

Philippines: Warlords in a weak state

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MEDIA reports and analyses of the Nov. 23 gruesome mass murder of 57 innocent civilians in Maguindanao have highlighted different aspects of the culture of warlordism in Muslim Mindanao. Their common starting point is the *rido*, the clan wars that have persisted in many parts of Philippine society, transferring unresolved antipathies to younger generations as part of the family legacy. But *rido* alone cannot explain what happened in Maguindanao. A fuller analysis must take into account the weak state in which it is framed.

Family feuds are certainly not unique to our society. They thrive wherever kinship remains the dominant principle for organizing an individual's participation in the larger social world. They usually disappear as a society grows in complexity. The individual becomes entangled in the multiple crosscutting ties offered by the modern world. Thus the kinsman becomes a citizen, a university student, a journalist, a member of a political party, a Rotarian, a doctor or a soldier in the army, or falls in love with someone outside the clan.

This is a process that does not always occur smoothly. For many postcolonial societies like ours, the transition to modernity has been very uneven, spawning problems that are not easily solved in either the traditional or strictly modern way. Instead of withering away in obsolescence, clans can often draw new vitality from the modern institutions into which they are grafted. This could give rise to something as benign as a family corporation, or to something fundamentally vicious. The traditional absolutism of these patriarchal clans, when fused with the immense resources of the modern state, can spawn barbarians of the most lethal and abusive kind. This, exactly, is what has happened to varying degrees in our society.

The massacre in Maguindanao may stand out for a long time for its brazenness and heinousness, but the forces that shaped it are by no means isolated or peculiar to Muslim Mindanao. They lurk in many regions of our country, providing support to various activities—political and economic, legal and illegal—and feeding from the institutional structures of modern society. One only needs to take a look at the local leaders and organizers of the party in power in order to produce a map of modern warlordism in the Philippines. In their ranks, any observer will find an assortment of gambling lords, smugglers, drug lords, human traffickers, and leaders of crime syndicates, who, without exception, maintain private armies. Many of them have become big players in the world of business and politics, gaining reputations as benevolent entrepreneurs, displacing the traditional warlords from the landed oligarchy. They operate through networks and layers of patronage, demanding from their followers unconditional loyalty in exchange for economic security and assisted access to the offices of the state. But whereas the feudal lords softened their rule by appeals to culture, the new warlords govern mainly through intimidation and violence.

Like the *jueteng* lords operating from behind the façade of the legal Small Town Lottery (STL), warlords like the Ampatuans accumulate and deploy their awesome power from behind their legal positions as government officials. Their links to national politics are not mediated by political parties, but are forged, like all patronage ties, directly with the principal bosses in government. The Ampatuans do not care if they are expelled from the administration's Lakas-Kampi-CMD party; what

would hurt them is if Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo, their principal patron, turns her back on them.

These people do not bother to recruit proxies to run for public office and represent their interests; they themselves become the officers of the state, bequeathing public positions to their children as if these were part of the family heirloom. Their private armies, usually entered as “force multipliers” in the war against terrorism and crime, are paid for and maintained with government funds. Even the local police are “their” police. The internal revenue allotment (IRA), given regularly to local government units, becomes their private cash box. No government auditor would dare question their expenditures. What we have here is the colonization of the weak state by local warlords recycled as public officials.

This situation, so pervasive still in our country today, will not disappear as long as our national politicians choose the path of enlisting outmoded local power systems into their political parties, rather than patiently create modern organs of political aggregation appropriate to a democracy.

When the national leadership is strong and rests on a clear popular mandate, it is in a better position to dismantle the anachronistic local power centers that operate side by side state institutions. It need not tolerate, or worse accommodate, the existence of parallel sultanates and their abusive armies. But where we have an insecure leadership that colludes with a broad range of non-accountable forces to keep itself in power, it is the modern state that withers away.

This, in a nutshell, is the story of our society’s troubled transition to modernity. The transition has not merely prolonged the life of feudal lords; it has equipped them with the latest weaponry, and given them strategic positions in the modern state from which they could continue their oppressive rule. We have indeed paid a high price for allowing an illegitimate president to take charge of the state.

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