

Philippines: Celebrate The Freedom of Leila De Lima, Send Rodrigo Duterte to the International Criminal Court

Friday 13 December 2024, by [BELLO Walden](#) (Date first published: 15 November 2023).

After 6 years, 10 months, and 21 days, former Senator Leila de Lima is finally free. Judge Gener Gito of Branch 206 of the Regional Trial Court in Muntinlupa, Rizal, granted her bail after she posted a P300,000 bond. Her complete exoneration from the charges leveled against her by the administration of former President Rodrigo Duterte is only a matter of time. The three cases charging her with being engaged in drug trafficking collapsed when all key witnesses recanted their testimonies, claiming they were forced by the government to bear false witness against her.

De Lima's imprisonment has been the most spectacular frame-up in the history of the Philippine judicial system. It was the act of a criminal president who had sworn to take revenge for her daring to investigate the extra-judicial executions that took place in Davao when he was mayor of that city and throughout the country when he assumed the presidency in 2016. With de Lima out of the way, Duterte's so-called war on drugs went on to claim some 27,000 lives via extra-judicial execution, according to some estimates.

From the very beginning, those of us who had worked with Senator de Lima knew the charges against her were utterly false and that she was the object of a campaign that involved the use of the most despicable tactics by Duterte and his allies like former Senator Richard Gordon and former Duterte spokesman Harry Roque. As I said at the conference on lawfare or the weaponization of the law held at De La Salle University in February 2020,

Let me just share my thoughts on two of Duterte's blitzkrieg methods that proved so effective. One was the blatantly misogynistic line of attack, characterizing Sen Leila as "an immoral woman." This was, in a very real sense, a witch hunt, a drive to paint this particular woman who had the gall to stand up to the omnipotent patriarch as the source of all society's evils. One must admit that it was a stroke of evil genius to dredge up Jurassic age prejudices against women, the primordial Samson and Delilah complex about women leading men astray, that primeval fear that Freud called castration anxiety, and to link these subliminal male terrors to the legal accusations that Senator Leila was a high-level enabler of the drug trade.

Related to this misogynistic psycho-strategy was the sheer effrontery of the plan to paint a former Secretary of Justice as being at the center of the country's illegal drugs problem. This panzer punch was so bold that it stunned people and, among many of those who did not know Senator Leila, it made them question their initial common sense or instinctive reaction that the accusation was utterly false.

Now those of us who knew Senator de Lima and had worked with her and known first-hand her determination to combat injustice knew the accusations were nonsense. I had the opportunity to work with her briefly in pursuing cases against government officials abroad who were treating our OFWs as sexual prey while I was head of the House of Representatives' Committee on Overseas Workers' Affairs, and I was thoroughly impressed with her commitment to rectifying injustice. But for those who had not had my chance to work with her, the panzer punch was so outrageously bold that it psychologically destabilized them and made them question their initial reaction to dismiss the charges against Senator Leila as absurd.

Justice has been long in coming, but let not the Marcos, Jr, administration take credit for Senator de Lima's release. She could have been set free from the very first day of this administration had the president had the courage to defy his predecessor. Instead, she languished in jail for nearly another year and a half, during which time she almost was killed when she was taken hostage by an inmate at the Crame police detention center in October of last year.

It has been pressure from the people that forced the government to release de Lima, one that was mobilized by the Free Leila Committee and channeled to the courtroom by a formidable legal team.

I join the whole country in celebrating the vindication of Senator Leila de Lima and demanding the legal and moral rectification of the outrage perpetrated against her by bringing Rodrigo Duterte, along with his minions, to justice for orchestrating a travesty of truth, morality, and due process. I also join the now universal clamor to send Duterte to the International Criminal Court in the Hague to stand trial for masterminding the extra-judicial execution of thousands of Filipinos.

Walden Bello Former Congressman Walden Bello is a member of the Free Leila Movement and the recipient of the Most Distinguished Defender of Human Rights Award from Amnesty International Philippines. He has been charged with "cyberlibel" by the camp of Vice President Sara Duterte.

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