

Editorial

Philippines: Dynasty tragedy

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The shock we all feel over the unprecedented, indeed unimaginable scale of the massacre in Ampatuan, Maguindanao is also, and traumatically, the shock of recognition. We realize: This is what happens when power becomes absolute.

How did one political family come to exercise absolute control over one province? In the same way that other political families who won absolute control in other provinces or districts or cities came to power and maintained their hold on it.

In a polity with weak political parties, a political dynasty is often the best, the most effective form of political organization. When the biggest political parties in the country remain essentially factions bankrolled by financiers or political entrepreneurs—the Nationalist People's Coalition by businessman Eduardo Cojuangco Jr., the resurrected Nacionalista Party by Sen. Manuel Villar, the Liberal Party by the Araneta-Roxas clan (at least until the sudden ascendancy of Sen. Benigno Aquino III), the Lakas-Kampi-CMD by President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo—an extended political family, often funded by a ruling elder, offers an additional advantage: built-in loyalty.

A political dynasty requires no membership initiation, no formation programs; membership is, quite literally, a matter of DNA.

In a political domain with a tradition of centralized authority, a dynasty in power enjoys an incomparable advantage: the equity of the incumbent. As any politician knows, power begets power; centralized power, as in the case of an underdeveloped province like Maguindanao, is the gift that keeps on giving.

In a centralized or “traditional” political domain, a ruling political dynasty enjoys another advantage: It can effectively work around the inconvenience of term limits. (Thus, in Maguindanao, the Ampatuan patriarch, Andal Sr., may opt to transfer the office of governor to a son through the benefit of an assured electoral majority.)

In other words, the immaturity of our political system allows political dynasties to flourish.

But the question also demands a specific answer. How did one political family come to exercise absolute control over one province?

By giving the Arroyo administration, the central source of government patronage and power, exactly what it needs, and earning for itself special or legal authority to do, in its own domain, whatever it pleases.

The Ampatuans have ruled Maguindanao since 2001. They have delivered a command vote in two crucial elections: the 2004 presidential contest, and the 2007 senatorial race. Consider that the Maguindanao “vote” proved critical to President Arroyo's presidential bid and instrumental to Senate

Majority Leader Juan Miguel Zubiri's election to the Senate. Consider, too, that the election of Zaldy

Ampatuan as governor of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao in 2005 was a happy solution for the administration; it placed a reliable ally in the influential ARMM, and allowed the administration a stronger hand in Muslim affairs. (The ARMM governor is son and heir apparent of Andal Sr.)

In return, what did the Ampatuans receive? Among many other favors, a crucial piece of paper, as the PCIJ has written: In 2006, Executive Order 546 allowed the use of barangay tanods (village watchmen) as “force multipliers” in peace and order and counter-insurgency operations. The order gave legal sanction to civilian volunteer organizations or CVOs—and effectively legalized private armies.

This EO led directly, three years later, to the Ampatuan massacre: the worst outbreak of political violence in our history, and the worst loss of life in the history of journalism. On Tuesday, the Philippine National Police ordered the disarming of CVOs, a necessary process not without risk. It has also cancelled all permits to carry firearms (a tacit recognition that licensed guns may very well have been used in the massacre). But the damage has been done.

While the extreme savagery and sheer scale of the mass murder are unprecedented, the basic impulse behind it is something we are all too familiar with: When unmarked, black-tinted SUVs wang-wang their insolent way through a city’s roads, when government officials who have no other source of income except access to public funds ostentatiously purchase the most expensive luxury items, when public servants swagger into a room with dozens of bodyguards, we recognize the seeds of future massacres.

P.S.

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