

Trillanes gets KO'd

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SEN. Antonio Trillanes 4th has been “quo warranto-ed.” Malacañang has revoked the presidential pardon given in 2011 to the persistent critic of the Duterte administration for being void from the beginning, after finding that he did not apply for pardon nor did he formally admit to the charge of attempting to bring down the government.

Trillanes reacted to the executive order signed last August 31 by President Rodrigo Duterte and Executive Secretary Salvador Medialdea in his usual manner, calling the President “cowardly” for being conveniently away when the edict was issued. He also identified Solicitor General Jose Calida as the alleged author of the order, saying that his current investigation of Calida’s supposed conflict of interest cases directly led to the issuance of the decree revoking his pardon.

As this is being written, Trillanes is still in the Senate, browbeating Calida for allegedly securing contracts for his family’s security agency with certain government agencies. He has declared that he will not resist arrest but that he believes the Senate will not allow this to happen because his pardon by then President Noynoy Aquino was an act of Congress (which ratified Aquino’s action) that cannot be revoked by a mere executive order. Trillanes may not be able to finish his probe because the order for his re-arrest is supposed to be immediately executory. Before the day ends, he could be back behind bars, where he was before Aquino granted amnesty to him and his fellow coup plotters involved in the takeover of the Oakwood and the Manila Peninsula hotels.

The latest news I heard has the Senate leadership declaring that the chamber will not allow the arrest of one of its members within its premises. That could mean that Trillanes will stay in the Senate indefinitely, until it is safe for him to leave without being arrested. Watching Trillanes talk to reporters before his hearing started, I could sense that he was worried despite his usual braggadocio. I was certain that he had believed that Duterte would just let him continue what he’s been doing until his term expires in June next year, when he leaves the Senate.

But that was not to be. And it’s all because of yet another strategic miscalculation committed by the former coup plotter.

Trillanes was punching above his weight, as British boxing fans say. And I don't mean that he should not be allowed to criticize the President simply because he is a "mere" senator.

Trillanes gained fame and a Senate seat because he led attempts to oust Gloria Macapagal Arroyo. He was fighting a president who, rightfully or not, was so unpopular that the people could have accepted her removal from office through armed revolt if that was what it took to be rid of her.

In fact, if the ranks of Trillanes and his Magdalo coup pals had been reinforced in a timely manner by other sympathetic military units outside of Metro Manila, the Oakwood mutiny would have succeeded, most analysts agree. But Arroyo, ever the wily leader, and her loyalist generals effectively prevented the arrival of the reinforcements that Trillanes and his gang had been expecting, leading to the collapse of the revolt.

This is where Trillanes erred: Going against Duterte, with his overwhelming support from the people, and going against Arroyo, who had to rely mostly on her vast political survival skills just to remain in office, are simply not the same thing.

While Trillanes appeared like a knight in shining armor when he and his Magdalo brethren burst on the scene and went after Arroyo, he has now been forced to accept the much-reduced role of knee-jerk opposition obstructionist in the time of Duterte. And his refusal to understand the difference between his two incarnations lies at the heart of his failure to rise beyond the level of a chained dog that will bark at anything that attracts its attention during the current dispensation.

I cannot believe that the quality of Trillanes' criticism has improved significantly over the years. He still makes the same scurrilous, unfounded accusations against Duterte that he made against Arroyo — and which, by the way, he also made against the perceived enemies of his pardoner Aquino, when he was president.

Trillanes has become a caricature of his old self, making it his business to oppose anything and everything that emanates from his political foes. His refusal to do anything else other than to attack those opposed to him and his masters (in the case of Aquino) has led to his undoing.

But the really ironic part of the current Trillanes drama is that the senator once offered himself to Duterte as his running mate in the 2016 elections. I really wonder if Trillanes would have done what he did to Duterte had he not been spurned by the Davao City mayor.

So, it's not really true that Trillanes has always been a Duterte critic. And that he cannot change his political leanings, when it's convenient for him to do so.

Of course, these days, Trillanes would rather focus on calling out Duterte as a coward, a crook and a dictator rather than on that time when he went to Davao to ask him to make him his vice-presidential candidate. He's forgetful that way, apparently.

Right or wrong, the political calumny and military adventurism that Trillanes turned so successfully into his calling card requires the support of the people. And as far as the people are concerned, they have long relegated Trillanes to the role of political nuisance, just barely above characters like Ely "Spike" Pamatong only because he actually holds political office.

On a final note, I hope all the other Magdalo putschists who were pardoned by Aquino — that includes you, Gary Alejano — immediately check their files to see if they complied with all the requirements for eligibility before they were granted amnesty. They may not be as prominent and consistent in criticizing Duterte as Trillanes but, hey, you never really know.

Better safe than sorry. And if Trillanes' case should teach us anything, it's that before you take on the role of critic, make sure that you've not done anything against the law that could get you in trouble someday.