



In the past two years, Filipinos have been living under a climate of fear made possible by the killing of thousands of mostly poor drug users in the heat of the night, and the murder of priests, militant activists, media members and, now, local officials in broad daylight.

The brazenness of the killings has created an atmosphere of violence and the failure — perhaps even apathy — on the part of law enforcement to solve the crimes has established a culture of impunity in the country.

With the murder of three priests in June still fresh in the minds of Filipinos, still unidentified killers gunned down two mayors, one vice mayor, one city councilor and one barangay councilman in various parts of the country in the past week.

First to fall was Tanauan, Batangas Mayor Antonio Halili, who was felled by sniper fire while singing the national anthem during the town's flag-raising ceremony in front of the City Hall on a bright sunny Monday.

## Climate of fear

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The next day, motorcycle-riding men gunned down General Tinio, Nueva Ecija Mayor Ferdinand Bote.

A few days later, Vice Mayor Alexander Lubigan of Trece Martirez, Cavite was ambushed and killed by gunmen riding in a black pick-up truck.

On the same day that Lubigan was killed, barangay councilman Michael Magallanes was shot dead in Zamboanga City, and Councilor Nassif Palawan Bansil of Kapatagan town was gunned down in Lanao del Sur.

Although the Philippine National Police has promised, as usual, to thoroughly investigate the killings, no suspect has been identified, much less arrested, a dangerous pattern in many murders for the past several years now.

And despite all these unsolved killings, which run in the thousands now in the two years of the Duterte Administration, Presidential Spokesperson Harry Roque insists there is no culture of impunity prevailing in the country.

Prove the critics wrong, Harry, and show us a list of solved killings, the names of the suspects and the number of convictions, if any.

What has worsened the climate of fear in the country, which was made possible by the brazen murder of more than 10,000 drug users in the very first year of the Duterte presidency, is the fact that the victims of the latest killing spree are mayors, vice mayors and other local officials who are known to have bodyguards and policemen protecting them.

What about the ordinary Filipinos who have no one and nothing to protect them from these killers?

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And now, it's not just the ordinary Filipino who must cower in fear.

It's not just the militant activists, the vigilant media members, the lawyers and prosecutors, and priests who must now constantly look behind their back every single day, but also elected local government officials.

How can they perform their tasks in this climate of fear?

Mayors, vice mayors and other local officials, especially those included in the list supposedly of politicians involved in illegal drugs or who Duterte calls the "narco-politicians," have expressed fears for their safety.

Mayor Maria Fe Brondial, president of the League of Municipalities in the Philippines, said that local chief executives have expressed their deep concern over the killing of Mayors Halili and Bote.

Brondial said: "They are afraid, especially our mayors who are in the list. It's scary and I feel sorry, as they say, 'Mayor, we are not really involved. Why were our names included?'"

Brondial stressed that even if local officials have committed a crime, they should never be executed that way, as there are courts where they should be appropriately charged.

The brazenness of the killings has also increased anxieties among other elected public officials who now fear for their lives when they venture out of their homes, according to the Union of Local Authorities of the Philippines (Ulap).

Albay Gov. Al Francis Bichara, president of Ulap, said the incidents have seriously affected the work of local officials.

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They have every reason to be afraid.

Rappler has reported that at least 10 mayors have been killed in the two years of the Duterte Administration.

These include Mayors Samsudin Dimaukom of Datu Saudi Ampatuan, Maguindanao; Rolando Espinosa Sr. of Albuera, Leyte; Mohammad Exchan Limbona of Pantar, Lanao del Norte; Arsenio Agustin of Marcos, Ilocos Norte; Gisela Bendong Boniel of Bien Unido, Bohol; Leovino Hidalgo of Balete, Batangas; Reynaldo Pajorinog of Ozamis, Misamis Occidental; Ronald Lowell Tirol of Buenavista, Bohol; Halili; and Bote.

Aside from Lubigan, four other vice mayors have been killed since Duterte assumed the presidency in July 2016.

They were Vice Mayors Aaron Sampaga of Pamplona, Cagayan; Anwar Sindatuk of Datu Saudi Ampatuan, Maguindanao; Jackson Cinco Dy of Roxas, Oriental Mindoro; and Jonan John Ungab of Ronda, Cebu.

The murders of Mayors Samsudin Dimaukom, Rolando Espinosa, Jr., Reynaldo Parojinog, Antonio Halili, and Vice Mayor Jonah John Ungab were believed to be drug-related.

The local officials fear that inclusion of one's name in Duterte's list of alleged narco-politicians could become a death sentence for them.

They are afraid that anybody, including their political rivals, could have their names included and they are then damaged politically, not to mention the possibility that they could be the next victim of cold-blooded murderers.

The climate of fear, the cycle of violence and the culture of impunity have made the Philippines a mini-replica of the violence that has pervaded over Mexico in the past several years.

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In the past, it was just the drug cartels murdering rival cartel members, policemen and uncooperative officials and individuals.

But with the rise of Felipe Calderon as president in 2006, he sent soldiers and gunships to go after suspected drug cartel members, resulting in the death of more than 200,000 individuals with 30,000 more missing.

Under his successor, Enrique Pena Nieto, 63,000 were killed in the first three years alone of his presidency.

But people are finding out that the killings have not stopped nor slowed down the flow of illegal drugs.

The killings have only worsened the atmosphere of violence in the country.

The Mexican people are obviously tired of the violence from both the cartels and the government.

In last month's election, they elected Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador, who promised that more than the use of force, his government will deal with the causes from which the violence and criminality arise.

"I am convinced that the most effective and humane way of fighting these ills involves combatting inequality and poverty," Obrador said.

Does Duterte need to see tens of thousands more dead bodies on the streets before realizing the futility of combatting crime with violence, without attending to the root causes of these crimes?

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The country needs to get out of this climate of fear to help spur inclusive growth that would eventually solve the drug and criminality problems.

Violence will only send investors away.

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