

Philippine political massacre foreshadows widespread election violence

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On 23 November, 57 unarmed men and women travelling near Shariff Aguak, capital of the province of Maguindanao in the southern Philippines, were murdered, their bodies dismembered and thrown into mass graves. Thirty of the victims were journalists, 22 were women. Many of the women were raped and their genitals were shot at close range. Corpses were beheaded and their legs severed with chainsaws. Both the Philippine and international press expressed shock and outrage at the number of people killed and the brutality of the crime.

Those killed were victims of the violence of the electoral process in the Philippines, a violence that is wielded with impunity by powerful political families throughout the islands. Political candidates and their family members, journalists and activists are routinely murdered during the election season; the national and international press remain silent. Had the 57 murders of Maguindanao been committed in groups of three or four over the space of several weeks, no comment would have been made.

Maguindanao is the third poorest province in the Philippines. It lies in the Pulangi river basin in the war-torn southwestern portion of Mindanao. The province has long been controlled by the Ampatuan family, which employs hundreds of armed thugs to retain its stranglehold on political power.

Rival political leader from the adjacent province of Sultan Kudarat, Pax Mangudadatu, announced this March that his family intended to field a rival candidate for governor in Maguindanao. He was responding to the Ampatuans' political intrusion into Sultan Kudarat. A *rido*, a feudal war between rival families, was in the making. In order to declare candidacy in Maguindanao, one would have to travel to the capital city of Shariff Aguak. Andal Ampatuan, mayor of the city, announced that no candidate would arrive at the capital.

Esmael Mangudadatu, intending to run for provincial governor but fearful of an assault should he personally travel to declare his candidacy, sent his wife and sisters in his stead. He assumed that a convoy of female family members and supporters, accompanied by 30 journalists, would not be

assaulted. They travelled in six mini-buses from the town of Buluan to the provincial capital to register Mangudadatu as a candidate in the May 2010 election.

November 23 marked the beginning of the national election season. Candidates registered throughout the country. Members of the Ampatuan family prepared days in advance for the Mangudadatu convoy. They took local government equipment and dug holes intended as graves for the victims. Both lower and senior level police officers and army officials at checkpoints along the main road turned a blind eye to the Ampatuans' messengers and thugs stalking the Mangudadatus.

One hundred armed men diverted the convoy and began the executions at the planned grave site. An emergency text message secretly sent from the cell phone of one of the victims, brought the intervention of the armed forces before the backhoe could complete the burial of the remaining bloody body parts. The armed men fled, shooting the operator of the machinery as they left. Had they had another hour, the convoy would have simply disappeared. The Ampatuans intended to blame local armed Muslim separatists for the disappearance.

With the progressive privatization of government functions and the weakening of the central state, regional familial dynasties have come to dominate Philippine political life. They supply the Manila-based political elite with votes, controlled en bloc from their rural centers of power. In return they have received various forms of rent: trade concessions, control over the appointment of civil servants within their region, and monopolies over mining, agricultural development, and, in the case of Maguindanao, timber concessions.

The Ampatuans delivered to the current president Gloria Macapagal Arroyo the votes of the province of Maguindanao in the 2004 presidential election. Arroyo allegedly engaged in election fraud throughout the country. The Ampatuans were particularly effective agents in her presidential campaign. Through a combination of intimidation and trickery the Maguindanao vote was rigged in her favor. In 2007, they performed the same service during congressional and senatorial

elections; the ruling party's candidates swept the Maguindanao vote, 12-0.

What is overlooked in the outcry over the massacre of Maguindanao is the widespread and routine nature of electoral violence in the Philippines. The political oligarchs field private armies from rural and urban lumpen elements, often recruiting among very young males. The majority of the thugs in Maguindanao, according to a study conducted by Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, are under 18. These recruits are armed with weapons purchased from corrupt military officers, and are brainwashed with hysterical and religiously inflected anti-communism.

Reporters without Borders declared the event to be the worst killing of journalists in world history. Yesterday hundreds of journalists and human rights activists protested near the presidential palace in Manila, demanding justice for their 30 colleagues killed in Maguindanao. The Committee for the Protection of Journalists stated that the Philippines was now the most dangerous place in the world to be a journalist; it had surpassed Iraq. This was not simply the result of one massacre. Seventy-four journalists have been killed since Arroyo became president.

Arroyo's time as president is at an end. During her time she has taken steps intended to circumvent the term limitation upon stay in office. She clearly aspired to imitate the brutal Philippine dictator Marcos and use the military to extend her hold over power. She has profited from power—her net worth has grown 114 percent during her tenure as president—and hoped to keep it. She lacks, however, any sense of charisma; unlike the dynamic young Marcos, she has a personality as inviting as a thin and tepid gruel. More importantly, she has alienated the younger officers of the armed forces upon whom Marcos relied during his seizure of power.

The presidential elections of May 2010, are already being fiercely contested. During the past week 40 candidates have officially declared their intentions to campaign for president. A leading protestant evangelist, a multi-billionaire, and former president Joseph Estrada, who was ousted by Arroyo in 2001 in what amounted to a constitutional coup, are all running.

A leading candidate is former president Cory Aquino's son, Noynoy Aquino. He was an uninteresting politician less than a year ago, trivial, given to stolid silence in public; he stood for nothing other than the family interests of the powerful Cojuangco dynasty. He now aims to capitalize upon his mother, Cory's, death and subsequent canonization as patron saint of Philippine democracy by the disingenuous posturings of the political elites. As the Cory Aquino halo wears thin, the vacuous politician lurking behind the accolades will be

revealed.

The Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) is also entering the elections in a major way. Its various front organizations have launched candidates for seats from the senatorial level down. In a thoroughly cynical and predictable move, they have thrown their full support to Manny Villar, a billionaire businessman and senator. They claim that he represents "a progressive section of the bourgeoisie," and they are hoping to benefit from his largesse.

Their choice is the continuation of the endless Stalinist quest for a bourgeois champion. The national bourgeoisie is organically incapable of playing a consistently revolutionary or even progressive role in economically backward countries like the Philippines. It is intimately linked with imperialist capital and with the class of landowners. In backing Villar, the CPP is lying to the working class and the peasantry and leading them to defeat.

The Arroyo administration has attempted, fruitlessly, to distance itself from the events in Maguindanao. It has arrested Andal Ampatuan, the mayor directly involved in the killings. This is damage control. The entire Ampatuan political machine is implicated in the massacre.

The stakes involved are much higher than this, however. What the brutal slaughter in Maguindanao, laid bare was the culture of familial political power, private armies and election violence that serves as the basis for what is termed democracy in the Philippines. None of the candidates and parties has any solution to the worsening social and economic crisis facing masses of working people. Regardless of who emerges as leader among the 40 candidates for president, these violent assaults on the democratic rights of the Filipino people will continue to serve as an essential tool of landlord and bourgeois political machinations.



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