

Philippines: Arrests, Torture and the Presidential Election

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The run-up to presidential elections is a time of heightened state-sponsored repression as Asia's foremost 'death squad democracy' wages war on its progressive rural medical workers.

The notoriously violent and corrupt elections in the Philippines stand in sharp contrast with those in South Korea, Taiwan, Japan and Malaysia, where the ruling elites have secured their hegemony via economic prosperity, rising salaries, increased employment and extensive social services for their citizens. In these countries, the elite can abide by the results of a relatively 'open' election, whereas in the Philippines, any challenge to the closed, family-based ruling class is met with relentless terror.

In the Philippines, stagnation in the agricultural sector and a backward manufacturing sector, combined with electoral politics dominated by a coalition of landlords, warlords and oligarchic family clans, have led to mass poverty, deepening class inequalities and social polarization. The elites are unwilling to tolerate any challenge or movement for change. Since they have not been able to establish their legitimacy or hegemony via programs and policies which create rising prosperity for the Filipino masses, the Philippine political elite rely on the military and paramilitary to repress popular social movements, while their allies among the local warlords and clan leaders 'deliver' the votes.

Elections in the Philippines are violent contests between rival 'oligarchic' families - a pattern frozen in 19th century style rivalries - where guns and assassinations, as well as ballots, decide which 'faction' will rule. Political elites actually enlist the help of the local police, military, paramilitary and death squads to kill leading rival contenders, in order to ensure a 'win' for their candidates. The recent massacre of 57 civilians (including two dozen journalists), on their way to register a local candidate by a warlord ally of the president, has ensured that the coming election will be among the bloodiest.

The primary challenge to the politics of the oligarchs in the Philippines comes from the independent social organizations. These community-based, grass-roots movements are engaged in organizing health programs as well as environmental and women's organizations and human rights groups defending workers, peasants and social activists, along with class-based trade unions and organizations of small farmers and rural workers.

The 'battle for votes' among the elites is narrowly focused but intense: The perks of office and unfettered access to the public treasury is what sustains Filipino crony capitalism, despite the rhetoric of 'free market' and 'private enterprise'. The electoral 'process' ensures the right number of votes for the right candidate through a combination of bribes,

threats, violence and outright fraud.

The 2004 Philippine presidential race was the template for election in the 'death squad democracy': President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo's 'victory' was secured through an assassination and terror campaign against candidates and political organizers belonging to the sectoral 'party-list' parties representing marginalized groups, like the urban poor, workers, farmers, women and students and guaranteed in an unforgettable taped conversation of the President ordering her election commissioner ("Hello Garci") to deliver specific percentages of votes.

While elite candidates compete with each other, they work together to oppose any popular social movements that emerge within their social and political domain; hence the unprecedented increase in repression as the electoral process unfolds. For these war-lord politicians, all independent organized activities within their 'territories' directly threaten their clientelistic hold over the voters and must be violently stopped. This dynamic is key to understanding the thousands of instances of violence perpetrated against independent journalists, health care workers, legal aid workers, union organizers, teachers, church rural workers and many others.

Mass Arrest of Health Workers Accused of 'Terrorism'

On February 6, 2010, 300 heavily armed soldiers and militarized police, with their faces masked, broke into the provincial home of Dr. Melecia Velmonte, a distinguished infectious disease specialist and Professor Emeritus of the University of the Philippines, College of Medicine, and arrested 43 rural health workers, physicians and nurses who had been holding a seminar on rural disaster preparedness in the wake of the devastating Typhoon Ketsana. The participants were blindfolded, tied and brought to a military camp where they underwent harsh interrogation and torture and were charged with terrorism and membership in the guerrilla movement, the New Peoples Army. The owner of the home where the 'terrorist' medical workers were meeting, Dr. Velmonte and her son, who were present during the arrests and protested the invasion of her property without a warrant, were not arrested.

