



# Confronting Challenges on Human Rights Defenders in the Philippines

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In the Philippines, the defense and protection of human rights is a noble cause that entails serious risks to the life of the defender. The climate of impunity makes it a conducive ground for the systematic, continuous, and relentless attacks, harassments and murders of lawyers and human rights defenders.

To date, the National Union of People's Lawyers (NUPL) has recorded **43 lawyers killed**, and **57 attacked** between the period of 2001 and 2014. In 2010, **15 lawyers and three judges fell victim of extra-judicial killings. 13 other lawyers were harassed, intimidated, and received death threats.** Of the known perpetrators recorded, 65% were identified to be members of the military, while 20% were from the police service.

According to a report of Endangered Lawyers Day Foundation, from 2001 to 2015, **47 out of 57 lawyers that have been threatened, harassed, intimidated, and surveilled, were directly involved in human rights cases.** In fact, there were more lawyers under surveillance (35) and maliciously labelled (37) during the period 2001 to the present than in the prior years since 1977.



Aside from the direct attack and harassment, human rights lawyers fall victims of a continued propaganda of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) under Oplan Bayanihan. Human rights lawyers and defenders are labeled as “enemies of the state”, thus making them vulnerable targets of the counter-insurgency program of the government.

Lawyers and law students who are members of NUPL are, themselves, victims of these state-perpetuated mechanisms to impede the work of human rights defenders and to silence anyone critical of an administration's treatment of human rights and record of extra-judicial killings. One of the most recent is the surveillance conducted on **Atty. Catherine Dannug-Salucon**, a founding member of NUPL and lawyer of political prisoners. In 2014, her home and office have been monitored by men on motorcycles, presumed to be members of the Military Intelligence Group (MIG). **William Bugatti**, her paralegal, was killed one month before the surveillance on Salucon started. Bugatti was killed by persons in civilian clothing after attending a court hearing on cases of political detainees.



In an attempt to silence human rights activists, trumped up charges are also filed against lawyers. **Atty. Edre Olalia**, current President of NUPL, was charged with violation of the Public Assembly Act, alleging that he was one of the organizers of a “rally without a permit”, whereas he was in the mobilization as a paralegal. **Atty. Bartolome Rayco**, President of NUPL-Albay chapter, and **Atty. Madonna Gay Escio**, Vice President of NUPL Luzon were also harassed on February 24, 2014 while observing a rally against a power company. They were subsequently arrested even if they presented themselves as lawyers for the picketing rallyists, and were charged with coercion and malicious mischief.

In May 2016, a new president was elected. As much as the administration promised “change” such did not alter the climate of impunity lawyers have to work against. President Rodrigo Duterte, adamant in his campaign against illegal drugs, has even threatened to kills human rights lawyers and defenders who will attempt to prevent him from continuing his “war against drugs”.

*Though difficult and dangerous, a human rights lawyer and defender do not cease to work toward a goal: justice. It is with fervor that NUPL and other human rights organization will continue to defend the defenseless despite all these challenges.*