

Editorial

# Maguindanao: Philippine Warlords as Political entrepreneurs

Sunday 29 November 2009, by [Philippine Daily Inquirer](#) (Date first published: 28 November 2009).

MANILA, Philippines—This is what Francisco Lara Jr., writing for *MindaNews* [1], calls political families—like the Ampatuans. He says that causes of violence and conflict in Muslim Mindanao are going through some changes. There is a new breed of warlords, he says, “whose powers depend upon their control of a vast, illegal and shadow economy and an ever-growing slice of internal revenue allotments,” and their insatiable hunger for wealth induces “a violent addiction to political office.”

Lara differentiates the old power dynamics governing warlords in Muslim Mindanao and their patrons in the national government from the psychopathic behavior of the new kind. As the national government surrendered revenue and authority to the new warlords in order to engage them on the government’s side in fighting rebel groups—in the process anointing specific warlord clans—elections in their area became winner-take-all contests and were held with ever-mounting ferocity. As the state abdicated its powers and responsibilities, the warlords discovered that beyond patronage via tax pesos, enormous fortunes could be made by engaging in Mafia-style activities.

As Lara puts it, “political authority may enable control over the formal economy, but the bigger prize is the power to monopolize or to extort money from those engaged in the lucrative business of illegal drugs, gambling, kidnap-for-ransom, gun-running, and smuggling, among others.” The “others” include piracy (software, CDs and DVDs) and smuggling of pearls and gems from overseas.

Imagine the utter impotence national agencies like the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) feel in places like Maguindanao; or how the internal revenue or customs bureaus are reduced into nominal agencies in such fiefdoms.

This explains the warlords’ spectacular and damning lack of interest in imposing true law and order, or in anything beyond the undeveloped economy that exists in places like Maguindanao, one of the poorest parts of the country by any measure. The real money is to be made only in so far as political office ensures the means to allow or disallow illegal activities—depending solely on whether officialdom gets a piece of the action or not.

It is actually in the interest of such “leaders” to keep their electorate poor, hungry, ignorant and unhealthy. As Lara bluntly puts it, “People actually expect local leaders to pocket government resources, and are willing to look the other way so long as their clans dominate and they are given a small slice during elections. Legitimacy is all about providing protection to your fellow clan members by trumping the firepower of your competitors, leaving people alone, and forgetting about taxes.”

The only limit to such predatory official behavior is not the national government—which created such a monstrous situation in the first place—but the Moros themselves: specifically, the Moro civil society and organized sectors in the population, such as women’s groups, assisted by the media, to show that Moro aspirations are different from those of their so-called elected officials.



This is why the Ampatuan Massacre was so horrific, not just in the manner it was conducted but also, in the targets picked for slaughter. When Moro women, “who usually played a strategic role in negotiating an end to rido became its principal victims,” Lara says, it was a signal that there is no room for any dissent or change whatsoever in the Maguindanao envisioned by the killers. And the lesson was meant to sink down the line for all others targeted on that horrific day of Nov. 23: the media, as the megaphone for the powerless and the weak; and even the Mangudadatus who dared think the province can be anything but a one-clan dictatorship.

And all because Manila, believing that warlords could serve as useful auxiliaries to the PNP and AFP, has learned to its delight the real value-added of dynasties like the Ampatuans: they can help administrations exercise a veto power on the results of national elections.

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**P.S.**

\* Editorial of the Philippine Daily Inquirer. First Posted 23:17:00 11/28/2009, under the title “Political entrepreneurs”.

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**Footnotes**

[1] See on ESSF: [The Ruthless Political Entrepreneurs of Muslim Mindanao](#)