

## Philippines: The silence of the camps

Sunday 2 December 2007, by [DAVID Randy](#) (Date first published: 1 December 2007).

MANILA, Philippines — Brig. Gen. Danilo Lim and Sen. Antonio Trillanes IV, a former Navy lieutenant senior grade, are two of the smartest officers in the Armed Forces of the Philippines. They are highly regarded by their men and by their contemporaries in the officer corps. Few senior officers in the Philippine military today can match their popularity among the soldiers. It is significant that they have also led repeated coup attempts against the government of the day. They are not novices in the art of military mutiny.

Knowing this, one is hard-pressed to understand why they would venture into something like Thursday's standoff at the Manila Peninsula Hotel, with hardly any arms to defend themselves, only to surrender without a fight to the police forces sent to arrest them. It just doesn't make sense. The two detained officers, together with their fellow officers and security detail, strolled out of the courtroom during a break in the hearing of the 2003 Oakwood mutiny. They had no fear of being re-arrested. Only a handful of civilian supporters accompanied them in their unhurried walk to the five-star hotel in which they were to make their statement. If this was going to be a coup, it was rather unusual if not suicidal. They came virtually without arms.

While they called on the Filipino people to join them in their bid to oust President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, they didn't sound like they were desperately waiting for people power to pick up the cause they were espousing. If they were banking on popular mobilization, then they were one day too early. They should have stretched their stay at the Peninsula till the following day, Bonifacio Day, when huge rallies were expected. In fact, this possibility was what worried the government forces. So why did Trillanes and Lim give up so quickly?

We can only speculate that their action was meant to spark a mutiny that they thought was waiting to happen. But because we did not see troops marching in

the streets or moving in trucks and choosing sides, we are now led to think that the Magdalo officers badly miscalculated. In fact, the spokesmen of the Arroyo government lost no time in assuring the public that the military chain of command remained intact and that the rebels were totally isolated.

But, if indeed they were alone in this doomed and foolish adventure, how do we explain the fact that, at the height of the standoff, no military commander, apart from the chief of staff, Gen. Hermogenes Esperon Jr., came out or was presented to reiterate support for the Arroyo government? Why did the government rely exclusively on police forces to deal with what was openly declared as a bid to remove the existing government? Was Ms Arroyo afraid that, if compelled to declare their loyalty, a good number of the nation's soldiers might actually side with Lim and Trillanes?

In short, what did the silence of the camps during this six-hour siege signify? I doubt if General Esperon or Ms Arroyo knows. Perhaps if they know anything at all about the state of mind of the soldiers in the camps today, it might be something that is likely to give them sleepless nights in the next few weeks or months. Could this be the real reason for the sudden imposition of a midnight curfew — that they are seriously spooked by the possibility of troop movements quietly taking place in the coming days?

For it is hard to believe that the soldiers barricaded in their barracks would not care less about what was going on in Makati City last Thursday. If they saw what the rest of the nation saw, and they remained silent, I would consider that a meaningful silence. In a time like ours, when images from live media pack more power than the most stirring statements, what might the silence of citizens and soldiers possibly indicate? Are their senses stunned and their will paralyzed? Or are their souls shaken and courage awakened in their hearts? Who knows?

Who would know what it means for a soldier or a citizen to see a young senator of the republic, filled with idealism, being shackled and handled like a sack of potatoes by his captors as he is led to a waiting police bus? Who would know what it means for any viewer to see an 81-year-old prince of the Catholic Church, hobbled by age, his left hand tied to the right hand of another priest, being led to a waiting police bus after having just said a prayer of hope?

Who would know what it means for someone to see a whole line of media people, their hands bound in plastic restraints proudly held up above their heads, being led to a waiting police bus for “processing” as suspects? Such were among the most memorable images from Thursday’s episode.

I only know that one would need to be blind and insensitive to view these snapshots as achievements of the rule of law. You take one look at General Lim and Senator Trillanes side by side General Esperon and Colonel Bacarro — and you can tell at once who among these soldiers have their ideals intact. You take one look at Bishop Julio Labayen and former Vice President Tito Guingona side by side Interior Secretary Ronaldo Puno and Press Secretary Ignacio Bunye — and you know at once who the liars are.

There is a mutiny in the making not just in the camps but in the hearts of the rest of us. We were beginning to forget what social anger is all about, and what it means to take responsibility for the nation our heroes bequeathed to us. Thursday set us on a new path. We are starting to see what General Lim meant when he said: “Dissent without action is consent.”

---

**P.S.**

\* From the Philippine Daily Inquirer. Last updated 03:12am (Mla time) 12/01/2007.