

Philippines: Forget martial law, just resign

Theres The Rub

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GOVERNMENT DID NOT DECLARE MARTIAL law when Antonio Trillanes, Danilo Lim, Nicanor Faeldon and several Magdalo men holed up in the Manila Pen. They had walked out of their trial, marched into the streets of Makati and barricaded themselves in the hotel calling for the ouster of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.

All government did was give the mutineers until 3 p.m. to surrender. When they did not, the soldiers moved in an hour later, firing shots, hurling tear gas inside, and even mowing down the hotel façade with an armored tank to allow troops to storm inside. They even trundled up the media people there, charging them with obstruction. It was the very picture of government resolve, if not OA.

They did not declare martial law when the MILF went on a rampage following the non-signing of the Bangsamoro MOA in Kuala Lumpur. Feeling betrayed, the MILF launched attacks all the way to Cotabato. Unless government reconsiders, MILF chairman Al Haj Murad Ebrahim warned, the hostilities could escalate into an all-out war.

All government did was put a P10 million price on Commander Bravo's and Kato's heads and send several battalions of soldiers to quell the uprising. It was the picture of government resolve, but one that came after much duplicity, perfidy and treachery to the Filipino people.

They did try to declare martial law, or at least a state of emergency with martial law properties, after Danilo Lim led his "withdrawal of support." GMA found in it an opportunity to crack down on her enemies, not least the media.

The media fought back, refusing to be cowed by it. The Supreme Court later ruled against the proclamation of a state of emergency finding it unconstitutional or finding the public mood to be ugly, whichever was more compelling.

The point is simple. You do not need martial law to solve spurts of mutiny, uprising or rebellion. Government is not without ample resources to quash these things. So what if "a rebellion was in the offing" in Maguindanao, as Justice Secretary Agnes Devanadera puts it? A rebellion is in the offing there, then crush it. Compared to the incidents above, which threatened government itself, the "Maguindanao uprising" is nothing. Indeed, compared to the incidents above, which were at least done in the name of principle, and not an altogether misguided one—ousting a coup regime, which is what the GMA government is, one mounted by purloined ballot if not by wayward bullet, is defensible—the "Maguindanao uprising" is just a vicious farce, roistered to prevent thugs who massacred 57 journalists, lawyers, and political supporters from getting their due.

The idea of holding back and avoiding confrontation to save lives is laudable, but it ought to be used judiciously. It makes perfect sense to do that when engaging an honorable enemy—to the extent possible, you want to exhaust all peaceful means to settle a conflict. It makes no sense to do that to a mob determined to spring their boss from jail—the only thing they understand is force. The military commanders say the situation has gotten more complex because the Ampatuans' supporters have

abandoned their offices, grinding the place to a standstill. If that's the case, then replace them, preferably with Toto Mangudadatu's people, and file charges of dereliction against them if they should still be around after refusing to lay down their arms.

All government has shown in the way it has dealt with Maguindanao is selective justice, one for Trillanes and company and one for the Ampatuans and their supporters. You would imagine that after soldiers dug up that graveyard of arms in the Ampatuans' backyard, with enough assault rifles and bullets to mount a not very minor war, soldiers would have swooped down on them and ordered all of them to stand down or lie under the ground.

We need martial law in Maguindanao like we need a hole in the head. It is not just unnecessary, it is pernicious. At the very least, it rewards the guilty. It gives GMA tremendous powers to do whatever she wants to do there, including bury the truth, which may not prove entirely figurative, about her role as Dr. Frankenstein in the creation of the Ampatuans. It reposes the cure in the hands of the source of the disease, it puts the solution in the hands of the originator of the problem. The very brazenness of the Ampatuans is a testament to GMA's complicity with them. Writ large over their mutinous rage is the threat that if we go down, you go down with us. Martial law gives GMA the power to sew up the place, to blanket it in secrecy so that nothing escapes from it, not a cry, not a peep, not a dying breath. So that nothing escapes from it, above all the truth.

What we need most today from the Maguindanao massacre is not secrecy, it is transparency. What we need most today from the Maguindanao massacre is the very open and public trial of Andal Ampatuan and his kin so that they might sing like a canary, or like drunken istambay in the neighborhood karaoke, apprising the world of why they think the way they do, why they imagine they could wreak wanton death and destruction upon the world without having to fear they would ever fall under the sway of justice. What we need most today from the Maguindanao massacre is to know the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, and not to settle for the lie, the whole lie and nothing but the lie.

At the very most, well, we know what happens when Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo tastes power. Nothing, not term limits, not guilt, not the universal loathing of her countrymen, can prevent her from wielding it. She wields martial law in Mindanao, she will wield it elsewhere. Or try to, desperately. In fact the solution is simple:

Forget martial law, just freaking resign.

By Conrado de Quiros

P.S.

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