



## **Lesson from Prison: How Political Persecution Keeps the Ideals of Democracy Alive**

By Leila M. De Lima

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In the evening of February 23, 2017, I was in my office in the Philippine Senate, waiting for the hours to pass until the agreed time of my surrender. That night marked the very height of the *hounding* I had been suffering at the hands of the President and his henchmen. Yes, *hounding*, for I felt like a prey being toyed with and tortured by a predator right before it went for the kill.

It started with verbal attacks from the President himself, who vowed to destroy me publicly because I represented the human rights movement that, in his perception, made him its “whipping boy”. Then his men all threw in their own kicks and punches. I was slut-shamed. Videos and photos were spliced. Perjured testimonies were bought and collected. A colleague of mine in the Senate even jokingly described me as the “most wiretapped person in the country,” and the President himself admitted that he was listening into my correspondences with the help of a “friendly nation.”

It became a game of who can earn the most brownie points by brutalizing that irrepressible Leila M. De Lima.

For a while, I was referred to as an unnamed female government official. But anyone who knew me or Duterte, or, at least, knew about the spate of extrajudicial killings (EJKs) that were happening as early as the first two months of his Presidency and his so-called “War on Drugs”, knew that he was referring to me. After all, I had delivered a privilege speech before the Philippine Senate calling for a stop to the killings.

While I expressed support for the campaign against illegal drugs, I objected to the use of extrajudicial killings as a means to solve it, for it is the embodiment of an evil far greater than what we were fighting. “Impunity, once unleashed, has no boundaries. It does not care who dies. It does not care who suffers. ... [It] has no sense of right or wrong. It is as amoral as it is immoral.

“We need not destroy lives in order to destroy drugs,” I said. And with that, I signed my own arrest warrant.

It was bound to happen. The enemies I made – as Chairperson of the Commission on Human Rights, as Secretary of Justice and, now, as Senator of the Philippine Republic – were too powerful and had demonstrated their brutality even before I became a public servant.

As far as I was concerned, short of killing me, my enemies have already done their worst.

And I thank them for making that mistake. It placed me somewhere I could not have reached without their help: in the company of giants and immortals.

Nelson Mandela. Senator Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino, Jr. of the Philippines. In Asia, Ilham Toti, who was named the winner of the Martin Ennals Foundation’s award. And many, many others.

Just like that, I was no longer just one woman. I’m a prisoner of conscience.

My persecutors thought that putting someone like me in jail will isolate me until I wither into oblivion. I have to say, in my 10 years in public service, this has been the most liberating and most engaging experience of my life.

In the past, I was knowledgeable and well-versed in the problems I was trying to draw attention to on an intellectual and, perhaps, even on a sympathetic level. But there was a line dividing and isolating me from the people I am defending.

Now, that line has been dissolved. And that came with so many realizations.

First, political persecution is never about the individual. It is about an idea.

You cannot kill or jail an idea. By persecuting the messenger, you strengthen it.

Second, this is a lesson that we, too, as the defenders of human rights, democracy and the rule of law should learn and always bear in mind.

Authoritarianism and populism are ideas that can never be killed. They are always there in the shadows of the human mind and society, waiting for someone to expertly manipulate reality, or the people’s perception of reality, to make them seem like the one and true answer to all of the people’s woes.

The moment we think we’ve “won”, we slide into complacency and plant the seeds for the rise of the next populist or authoritarian ruler.

Instead, we must constantly address the ideas they represent head on, bearing in mind what makes movements like authoritarianism and populism so attractive to people.

Note, it isn’t because people are irrational. It is *because* people are trying to act rationally while having an imperfect knowledge of the past, the present and the future. News flash: fake news and propaganda aren’t anything new. Only the platforms and the technology are new, making them more effective and powerful in manipulating people into making the wrong decisions.

Third, populists and authoritarians create the illusion of simplicity, compared with the “lofty” ideals of democracy and liberalism, *i.e.*, human rights, rule of law, democracy and freedom. If we are ineffective in connecting these with people’s “real” daily needs, we will always be accused of being out-of-touch elites, paving the way for populists and authoritarians to step in.

It is Maslow's hierarchy of needs applied to public governance. A hungry man just wants to eat. A woman who is afraid just wants to feel protected. A parent whose child fell victim to the drug menace just wants to see the drug problem eliminated.

That's when a populist leader comes in and promises that those can be achieved, but only if sacrifices are made. That's when he or she can boldly say that "human rights is the enemy". By the time the people realize their mistakes, they are little more than slave labor and secondary citizens in their own countries, being forced to live in subhuman conditions.

To avert this, we must learn to *speak to* our people, not to talk over them, expecting them to see what we see. Because, as a victim, I realized that when you are trapped within the four corners of your daily life, it is hard to see, much less care, about the big picture.

Finally, political persecution *is* a threat to democracy. Persecutors want their victims to be silenced, and for others to take heed and obey.

But it is also a warning in another sense: it is better to be proactive, than be passive. If I had kept quiet – as I was asked to do about my objections about the EJKs – it would have been easier to assassinate my character in the eyes of the public, should I finally be moved to say something later. At least I had my track record as proof and testament of my innocence.

If we stay silent once, we have to stay silent forever. We might as well pack our bags, admit defeat and surrender our humanity.

But, if it is true that "the hottest place in hell is reserved to those, who, in times of moral crisis, refuse to take a stand," I would rather be jailed in defense of what is right, than go to hell in the company of those responsible for our collective descent into impunity, fear, and inhumanity.

*Leila M. de Lima is a senator of the Republic of the Philippines and a member of the Liberal Party, a founding member-party of the Council of Asian Liberals and Democrats*

