

The farce about disbanding the private armies

Presidential aspirants should be probed about their possible connections to private armies. They should be willing to stake their presidency to the disbandment of private armies.

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The presidential order for the disbandment of hundreds of private armies in the country could be a cheap publicity gimmick. At the very least, it was meant to exonerate the Arroyo administration from accountability for their proliferation as well as for the Maguindanao mass murder of Nov. 23, 2009.

The plan of disbanding – not just disarming – about 200 private armies surfaced weeks following the Maguindanao massacre that killed 57 civilians, including 30 journalists, and in the approach to the May 10, 2010 automated elections. A presidential commission was created to spearhead its implementation.

Such presidential directive is not new. Similar orders had been repeatedly issued by various presidents since Marcos 40 years ago. But it remains a thorn in the country's political life with many election-related incidents of violence blamed on them. Police authorities know who and where these private armed groups are but the laws that had been enacted to dismantle them and prosecute their operators remain on paper.

As armed bands, private armies are not asymmetrical to or far removed from the country's political psyche. Rather, they constitute a sub-system of a bigger political society where the helm of power is in the hands of jurassic and emergent political clans. They serve as the coercive instruments of political dynasties. They typify warlordism that is virtually insulated from accountability while promoting a culture of impunity that makes violence a law by itself.

Feudal structure

The country's feudal structure is the material condition that gives rise to private armies and warlordism but it is presidential patronage that sustains this sub-system. Private armies spring forth from powerful political clans or local kingpins who make local communities their own domain that in many respects is untouched by the national authority and the criminal justice system. The material base of some of these powerful private armies is the ownership of vast landholdings, logging concessions, and other properties as well as illegal operations. Their political power stems from the control of local governments with a vast civilian population subjugated through indebtedness, a patron-client relationship, and rule by the gun.

In recent decades, warlordism and private armies figured in peasant unrests and election-related violence. Landless tenants' wrath against landlord exploitation and landgrabbing was silenced by the gun; rivalry with other political clans resulted in bloodbath, pillage, arson, and mass displacements. Such scenes of warlord impunity were a normal occurrence in the Ilocos and Abra provinces, Cordillera, Isabela and Cagayan, Nueva Ecija, Tarlac, and other Central Luzon provinces, Cavite, Masbate, Samar, Cebu, Negros, and many Mindanao areas. In these areas, backward agrarian economy marked by severe income disparities reigns. Warlordism rules in the poorest provinces, such as Maguindanao.

Election killings

The number of election-related killings involving private armies rose from 24 in 1959, 128 in 1967, and 225 in 1971. The Marcos military claimed to have disbanded in the 1970s some 145 private armies with more than 100,000 high-powered firearms – enough to equip 35 army divisions. But the number of private armies rose once more in 1988 under Corazon C. Aquino with about 1,000 armed with 512,678 guns and maintained not only by political clans but also crime syndicates including kidnap-for-ransom (KFR) gangs. The quantum increase of private armies during the Aquino presidency can be attributed to the U.S.-inspired total war policy (low-intensity conflict) that promoted anti-communist vigilantes, cults, and paramilitary groups in the fight against the leftist armed revolutionary movement. Today, with 1.2 million loose firearms reported by the police, the figure of 180 private armies claimed by government appears to be small.

The fiefdoms run by local kingpins are fostered by patronage politics that was first introduced by American colonial masters at the turn of the 20th century and mastered thereafter by post-colonial presidents. To win in the elections and maintain their power, presidents kept ties with various political dynasties through which state resources in the form of budget allocations, pork barrel disguised as “development projects,” presidential favors and other perks are distributed. In the main, however, these favors never uplifted the lives of the people but went to the pockets of politicians and their subalterns or helped bankroll private armies. In many instances, units of the armed forces and police came under the private use of local kingpins – the reason why many cases of violence committed in the past and till today had involved state security forces.

In this situation, not only was national authority weakened but such authority was used to strengthen the local domains of political clans most especially where warlordism and private armies exist. In many conflict-ridden rural areas warlordism is conjoined with counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism leaving large populations under a state of siege and reign of terror thus further undermining civilian authority.

In many respects, political dynasties and the warlordism that these breed are the sources of political instabilities and make a mockery of the same laws they create. One may ask, how can civilian authority assert itself when poverty and injustice remain largely unaddressed and social services largely undelivered by both national and local authorities? How can presidential authority gain mass support when this is used in favor of tightening the power grip of the local elite?

Ampatuans

In the case of the Ampatuans of Maguindanao, it is an open secret that President Gloria M. Arroyo coddled a local dynasty into a monster. The Ampatuans' private armies were augmented not only to make sure that votes went to preferred candidates and political parties but also to pit lawless elements against rebels who threatened the clan's local hegemony. Military soldiers, policemen and paramilitary units became part of the Ampatuans' private armies, reports show. Civilian volunteer organizations (CVOs), said to be illegally formed, were armed as “force multipliers” under Arroyo's Executive Order 546 (2006) thus providing the pretext for their use not only by the Ampatuans but also by other local kingpins. The same forces were also used to make sure the Moro rebels' hold on the Liguasan Marsh – claimed to host one of Asia's largest natural gas reserves worth about \$600 billion – is neutralized. In the country's oligarchic political structure, presidential authority is used to clothe warlordism and private armies with legitimacy.

Under these circumstances, the presidential order to disband private armies is nothing but hot air. Lawlessness cannot be ended by a regime known not only for keeping an unholy alliance with rogue political clans but also for its poor record in upholding the law and respect for human rights.

Congress may need to revisit laws that were enacted to render private armies out of action. With majority of its members coming from ruling political clans and anti-dynasty bills all but buried, however, it is illusory to expect any meaningful legislative response to the issue.

In the current elections, presidential aspirants should be probed about their possible connections to private armies. They should be willing to stake their presidency to the disbandment of private armies. They should go beyond their narrow political interests by acting for the bigger cause of serving justice to the victims of private armies and putting back public trust in government.

The superstructure of political mafias and modern caciques and the material conditions that breed them are so powerful that piecemeal approaches to addressing this issue are self-defeating. One begins to think that in order to dismantle the private armies the first step is to put the political superstructure that promotes them out of circulation.

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