

Defining Justice

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On this day, March 17, in 1968, at least 28 young Muslim men, no more than 30 years old, were massacred in Corregidor in the infamous Jabidah Massacre. Some say the victims were executed because they mutinied against their officers in protest over the delay in payment of their allowances. But a more popular version of the story is that these young Moros, hoping to be members of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, found out that their mission was to invade Sabah, where many of their fellow Muslims, friends and families are living in peace. They protested and decided to back out of the training. Since the mission was a top military secret, and to prevent it from being exposed, their trainers brought them to a tiny airstrip, in groups of twelve and subsequently gunned them down. This incident gave birth to various Muslim groups including the Muslim Independence Movement of Datu Udtog Matalam, the Ansar el Islam of former Senator Ahmad Domocao Alonto, the Moro National Liberation Front of Misuari and later, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front of Hashim Salamat.

Now, 37 years after, 22 Muslims were killed in the Bagong Diwa jail siege.

As the government, some sectors and individuals rejoice and congratulate each other for what they claim as a successful end to the crisis, the chain of injustice, pain, and worst, maybe even hatred and vengeance is again passed on to another generation of Muslim children.

Yesterday, as the victims were being buried, the young sons of Ahmad Opao and Muktar Abukhair wept as they looked helplessly while their fathers' bloodied bodies, the lifeless bodies of their people, were gradually covered with mud.

At the height of the crisis, many people, including supposedly unbiased media personalities and public officials openly expressed their irritation and impatience over the then on-going negotiations. *Bakit pa sila nakikipag negotiate? Dapat sumalakay na sila!*

It was easy for them to decide for they do not know whose lives they were asking to be sacrificed. For them, they were just faceless criminals. But for those who knew them, for the families and loved ones of the 400 plus inmates in that building, who can attest to their innocence, attacking and possibly killing them would be a grave injustice. An act which would make us no different from those we call terrorists.

The call to attack was anchored on the government's policy not to negotiate with terrorists and the great humiliation the country is facing due to its own incompetence and lapses. Have they become brutally heartless that human life is now but secondary to the image of the government?

But have we not humiliated ourselves before the whole world when we pulled out our troops from Iraq to save the one life of Angelo dela Cruz? How long have we been negotiating with the undoubtedly cold-blooded terrorists holding Tarongoy as hostage? We do not question these moves of the government, in fact we commend them, for we believe in the sanctity of every human life.

Our question is, can we not bear a lesser degree of humiliation and afford the same degree of patience for the sake of the hundreds of lives at stake?

Obviously, the answer is no. And one can not help but think that maybe because the lives sacrificed are mere Muslim lives who all deserved to die? For them, they are all the same. We are all the same.

We do not question the fact that those who staged the siege must pay for the death of the jail guards. But who were these perpetrators? The government was able to identify only Kosovo, Ka Lando, and a certain Edsel. Other reports said that Kumander Global and Robot were not part of the group. But granting, that Global and Robot were indeed involved, based on their established notorious identities, that would make a party of five, and they were all killed. They have paid for the lives of the heroes.

But eighteen others were killed, including a 75 year old detainee who wets his bed, and other suspected Abu Sayyaf members, many of whom were just indiscriminately picked up by authorities in Basilan, Sulu and other neighboring provinces. Suspects, who had the right to defend themselves in a fair trial. Who had the right to voice their own share of the truth. But along with their dead bodies, the truth is buried. Who will now pay for their death?

Philippine law clearly states that one is deemed innocent unless proven guilty beyond reasonable doubt. But in the Bagong Diwa assault, clearer is the fact that the Philippine government is the very own violator of its laws. Clearest is the fact that the Philippine government is the very perpetrator of injustice.

But still, we are for peace. We believe that this incident will not justify the killing of innocent civilians, Muslims, Christians, or whatever faith they may be, for they are unquestionably unIslamic. But as we call for peace, we also cry for justice, for there can never be peace where there is no justice.

Unless there is now a new definition of justice? Or is justice now reserved for just a chosen few?

We appeal to those who think otherwise, to those who still believe in the true sense of justice, to the universality of justice. In the name of peace, let us join hands in defending our definition of what is just. This is not a sole struggle of the Muslims, but a strife of every human soul, for the injustices committed are not just against the laws of any faith or nation, but against the very law of humanity.

P.S.

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