The 43 medical detainees have been held in a military camp ever since without access to family and attorneys. Trumped-up weapons charges against the health workers were based on explosives, guns and 'bomb-making' manuals, obviously planted in their belongings. One nurse was accused of keeping a hand-grenade under her pillow. A parade of transparently phony charges, including participation in 'communist assassination units' were leveled at the physicians, especially a 61 year old public health specialist suffering from diabetes and hypertension, as well as the nurses and health workers. These preposterous charges, the bizarre commando-style 'raid' on Dr. Velmonte's home and the prolonged isolation and abuse of the detainees were defended at the highest level of government with few complaints or calls for inquiry by the elite-led opposition. The Dean of the University of the Philippines, College of Medicine, issued a stern denunciation of the mass arrest, describing the military's abuse of medical workers as part of a pattern of attacks on members of the health sector seeking to fulfill their mission of service to the underserved rural population.

The detainees have become known as the 'Morong 43' after the village in Rizal Province where the arrest took place. Mass protests and support groups have emerged among a wide range of professional associations, civil society organizations, and class-based popular

movements in the Philippines and nurses groups and human rights organizations in North America and Europe. The incident was reported in the *Lancet*, Britain's prestigious medical journal. The US press, which routinely covers 'human rights' abuses against independent professionals in China and Burma, has yet to mention the detention and torture of 43 medical workers in the Philippines, whose President Macapagal Arroyo is a staunch political ally of the Obama Administration.

The 'Reasons' behind the Repression

The Macapagal-Arroyo regime's brutal assault and arrest of 43 health workers, engaged in providing accessible basic medical services and disaster aid and training to the rural poor, may appear irrational from an economic point of view: After all, in a country where over 70% of the rural population are born and die without ever seeing a physician, these health workers provide vital social services to marginalized populations at no cost to the government.

However, economic considerations are not what inform the politics of an unpopular regime deeply immersed in corruption scandals and electoral chicanery. The principle concern of the Macapagal-Arroyo regime is political: How can this regime retain control of a restless rural electorate deeply disenchanted with the local warlords, clan leaders and paramilitary thugs, who 'round up' their votes for the regime's chosen candidate. In this context, local health clinics run by independent health workers under community control are a threat to the regime's local chain of command, which runs the vast 'patronage machine' dictating who among the people vote and how. Whatever meager social services do exist in the rural areas must be totally under their control to underscore the electorate's dependency on the local representative of the regime.

Grassroots community health centers, where health workers provide and teach preventative care, basic hygiene, disaster preparedness and many other services, empower small farmers, rural workers and their families to think and act independently of the local bosses. Volunteer health workers provide a micro-model of what a comprehensive rural health program should be like in contrast to the inaccessible, corrupt, privatized system of medical care promoted by the national government.

Under the Macapagal-Arroyo regime, the pillage of the public treasury has impoverished the health system to the point that over 3,000 nurses and doctors are forced to leave the country every year. The private clinics and health insurance companies provide quality medical services to salaried employees of larger businesses, affluent middle class professionals and members of the upper class. In the public hospitals, especially the major teaching hospitals, like the huge Philippine General Hospital, young doctors, who provide critical services to tens of thousands of lower middle class and poor patients, go without salaries for months and even longer. Faculty and department staff are so poorly paid that they are forced to take additional sideline jobs in private clinics to survive.

With the upcoming presidential elections this May, the political elite have made a logical calculation: As a result of their pillage and brutality, promises of prosperity cannot 'buy' the support of the electorate whose 'loyalty' must then be 'secured' through the traditional double G's of Philippine governance: Guns and goons.

Heavily funded and encouraged by the US in its 'World-Wide War on Terror', the regime of Macapagal Arroyo has drawn up its own list of threats: First on the 'order of battle' are the

popular social movements, whose dedicated activists cannot be bought. This explains the widespread use of mass arrest and continued detention of the 'Morong 43' by the regime's military and the 'targeted assassination' of independent, popular political candidates and independent community leaders.

The military has ignored the Philippine Supreme Court's orders to transfer the 43 health workers to Manila where they would have access to their attorneys and to medical care. The regime's continued detention and abuse of 'the Morong 43' is a gangster-style message to the Filipino civil society movement: "Stay out of poor communities or face a similar fate!" The tactic of the Macapagal Arroyo government and its supporters in the White House is to proceed with the electoral charade as if 'nothing is wrong'.

What is urgently needed is an international campaign exposing the dark underside of Philippine elections and securing the freedom and safe return of the 'Morong 43' to their families and communities. What is at stake is not only the lives of the jailed health workers, but the lives and well-being of many thousands of poor farmers and their families who depend on their vital services.

JUSTICE FOR THE RURAL HEALTH WORKERS!

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