

Maguindanao: A preventable massacre

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HE WAS ONLY ATTESTING TO THE INSTINCT for violence of the Ampatuans—and surely had no intention of putting the latter’s political allies in a bad light, certainly not the administration presidential aspirant, Gilbert Teodoro, with whom he is now aligned. But the testimony the other day of Buluan Vice Mayor Esmael “Toto” Mangudadatu at the bail petition of Mayor Andal Ampatuan Jr., the principal suspect in the Nov. 23 massacre, contained enough intriguing information to bring out the administration’s staunchest defenders. Indeed, the picture that emerged from Mangudadatu’s testimony provides sufficient reason to ask whether President Macapagal-Arroyo’s party should not be held accountable for the consequences of the Ampatuans’ abusive rule in Maguindanao.

I do not mean legally liable, although that cannot be entirely discounted. I mean politically answerable. The voters of this country have every right to demand of Ms Arroyo and her party that they explain why in the last nine years—despite what they knew of them—they supported and befriended the Ampatuans, actively courted their favor, entrusted them with enormous amounts of public resources, and generally turned a blind eye to reports of their widespread abuses.

I draw from the *Inquirer* report (1/28/10). Vice Mayor Mangudadatu testifies that on Oct. 10 last year, he was summoned to a meeting with the ruling Lakas-Kampi-CMD party standard-bearer Gilbert Teodoro at Café Adriatico in Manila. He says that Teodoro warned him about running as Maguindanao governor against Ampatuan Jr. Teodoro supposedly told him: “Don’t. I care for you a lot, Toto. You know those people are prone to violence.”

Weeks before the massacre, the same message was conveyed to him, he said, by another party official, former Rep. Prospero Pichay. “Mag-ingat ka, Toto. Violent ang mga taong ‘yan.” (“Be careful, Toto. These people are violent.”) On two separate occasions (July 20 and Aug. 11), he was asked by presidential political adviser Gabriel Claudio to come to “conciliatory” meetings with Maguindanao Gov. Andal Ampatuan Sr. In those meetings, he was again dissuaded from challenging the political supremacy of the Ampatuans. He said that as early as July 9, 2009, he and his cousin, Sultan Kudarat Gov. Suharto Mangudadatu, also met personally with Ms Arroyo to ask for her help in recovering the firearms of the police force of Pandag town, where his brother was mayor. He told the President that the firearms were seized by government forces on orders of Governor Ampatuan Sr. He said the President called Armed Forces Chief Gen. Victor Ibrado to order the return of the guns.

What this testimony intends to document is the Ampatuans’ reputation for violence. But almost like an annoying subtext that keeps calling attention to itself, it is the astounding political clout of the Ampatuan clan that stands out here. Everyone in the highest echelons of government seems to be aware of the clan’s capacity for violence. One wonders if Ms Arroyo and the leaders of Lakas were at all surprised when the Nov. 23 massacre happened. Perhaps only poor Ms Lorelei Fajardo, erstwhile presidential spokesperson, was clueless about the political implications of this tragedy. When the Ampatuans were tagged as the principal suspects in the gruesome crime, she found herself confirming their friendship with the President, naïvely adding that this relationship is not erased by the fact that they stand accused of a crime. She lost her job the following day.

The more astute players however immediately kept their distance. Teodoro rushed to Maguindanao to embrace Toto Mangudadatu in sympathy, and forthwith demanded the expulsion of the Ampatuans from the party. Ms Arroyo herself chose to remain silent, after reading a prepared statement expressing horror over the incident and condoling with the families of the victims.

But sensing the potential political fallout from Mangudadatu's recent statements in court, party leaders have been quick to react. Cabinet Secretary Silvestre Bello III, who is running for senator, said on radio: "It is not right to blame the President. The President had nothing to do with this political rivalry that started from both parties. The violence in Maguindanao was caused by a feud between two families, some of whose members are related to each other."

True, the initial attempts to explain the barbaric killings referred to the tradition of Mindanao clan wars or rido. Such accounts failed to consider the fact that the Ampatuans and the Mangudadatus were related to one another by marriage and were in fact political allies until recently. In short, the massacre was not an episode in a vicious cycle of family feuds. It appears that they simply could not agree on a fair distribution of the spoils of political power. The Ampatuans had enjoyed a special closeness with Ms Arroyo, and this made them just too powerful to be challenged by any other local political group.

Local warlordism has its own natural bounds. These are defined by limited access to arms and equally limited control of economic means. But in the spaces of the modern state, which asserts a monopoly of the means of coercion and opens up access to economic resources, warlords should wither away. Not so, apparently, in the world of Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, where, in exchange for modern weapons and access to public funds, they have carved out a new role as the national elites' technicians of violence and enforcers of electoral fraud.

No, we cannot indict Ms Arroyo for the Nov. 23 massacre. But we can hold her responsible for making it possible.

By Randy David

P.S.

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* public.lives gmail.com