

Theres The Rub

Maguindanao Massacre: Cause and Effect

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I do not just mean that in the sense that the massacre of 57 people in Maguindanao was an event everyone knew would happen. That it was just a matter of time, place, and scale of atrocity. I mean that in a larger sense. In the sense that there was something inevitable about it, given the signal, message, and example the national government had been sending all this time.

There are three of them. They bear directly on what happened in Maguindanao as cause does to effect.

The first is the theft of the vote in 2004. The coming to light of the “Hello, Garci” tape in particular, not least with its revelations of Virgilio Garcillano proposing the kidnapping of a public schoolteacher in Tawi-Tawi and President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo assenting by silence, sent forth a powerful message. Henceforth, the vote meant nothing. Henceforth, keeping power meant everything. Henceforth, doing everything in one’s power to win power and keep power, including stealing, kidnapping, and where necessary, killing, is perfectly acceptable.

The Ampatuans’ participation in the theft of the vote moreover guaranteed them impunity. It wasn’t just Garci who had made Arroyo win in Muslim Mindanao, it was the Ampatuans too. That Fernando Poe Jr. got zero votes in a place he was worshipped as hero was either a statistical impossibility or the product of fear so absolute no one dared signify otherwise. Either way, it encouraged the Ampatuans to up the ante on terror and violence, the two things the Arroyo and US governments pass themselves off as fighting.

Going further, Arroyo defended herself from threats of unseating by force. Specifically by investing in Hermogenes Esperon and Norberto Gonzales, and by threatening martial law then and threatening martial law now. Arguably it’s institutional violence and not bloodcurdling violence, but it’s violence nonetheless. Arguably it’s nothing like the biblical or Koranic smiting of enemies, but it’s a modern-day, efficiency-oriented, facsimile of it nonetheless.

The second is the killings of political activists. Arguably too, that was done over a period of time and a lot more invisibly. If Arroyo’s hordes hadn’t gotten carried away and made Jonas Burgos disappear for good, they themselves might have disappeared in the thicket of anonymity and public apathy. But for all that, it is far more bloodcurdling in a deeper sense. The quantity alone suggests so—more than tenfold the number of the Ampatuans’ victims. As to the quality, well, ask yourself who’s the more monstrous, Attila who swept over the countryside raping and pillaging, or Hitler who sent six million Jews up in smoke perfectly clinically.

The wholesale murder of political activists upped the ante even more on what was permissible under the new order of things. Such was the ease with which this could be done—not least because of the apathy that had settled on the minds of the populace, not unlike the dread that had taken hold of the hearts of the Maguindanaoans—the perpetrators no longer bothered hiding their hand.

Philip Alston did point to Jovito Palparan as the immediate culprit, while noting that he was merely

carrying out a policy of the state. The military was just as quick to point to the New People's Army as Andal Ampatuan to point to the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) after being caught pretty much in the act. If you were the Ampatuans, why should you think Arroyo has any right to prevent you from massacring your enemies? At least, praise the Lord, or Allah, you're fanatically honest, or honestly fanatical, about it.

If the Ampatuans hadn't gotten carried away, little caring whether they butchered partisan or journalist, who knows? For all its heinousness—done deliberately to dissuade the stoutest of challengers—the atrocity might have drawn routine condemnation but slipped into the night as just another one of those nasty things that happen down there, wreaked by Muslim and Christian alike, by Abus and warlords alike.

The third is a culture that rewards devilry and punishes decency, which is the culture that underlies the culture of impunity itself. Why should the Ampatuans fear retribution, or imagine that Arroyo, who would not be there except for them—and who would no longer be there if they confessed to that earlier crime—would not protect them in their hour of need? Everyone who has done nasty things for Arroyo has seen his station in life improve.

Palparan, who carried out the execution of political activists with a zeal over and beyond the call of bloodlust, was promoted to general and thence to (party-list) congressman. Esperon, who betrayed his comrades-in-withdrawal-of-support and who thenceforth vowed death and destruction to Arroyo's enemies, has seen his star blaze beyond the normal sheen of the cluster of stars on a general's shoulder. Mike Defensor, Lito Atienza, and Avelino Razon, who helped kidnap Jun Lozada and cover it up, have gotten a joint venture with a Chinese company to mine nickel, the Department of Environment and Natural Resources, and the post of Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process, respectively.

Arguably, the Ampatuans' atrocity did not advance Arroyo's cause, unlike the others'. And arguably what the Ampatuans did goes beyond "acceptable mayhem" even for an incontinently mayhem-filled place. But why shouldn't they be allowed now and then to commit atrocity purely, simply and exclusively for themselves? Arroyo has. Why shouldn't they be the epitome of warlordism, corrupting everything they touch, showing resolve of a scale, order and viciousness never known before, and plotting to rule forever by the threatened or real extinction of their enemies? Arroyo is.

Like I said, cause and effect.

By Conrado de Quiros

P.S.

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