

Philippines: Senator Leila de Lima: A Profile in Courage

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First of all, the good news. In February, Senator de Lima was acquitted of one of the three charges against her. The bad news is that, despite of all the efforts of her legal team to have the other two charges against her dropped, she continues to be prosecuted. It is clear that Malacanang has ordered its minions in the judicial system to prolong Senator de Lima's time in jail as long as possible, despite the fact that the whole country now knows that she has been framed of false accusations of having been involved with the drug cartel.

I don't want to spend my time going through the legalities of the de Lima case. What I would like to do instead is examine the social psychological aspects of President Duterte's imprisonment of Senator de Lima, sharing with you some thoughts I initially shared at the Lawfare Conference we had over a year ago at De La Salle University, in Manila.

I was wondering why at the beginning of Sen Leila's current odyssey there were not more people who stood up for her. I think I would attribute this to what I have termed elsewhere as Duterte's "blitzkrieg fascism."

While at the ground level, Duterte's panzers rolled over barangays indiscriminately killing people, at the national political level, Duterte and his minions focused their massive firepower on Senator Leila. Both at the ground level and national level, the aim of Duterte's panzers was to demonstrate the power of the administration to do anything it wanted and communicate that resistance was futile.

True, the persecution of Sen Leila was to Duterte partly a settling of personal scores, the guy's getting back at her for daring to investigate him for the Davao Death Squad killings. But, probably more important, it was a campaign undertaken for what social psychologists would call its "demonstration effect" on the citizenry.

Duterte's blitzkrieg methods

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 in the Filipino male's psyche, 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.

Those who did not know Senator Leila could perhaps be excused for being stunned by the lies of the President and his minions, and I am sure the good senator will not take this against them. But there were others who knew better but were so worried that the same public crucifixion would happen to them that they remained silent or did not come out to defend her as strongly as they should have. I mention this not to make anyone feel guilty but so we can understand why, despite their being fueled by falsehoods, Duterte's blitzkrieg tactics have been so effective in stunning people into inaction.

The blitz has lost its punch

But over four years on, the panzers have run out of fuel. The blitz has lost its punch. The testimony of drug lords who're willing to admit to anything to escape the full force of the law is ridiculed and dismissed even by pro-Duterte people. The prosecution is having a hell of a time trying to construct a case that would not be ripped to shreds during the first hour in court, so that is why they're dragging out the remaining cases against her.

Moreover, today, the eyes of a large number of our compatriots who used to support Duterte have been opened owing to the demonstration of massive incompetence his administration has shown in handling the Covid 19 pandemic and his total surrender to China on the West Philippine Sea.

But most important, people are coming forward to bear witness to a grave injustice. I know several people who now make it a point to bring up Senator Leila's case with other people whenever the occasion presents itself. Let me quote one acquaintance here: "Whenever I ride a taxi these days, I make it a point to engage drivers on the political situation, and one of the things I talk to them about is the frame-up of Senator de Lima." Slowly but surely, the tide is turning, if it has not already turned.

Suggestions for action

I am supposed to provide suggestions on what to do to advance Senator Leila's release. The legal suggestions I will leave up to our eminent lawyers. I will just mention non-legal initiatives.

Bringing up the case of Senator Leila whenever we can, like my friend does with all sorts of people and in all sorts of occasions, is one way of spreading the truth, and with many of us doing this consciously, as in a chain letter, this can work wonders.

Then there is bringing up her case to friends and followers in social media. Of course, you'll get responses from the usual trolls, but from my experience, over time, these level off while yesses and positive comments become more common. Let's just be thick-skinned and ignore the trolls, and, from my experience, they trail off.

For educators, Senator Leila is a profile in courage that deserves to be taught in civics classes to our students.

For you in the US and other parts of the world, work on your respective governments to pressure the Philippine government to release Senator Leila.

The road ahead

Let us, however, have no illusions about the road ahead. Again, let me say that the key obstacle that needs to be surmounted is probably not legal but psychological in nature. Even when they no longer believe in the charges against Senator Leila, many people may still be unwilling to acknowledge this, even to themselves.

On this phenomenon, let me offer the insights of Senator Leila herself in an interview I did with her for Rappler, when I posed the question of why Duterte remained so popular: “That is the misconception we have about democracy. People feel invested in the person they supported, and they do not want to believe that he is capable of destroying an innocent human being because if they admit that, they believe that they also have to admit that they made the wrong choice. I think people aren’t yet prepared for that dose of reality.”

Despite such obstacles, Senator Leila, the country’s leading political prisoner, is confident that ultimately the truth will prevail.

Over four years in jail have not broken Senator Leila. Ten more years won’t break her. She perseveres in her belief in her ultimate vindication and in her trust that we are the instruments of that vindication, her avenging angels, if you will.

Let us prove ourselves worthy of that trust.

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P.S.

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