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Philippines: Election marred by political killings

Candidates in the Philippines presidential election should outline their plans to combat political violence which has resulted in the killing of at least five candidates and sixteen campaign organizers this year, Amnesty International said today.

As political violence continues to mar the run-up to the 10 May poll, the organisation called on the candidates to commit to abolishing private armies responsible for election-related attacks.

Political violence during the election had already hit record levels before the official campaign period began in February. On 23 November 2009, 63 people travelling in an opposition candidate's convoy were killed in Maguindanao province.

The then-governor, Andal Ampatuan Sr, and members of his private army have since been arrested and charged with the murders.

“Maguindanao should have been a wake-up call for the president to abolish these militias,” said Lance Lattig, Philippines researcher at Amnesty International. “Whichever candidate wins this election will need to disarm and disband these private armies, once and for all.”

The number of private armies jumped from 68 in December to 117 in February, according to Dante Jimenez, member of the presidential commission created to dismantle these groups.

Despite public outrage over Maguindanao, President Gloria Arroyo has failed to revoke Executive Order 546, which effectively authorised private armies in 2006.

“This election is being fought with bullets as well as ballots,” said Lance Lattig. “The new president will need to tackle the private armies and political killings that mar Arroyo's legacy.”

Beyond the Maguindanao massacre, political killings in the Philippines remain an endemic problem, fuelled by a culture of impunity. Despite dozens of new cases each year, few effective investigations have been conducted, and prosecutions are rare.

During the election, the number of political killings has surged as a means of eliminating electoral rivals. Other acts of violence, including grenade attacks, have also been used to intimidate political supporters.

Amnesty International has found nine cases of candidates or campaign managers who have been victims of political killings:

- Kagi Ketong, campaign manager for the mayoral and vice-mayoral candidates Montasir and Abdulwahab Saban, killed in a grenade attack on a political rally in Datu Odin Sinsuat, Maguindanao (15 April).
- Edwin Segue, village councillor for San Antonio village and radio reporter, shot dead by motorcycle gunmen in Ozamis City, Misamis Occidental (14 April).
- McArthur “Tol” Cortez, candidate for councillor in Sarangani town, Davao del Sur, killed in Digos City (12 April).
- Bernardo Olarte, campaign organizer for mayoral candidate Junjun Binay, shot dead in front of his house in Makati City, Manila (31 March).
- Willy Vilorio, candidate for vice-governor of Zambales, shot dead by unidentified gunmen in his house in Cabangan, Zambales (7 March).
- Ponciano Numeron, candidate for councillor for Pasacao township and former policeman, allegedly killed by New People’s Army (NPA) forces in Camarines Sur province (5 March).
- Luis Mondia Jr., mayoral candidate and former mayor of Pulpandan town, Negros Occidental, killed in Jaro, Iloilo province (17 February).
- Oscar Animo, local campaign organizer for presidential candidate Gilberto Teodoro, killed while riding his motorcycle in Tagana-an, Surigao del Norte (2 February).
- Julio “Bimbo” Esquivias, candidate for councillor in Casiguran, Sorsogon, killed (5 January).

No suspects have yet been arrested in eight of the nine cases, according to news reports.

In the Oscar Animo case, Tagana-An police reported in March that they had arrested three suspects as of 2 March.

Almost two months after the killing of Luis Mondia, as of 5 April police in Pulpandan were still waiting for arrest warrants to be issued.

The authorities response was more robust in the case of a candidate who was allegedly killed by the NPA. In response to the Ponciano Numeron case, 9th Infantry Division’s Major General Ruperto Pabustan directed the 42nd Infantry Battalion to hunt down the suspects, the Division’s website reported on 24 April. However, no suspects have yet been arrested.