

# Charges dropped over Philippine political killings

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The Philippine government has dropped charges against two members of a prominent political family accused of conspiracy in the massacre of 57 people in southern Mindanao in November 2009. The victims were journalists and family members of a political rival who were travelling in a convoy to file candidacy papers for the national elections taking place on May 10.

The main suspect, Andal Ampatuan Jr., remains in jail facing multiple murder charges. His father, a former provincial governor, is also in custody and facing charges. But the decision by the Department of Justice to dismiss the cases against two siblings—Zaldy and Akmad Ampatuan—has provoked widespread public outrage.

The Ampatuans are the most powerful political family in the impoverished, predominantly Muslim province of Maguindanao and are close allies of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. According to prosecutors, Andal Ampatuan Jr. personally supervised the slaughter on November 23. His henchmen—among them police officers and members of a government-backed militia—allegedly stopped the victims at a roadblock, diverted them down a side road, murdered them and threw the bodies into mass graves.

The massacre was carried out in an apparent attempt by the Ampatuan clan to prevent a rival political leader from an adjacent province, Ismael Mangudadatu, from registering as a candidate for governor of Maguindanao. Zaldy Ampatuan, who was a regional governor at the time of the killings, is the highest-ranking official implicated in the case. Akmad Ampatuan and Andal Ampatuan Jr. were both local mayors.

The province has long been controlled by the Ampatuan family, which employs thousands of armed thugs. Led by

the governor, the family's political machine has previously organised substantial majorities for Arroyo and her party. In the 2004 presidential election, she won 100 percent of the votes in some towns. At some polling stations the number of votes exceeded that of registered voters. Her candidates in Maguindanao won easy majorities in the 2007 mid-term elections for the Congress.

Prosecutors initially said the massacre could not have happened without the complicity of the entire Ampatuan family, all of whom had been involved in planning the highly organised and pre-meditated attack. But in dropping charges against Zaldy and Akmad Ampatuan, Justice Secretary Alberto Agra claimed prosecutors had failed to find evidence establishing a conspiracy involving the two. He said both men had alibis showing they were not present at the murders. Agra also ordered the dismissal of similar cases against five other individuals.

The decision was denounced by spokespersons for the victims and various non-government organisations. "This is evidence that the victims cannot get justice under the administration of President Arroyo," lawyer Harry Roque told reporters. Elaine Pearson, deputy director for Asia of Human Rights Watch (HRW), declared that outgoing President Arroyo had "moved another step closer to leaving a legacy of impunity for extrajudicial killings".

According to HRW, there were concerns about the successful prosecution of the remaining suspects after at least one eyewitness and two of his relatives were killed. Crucial witnesses are now scared to testify. Roque has applied for the case to be held over until after Arroyo steps down on June 30. Meanwhile, lax security measures have allowed one suspect to escape detention. A large

number of police, military and paramilitary personnel implicated in the massacre remain at large.

After the killings, Arroyo's government was quick to distance itself from the Ampatuans, denouncing the deed as "unconscionable" and declaring no one "untouchable". However, she used the killings as the pretext for the imposition of martial law for the first time since the fall of the Marcos dictatorship setting a dangerous precedent for its future use against the working class.

It is not surprising that the Arroyo administration found a way to drop the charges against two of the Ampatuan family. According to HRW, a series of recent unsolved killings of regional and local candidates, party activists and relatives of witnesses "raise concerns that perpetrators are emboldened by the Arroyo administration's failure to hold those responsible to account".

Arroyo, however, who is prevented by the electoral law from standing for another term in office, is not alone in benefiting from the violence and intimidation that is endemic in Philippine politics. There have been numerous politically motivated killings in the lead-up to the May 10 national elections. Pre-election violence spiked again last Saturday when a campaign leader for a mayoral nominee and two campaign coordinators of a congressional candidate were shot dead in separate incidents.

The Criminal Investigation and Detection Group (CIDG) previously told HRW that between January 10, when the official election period began, and April 14, it had received 71 reports of violent incidents targeting elected officials and candidates, involving 86 victims. Thirty-eight people had been killed. The CIDG said suspects included "guns for hire", political opponents and members of paramilitary forces. To date, one suspect has been charged, eight suspects have been cleared, and investigations are "continuing" in the remainder of the cases.

During the full period of Arroyo's presidency, hundreds of political party members, human rights activists, journalists, and outspoken clergy have been killed or "disappeared" in politically motivated attacks. Of the political murders since 2001, HRW reports that only six cases have been successfully prosecuted, resulting in the conviction of 11 people. Although the military has been

implicated in many of the crimes, none of those convicted were active military personnel at the time of the killings.

The entrenched nature of political violence throughout official politics in the Philippines is an expression of the degenerate character of the ruling class and its political parties, which are prepared to use any means to defend their vested interests from their rivals and to suppress opposition from working people. All are committed, one way or another, to the agenda demanded by big business and international capital to slash public spending, boost taxes and further entrench the poverty of the masses.

In southern Mindanao, the Arroyo administration has cultivated local leaders such as the Ampatuans as part of its efforts to isolate the Islamic separatist Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). The president legitimised and helped arm local militias, including those involved in last November's massacre. The Ampatuans have now tried to shift the blame for the Maguindanao murders onto local armed Muslim separatists.

From jail, Ampatuan senior and junior have been free to continue their political activities through interviews and press conferences. They have expressed confidence that they will not be sent to trial any time soon, if ever. Speaking to the media on April 20 from the Camp Bagong Diwa jail, three family members announced the family's support for presidential candidate Benigno "Noynoy" Aquino, who promptly denounced the move as a ploy to undermine his campaign.



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