**The Human Heart is Bigger Than the World**

**PASS THE PHRA PHILIPPINE HUMAN RIGHTS ACT**

**BY MICHAEL ALCANTARA**

**6,700 miles. Or a 20+ hour flight**

This is the distance between Seattle, and the Philippines, between where I have lived my whole life, and my parents’ original home. One of my Papa’s favorite stories is how his 28th birthday was also his longest day as he traversed oceans and timelines to arrive in the States. It took thirty years, six months, and ten days for me to meet the Philippines for the first time. Late by some standards, but enough time to change everything.

In 2017, I joined an international solidarity trip with fifteen others from across the United States, Australia, Malawi, Canada, and China, to collect accounts from indigenous communities displaced by bombings in the southernmost island of Mindanao. At that time, Mindanao had been under de facto martial law by the recently-elected president, Rodrigo Duterte. Two years later, in 2019, I visited community organizations in the central region of the Visayas, still responding to the lasting effects of the 2013’s Typhoon Haiyan, one of the most powerful storms recorded to have ever made landfall.

**In Seattle, almost 40 years ago**

On June 1, 1981, Filipino-American union leaders Gene Viernes and Silme Domingo were gunned down in Seattle by state agents of the Philippine government under then-president Ferdinand Marcos. Viernes and Domingo were staunch critics of the Marcos dictatorship and organized solidarity relations between longshoremen in Seattle and the trade union movement in the Philippines.

Today, forty years later, another dictatorship in the Philippines and the passage of the Anti-Terror Law threatens Filipino-American activists once again.

**30,000 extrajudicial killings**

Under Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte, over 30,000 Filipinos have been killed by their government. These began as a so-called “War on Drugs” that targeted poor drug users and drug dealers. This silencing and violence against the people has since escalated in various forms, including but not limited to the aforementioned Martial Law in Mindanao, orders consolidating more power to the executive branch of the government, attacks on freedom of the press, and most notably, the Anti-Terror Law enacted last July.

Philippine military and police have increased their targeting of social activists, accusing them of being communists (a common tactic known as “red-tagging”) and terrorists. As a result, indigenous people, human rights workers, peasants, labor organizers, environmental activists, journalists, health workers, local elected officials, and clergy—many that I met on my trips—have been red-tagged, imprisoned, and extrajudicially killed.

In addition, the Duterte government has used COVID-19 lockdown measures to militarize the country rather than address the country’s health crisis. While the majority of the Filipino people already struggle to have their basic needs met, the government has failed to provide them with economic support, food, PPE, and vaccines. Meanwhile, Philippine police and military have arrested individuals delivering relief and food to those in need, increasing the country’s already high number of political prisoners. This militarist solution to a public health problem has failed miserably to provide a comprehensive health response and adequate economic support to the suffering Filipino people amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

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WWII: the Philippines and the U.S. fight alongside each other.

U.S. defeats the Philippines in the Filipino-American War on June 1, 1900.

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2000: The Philippines celebrates the 100th anniversary of its independence from Spain.

2025: The Philippines celebrates the 125th anniversary of its independence from Spain.

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$550 million in U.S. taxpayer money

We must be critical and reflective of our relationship to the struggles of the world. Father General Arturo Sosa SJ’s questions from the Universal Apostolic Preferences are constantly relevant: How are we living and working for justice within our institutional context? How are we relating within our institutional context to the people we serve?

Since Duterte’s election in 2017, the Philippines has received over $550 million in U.S. taxpayer money in the form of military aid. Similar to the ongoing events in Palestine, Colombia, and many other places in the world, we see that these contributions are leading toward people’s suppression rather than people’s liberation. How can we, as U.S. citizens, use our voices to ensure our government resources are not used to commit injustices in places abroad, like the Philippines? At times, grappling with these questions can feel like we are the camel traversing through the eye of a needle (Matthew 19:24), but Jesus promises that we save ourselves as we save each other in this process (Matthew 16:25). These are the tough questions we must answer not only in thought and spirit but also in action. We must confront these questions and organize ourselves as people standing for justice.

Organizing work is the recurring invitation to ground ourselves in who we most truly are in God’s eyes (Galatians 3:28), and acting from that posture day in and day out. It is a subversive act. And it gets at the root (aka radical) of justice work. It simultaneously rejects being owned or claimed by the decrepit systems of empire, capitalism, and fascism. We are neither Jew nor Gentile, slave nor free, woman nor man (Galatians 3:28)—but we also deny racism, white supremacy, xenophobia, “model minority” and other life-denying narratives that prevent us from recognizing and claiming our right relationship with ourselves, others, and God.

55 legislative representatives and over 140 organizations

One way to practice this organizing of consciousness and people power is to join the movement to pass the Philippine Human Rights Act (PHRA)! Organizers from all over the U.S. are pushing to reintroduce the PHRA bill to the House of Representatives and Senate. In its reintroduction, we ask our legislators to look critically at the role of U.S. taxpayer money in the Philippines and “to suspend United States security assistance with the Philippines until such time as human rights violations by Philippine security forces cease and the responsible state forces are held accountable.”

In Seattle, ICHRP (International Coalition for Human Rights in the Philippines), Malaya Movement and the Kabataan Alliance are engaging in this campaign to encourage Washington state representatives to endorse the PHRA via outreach, phone barraging, and more. They also hope to form a local PHRA coalition. This is a call and invitation to participate in something as simple as a phone call to your representative or to have you or your organization join our local coalition! As we have seen in the BLM mobilizations, Standing Rock actions, Stop Asian Hate, and many other movements in this country and across the globe, democracy is more than voting. And the true power of the people is wielded in collective day-to-day action and solidarity.

Even in the conditions presented to us by the COVID-19 pandemic, solidarity does not mean social distancing. Though we are thousands of miles and a 20+ hour flight away from the Philippines and many other places that encourage our care and concern, solidarity urges us to reduce this distance. We remember and live out our identity as God’s people and through genuine building and organizing together as the Lord’s Prayer invites us to do day in and day out. May we bring Your Kingdom here on Earth as it is in Heaven.

Michael Alcantara is a member of PUSO Seattle (Philippine US-Solidarity Organization) and the ICHRP (International Coalition for Human Rights in the Philippines). He is a graduate of Seattle University. Take Action to support the PHRA at ipjc.org/legislative-action-center/

1 A quote from Filipino novelist and poet Carlos Bulosan
2 Model Minority is a common racist stereotype of an ethnic or racial group that assumes an individual or group has a high level of education, socioeconomic status, and professional level. The idea stems from a “deservingness framework” that constructs the “ideal” minority for other minorities to follow or become.