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Arroyo-Ampatuan Unholy Alliance

SACRAMENTO, CALIF., Dec. 2 (PinoyGlobal) - The gruesome and barbaric massacre of at least 57 unarmed civilians, including 27 journalists, shocked the world and left people wondering if what happened was an ominous sign of things to come. The bloody carnage in Maguindanao could spark violence that could engulf the entire island of Mindanao into the bloodiest political and clan warfare never before seen in the history of the country. The whole situation could only be described as “extremely volatile” which could cause a total breakdown of law and order and throw the region into chaos and anarchy. Indeed, November 23, 2009, will long remain as a day of ignominy in the annals of Philippine politics.

The following day, President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo declared a state of emergency in the provinces of Maguindanao and Sultan Kudarat. Arroyo’s presidential assistant for Mindanao Jesus Dureza told the media that the scope of the state of emergency “will allow the government and military the authority to prevent lawlessness and further political violence.” However, he said that it did not include suspension of the “bill of rights” or writ of habeas corpus.

A few hours after the imposition of a state of emergency, Dureza went to the Ampatuan residence in Shariff Aguak to meet and confer with the Ampatuans. It was attended by the clan’s patriarch, Maguindanao Gov. Andal Ampatuan Sr., and his two sons, ARRM Gov. Zaldy Ampatuan and Datu Unsay town mayor Andal Ampatuan Jr. who was accused of leading the 100 armed men who slaughtered the 57 victims.

Criticized for his unusual visit with the Ampatuans, Dureza defensively said that he merely told the Ampatuans about the creation of the Crisis Management Committee and about the investigation. He also said that there was no discussion about the accusation against Andal Jr. But shouldn’t he instead have invited them to meet with him at the police station as normally would have been the case?

What Dureza did was akin to US President Obama sending his assistant to meet and confer with Mafia dons, after they have slaughtered their enemies, to inform them that the government was investigating them for their involvement in the massacre. Why the unusual “special treatment” accorded the Ampatuans?

Two days later, Andal Jr. surrendered to Dureza. He was flown to General Santos City where he was met by no less than Justice Undersecretary Agnes Devanadera. The meeting had the aura of a visiting dignitary with Devanadera shaking Andal Jr’s hand. He was then escorted by Dureza’s men without handcuffs. Criticized for not doing a “standard operating procedure” in handcuffing an arrested suspect of a crime, Dureza explained that the keys of the two handcuffs his men had were lost. If he thinks that anybody would believe that, he’s wrong. But that just shows that “lying” seems to be the government’s “standard operating procedure.”

The following day, two disturbing news articles were reported. The first article, “Palace says Arroyo won’t cut ties with Ampatuans,” was reported by Christian V. Esguerra

and TJ Burgonia from the Philippine Daily. The report says: “President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo is maintaining her ties with the powerful Ampatuans despite their expulsion from the ruling party and the filing of multiple murder charges against one of them in connection with the Nov. 23 massacre of at least 57 people in Maguindanao province.”

Arroyo’s spokesperson, Lorelei Fajardo, further said, “I don’t think the President’s friendship with the Ampatuans will be severed. Just because they’re in this situation doesn’t mean we will turn our backs on them.” Fajardo went as far to cast doubts that the Ampatuans were involved in the massacre when she told the media that “it doesn’t mean that they are no longer our friends, if ever they indeed committed the crime.”

When reminded by reporters of “how the Ampatuans helped ensure Ms Arroyo’s disputed victory over opposition standard-bearer Fernando Poe Jr. in 2004, and how they delivered an astonishing 12-0 sweep in Maguindanao for the administration’s senatorial ticket in 2007,” Fajardo said that Arroyo’s role as President should be viewed as “separate” from her function as a political ally of the clan. In my opinion, the presidency is a political job and the president’s actions are always influenced by political considerations. They are intertwined like a Gordian Knot.

The second article, “Ampatuans won’t cut ties with Arroyo,” was reported by ABS-CBN. The report says: “In an interview with ABS-CBN, Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao Gov. Zaldy Ampatuan said he was very hurt by the arrest of his brother, Datu Unsay Mayor Andal Ampatuan Jr., for allegedly masterminding the massacre last Monday.”

Ampatuan said that he also was offended by the statements of Lakas-Kampi CMD standard bearer Gilbert Teodoro and the decision of the Lakas-Kampi leadership to expel the Ampatuans from the party. “They didn’t even consult us. They just expelled us from the party without asking any questions,” he said.

And in a naked display of power -- and arrogance -- he said that “despite the expulsion, his family remains a staunch supporter of the Arroyo administration” and that he is set to “meet with President Arroyo to discuss problems faced by several Lakas-Kampi candidates in Sulu.”

Evidently, notwithstanding the magnitude of the horrendous massacre of which members of the Ampatuan clan were suspected of having perpetrated, President Arroyo didn’t distance herself from the Ampatuans. Instead, she further reinforced their strong friendship and alliance. The gory spectacle of 57 brutally slaughtered civilians -- many of whom were raped, beheaded, and mutilated -- would have caused Arroyo to flinch and immediately sever her personal and political relationships with the Ampatuans. That would have been the right thing to do for a president of a country. Instead, she sent a subtle but clear signal that her alliance with the Ampatuans remains strong... and perhaps, stronger.

But why didn’t she divorce herself from her alliance -- or is it “unholy alliance”? -- from the powerful Ampatuan clan? Is she scared that if she abandoned them, they would retaliate by unraveling the “secrets” of how they helped her win in Maguindanao in 2004 and deliver a 12-0 sweep of her senatorial candidates in 2007? That would certainly open a can of worms and could cause a political storm that would destroy her politically and further tarnish her checkered image beyond redemption.

And since she is running for a congressional seat -- unopposed -- representing Pampanga’s second district, Arroyo needs the Ampatuans when she vies for the Speakership of the House of Representatives next year. And if she succeeded in changing the form of government to a parliamentary system, she would be in a position to become the Prime Minister. That would truly be a Machiavellian feat.

At the end of the day, for as long as Arroyo continues to pursue her dream of reigning for years to come, she would not let her political allies down, come hell or high water.