

Interview 23: PHILIPPINES: Dorris Cuario

Ms. Dorris Cuario is the Secretary General of Karapatan-Southern Tagalog region, a local human rights organisation. Dorris has been involved in human rights work for many years. In 2008, police officers in Mindoro Island included her name as one of the accused in a fabricated charge of the murder of a police officer. The local court later dismissed the case.

What do you think of the policing system of your country?

In the Philippines it is said that there is democracy in policy, but that for a long period of time, the laws that envisage human rights cannot guarantee that one's rights are protected. There are a lot of laws which fail to protect the people, such as those coming from the lower classes in our country, particularly the minorities. While there are laws which do protect the rights of the people, they also have loopholes which ultimately make it meaningless for the people. For example, Article III of the Philippine Constitution (Bill of Rights) but in reality what happens is exactly the opposite. There is no democracy for the poor. Democracy only applies to the rich, politicians, the armed forces and the police.

What do you think of the police use of torture?

Torture is widespread in the Philippines. The police and the soldiers of different regimes have been doing this for a long time, particularly against the people who fight for the rights of farmers, workers and other sectors who want change in the society in which they live. Those in the government are using torture to suppress the increasing dissent of the people. We have wanted a law against torture because it is against the eyes of men and of God. However, this was never considered a priority because most government officials are the ones violating this. They are doing it to prevent people from rising up or fighting against the personal interest of the country's political way of life.

What is your idea of the relationship between the police and citizens? In the Philippines, for a long time now, there has not been a good relationship between the police and soldiers. This is because of their graft, corrupt practices and their involvement in criminal activities, like illegal drugs, selling illegal firearms and being used as the private armies of big political dynasties, like in the Ampatuan Case. (In which over 50 people were massacred on the island of Mindanao). They are also involved in the killing of known activists in the country. Most of those involved are being promoted instead of being charged and prosecuted; and they are also given awards by the president of the country, as in the case of General Jovito Palparan under the regime of President Gloria Arroyo.

If you have a problem would you feel safe going to the police to complain?

It depends on the situation: if you are complaining against influential people in the country (businessmen, landlords, the President and the administration) I would not trust the police, because most of them are appointed by the winning President or politicians of the country. While this law remains, there can never be any guarantee for the security and safety of the Filipinos who are poor. Until the police and the soldiers serve the people in a real sense, they will not obtain recognition from the people for their services.

Is there a domestic violence law in your country? If yes, is it well implemented? If not, what are the problems?

There is a law protecting children's rights and advocating against violence against women, but these laws are not widely implemented. There are many cases of child labour and abuse. That is how laws are implemented in our country, but if the law guarantees the interest of the society (not to the disadvantaged) like the imposition of the E-VAT (Expanded Value Added Tax) and other laws, they are swiftly implemented. But the laws that fulfill the wishes of ordinary people who are experiencing hunger, poverty and abuse of their rights are not effectively implemented. The law and policies of the country should not be treated as an issue of class.