

Neri Javier Colmenares
Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*

Mr. Neri Javier Colmenares is a leading human rights lawyer and law reformer in the Philippines advocating human rights, good governance and legal system reform. For his work, he was awarded the 2020 International Bar Association (IBA) Human Rights Award for “Outstanding Contribution by a Legal Practitioner to Human Rights” and ‘continuing determination and advocacy, in the face of great adversity’. His unflagging work contributed to reforms in the field of advancing accountability for corruption and human rights abuses in the Philippines.

Human Rights Lawyer, Advocate and Victim

In the 1970s, Mr. Colmenares’ determined public campaigning on human rights issues as an 18-year-old student leader led to his arrest in 1978 under a warrant of arrest issued by then Philippines President Ferdinand Marcos. Mr. Colmenares, one of the youngest political prisoners at that time, was heavily tortured and was imprisoned for a total of four years for his human rights advocacy.

Despite being a victim of brutal abuse, Mr. Colmenares has devoted his life to courageously advancing democracy, constitutionalism, the rule of law and human rights. A leader in innovative public interest litigation, a law reform activist and a congressman, his career has been marked by his deep knowledge of, and commitment to, international law and, in particular, the International Criminal Court (or ICC). Mr. Colmenares has achieved extraordinary results speaking truth to power.

In fact, Mr. Colmenares’ human rights lawyering started even before he became a lawyer when in 1997, as a fresh law graduate still awaiting Bar exam results, he was asked to draft a Supreme Court appeal for a death row inmate. His work led to the exoneration and reversal of the inmate’s death penalty conviction in the case of *People v. Del Rosario*. Due to the determined campaigning of human rights advocates including Mr. Colmenares, then Philippine President Gloria Arroyo abolished the death penalty in 2006.

Legal System Reform for Accountability under international law

In 1999, Mr. Colmenares appeared as one of the victims before the US District Court in Hawaii in the Marcos Human Rights Class Suit arguing for the full reparation of the victims. The court granted the extraordinary award of over US\$2 billion for victims of human rights violations during martial law. He later became one of the main authors of a law granting US\$ 200 million reparation for martial law victims. This experience also led to Mr. Colmenares to be a major voice in his country for accountability through international law.

As a result, Mr. Colmenares has been a leading figure in the Philippines advocating for the ICC. In December 2000 he was asked to draft a Legal Memorandum for then President Joseph Estrada on ‘The Need for the Philippines to Ratify the Rome Statute’, the treaty establishing the ICC. Estrada signed the Rome Statute later that month.

The recipient of this university’s first Human Rights Scholarship in 2001, Mr. Colmenares conducted research here in Melbourne on domestic implementation of the Rome Statute. He used the expertise acquired while studying here to push for Philippine membership of the ICC, including passage of a law that implemented the Rome Statute as Philippines domestic law in 2010.

In 2018 Mr. Colmenares acted as counsel and helped file with the ICC a complaint by families of extra-judicial killings victims against former President Rodrigo Duterte for Crimes Against Humanity as a result of the death of thousands in his violent war on drugs. Although the Philippines withdrew from the ICC in 2019, Mr. Colmenares was among those who argued that court can still try crimes committed when the Philippines was a member. In 2025, the ICC executed the unprecedented arrest of Duterte and his transfer to The Hague to face trial.

Mr. Colmenares also played an important role in public interest jurisprudence, filing or arguing cases before the Philippine Supreme Court that resulted in decisions nullifying presidential orders that curtail freedom of assembly,¹ voiding an executive privilege order curtailing congressional powers to investigate,² declaring unconstitutional extended powers exercised by a President in the imposition of emergency rule in the Philippines,³ and a landmark decision disqualifying candidates from the rich and powerful in party-list congressional elections which he argued must be reserved for the marginalised and underrepresented.⁴

Mr. Colmenares also led a successful Supreme Court challenge against China's encroachment in the Philippine claim in the South China Sea. The Supreme Court granted his petition in 2023 and declared unconstitutional China's joint exploration in the "West Philippine Sea".

Legislator and Anti-Corruption Advocate

In addition to his work as a human rights lawyer, Mr. Colmenares was also a member of the Philippine House of Representatives for three terms, from 2007-2016, where he served as Senior Deputy Minority Leader. During this time, he, with other progressive legislators, authored major new laws designed to better protect human rights in the Philippines, including the Anti-Torture Law, the Anti-Enforced Disappearance Law, the Reparation Law for human rights violations victims, and a law creating Special Election Precincts to assist people with disabilities and the elderly to vote.

Mr. Colmenares also played a central role in the infamous pork barrel corruption cases filed in 2013, against the misuse by the president and members of Congress of public funds allocated for development projects. The cases resulted in the Supreme Court decision declaring allocations in the national budget in the form of Priority Development Funds unconstitutional.

In 2015, he was appointed one of the public prosecutors in an impeachment trial in the Senate that led to the removal of the Chief Justice and the resignation of the Ombudsman for corruption.

Mr. Colmenares has been recognised by members of the legal profession worldwide. He was elected member of the Council of the International Bar Association Human Rights Institute in 2021. He has also been President of the National Union of Peoples' Lawyers, a national association of human rights lawyers in the Philippines, Presidential Advisor for Human Rights of the Integrated Bar of the Philippines, and Vice-President of the Confederation of Lawyers in Asia-Pacific. He also lectures in University of the Philippines Institute for the Administration of Justice.

In sum, Mr. Colmenares has made an extraordinary contribution to human rights as a human rights lawyer, academic and as an author of human rights laws, as well as paving the way for groundbreaking jurisprudence that protects the rights and welfare of the Filipino people.

A long-standing Associate of the Melbourne Law School's Asian Law Centre (ALC) and Centre for Indonesian Law, Islam and Society (CILIS) who has visited to lecture on the ICC and international humanitarian law, we are proud that Mr Colmenares has deep connections to this university. This award recognises his eminence as practitioner of human rights law, especially in international criminal law, and his exceptional public service to the poor, weak and marginalised, as an international criminal lawyer, a public interest lawyer and law reforming legislator. It recognises not just Mr. Colmenares' exceptional skills as a lawyer and policy maker but also his extraordinary courage in the face of repression and violent abuse, and, above all his exceptional integrity and probity, and his commitment to achieving justice, whatever the personal cost.

¹ The Calibrated Preemptive Response case (2006).

² Executive Order 464 Case (2007).

³ Emergency Proclamation Case (2006).

⁴ Partylist Electoral Reform Case (2001).