

Escalating political murders in the Philippines

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The death toll of political activists has continued to mount in the Philippines. On September 20, eleven gunmen, wearing bonnets, black shirts and combat boots, barged into the backyard of Christopher Lunar, and shot and killed the peasant leader in broad daylight.

The 31-year-old Lunar, a local coordinator of the party-list group Anak-Pawis in the Camarines Sur province, was the second political activist to be assassinated in the Bicol region. On August 3, Isaias Sta. Rosa, a pastor for the United Methodist Church and leader of the leftist Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas, was shot in his own house in the neighboring province of Albay.

According to *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, Lunas was the 251st leftist victim since President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo took power in 2001. Karapatan, a local human rights organisation, claims a higher toll, recording 601 killings. Another 140 activists have also “disappeared”. Even worse, human rights organisations have noted a surge in political murders this year. Amnesty International reported 51 killings in the first six months alone, compared to 66 for the whole of 2005.

Top government officials insist that the murders are a purge being conducted by the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) against its own members. Police authorities deny outright that any pattern exists, claiming the murders are simply part of the normal crime-rate cycle. “Sometimes it falls, sometimes it goes up,” national police spokesman Samuel Pagdilao told the press in May.

Of the 110 political killings admitted by the government since 2001, only four cases have been filed in court. This “pattern of impunity” finally forced even the official Commission of Human Rights, an independent constitutional body, to timidly warn that, while not condemning the Arroyo administration, “in human rights terms, the government is still responsible, even if persons in authority are not those behind the killings”.

However, it is not simply a matter of government indifference. The rising tide of death is the result of a deliberate and vicious campaign launched by government security forces, working in tandem with death squads and vigilantes to intimidate and terrorise a growing protest movement among the rural poor.

The leftist Bayan Muna party-list group, which in 2001 received 1,203,305 votes and sent three representatives to the Philippine congress, has been the prime target, with 95 of its

local officials killed. The party-list groups Anak-Pawis and Gabriela, which separately obtained half a million votes and have a total of three representatives, have also been targeted. As of March 2006, 23 Anak-Pawis members and officials had been killed. Gabriela has suffered four fatalities.

The surge of political killings has been accompanied by a crude campaign by government security forces of “red-baiting”—branding all leftist party-list groups and allied rural and other social-civic organisations as nothing but “fronts” for the underground CPP or its armed wing, the New Peoples Army (NPA).

This propaganda campaign, which is similar to the methods used in the 1970s under the Marcos dictatorship, effectively turns peasants, trade unionists, church, social and human rights activists into targets of counter-insurgency operations. According to Amnesty International, some of the victims were placed, “without opportunity for rebuttal, on AFP [Armed Forces of the Philippines] ‘Orders of Battle’ [lists of people wanted for alleged subversion].”

The AFP’s open contempt for basic democratic rights is exemplified by military field commanders like Major General Jovito Palparan who, according to an *Asia Times* report, shrugged off the deaths of leftist activists last year as just “small sacrifices” and asserted that the “extra-judicial” killings helped the military in its counter-insurgency campaigns.

Justice Secretary Raul Gonzalez has expressed the same sentiments. According to the *Philippine Star*, he told the five leftist party-list representatives accused of rebellion during the state of emergency in March “to go back to the mountains where you belong”—that is, to the NPA’s guerrilla camps. Not to be outdone, national security adviser Norberto Gonzalez accused Bayan Muna members of “moonlighting” as NPA guerillas and their party-list representatives of funding the CPP with their congressional “pork barrels.”

President Arroyo, while less blatant, obviously supports the campaign. In her July 26 state of the union address, she condemned political killings “in the harshest possible terms” but then heaped praise on Major General Palparan for not “backing down” against rebels, “who kill without qualms, even their own.” Palparan has been branded the “butcher” by various human rights organisations for his alleged connections to more than 500 cases of human rights violations since 2003.

Amid growing public outrage over the political murders,

Arroyo has established two supposedly independent bodies to conduct inquiries.

Task Force Usig (or Prosecute) is a case of the suspects investigating themselves. It is a special police unit headed by the deputy general of the national police. Its report released during Arroyo's visit to Europe early in September proclaimed the government was "not responsible for any abuses that might have taken place." The task force found that of 36 killings investigated, the Maoists allegedly committed 16 and the military just six—conveniently justifying the government line that the CPP was conducting a purge.

The second body is the so-called Melo commission. It is named after its chair, former Supreme Court justice Jose Melo, who began his career as an appointee of President Diosdado Macapagal, Arroyo's father. The commission has the narrow remit of investigating the root causes and recommending "policies to end the bloodshed," according to a presidential spokesperson.

Its "independence" is highly questionable. The commission's budget of \$20,000 was traced to the president's office, after it was revealed that the government had allocated no funding. Additional funds are to come from the National Bureau of Investigation, the Philippine National Police and the AFP, but only if the agencies themselves agree.

The Arroyo administration rejected a suggestion by Amnesty International to expand the commission to include human rights organisations. The body is mainly composed of government officials—the director of the National Bureau of Investigation, the chief state prosecutor and a regent of the University of the Philippines. Its only non-government member—a Catholic archbishop—refused to join, saying his membership would compromise the independence of the Roman Catholic Church.

It is not just political activists who are being murdered. Amnesty International has drawn attention to a surge of extra-judicial killings of suspected petty criminals, particularly in two major cities whose mayors are close allies of Arroyo.

In Cebu city, at least 162 suspected petty criminals have been reported killed since December 2004. The *Sun Star Daily* reported the mayor as saying: "To me, as long as there are fewer robberies and [bag] snatching, it's not so bad." In Davao city, 390 suspected criminals, again mostly petty thieves, including street children and youth gang members, have been murdered since 2001. The mayor told the *Washington Post*: "I've been telling criminals it's a place where you can die any time. If that's a cue for anybody, that's fine."

Many unsolved killings of journalists have also occurred in the Philippines. According to Amnesty International, 79 journalists have been killed since 1986, with 42 deaths since Arroyo assumed power in 2001. Nine have already died in the first seven months of 2006.

The ruthless murder of political opponents is an attempt to suppress the growing popular hostility and opposition to the Arroyo administration. Arroyo was installed in power in 2001

in what amounted to a constitutional coup. A protracted campaign to oust elected President Joseph Estrada through formal impeachment on corruption charges failed. With the backing of the military and sections of the corporate elite, Arroyo was inserted as president with the sanction of the Supreme Court amid a series of so-called peoples' power rallies.

Having come to power, Arroyo, who repeatedly declared herself "for the poor," immediately launched into her agenda of far-reaching market reforms—including privatisations, regressive taxation and government spending cutbacks. She won the 2004 presidential election amid allegations of ballot corruption and has faced two campaigns to impeach her in 2005 and 2006. Arroyo's response to her growing unpopularity has been to turn even further to the right. She is a fervent supporter of the Bush administration's bogus "war on terrorism," has relaunched military operations against the NPA and backs tough "law and order" measures.

The CCP and other leftist parties—mostly CPP breakaways—bear a heavy political responsibility for helping Arroyo come to power. In 2001, they joined the "peoples' power" bandwagon, demanded the ousting of Estrada and supported Arroyo as the alternative. Their political backing was crucial in duping ordinary working people into believing that Arroyo, a scion of the Philippine establishment, would in some way address their burning social needs. Once in office, Arroyo rapidly turned on her left backers as she implemented her regressive policies and cracked down on any opposition.



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