

A revealing prison “escape” in the Philippines

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On May 18, the former governor of the Philippine province of Batangas, Antonio Leviste, was arrested in the Manila business district of Makati for having escaped from prison where he was serving a sentence for homicide. The details that emerged in the wake of his arrest exposed the grotesque inequality that characterizes the Philippine penal system.

Leviste was convicted in 2009 of killing his aide, Rafael delas Alas. Delas Alas had asked Leviste for a raise and Leviste shot him. Leviste argued that the shooting was self-defense and the court agreed, reducing his charges from murder to homicide and sentencing him to six years’ prison time.

Leviste was placed in New Bilibid Prison, Philippines’ largest and headquarters of the Bureau of Corrections, located in Muntinlupa, on the south side of Metro Manila.

Muntinlupa is a microcosm of inequality. Hundreds of thousands of people live in run-down, cramped and partially completed housing, consisting of four concrete walls and a corrugated roof. Muntinlupa bears the stamp of that admixture of the worst of urban and rural life that is so characteristic of many parts of the world: dilapidated schools, neighborhoods dependent on a hand-pump for their water supply, and an intense dirty squalor.

Muntinlupa is also the location of Ayala Alabang, a posh subdivision for the elite. The broad, quiet acacia shaded streets are lined with mansions housing foreign and local capitalists alike, corrupt politicians, a few military officials, grown children and their hangers-on. At the center of the subdivision is the country club and golf course. Membership costs P1.6million (\$US40,000).

In the midst of Muntinlupa is New Bilibid Prison, built during the American colonial period to house the burgeoning population of the incarcerated. Previously the Spanish and then the American rulers had

imprisoned bandits, revolutionaries and petty thieves in Manila’s Old Bilibid. The American imperialist administration executed those who fought against its occupation as bandits, at one point hanging 200 inmates in Bilibid simultaneously in the prison yard.

New Bilibid had 16,747 inmates in 2004. The number has grown since then. A very small portion of the prison population lead lives of relative independence and comfort; they are the wealthy, and Leviste was one of their number.

Bilibid practices a living-out policy for its wealthy inmates. These occupants are allowed their own homes on the sprawling 466 hectare prison grounds. They live alone, unguarded. They have cell phones, air-conditioning, flat screen televisions, laptops, queen sized beds, Lazy-boy recliners. Some of them carry on a lucrative drug trade within the prison. The practice of ‘living out’ is termed minimum security, but this seems an overstatement. Living-out inmates come and go at will. There are no walls, no perimeter fence that prevents their departure from the prison grounds. Their guests come and go at will, unannounced to the guards.

On the day of his ‘escape’, Leviste’s driver drove up to his house, picked him up, and nonchalantly drove out of prison grounds. Escape is not the appropriate word. Leviste had been routinely leaving the prison grounds, conducting business in Makati and visiting his friends. Other wealthy inmates conduct themselves in a similar manner. They return to their prison homes at night, when a prison guard will visit for a once-in-24 hours security check, making certain that they are tucked in at night.

The living conditions of Leviste and the other wealthy prisoners of New Bilibid Prison are starkly better than those people who live on the edges of the prison grounds in government housing. The National Housing Authority has constructed dingy one-room homes for the relocation of squatter families from other

sections of Manila; some wind up here. While they scramble to make a living driving tricycles, or peddling used clothing in the marketplace, a former governor, guilty of committing criminal homicide, lives in greater comfort and ease than they will ever know, not five hundred meters from the unfinished hollow block walls of their homes.

But it is the conditions within Bilibid that are particularly appalling. The same jail that houses Leviste, crams sixty to eighty men on average into a 40 square meter cell. They are caged like so many animals in a cruel zoo. Maximum security puts 337 people into a single cell of 500 square meters. These are human beings who are made to live, sleep, and defecate in a single bare cage.

The fetid cells breed disease. Tuberculosis and hepatitis ravage the prison population. Hacking coughs and sputum, untreated injuries, and an intensive care unit where inmates lie on sheets of cardboard—the Philippine government may have banned the death penalty, but a few years in New Bilibid Prison may have precisely same effect.

And these are not all adults. In an average year, 20,000 children are inmates in the Philippine prison system. Boys as young as nine are packed into the same cells with the other sixty or so inmates. Most have been convicted of either petty theft or sniffing glue. What little hope the streets of Manila may have left them, whatever childhood they may have known, this is extinguished the moment they enter the prison system.

The Philippine penal system reached the attention of an international audience with the success of the dancing inmates of Cebu Prison performing Michael Jackson's "Thriller" in a video uploaded on Youtube. The international media flocked to interview the head of the prison, curious and amused by the well-choreographed and synchronized dance steps of the men in orange jump suits. This was a new form of rehabilitation, it was said. Prison violence was declining as the dancers found an outlet for their creativity.

The truth is a much more sordid story. Byron F. Garcia, head of the prison, is a member of the wealthy and incredibly powerful Garcia family of Cebu. He acts with impunity. The videos which he has made and posted to Youtube were posted under his own name.

There is money at stake. In addition to the stream of

advertising revenue from the popular Youtube videos, there is the money to be made from the tourists who routinely travel to the Cebu Prison to watch the prisoners perform. They are trouped out and made to dance for visitors on a daily basis. Documentary film crews and music video production units have struck lucrative deals with Garcia.

Garcia runs his prison with a medieval flourish for cruelty. He tattoos his name on the shoulder or back of every female inmate and refers to them as his 'bitches.' The dancing inmates of Cebu are serving time for the crimes of poverty—petty theft in the marketplace, a snatched necklace, or possession of the mixture of methamphetamine and caffeine known as shabu.

The disgusting two-tier prison system is not unique to the Philippines. Under capitalism, regardless of the country, the blindfold slips off the eyes of justice. In the wake of the Leviste scandal, Philippine Senator Miriam Defensor Santiago pointed to the system in the United States as the way forward for the Philippine penal system.

Many US prisons have a 'pay-to-stay' program where inmates can pay around \$US120 per day for what the *New York Times* called "five-star jail cells." The for-profit prison system refers to these paying inmates as clients and offers them luxuries and freedoms that the majority of inmates can only dream of. "Of course there's an inherent injustice," Santiago said. But, she argued this would legalize existing policy and the government could make some additional revenue.

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