

Constricting democracy: Government response to political killings in perspective

Contributed by H. Marcos C. Mordeno
Friday, 15 February 2008

Not since the Martial Law regime of President Ferdinand Marcos has there been an upsurge in the killings of Left-wing activists whose organizations are labeled by the military and police to be fronts of the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) and its armed wing, the New People's Army (NPA). As such, members and leaders of these groups have become fair game to a counterinsurgency program that appears to have erased the line between armed struggle and legal dissent.

The government, as expected, has repeatedly denied there is a policy to exterminate or at least persecute the legal Left, incidentally, the harshest critic of the Arroyo administration. Yet the denials are easily contradicted by the increasing number of extra-judicial executions, the deliberate and systematic manner with which these crimes have been carried out, and more significantly, the impunity that suggests a thinly veiled official approval of these acts.

The human rights group Karapatan, some of whose leaders were victims themselves, reported that over 800 activists have been killed since Arroyo became president in 2001. A national daily offered a lesser figure. But what is important is that these killings have occurred and nobody is denying these things are happening. The only point of contention is who should be held responsible for these violations, a question that inevitably leads to identifying who has the motive — and resources — to prosecute them on such a scale and degree of daringness.

Aside

from the deaths of many of its leaders, the legal Left has also suffered various forms of harassment, not least among them the filing of dubious murder and rebellion charges against its top officials. It was not pure coincidence that the legal action against Bayan Muna Rep. Satur Ocampo, Anakpawis Rep. Crispin Beltran and three other militant legislators took place at the height of the campaign for the May 2007 elections. Bayan Muna and other left-wing party-list groups were vying for seats in the House of Representatives. Not a few observers correctly opined that the harassment formed part of a plot to vilify these groups so as to disenfranchise them from Congress as the mainstream arena of open political engagement.

Ocampo,

a former peace negotiator of the National Democratic Front (NDF), was accused of having ordered the alleged murder of suspected government spies in Leyte who were killed when he was still languishing in jail as a political detainee. Beltran, on the other hand, had his Marcos-era rebellion charge resurrected. One may find it amusing, but an amnesty proclamation issued by President Corazon Aquino has since rendered his case moot and academic, a fact which only made government prosecutors look silly.

What

is not amusing however is the characteristic response of the government to accusations it is condoning, if not actually sanctioning, these acts against members of the legal Left. The response has usually been to issue denials, even in instances where direct or circumstantial evidence points to soldiers or policemen as the culprits. The standard line from the government has been a taunting “come forward with witnesses and evidence.” It would seem that the outcry raised by various sectors, including the international community, was insufficient to convince the government to act on the killings.

But

sustained publicity of the killings and pressure from foreign groups eventually forced the Arroyo administration to agree to an investigation by the United Nations. In early 2007, the UN sent

Philip Alston, Special Rapporteur on Extrajudicial, Summary or Arbitrary Executions. The “muchacho” (servant) of the UN, as Justice Secretary Raul Gonzales derisively called him, interviewed not only witnesses and members of militant groups but also high government and military officials including President Arroyo herself.

In other words, Alston exerted efforts to be impartial in his investigation by reaching out to all parties who could shed light on the issue. As he noted in his report, “I spoke with a wide range of actors to clarify responsibility for these killings and to formulate recommendations to bring them to an end.”

“I came with an open mind, and I succeeded in speaking candidly and often constructively with a very broad range of interlocutors,” Alston stresses in his report.

Nonetheless, these assurances failed to convince the government that the UN official’s report has been a fair presentation of facts. The biggest reason could be that it refutes [1] the military’s assertion that many civil society organizations are fronts of the CPP-NPA; and [2] the theory that the victims were killed by the rebels in an internal purge.

“Relatively little is known about the extent of the CPP’s influence within civil society organizations, and it would be naïve to assume that the CPP is as powerful as it would like to present itself as being,” Alston explains. What he actually means is that the accusations are not baseless but exaggerated, if only to justify the

“political” element of counterinsurgency, a philosophy that, as mentioned earlier, blurs the distinction between combatants and unarmed civilians suspected of having links with the underground movement.

Furthermore,
Alston dismissed the purge theory as a reflection of the military’s
“state of denial”.

“The
NPA does commit extrajudicial executions, sometimes dressing them up
as “revolutionary justice”, but the evidence that it is currently
engaged in a large-scale purge is strikingly unconvincing. The
military’s insistence that the “purge theory” is correct can
only be viewed as a cynical attempt to displace responsibility,”
his report states.

The report, however, acknowledges as
encouraging “the many measures that have been promulgated by the
Government to respond to the problem of extrajudicial executions”.
But he added these measures “have yet to succeed, and the
extrajudicial executions continue”. [Emphasis mine –
the author]

It
is quite easy to see why the killings continue and practically
nothing has been done to resolve them. The phenomenon must be viewed
in the context of the militarist solution to the nearly four decades
of armed struggle being waged by the CPP-NPA. In her 2006 State of
the Nation Address, Arroyo ordered the armed forces to crush the
rebellion in two years time, and announced an additional budget of P1
billion for a war that targets not only the armed “enemies of the
state” but also the unarmed dissidents. She has, in effect,

abandoned negotiation in favor of head-on confrontation, hoping to exterminate in record time a movement that has weathered successive governments.

It was on the same occasion that she heaped praises on Maj. Gen. Jovito Palparan (now retired) for his relentless efforts in fighting the rebels.

The praises were no casual remarks. Nor was the object of presidential admiration an obscure official who performed mundane tasks in the armed forces. Palparan's name has become synonymous with terror in as far as human rights groups are concerned. He has been blamed for several extra-judicial executions of activists and suspected rebels in regions where he was assigned. Given therefore his reputation as a "butcher", as the militants would call him, the praises sent the wrong signal and could only be interpreted as an endorsement of Palparan's tack in treating activists and suspected insurgents, of the killings that have put in grave peril the future of pluralistic democracy in this country.

(The author is editor/columnist of MindaNews.)