

Columnists Opinion

Philippines: The House quad comm grills Duterte

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Despite an onslaught of typhoons relentlessly battering the country over the past week, the headline-grabber was former president Rodrigo Duterte's dramatic appearance before the House of Representatives' powerful quad committee. This super committee has been digging into a host of contentious issues—from the extrajudicial killings linked to Duterte's war on drugs to the crimes tied to offshore gaming hubs that flourished under his watch. Finally, the principal figure was in the hot seat.

Duterte had previously faced a Senate committee led by a visibly uneasy Sen. Koko Pimentel. During that session, the former president tested the limits of his lingering influence, delivering a defiant performance. The House had long sought its turn to grill him, but Duterte kept them guessing, promising to show up but refusing to say when.

Clearly, he aimed to frame his appearance as a voluntary act, not a response to compulsion. When he finally announced he was heading to the Batasan to face the quad committee, they scrambled to reconvene a hearing they had initially canceled.

This was political theater at its finest, where appearances often matter more than substance and where implied messages resonate louder than explicit ones.

In this arena, Duterte held the upper hand. His message was strikingly direct: I alone take full moral and legal responsibility for the drug war and all police actions under it. I did it to save the country from the drug menace and would do it again if needed. Don't lecture me about command responsibility—this is leadership.

In contrast, the intentions of Congress seemed muddled. From their line of questioning, it was clear that the two chambers weren't seeking Duterte's insights on reforming human rights laws. Instead, they aimed to confront him with the abuses committed under his drug war. That perspective was not only correct but essential.

Yet if justice for the victims was truly the goal, why didn't our lawmakers yield the floor to the victims' families? They were there with the photos of their dead loved ones in both sessions. Letting them voice their truths in the presence of Duterte would have been a powerful moment of catharsis and reckoning. Instead, they allowed the smug former president to dominate the narrative once again.

It became evident that Duterte had no intention of offering remorse. While no longer in power, he wasn't about to let himself be treated like a disgraced ex-leader. Fully aware he was playing a battle of wits, Duterte skillfully avoided appearing chastened by the committee's admonitions.

Deep down, it was clear Duterte didn't see his interrogators as equals. During his six-year presidency, neither the Senate nor the House dared challenge his drug war. Congress, tasked with checking executive excesses, remained silent while the killings unfolded from day one of his presidency. The right time to address police abuses and violence was then. So, why the sudden shift? Has Congress truly changed, or is this a mere display of moral posturing in the service of an unfinished war of political attrition? This glaring contradiction loomed over the hearings like an unspoken truth.

For Duterte, the hearings were a platform to recapture the spotlight he once commanded as president. Despite the repeated warnings to avoid uttering cuss words and to stick to the topic, he clearly relished the airtime, spinning long-winded statements riddled with contradictions. The sharper ones among his interrogators—Sen. Risa Hontiveros and Batangas Rep. Gerville Luistro—may have hoped to corner him into self-incrimination, but as a seasoned lawyer and former prosecutor, Duterte deftly sidestepped their traps. He introduced just enough ambiguity to stay elusive, a tactic far easier to pull off in a political arena than in a formal courtroom.

As I previously argued (Public Lives, 11/03/2024), Duterte's focus isn't on the potential legal fallout of his words. His priority is reinforcing the Duterte brand of leadership for his loyal followers and on behalf of his beleaguered daughter, Vice President Sara Duterte. It's why he favors a public spectacle in the Philippines, where he can manipulate the narrative, over the closed, controlled proceedings of the International Criminal Court.

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P.S.

• The Inquirer, November 17, 2024:
<https://plus.inquirer.net/opinion/the-house-quad-comm-grills-duterte/>

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