

Commentary

Cruelty to the poor and democracy

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CRUELTY TO THE POOR BY GOVERNMENT people or the agents of the powerful are always surprising, since it seems so unnecessary. The urban poor with whom I've worked for many years are among the most patient, tolerant and realistic people God ever made. There's no need for violence of any sort. The people will cooperate in any government plan that is based on consultations and common sense.

Instead, there is an endless tale of violence big and small done to them, which in the end undermines the people's sense of their dignity and democracy itself, just as long rains loosen the soil on the hillside and eventually bring down the whole hill or mountain.

Cruelty manages to turn first-class citizens into resentful people, willing to scheme and do whatever may be needed to get what they want for themselves. Think of how the people of Estero dela Reina will react to government in the future after their experience with an eviction team of the Metro Manila Development Authority on Nov. 11. The people were told they had to get out of their homes of 20 or more years and relocate to the Norzagaray resettlement area, 40 kilometers or more away. They didn't want to go, but they had little choice: whether they agreed to go or not their homes would be torn down.

The eviction turned out badly. People including women were injured in violent scuffles with the MMDA. Nothing is uglier than seeing women and even pregnant women and the demolition team fighting over pieces of lumber and G.I. roofing. Finally 10 families left Binondo in an MMDA truck at about 4 p.m. with a cross-section of poor people, the elderly, a few men, women, small children and babies. They arrived at the resettlement area at 8 p.m. because of the heavy traffic. The barangay captain there told them they couldn't enter because they didn't have the proper papers. They came back to Binondo at 11 p.m. to sleep on the sidewalk.

An almost similar episode took place a few days earlier. Families from Santolan, Pasig were brought to the Calauan resettlement area, 100 km from Manila. When they got there, they found there were no homes for them. They returned to Santolan, though now they were homeless. The callousness of the officials involved is breathtaking. No one apologizes. Not every poor person has to experience cruelty personally. Word of it travels fast in poor communities.

Sometimes matters turn truly violent. On Oct. 10 in North Fairview, Quezon City, Myrna Porcare, 52, was shot down with a shotgun at a distance of two or three meters by the security guards of the landowner. Her offense was to try to remove a fence put up illegally by the guards. Police watched the incident develop, but didn't intervene. Myrna's son was also killed. The killers are now out on bail.

It seems clear in this incident that these guards are not for security at all. No one was threatening them or the landowner, and the police were there to protect the demolition crew. The guards were not needed. Can the rich buy what can be called "special forces," or "guns for hire," who can be sent into an area to do whatever the owner wants?

There are even more harsh incidents against the poor in the rural areas, around mining sites, in factories and plantations, and once in a while something like the Maguindanao massacre. People treated unfairly over time lose any sense that they are citizens of a democracy where their rights as human beings under God should be guaranteed and their human freedoms defended. To be a citizen should bring rights and security, and, hence, pride. Even St. Paul was proud to say he was a Roman citizen (Acts 16:37).

Paradoxically, it should be added that Filipino government officials are among the most accessible officials in the world. Hundreds of poor people meet the President every month, troop the halls of the House and Senate, visiting the officials one after the other, or talk to their mayors and Cabinet officers. That is democracy at its best.

Of all the varieties of violence the saddest is that between the demolition teams and the urban poor men and women. The demolition people are urban poor themselves, so it is one poor man trying to keep his family going against another poor man or woman trying to do exactly the same. The powerful have set poor against poor. Nothing destroys more quickly any sense of brotherhood and sisterhood among the poor. It is sinister for that reason.

In the last analysis these cruel ways come down from the top officials and the elite, as do most values in society, so it's up to the powerful to stop the practice.

On Nov. 18 in front of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources people had a chance to witness how citizens can deal with abuses of authority. The people of Mindoro were there to protest a Norwegian mining company's activity on the island. There were the governors and bishops of the two provinces, the clergy, mayors, academicians, Fr. Robert Reyes, NGOs, Mangyans and other ordinary people. They were telling the environment secretary they couldn't accept the permission he gave to the mining company to begin work. They said he had made a big mistake. How in a democracy can a single national official overrule a decision of all the people of an island, who are the most likely to know their situation and what is best for them? The people of Mindoro show the effectiveness of people at different levels of society joining together in search of good law, the proper use of authority—and democracy.

Denis Murphy

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* Denis Murphy works with the Urban Poor Associates. His e-mail address is upa pltdsl.net.