quo. Therefore, reform must be advanced through coalition-building between civil society, educators, local governments, and reform-minded legislators across party lines. Bureaucratic resistance within DepEd and other agencies, where English and Filipino dominance is deeply normalized, can be mitigated through change-management strategies, teacher incentives, and early engagement with unions and higher education institutions. Furthermore, linguistic parity must guard against perceptions of favoritism between larger and smaller ethnolinguistic groups. Ensuring equitable representation in RMICs and their proposed curricula, especially in regions with multiple ethnolinguistic groups, will be essential. Finally, reform must be accompanied by a proactive media and public communication campaign to counter misinformation and to normalize the vision of multilingual excellence as both patriotic and globally competitive. By framing this policy as a national revitalization strategy that can address brain drain and strengthen civic attachment to the Philippine nation, it can be positioned not as a rejection of globalization, but as a means of boosting the economy while standing firm in Filipino identity.

## **ROAD MAP OF IMPLEMENTATION**

Third, the road map of implementation will unfold over a ten-year period, with formal reevaluations and potential revisions conducted every two years. The rollout of SB 2380 will begin immediately: the current KWF chairman and commissioners will serve out the remainder of their terms, while annual performance evaluations will commence one year after the bill's passage. The revolving fund will likewise be activated without delay.

As for the rollout of the reformed RA 10533, the 5 percent allocation of the DepEd's budget will occur at the next General Appropriations Act cycle, with earmarked funding directed toward MTB-MLE revitalization, region-specific teacher training, and the development of culturally relevant teaching materials. Rather than establishing a new budget line, this proposal recommends earmarking 5 percent of the DepEd's total budget by integrating it



proportionally across existing expenditure categories, including: (1) Learning Tools and Equipment, (2) Textbooks and Other Instructional Materials, (3) Computerization Program, (4) Basic Education Facilities, and (5) Indigenous Peoples Education Program. For instance, in Textbooks and Other Instructional Materials, 5–10 percent of its budget could be earmarked for translating and developing culturally relevant MTB-MLE materials for grades 1–3.<sup>46</sup> The exact budgetary allocation percentages will be determined based on input from educators, legislators, linguists, and the KWF. This approach avoids additional financial strain, ensures continuity with existing budget frameworks, and aligns with the goals of decentralization and educational equity.

Pilot programs in high-need regions will begin within the first year, with nationwide expansion phased in over the following five years. All currently employed teachers will undergo mandatory in-service training immediately prior to the next academic year, while pre-service training for prospective teachers will be aligned with the reformed MTB-MLE framework in all teacher education institutions. Lastly, each region shall establish an RMIC immediately, appointed by each respective Regional Development Council, by the Metro Manila Council for the National Capital Region, and by the Bangsamoro Economic and Development Council for the Bangsamoro Region. These RMICs will serve as the primary coordinating bodies to oversee local implementation, ensure alignment with national goals, and evaluate regional progress.

## **METRICS FOR SUCCESS**

Finally, to ensure accountability and monitor this reform’s impact, success must be measured across educational, institutional, and societal domains. The following three indicators will guide evaluation and guide adaptive improvements throughout the implementation timeline. First, regarding educational outcomes, literacy rates, dropout and retention rates, and student confidence and participation by region and language will be recorded annually. Literacy rates must show improved early-grade reading and writing scores in the mother tongue, Filipino, and English. Fluency in English must be closely monitored for improvement to assure pro-English factions of the efficacy of the MTB-MLE framework. Dropout rates in grades 1–3 in MTB-MLE regions must fall, while retention and grade completion rates rise. Lastly, self-reported surveys must display increased confidence, comfort, and engagement in the classroom.

Second, regarding institutional outcomes, MTB-MLE coverage, teacher training completion rates, and KWF performance benchmarks will be monitored annually and must show improvement across the board. MTB-MLE coverage will be measured by the percentage of schools using mother tongue instruction in grades 1–3 and the percentage of curriculum and materials translated into regional languages. Teacher training completion rates will be measured by the percentage of in-service and pre-service teachers completing MTB-MLE training annually and certification or competency scores in teacher assessments related to multilingual instruction. Lastly, KWF performance will be assessed based on its annual evaluations: policy development, language documentation progress, publication output, and regional coordination efforts.

Third, societal and national impact shall be evaluated based on attitudes toward native languages, brain drain mitigation, and legislation and policy uptake. Attitudes toward native languages would be measured through nationwide public surveys and reported observations of increased use of native languages in media, public signage, and local government, both of which will be implemented by the KWF. As for brain drain mitigation, this would be measured by long-term tracking of skilled labor movement and measures of civic engagement or a desire to contribute to Philippine development. Both would be tracked through graduation surveys at universities that would inquire about whether graduates intend to stay in the country or go abroad and whether they feel a strong desire to contribute to Philippine society.

