

Philippines: A press conference that went awry - “Never have I seen a government being publicly castigated by the youth for its bungling attempts to distort facts and manipulate events”

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When young activists Jonila Castro, 21, and Jhed Tamano, 22, who were reportedly abducted on the night of Sept. 2, were presented at a press conference by the military and the National Task Force to End Local Communist Conflict (NTF-Elcac), I felt great relief at merely knowing that the girls were alive. Had they said anything then in support of their captors, I would have found that understandable. Back in 2006, two former University of the Philippines students, Karen Empeño and Sheryl Cadapan, disappeared under the same circumstances. To this day they remain missing.

But, like everyone who has been following the news, I was curious to know how the authorities would account for the two girls' disappearance. The fact that the NTF-Elcac had called the Sept. 19 press conference offered a hint that the event was going to be used to burnish the image of the agency and the military. This was only possible by replacing the sordid story of military abduction with the triumphalist narrative of repentant rebels returning to the fold.

To the eternal shame of the military and the NTF-Elcac, the public event they sponsored became the occasion for everything they did not expect. Their voices shaking with anger and defiance, the two young women used the press conference to refute the government's version of their abduction. Instead of confirming their supposed rescue from the communist movement, they spurned their sworn affidavits of contrition and surrender, portraying these as worthless testimonies secured under duress.

Only old men who know nothing of the romance of youthful activism could have hatched this naïve scheme and mustered enough confidence to livestream its execution on Facebook. Did they really think they could cajole these young people into parroting a story of “pagbabalik-loob” (moral conversion) after detaining them for more than two weeks? Of course, alone with their captors and fearing for their lives, they would admit anything. But, in front of media and no longer under the absolute control of the military, they would have been foolish not to seize the chance to speak the truth.

Those who were orchestrating the entire charade must have thought that making the two girls write affidavits in their own handwriting and having these sworn before a government lawyer was enough to ensure that the girls would stick to their script. This was so disingenuous that it is incredible that the lawyers among them would think such affidavits could stand legal scrutiny.

By bringing in the girls' parents to witness this act of conversion, they must have thought they had

the whole drama wrapped up. The story they clearly sought to promote was that these girls were wrenched from their families and led the wrong way by the communist movement. Though they meant well, they were too young to understand what they were getting into. But having realized that they missed their parents and longed to lead normal lives, they begged to be rescued. That was supposed to be the story.

When it became obvious that the government narrative of conversion and rescue had been totally demolished, the press conference was abruptly concluded. But not before someone in the audience was able to ask if the two girls were now going to be released from military custody. Instead of scoring a win for its anti-communist crusade, the government ended up being excoriated by the young activists for its oppressiveness and for lending itself to the nefarious designs of powerful business groups that seek to destroy the environment.

I watched the full video of the press conference, which was hosted by the office of the mayor of Plaridel, Bulacan—the hometown of one of the girls. Never have I seen a government being publicly castigated by the youth for its bungling attempts to distort facts and manipulate events. The authorities should have stopped after that first bungled presscon, and quietly swallowed their shame.

But, no, they wanted to redress what they felt was a betrayal of trust. And so, at a second press conference called by the now-infamous NTF-Elcac, they accused the two women activists of perjuring their testimonies. They also claimed that this whole affair was an elaborate communist conspiracy to simulate a rebel surrender for the purpose of embarrassing the government and depicting its military as a human rights violator.

The charge of perjury might be arguable, but even this could be excusable if the sworn testimony was obtained while one was under custody inside a military camp, and without the assistance of a lawyer of one's choice. But, to say that the government itself had been hoodwinked by the communists into participating in an intricate scheme to process two activists who were posing as rebels returning to the fold is to confess to a pathetic failure of intelligence, both in the technical and plain meanings of that word.

That this second press conference took place on Sept. 21, on the 51st anniversary of the declaration of martial law, confirms the enduring relevance of the Marxist axiom that facts and personages in history do indeed appear twice: "The first time as tragedy, the second time as farce."

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P.S.

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