

Remembering the Maguindanao Massacre: Warlordism at Its Worst

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*The Maguindanao Massacre is unanimously viewed as the most tragic event in the Philippines that capped 2009. On the fateful morning of 23 November 2009 — exactly eleven years ago — fifty-seven helpless civilians including women and media people were cold-bloodedly slaughtered by policemen, military men, civilian-militia personnel, and private-army members — all being fearfully and blindly subservient to the “omnipotent” Ampatuan warlord family of Maguindanao represented by the “trinity” of **Andal Ampatuan, Sr.**, the erstwhile governor of Maguindanao; **Zaldy Ampatuan**, the erstwhile governor of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM); and **Andal Ampatuan, Jr.**, the erstwhile mayor of the municipality of Datu Unsay, Maguindanao. This tragic event happened during the presidency of **Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo** who happened to be a close ally of the Ampatuans.*

The criminal minds of these “trinity” of ruthless murderers are typical of warlords as they are found anywhere in the Philippines and in other less-civilized societies in the world. As we commonly know them, it is inherent among warlords to be cold-blood murderers contemptuous of the legal and the moral. Politicians of the same warlord streak whether they are in Luzon, the Visayas, or Mindanao are generally perceived and expected to act like the Ampatuans when their political domination and monopolization are gravely challenged by emerging “New Turks”. In fact, by a mere exercise of one’s sociological imagination, it could be said that since time immemorial, warlords anywhere in the Philippines “naturally” eliminate by “liquidation” anyone who’d cross their paths, i.e., challenge their seemingly perpetual dominion and permanent supremacy.

Image on the right: Gloria Arroyo (Source: Wikimedia Commons)



In the history of the Philippines, many have opined that the most vicious warlord with the ruthlessness of a cold-blooded murderer was **Ferdinand Marcos** who ordered the summary executions and forced disappearances of hundreds of his adversaries specifically in the ranks of peasant, labor, and student activists within a period of more or less 20 years, i.e., prior to the declaration of and during the Martial Law era. But I beg to disagree because what Marcos did within 20 years has been surpassed by **Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo** in less than 10 years. And now under the six-year presidency of another notoriously ruthless warlord, **Rodrigo Roa Duterte**, Marcos and Arroyo atrocities combined are just a minuscule fragment of the Duterte government’s extra-judicial killing spree. In other words, Duterte is miles and miles worse than Marcos and Arroyo put together.

The Maguindanao Massacre appears to be so heinous and hence exceedingly controversial to grab the front pages of both domestic and international dailies for days and weeks because in just one sweep of bullet hails from high-powered automatic weapons 57 defenseless and innocent civilians lost their precious lives. The masterminds and lead perpetrators of course were the Ampatuan “trinity”. But the issue is from what “supreme power” did the Ampatuans draw their satanic will? One very glaring reality is the fact that the Ampatuans are leading minions of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. They had the guts to commit a brutal crime because they knew that Gloria Arroyo would provide them with all the unassailable protections available within the clout of her power.

But how did they get to that idea? It is because they knew from deep within their zealously guarded chamber of secrets that Arroyo could have never—even in her dream—simply ignore them and drop them like hot potatoes. They and Arroyo and their other blind followers knew that the latter’s overwhelming victory in Maguindanao and in the rest of the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) during the previous presidential elections was courtesy of the iron hands of the Ampatuan warlords. This is basically the reason why right after the news of the massacre reached Malacanang, Arroyo did not order the immediate arrest of the Ampatuans. Other measures were likewise done to shield the Ampatuans. But because of popular local and international pressures, Arroyo was forced—against her will—to arrest and incarcerate the Ampatuans. In retrospect, we could almost accurately say that the power of the Ampatuans exercised to the point of committing a terrible heinous crime was actually directly drawn from the seeming “omnipotence” of their “patroness,” Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.

Having another warlord as president, Filipinos cannot hope for something better as far as justice and peace in the country are concerned. There have already been thousands of extra-judicial killings of suspected drug users and pushers along with those innocent people caught in the senseless crossfires perpetrated by no less than the national police and other government agents tasked by Duterte to follow his murderous mandates. But what is worse in this whole agenda is none of the identified big fish — big-time drug lords — have ever been arrested and convicted before the court of law. With this in mind, what one can’t get rid of at this moment is a suspicion that is as good as anybody’s allegation. If we are in a situation like this, what would you have in mind about the government that for the last four years has been mismanaging the state affairs more particularly the issue of the seemingly unchecked and uncontrolled proliferation of illegal drugs in the country?

Warlordism is well-entrenched in the political culture of the Filipino. We are already in the 21st century and none of its vestiges have significantly declined. The notion of democracy is simply an abstract theory whose realization is apparently infeasible in a society whose fractured culture and distorted political sense have continued to sustain warlordism, whether unwittingly or otherwise. The demise of warlordism in the Philippine context is therefore deemed to be an unachievable dream.

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