

AFTERTHOUGHTS

Our very own dirty war

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IN ARGENTINA during the “Dirty War” in the mid-1970s, the military loaded tortured university students onto helicopters and pushed them into the stormy South Atlantic.

We have not yet come to that, thank god. But the statistics are mounting, as almost every week activists and journalists are murdered or abducted. The dirty war is a grim reality that is unfolding, especially in the countryside.

Like many institutions, the University of the Philippines (UP) as a community has been slow in reacting to the spread of the dirty war. But when its very own were swept up in the dragnet, it finally reacted. Sherlyn Cadapan, an outstanding athlete, is with the College of Human Kinetics. Karen Empeno is a student at my unit, the Department of Sociology of the College of Social Sciences and Philosophy. Both Cadapan and Empeno were picked up by masked men with long firearms at 2 a.m. in Hagonoy town in the province of Bulacan, just north of Manila, along with a male companion from the same area.

In a letter to Ronaldo Puno, secretary of the Department of Interior and Local Government, UP president Emerlinda Roman requested the assistance of government authorities in locating the two students. In the letter, the university president reminded Puno: “We know that you share with us a commitment to the spirit of the UN General Assembly’s ‘Declaration on the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance.... We also know that the acts done by masked armed men are criminally punishable under our laws.”

Ten days after Roman’s letter, with still no word from the military or any other government agency on the whereabouts of the two students, the University Council approved with no negative votes a resolution reiterating her request for information and asking the government to “provide [the students] with medical and legal assistance and release them to the care of the University as soon as possible.”

The July 13 resolution added: “We consider the continuing silence of the authorities in this matter of life and death to be inexcusable and a betrayal of the public trust.”

The university community’s reaction, along with the recent Catholic Bishops’ Conference of the Philippines pastoral statement of July 11, which condemned the spate of killings, was an important gesture in the awakening of civic consciousness over the grave danger to institutions of liberal democracy posed by the rampant assassinations and abductions.

But the protests from these two institutions are far from turning the black tide of state and paramilitary terrorism.

In contrast to the waning years of the Ferdinand Marcos regime and the early years of the Corazon Aquino presidency, there has yet been no mass outrage at the systematic assassination of activists and media people.

It could be that people have become cynical about the ability of the justice system to bring the perpetrators of such deeds to justice. This is understandable, since none of the perpetrators of the killings of high-profile figures — Benigno Aquino, the student leader Lean Alejandro, labor leader Rolando Olalia — have been brought to justice, much less identified. This cynicism about the justice system is part of the general disillusionment with the institutions of the unraveling EDSA liberal-democratic state that replaced the Marcos regime.

Lack of faith in mass actions, profound skepticism that the vote can change anything, a withdrawal into the private sphere, general dispiritedness: These are the elements of the miserable political context in which the killings are taking place.

The systematic assassinations and abductions are part of an anti-communist campaign that has run out of control. They are being perpetrated by elements of the security and defense establishment, along with private landed armies, and these forces are encouraged by the unwillingness of civilian authorities to check them. For the civilian authorities — in this case, Malacañang — are not only weak; they depend for their survival on the support of the military.

This symbiosis between a corrupt and weak civilian regime and a strong and reckless military is an opportunistic alliance that is stripping the EDSA state of its last liberal features.

For all intents and purposes, we are living in a repressive, post-democratic state.

It is estimated that at least 15,000 young people were assassinated in the dirty war in Argentina. It will never get that bad here, some say. Well, let me tell these people that this is no longer a far-fetched scenario, and the only thing that will prevent it from transpiring is a mobilized civil society that says enough, and is angry enough to bring back the rule of law.

Can we turn the tide? Yes, but that will take a lot of determination and a lot of courage.

P.S.

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