

Editorial

Maguindanao: Ampatuans - “Extraordinary people”

Saturday 28 November 2009, by [ESGUERRA Christian V.](#), [Philippine Daily Inquirer](#) (Date first published: 27 November 2009).

WHILE the whole nation recoils at what they are believed to have done, President Macapagal-Arroyo is not about to break her embrace of the Ampatuans. Or at least that was the assurance the deputy presidential spokesperson, Lorelei Fajardo, gave to the warrior clan that is widely suspected to be behind the merciless massacre and mutilation of 57 persons in Maguindanao Monday. “I don’t think the President’s friendship with the Ampatuans will be severed,” Fajardo said. “Just because they are in this situation doesn’t mean we will turn our backs on them.” As if that weren’t enough assurance, she added, “it doesn’t mean that they are no longer our friends, if ever they indeed committed the crime.”

Up to now, it seems, Fajardo remains as blissfully unaware of the horror and the outrage that happened in Ampatuan, Maguindanao, as she has always been. On Tuesday she dismissed the mass murder as a mere “incident between two families” and said Malacañang “cannot be affected by that.” Ms Arroyo had to correct her by saying that the massacre was “not a simple feud between opposing clans; this is a supreme act of inhumanity that is a blight on the nation.” The President went on to describe the crime as “outrageous” and “gruesome,” adding that she was “appalled and outraged by it.”

Between the President’s expression of indignation and her spokesperson’s affirmation of eternal friendship with the Ampatuans, what is the Filipino public to believe? From all that has been happening since the national tragedy and shame transpired, Ms Arroyo has been saying what she thinks she is expected to say, while her spokesperson has been revealing, perhaps inadvertently, what the President apparently wants to be done, which is to find a way to exonerate her loyal and faithful political allies. Apparently there are ties that bind her to the political clan that even the most heinous crime cannot sever—a shared complicity perhaps in cheating during elections past, as some people suspect? Thus where duty demands that the government come down hard with a mailed fist on the suspected mastermind, Mayor Andal Ampatuan Jr., her deputies have been handling him with kid gloves.

Such was the Arroyo administration’s feeling of awe and helplessness toward the warlord clan that Presidential Adviser for Mindanao Jesus Dureza, the head of the crisis management committee, could not bring himself to summon the principal suspect. Instead he humbly sought an audience with the Ampatuans to plead for their cooperation in the investigation. Executive Secretary Eduardo Ermita, while asserting that no one was “untouchable,” was also reduced to appealing to “those who feel they are already being considered as suspects” to surrender to authorities and prove their innocence. And a fearful and worried Chief Presidential Legal Counsel Raul Gonzalez urged the government to go slow in arresting the suspected mass murderer. “If we use the iron hand on them, they might fight back,” Gonzalez warned. “We should take precautions. These are not ordinary people.”

That much is clear: The Ampatuans are extraordinary people by almost any measure. They control the towns. They control the province. They control the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao. They control the police and the military who refused to provide security escorts for the convoy that bore the victims to their common graves. They control the armed militia that helped carry out the massacre. And they control Malacañang which had to be pushed by public opinion to start the process of bringing one of their members to justice and which up to now shrinks at the thought of unfriending the clan.

But now that the principal suspect is in the custody of the National Bureau of Investigation, perhaps the government will begin to do what needs to be done to give justice to the victims. The first order of business, as both critics and administration officials have suggested, is to disarm and disband the private army of the Ampatuans. At the same time, all members of the clan holding office should be suspended. They cannot be allowed to continue to wield arms and exercise governmental powers if investigators are to work unhampered in identifying the other culprits and building a solid case against everyone involved in this unspeakable tragedy. Once the basic investigative work is done, perhaps even the Ampatuans' friend in Malacañang might find it hard to stop the wheel of justice with the whole world watching.

The Inquirer

* *Editorial of the Philippine Daily Inquirer under the title "Extraordinary people"*. First Posted 21:50:00 11/27/2009.

SAYS SPOKESMAN: Arroyo still 'friends' with Ampatuans

By Christian V. Esguerra
Philippine Daily Inquirer
First Posted 20:01:00 11/26/2009

MANILA, Philippines — President Macapagal-Arroyo is still keeping her political ties with the powerful Ampatuans of Maguindanao despite their expulsion from the ruling party and the filing of multiple murder charges against Mayor Andal Ampatuan Jr. over Monday's massacre of at least 57 people.

"I don't think the President's friendship with the Ampatuans will be severed," Lorelei Fajardo, her deputy spokesperson, told reporters in Filipino.

"Just because they're in this situation doesn't mean we will already turn our backs on them,"

With Malacañang's promise of enduring friendship with the political clan, it did not seem to matter to Ms Arroyo that Ampatuan Jr. was the prime suspect in what has been described as the worst election-related violence in the country.

Director Andres Caro of the Philippine National Police said on Thursday authorities were not discounting the possibility of conspiracy involving other members of the Ampatuan clan in the mass killing.

Fajardo said Ms Arroyo's role as chief executive should be seen as "separate" from her function as a political ally of the Ampatuans.

“It doesn’t mean that they are no longer our friends, if ever they indeed committed the crime,” she said.

The Palace’s position seemed to contradict that of the administration’s standard-bearer, former Defense Secretary Gilbert Teodoro, who initiated the expulsion of three Ampatuans from the Lakas-Kampi-CMD in his capacity as party chair.

“The Ampatuans were stripped of party membership for their failure to uphold party ideals and principles in their area of jurisdiction, specifically relating to the peaceful, legal and democratic pursuit and exercise of political power,” party president and Sarangani Gov. Miguel Dominguez said Wednesday night.

Besides Ampatuan Jr., no longer a member of the party are his father, Maguindanao Gov. Andal Ampatuan Sr. and his elder brother, Gov. Zaldy Ampatuan of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao.

At Thursday’s press briefing in Malacanang, Fajardo was reminded of the Ampatuans’ role in helping ensure Ms Arroyo’s highly disputed victory over Fernando Poe Jr. in Maguindanao in the 2004 elections.

The clan likewise delivered in the 2007 senatorial race, supposedly engineering an improbable 12-0 victory for the administration ticket in the province.

“Even if they have a relationship as friends or political allies,” Fajardo said, referring to Ms Arroyo and the Ampatuans, “that should not hinder the President from being the President who would make sure that the law should apply to everyone.”

Fajardo skirted one reporter’s query on the importance of the Ampatuans as Ms Arroyo’s allies and the supposed difficulty authorities had even in inviting for questioning Ampatuan Jr.

“If you’re asking how important (the Ampatuans are) politically, let us separate the issue for now because the President is no longer seeking reelection,” she said.
