

Charade

Contributed by Luis V. Teodoro
Monday, 07 August 2006

Political Killings in the Philippines are a Disgrace and Investigations a Sham

There's a farce being played out in the Philippines, and it's orchestrated by the country's putative president. But her subalterns are either also in on it and have memorized their lines, so to speak, or else are taking their cue from what she and their superiors in various government agencies do and say.

As part of this charade, President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo gave law-enforcement agencies a deadline last Tuesday of 10 weeks to identify at least 10 suspects in the recent spate of killings of political activists and journalists. While that sounds like a tall order, it's not as difficult as it seems. The police can quickly draw up such a list, throwing into it whoever's convenient, as they have done in the case of other killings when forced to produce something.

Justice Secretary Raul Gonzalez, who presides over a department that has had little to do with justice during his watch, immediately said that he and his agency would try to meet Arroyo's deadline, but that they would be hampered by a number of factors, including the lack of witnesses to the murders.

Meanwhile, the Philippine National Police spokesman said the PNP would do its best. But he also said that luck as well as the willingness of witnesses to testify would have a great deal to do with whether the PNP would succeed.

Were they reading from the same script? The refrain about witnesses issues with amazing regularity nowadays from the police, the military, the justice department and practically every agency charged with law enforcement, and/or accused of savaging the very laws they're supposed to enforce.

The PNP's Task Force Usig, which Mrs. Arroyo created with modest fanfare some months ago, in fact said exactly the same thing when it cleared notorious Maj. Gen. Jovito Palparan of involvement in the killing of political activists in the areas he has been assigned to (Mindoro, Samar, and, currently, Central Luzon). It said witnesses should come forward if they have information linking Palparan to killings in areas under his jurisdiction.

This hardly sounds reasonable even on paper, and in fact it shifts the burden of police work from the police to the public. But there's another catch. The heads of the country's

law enforcement agencies know perfectly well that the chances of any witnesses coming forward are about the same as finding life on Mars. It's possible but unlikely, and any person with the IQ of a house cat should know why.

In the Philippines, anyone who claims to be a witness to a murder, or, for that matter, any high-stakes crime, puts his life at risk once he comes forward. It's not only because the so-called Witness Protection Program of Gonzalez's Justice Department is another under-funded sham like Mrs. Arroyo's grand plans for the economy, or her order to repatriate all Filipino workers from Lebanon. It is also because any such witness would end up in the custody of, and possibly marked for elimination by, the very agencies that have been implicated in the killings.

The call for witnesses, in short, serves the police and other agencies well in two senses. First, none are likely to come forward, since the Witness Protection Program offers witnesses no protection. Second, if any witness does tempt fate by coming forward, it only makes it so much the easier to eliminate him or her before he or she can testify. (This is exactly what happened to a witness in the 2002 killing of Pagadian journalist Edgar Damalerio. A witness who was with Damalerio when he was shot, was himself later killed.)

Before Arroyo issued her so-called deadline, she had "condemned" political killings during her State of the Nation Address—but not before she had singled out Maj. Gen. Palparan for unprecedented, unqualified praise.

That there was the usual smirk of arrogance and insincerity on her face while she condemned the killings was not as crucial as her repeating the same refrain about the need for witnesses to come forward. He was clearly following as well as orchestrating a script, in which, while seeming to say one thing (condemning the killings) she was actually declaring something else (approval, if not encouragement, of political assassinations).

It was of course no surprise that despite—or because of that condemnation, the killings have continued, the latest victims being a much-beloved Northern Luzon community leader, Alice Omengan-Claver, whose similarly highly-regarded husband, the doctor and political activist Constancio Claver, was also wounded in the 31 July attack.

As has been repeatedly pointed out, the killings of political activists have followed a certain pattern. The victims receive death threats, and their movements are monitored by men who usually don't even try to conceal their military origins. This is then followed by the actual assassination, which is often carried out by two men—one drives while the other shoots riding tandem on a motorcycle.

But what is equally noticeable is that there have been few instances in which the assassins have tried to conceal their identities, which suggests that they are fairly certain of immunity from arrest and prosecution.

By now it should be fairly clear that what's going on is a government policy crafted and approved at the highest levels.

But why go through the pretence of condemning the killings, and even giving the police and other agencies a deadline they know they're not really supposed to take seriously?

The simple answer is that such acts mislead and confuse. They also make it appear that the Philippines is not really the tyranny it has evolved into under Arroyo, but is a civilized member of the community of nations. That of course is a sham and a fraud.

Reprinted with permission from Business Mirror, Manila