

Editorial

Philippines: Overlords

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BY instinct and conviction, President Macapagal-Arroyo is a believer in strong central authority and the paramount political status of the presidency. But out of necessity she has conceded unprecedented power to provincial warlords in the name of expediency and political survival to the extent that she can only be proven impotent in enforcing the writ of the national government in the coming days.

Let no one doubt that the horrors perpetrated in Maguindanao, in which two candidates, media persons accompanying them to the Comelec office, and civilians were stopped by policemen and paramilitary forces who then proceeded to murder and rape the group, deserves the strongest condemnation. We join the outrage and the demand for justice for the victims. And yet we must acknowledge that this kind of political murder is par for the course among the warlord allies the administration has assiduously coddled and who have thrived in the era of impunity fostered by the present dispensation. The only thing different is the scale of the brutality, the level of brazen impunity, so that no one previously conditioned to shrug off such atrocities can do so now that Christians and media people have become targets as well.

And yet there is a danger in focusing on the massacre perpetrated by the goons of the Ampatuans, against their rivals from the Mangudadatu clan as something uniquely Moro: the rido or clan vendettas engaged in there are no different from other famously grisly feuds, such as that between the Singsons and the Crisologos in Ilocos Sur. The Ampatuans themselves are unique only in that their ferocity spectacularly increases in direct proportion to their sense of impunity.

Impunity, then, is the issue: it is the reasons why the Ampatuans act with impunity that must be probed.

In the first place, there is the cynical belief by national authorities that provincial warlords are a necessary and valuable countervailing force to terrorist and rebel groups. If the Ampatuans are despicable, there are many other warlords not only in Mindanao but in the Visayas and Luzon who thrive on similar combinations of terrorizing voters and making themselves useful to the military and the national government.

We cannot help but notice how the spokesman of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, Lt. Col. Romeo Brawner Jr., tried to avoid using the word "massacre," at first referring to the mass murder as an "issue." His immediate concern seemed to be to absolve the AFP of responsibility for failing to secure a national highway after the Mangadadatus had asked for security. The AFP tried to pass the buck to the Philippine National Police (after all, one of the suspected culprits is the provincial PNP chief) when most observers in fact agree that the local police kowtow to the AFP.

And yet, much as the Ampatuans are one of many warlord clans, they are, indeed, a clan that stands apart.

We must not overlook the reality that the Ampatuans enjoy an unprecedented level of power and

impunity compared to other Moro warlord dynasties (such as the Dimaporos) that aspired to be regional overlords over other warlords in previous times. Those aspiring to paramount status among warring and competing clans in the past did so by means of the patronage of presidents, and only for the duration of the administrations that backed them. In contrast, the Ampatuans can stand on their own, regardless of who sits in Malacañang, and regardless of whether or not they are anointed as the sole administration candidate.

They proved their mettle in the elections of 2004 and 2007, and those who are skittish about demanding accountability from the national government and candidates that benefitted from the electoral machinations of the Ampatuans (and other administration allies) must reflect on their culpability in this grisly turn of events. Enfeebled institutions were saddled with exacting accountability while too many tried to excuse the President's efforts to thwart these exercises. Now we have what we have.

And that is, that even as the President's advisers darkly propose a state of emergency or some sort of emergency rule in Maguindanao, just how willing or able will the national government be to actually do something about the Ampatuans as the country—and the ruling coalition—braces for the 2010 elections? Just last week, at the Lakas-Kampi-CMD convention, Speaker Prospero Nograles (the Ampatuans maintain three mansions in Davao City) and Chief Presidential Legal Counsel Raul Gonzalez were photographed arm in arm with a beaming ARMM Gov. Datu Zaldy Ampatuan, and at a time when Defense Secretary Norberto Gonzales was gearing up to activate military reservists. Nothing Ampatuan did in the past could dispel Lakas-Kampi-CMD bonhomie Tuesday and nothing that happens tomorrow will interfere with the ramping up of the military establishment by proponents of impunity like Gonzales.

P.S.

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