

# Philippines: Upper Right Hand: Lawyers for the people

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**DAVAO CITY (Mindanews / 13 June) The controversial anti-terrorism bill puts lawyers, especially human rights lawyers, at the limelight. People from all walks of life enthusiastically poured their opinions and emotions through the mainstream or social media. Understandably, the public attention focuses more on the lawyers' views especially with respect to legal questions and fundamental issues of constitutionality.**

Individually as members and collectively as an organization, the Union of Peoples' Lawyers in Mindanao (UPLM) oppose the bill. Together with the National Union of Peoples' Lawyers (NUPL), UPLM strongly asserts that when the bill becomes a law, it will institutionalize the threats and attacks on human rights and civil liberties. Further, it will strip off the people of their freedom of speech and association.

On one hand, UPLM is a mass organization of lawyers as well as legal workers and law students in Mindanao committed to the promotion and defense of human rights, nationalism, democracy, peace, justice and truth.

While recognizing the primacy of the vibrant people's movement in Mindanao in the promotion and defense of human rights, there is a need for more systematic legal assistance to the basic sectors along the principles of peoples' lawyering. It is in this light that the UPLM was established on July 22, 2005 to respond to the increasing number of human rights violations in the island.

The organization accepts as members lawyers who are committed to the principles of public interest lawyering. Its regular members have a tri-people composition - majority Filipino lawyers, indigenous lawyers, and Moro (Muslim) lawyers, including Shariah lawyers. These include private practitioners and lawyers in government service. Associate members are also accepted among law students, bachelor of laws or *juris* doctors, paralegals and court personnel.

UPLM recognizes the peoples' right to self-determination. In order to attain justice, we must initiate and assist in a process that empowers the poor, dispossessed and the oppressed.

UPLM is affiliated with the End Impunity Alliance, *Barug Katungod* Mindanao - Consortium of Human Rights Defenders and National Union of Peoples' Lawyers (NUPL).

On the other hand, NUPL was founded on September 15, 2007 as a nationwide association of human rights lawyers as well as law students, paralegals and legal workers in the Philippines. They are united by a commitment to the defense, protection, and promotion of human rights especially of the poor and the oppressed.

The NUPL is oriented towards the active defense, protection and promotion of human rights covering the peoples' civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights, including the advocacy and assertion of their inherent right to self-determination.

The NUPL was organized to provide mechanisms for collaboration, coordination, assistance and facilitation of legal services in the local and national levels. As a frontline advocacy, the NUPL is united and committed to render competent legal services to the marginalized sectors for upholding and promoting their rights and freedoms.

The NUPL is an affiliate of the International Association of Democratic Lawyers (IADL), which has consultative status with the United Nations. It also has linkages with various international human rights lawyers organizations, including the Confederation of Lawyers in Asia in the Pacific (COLAP)

Guided by common principles, missions and qualifications for membership, and bound by shared advocacies, the older organization UPLM affiliated with the younger but nationwide NUPL. Nevertheless, the two organizations maintain their respective separate organizational structures. To further enhance their partnership however, the UPLM was subsequently considered and recognized as NUPL - Mindanao.

All lawyers of UPLM and NUPL are *bona fide* members of the Integrated Bar of the Philippines (IBP), which is the mandatory organization of lawyers in the country. The first two have actually cooperated with IBP in some of its advocacy programs and projects.

However, only a few chose to join UPLM and NUPL as public interest lawyers. Though fulfilling, it is not really the most convenient choice. As founding UPLM Founding Chairman Frederico M. Gapuz aptly said:

*"Poverty is a question of law. It is our challenge as public interest lawyers to save what remains of the law for the benefit of our people's human rights, as we envision a social order where equality is lived and does not merely exist as a concept of legalese."*

The daring challenge of public interest lawyering was echoed by NUPL Founding Chairperson Romeo T. Capulong when he said, "We have brave clients. They deserve brave lawyers."

While public interest in general and human rights in particular occupy the highest bar in the hierarchy of rights, their discussions have usually been limited in reach. They have been confined among those directly affected like families and friends of victims of extra-judicial killings and communities of indigenous peoples who are forced to leave their lands by harassments. It further validates the general human tendency or weakness - we react only when directly hit.

These sad realities, among others, inspire the UPLM to heighten its advocacy and information dissemination campaign through the media, giving birth to UPPER HAND, the first editorial column of the union. While members write in their personal capacities, they see to it that these opinions are consistent with the principles and in line with the advocacies of the organization.

A theory says that the readers' eyes follow the S movement, making the upper right hand corner the most conspicuous space on a page. Since public interest is the most important, then its discussions on paper should also be given the best space.

Also, UPPER HAND is a loose translation of TAAS KAMAO, a trademark signal of activists including public interest lawyers.

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