## CONCLUSION

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What this comprehensive language policy recommendation presents is, in essence, a national revitalization strategy meant to transcend exclusionary notions of Filipino nationhood, reignite the Filipino spirit, and instill a renewed sense of duty to our country. As argued above, our Republic's language policy is inextricably intertwined with and complicated by histories of American colonialism and English linguistic imperialism; with conventional, colonial-influenced models that equate nationhood with a single language and ethnicity—centered historically on Tagalog; and with the inherent ethnolinguistic diversity of this archipelago. Due to the failures of Philippine language policy to adequately and urgently address these factors when forming our education system, we find ourselves in a dire quagmire. First, there is a lack of national cohesion and sense of duty to the nation; Filipino youth increasingly wish to leave the country for a better life abroad. Second, because fluency in one's mother tongue is insufficient for socioeconomic mobility, combined with stagnant wage growth, many Filipinos learn English as a necessity for opportunities abroad. This includes many educated and skilled professionals leaving the homeland, causing a cycle of brain drain. Finally, and most alarmingly, Filipino culture and identity may disappear with the decline of our indigenous languages.

This policy brief offers the solution: a recalibration of the nation's language governance to reflect the true multilingual character of the Filipino people, uphold the cultural and intellectual richness of our native tongues, and forge a more inclusive and effective path toward national development. By amending the Constitution to enshrine language parity and reforming current legislation to protect and revitalize Philippine languages, we not only advance education and governance, but also reimagine Filipino nationhood to be one that is democratic, pluralistic, and resilient. One cannot deny that the ambitious nature of this recommendation demands constitutional reform, intergovernmental coordination, strategic reallocation of resources, and a revitalization of the entire education system. Yet the magnitude of these challenges is matched and justified by the magnitude of what is at stake: the survival of our nation and its heritage. Even the passage of just one of the three proposed reforms would represent a historic step toward this vision.

Indeed, as Filipinos, we must recognize that our strength, unity, and national identity derive from our shared experiences of colonization, resistance, and triumph as one people. We must always remember our people's grand aspiration enshrined in our nation's constitution:

To build a just and humane society, and establish a Government that shall embody our ideals and aspirations, promote the common good, conserve and develop our patrimony, and secure to ourselves and our posterity the blessings of independence and democracy under the rule of law and a regime of truth, justice, freedom, love, equality, and peace.<sup>47</sup>

This recommendation will not undermine our unity. Rather, it shall fulfill our shared aspiration, more truthfully and justly, to perceive and honor the different interwoven strands that have created the tapestry of our national epic: the multiplicity of languages, cultures, and peoples that have existed in our archipelago since time immemorial. Woven on the loom of our archipelago's struggle and unified defiance against foreign oppression; threaded with diverse cultures, histories, and languages; designed by nation-builders such as Jaena and Rizal; and dyed in the blood of revolutionaries such as Bonifacio, Lapu-Lapu, and Silang, this tapestry embodies the Filipino nation itself. Hence, in order to establish a resilient, inclusive, and truly *Filipino* republic, we must enrich the narrative of our shared history by offering a voice to every community's acts of resistance and triumph; not just that of the *illustrados*, the *Katipuneros*, the Tagalogs, but also of those from the Cordilleras, the Sulu Archipelago, the isles of the Visayas, to the shores of Mindanao. Every ethnolinguistic group—every Filipino—must have the right to speak of our national epic and pursue our national aspiration in the language that shaped their lives. By uplifting linguistic parity, we can more effectively and authentically pursue the goals of our nation's founding.

Thus, let our languages be etched in the conscience of our proud nation, forever integral to and inseparable from our national heritage. Let our voices continue to retell and fulfill our Filipino epic in Cebuano, Ilocano, Hiligaynon, Bicolano, Waray, Kapampangan, Maguindanao, Pangasinan, Tausug, Maranao, Tagalog, and many other indigenous languages. This foundational principle anchors this recommendation: to ensure the survival and continuity of the Filipino nation that our ancestors dreamed of, struggled for, and died for.

*Sapagka't kung hindi tayo ang magmamahal sa sariling wika, sino?*

*For if we do not love our own language, who will?*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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### MIKHAIL ROSHAN (MIKEY) TUPAZ

Mikhail Roshan (Mikey) Tupaz is a recent graduate of Stanford University, where he earned a BA in international relations and a minor in linguistics. His research focuses on constitutional and educational language policy, post-colonial nationhood and identity, and Southeast Asian politics. He has been published in the *Yale Review of International Studies* and worked as a Hoover student fellow on language governance reform in the Philippines.

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